Reconstructing a Theory of Mind in the *Mengzi*

Kevin James TURNER

Abstract

This article reconstructs a theory of mind in the *Mengzi*. It argues that recent studies in favor of mind-body dualism import Cartesianism through the vocabulary their arguments are couched in. This article exposes this “Cartesian language game” in order to effect a gestalt shift in our understanding of Mengzian philosophy. It then appeals to John Dewey’s conception of mind as both “minding” and “discourse” where mind is a function of attentive engagement predicated on a background of traditional values and meanings. This article then shows how the *Mengzi*’s concepts of ren 仁 and tian 天 contribute to a theory of mind where the former is defined as *xin* 心 thus to be understood as “mindful engagement” and the latter implies tradition as shared reservoir of social and cultural meaning. Through the interpretive comparison of the philosophies of the *Mengzi* and Dewey, we can reconstruct a Mengzian theory of mind.

Keywords: *Mengzi*, ren 仁, tian 天, mind, John Dewey, dualism

Rekonstrukcija teorije uma v *Menciju*

Izvleček


Ključne besede: Mencij 孟子, ren 仁, tian 天, um, John Dewey, dualizem

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The question of mind in Chinese philosophy is an old one. In 1932 I. A. Richards published *Mencius on the Mind* where he set out to explore “Chinese modes of meaning”, the difficulties of cross-cultural translation, a clarification of the “methods of controlling our meaning”, and to “present a Chinese view of psychology” (1932, xii). Richards consistently questioned the universal and absolute validity of our own ways of thinking going so far as offering the “uncomfortable suggestion” that the commonsense foundations of Western psychology might only be so “foundational” because we have talked about them being so for so long (ibid., 82). Herbert Fingarette, in his seminal *Confucius: The Sacred as Secular* published 40 years after Richards’ book, put forth the thesis that “The metaphor of an inner psychic life, in all its ramifications so familiar to us, simply isn’t present in the *Analects*, not even as a rejected possibility” (1972, 45). Following Fingarette, A. C. Graham states that the mind-body dichotomy of the Western tradition “never emerged in pre-Han philosophy” and that “Confucius is not a victim of the post-Cartesian superstition of mind as ‘ghost in the machine’” (1989, 25‒26). These three scholars are all keen on understanding Chinese philosophy within its own narrative context and, in arguing against Cartesian readings, desire to prevent the kinds of distortive interpretations that arise when foreign intellectual frameworks are uncritically employed.

However, these arguments have given rise to much debate in recent years. A slate of scholars has argued that while Cartesian dualism was absent, there did exist at least some kind of dualism. However, it seems to me that these arguments in favour of dualism are both misguided and undercut themselves at the same time.

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1 The Western word for “mind” did not enter into the Chinese language until at least the early 1800s and when it did, it was readily associated with *xin* 心. The 1819 *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* glosses *xin* as “*Intended to represent the human heart. The heart; the affections; the mind; the intentions; the motive; the origin; the middle of a thing*”. The 1904 *Commercial Press English and Chinese Pronouncing Pocket Dictionary* and the 1908 *An English and Chinese Standard Dictionary* both include such Chinese terms as *xin*, *xinling* 心靈, and *xinshen* 心神 in their definitions of “mind”. In today’s Chinese, the term *xinling* has become the commonsense translation of the Western concept of “mind” as seen in the term *xinling zhexue* 心靈哲學—philosophy of mind. The association of the two characters *xin* and *ling* 灵 (i.e. nimble, agile, spiritual) goes all the way back to the Zhuangzi’s concepts of *lingfu* 靈府 and *lingtai* 靈台 (“spiritual storehouse” and “spiritual platform” respectively). Guo Xiang 郭象 (252‒312 CE) comments on *lingtai* that it is “*xin*, clear and free-flowing, thus, there are no worries that can enter into it” (see Guo Qingfan 2016, 789) and the Tang dynasty commentator Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (c. 7th century) says of *lingfu* that it is “the abode of the spirit (*jingshen* 精神), and this is what is called *xin*. (ibid., 219) In addition, Cheng uses the term *xinling* several times through his *Zhuangzi shu* 莊子疏 (Commentary to the Zhuangzi). Interestingly, the closely related concept of *jingshen* 精神 has also been used as a translation for “mind”. Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 uses it as a translation for “mind” when he compares John Locke’s analogy of mind as “white paper” (1997, 89) to Wang Yangming 王陽明’s saying that “there is no thing outside *xin*” (*xinwai wuwu* 心外無物) (Zhang 2008, 368). Yet in modern Chinese, *jingshen* is almost universally understood to mean “spirit”. All translations of first- and second-hand Chinese sources are my own unless otherwise stated.
They are misguided because they misunderstand their target and they undercut themselves because in proclaiming their disavowal of “Cartesian dualism” they nevertheless continue to “couch” their account of “Chinese dualism” in the vocabulary of the Cartesian tradition. Therefore, in attempting to answer the question of mind in the Chinese tradition it is necessary to critically reflect on the philosophical assumptions so familiar to us that we no longer see them before we can effectively begin reconstructing a theory of “mind” in Chinese philosophy.

This article represents such an attempt and focuses on the Confucian philosophy of the Mengzi 孟子. I first rehearse the criticisms against the arguments for a non-dualist understanding of the Chinese tradition to illustrate how such arguments fail on two points: misidentify their target’s position and retain a Cartesian vocabulary. I then argue that a proper account of mind in the Chinese tradition requires an interpretive “gestalt shift” and that this shift requires critical reflection on our familiar philosophical assumptions. Therefore, I first expose the “Cartesian language game” and correlate philosophical assumptions before introducing John Dewey’s account of mind as “minding” and as “discourse” to provide a possible alternative vocabulary for interpreting the Mengzi. Finally, I attempt to reconstruct a Mengzian theory of mind through an analysis of the concept of xin 心 in relation to its definition as ren 仁 (humanity, consummate conduct, love) and through the related concept of tian 天 (nature, society, culture, tradition). Through this hermeneutical project we can reconstruct a theory of mind in the Mengzi devoid of Cartesian connotations and “couched” in language that more accurately conveys its native significances.

**Chinese Dualism and the “Cartesian Language Game”**

The argument for the presence of mind-body dualism in Chinese philosophy can be represented by three influential scholars: Paul Goldin, Edward Slingerland, and Alexus McLeod. These three scholars all express a legitimate concern for properly understanding Chinese philosophy, but it is unfortunate that in their criticisms of those who argue against the presence of dualism in the Chinese philosophical narrative, their claims both misidentify the argument of those they criticize and undermine themselves at the same time because their desire to reinstate dualism brings Cartesianism in through the backdoor via the language they deploy. This is not to deny that there are common-sense dualisms in Chinese philosophy;² rather,

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² There are all kinds of “dualisms” in Chinese philosophy, the most prominent of which is perhaps that of yinyang 陰陽. But we should not mistake this “dualism” as indicating a “strict dualism” whereby one has ontological priority over the other. Chinese “dualisms” in this sense are, rightly understood, “bipolarisms” or “biphasalisms.”
it is to deny the imposition of a foreign “frame of reference” (Rošker 2021, 9–56) that is dependent on a notion of strict dualism.

First, Paul Goldin, in his article “A Mind-Body Problem in the Zhuangzi?”, directly challenges what he says “has attained the status of a taboo”, that is, “the suggestion of a mind-body dichotomy” in Chinese philosophy represented by such figures as Herbert Fingarette and A. C. Graham (2003, 232). While Goldin does recognize that the kind of Cartesian dualism popular in the Western tradition certainly was not an element of ancient Chinese thought (ibid., 233), he nevertheless insists that there was some kind of dualism. He characterizes two ways of conceptualizing “mind” in Chinese philosophy: materialist and immaterialist. Under the former he includes such texts as the Zhuangzi 莊子, the Huainanzi 淮南子, and the Mengzi with their “thoroughgoing materialism” and under the latter Goldin includes such texts as the Xunzi 荀子 which he describes as “mentalist.” Commenting on a passage where the Xunzi says “One might sit in a room and still see the Four Seas” (he quotes Knoblock’s translation), Goldin says:

> When a philosopher declares that one might sit inside one’s chamber and still “see” everything within the Four Seas, there cannot be much doubt that he conceives of a mind with an actively theatrical imagination, with entire worlds and fantasies parading before a disembodied mental “viewer”. This is not a mind that is unfamiliar with ... “inner mental states”. (ibid., 235)

However, this interpretation of the Xunzi is not necessarily the most accurate. If we appeal to other pre-Qin texts in the Legalist and Huang-Lao traditions that the author(s) of the Xunzi were certainly aware of, we can see that to be able to “see everything within the Four Seas” can also refer to the idea that the political leader does nothing while his ministers and subordinates do everything: they bring news of the four seas to him (Wang 2018, 230‒84). Therefore, there is no need to think of the author(s) of the Xunzi as imagining a kind of mental world only accessible to a “disembodied viewer”. Goldin concludes by relating all of this to “folk psychology” and illustrates his final point with a story from the Mozi 墨子 about a medium possessed by a spirit who then kills someone through the medium’s body while the mind of the medium is elsewhere. Goldin says this is a stark example of a literal “ghost in the machine” (ibid., 236).

From this we see that even though Goldin argues against the presence of Cartesian mind-body dualism in the ancient Chinese tradition, when talking about the kind of dualism he does think exists, he nevertheless provides a Cartesian picture because he makes use of the language of Cartesian mind-body dualism. That is, the whole talk of “materialism”, “mentalist”, “disembodied viewers”, and “inner
mental states” are part and parcel of the Cartesian language game (see below) and, whatever merits his argument might have otherwise, such vocabulary undercuts his argument for a non-Cartesian dualism in the Chinese tradition.

Next, Edward Slingerland follows Goldin’s (2008, 1–22) lead when he adopts the language of “myth” in his criticism of what he calls “strong mind-body holism” (Slingerland 2019, 11). “Strong mind-body holism”, Slingerland tells us, is characterized by two claims in particular: “for the early Chinese there exists no qualitative distinction at all between anything we [i.e. Westerners] would call mind and the physical body or other organs of the body” (ibid., 40) and “the xin [i.e. heart or mind] is simply one organ in the body, not in any way qualitatively different from other organs” (ibid., 42). Slingerland’s criticism, then, is that this “strong holism” is actually a radical reductionism, a reduction of mind to body. In contrast to this “strong holism”, Slingerland introduces his own notion of “weak mind-body dualism”: “Unlike strict Cartesianism, weak mind-body dualism involves the conception that mind and body are functionally and qualitatively distinct, although potentially overlapping at points” (ibid., 13). As with Goldin, whose language reveals the prejudices of his interpretive framework, Slingerland likewise employs a vocabulary of Western philosophy of mind. Particularly, he refers to the Chinese concept of xin 心 as “metaphysical” saying that “It is reasonable to describe the xin as metaphysical, somehow free of the limitations of the physical world” (ibid., 101; italics in original) and that “It is possession of this metaphysical mind that is the key to our personal identity and individual moral responsibility, and it is also what makes human beings special among the ‘ten thousand things’”3 (ibid.). Even though he avows himself against Cartesianism, the dichotomy he sets up between the “metaphysical” and the “physical” brings it back into his analysis.

The final example is Alexus McLeod, whose insightful account of madness in the Chinese tradition goes off course due to the same methodological shortcomings seen above in Goldin and Slingerland. McLeod is right when he says that

> While early Chinese thinkers did maintain a mind-body distinction, their conceptions of the distinction do not map neatly onto familiar historical ways of making the distinction. We find nothing like the kind of substance dualism offered by Descartes in early Chinese texts, in which mind and body form two separate and incompatible categories of basic “stuff” in the world. (McLeod 2021, 35)

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3 Both Goldin and Slingerland share a methodological shortcoming in that neither seems to take seriously the implications of the qi cosmology of ancient Chinese thought (see Turner 2022, 1089–1108) and do not properly consider the Chinese understanding of ghosthood and embodiment (Lewis 2006, 59–60).
But he misses the point when he mistakes the thought of the actual Descartes for the Cartesian language game that he inspired (ibid., 36–37). It does not matter that René Descartes the man believed in a “mind-body unity” (ibid., 37) because the tradition which he inspired and still informs much of our common sense today maintains a form of dualism. Furthermore, McLeod accepts Slingerland’s account of mind as having an “intrinsic ‘otherness’” as distinct from the other organs of the body where it is taken as “immaterial, in control of the self, and the source of free will and moral responsibility” (ibid., 39). He oscillates back in the other direction, however, when he states that “To the extent that there are differences between them, mind and body are different formations of qi 氣, but ultimately they are both caused by and constituted by qi” (ibid., 40). McLeod’s account is self-contradictory because a qi cosmology that prioritizes the continuity of existence does not permit the kind of division between the physical and metaphysical or material and immaterial that is integral to the kind of description that he borrows from Slingerland.

If we might summarize the main concern of these three scholars, it is that much scholarship on early China has come to the agreement that dualism is not a prominent feature of the tradition while, in fact, it is. The crux of the debate, then, is just what is meant by “dualism”. It seems to me that, on the whole, both sides of the debate are arguing past each other. Whereas Richards, Fingarette, and Graham are arguing against the presence of a particular form of dualism in the Chinese tradition, that is, Cartesian dualism with all of the concomitant philosophical prejudices its referential framework brings, what Goldin, Slingerland, and McLeod are arguing is that there can be Chinese dualism without it being Cartesian dualism. Yet, as stated above, these latter three mistake the former three as arguing that no distinctions between mind and body in a general sense were ever made in the Chinese tradition—despite whatever examples of scholars engaging in such a reduction they might have found. The problem is not whether the early Chinese distinguished between bodies, emotions, and thoughts—they certainly did—but rather how they chose to theorize about these things. As we famously learn from Ludwig Wittgenstein (2005), “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (§5.6, 68) and as Richard Rorty teaches, because philosophical problems are usually a problem of the language we use to ask our questions, a change in language is likely to result in the resolution of our philosophical problems (1979, xiii).

This problem of language requires serious consideration. Even though the three scholars discussed above deserve recognition for their attempt to provide an accurate description of the mind/body relationship in Chinese philosophy, it must be pointed out that the means which they adopt to achieve such an end undermine their argument for a Chinese dualism. This is primarily because their criticism of
the anti-dualist position reflects a feature of the Western philosophical tradition that Richard Bernstein has called the “Cartesian Anxiety”. This is

a grand and seductive Either/Or. Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos. (Bernstein 1983, 18)

In applying this notion of the “Cartesian Anxiety” to the dualist position, we see that they conceive of the mind-body relation along Cartesian lines despite their explicit disavowal, thereby retaining the basic Either/Or dichotomy: either there is mind and body or else there is only body. But as Bernstein says, “if we question, expose, and exorcise Cartesianism, then the very possibility” of this Either/Or “loses its plausibility” (ibid., 19).

The concern of the dualists with substituting a holism with a dualism is indicative of this Cartesian Anxiety because the very language by which they undertake their critiques and institute their own version of dualism continues to play what I call the “Cartesian language game”. This idea of the “Cartesian language game” draws inspiration from John Searle, who explains:

[A]long with the Cartesian tradition we have inherited a vocabulary, and with the vocabulary a certain set of categories, within which we are historically conditioned to think about these problems. The vocabulary is not innocent … [it] includes a series of apparent oppositions: “physical” versus “mental”, “body” versus “mind”, “materialism” versus “mentalist”, “matter” versus “spirit”. Implicit in these oppositions is the thesis that the same phenomenon under the same aspects cannot literally satisfy both terms. (Searle 1994, 14)

In other words, the criticism against the “holist” position as resulting in a materialist reduction of mind to body is only possible in the “logical space of reasons” (Sellars 1991, 169) of the Cartesian language game because the very categories of material/immaterial, physical/mental, subjective/objective and so on belong to a culturally specific way of parsing the world:

4 While Slingerland does correctly identify some scholars who do make this reduction, he nevertheless lumps scholars with a more nuanced account of mind/body in Chinese philosophy into the reductionist camp treating them all as being cut from the same cloth. For example, he singles out Roger Ames’ claim that the person was conceptualized “holistically as a psychosomatic process” as an example of mind being reduced to body. Yet, the very word “psychosomatic” involves both “mind (psyche)” and “body (soma)”. Furthermore, in the article this quotation is taken from, Ames describes mind and body as existing at the two poles of a single continuum (Ames 1993, 159). This is far from the reduction of mind to body that Slingerland claims it to be.
Both traditional dualism and materialism presuppose conceptual dualism ... materialism [i]s really a form of dualism. It is that form of dualism that begins by accepting the Cartesian categories ... Materialism is thus in a sense the finest flower of dualism. (Searle 1994, 26)

Whether it be materialism or immaterialism, the language of the Cartesian philosophical tradition had no cash value in the view of “how things hang together” (Sellars 1991, 1) of ancient Chinese philosophy. What this means, then, for the dualists, is that the very language of their criticism is Cartesian in nature and thus, any of the dualisms they wish to instate in our understanding of Chinese philosophy are Cartesianism in disguise. This is why in asking after the question of mind in the Chinese tradition it is first necessary to critically reflect on our familiar assumptions and second to look for a vocabulary appropriate for expressing Chinese ideas.

There is a correlate problem that arises in the scholarly literature on both sides of the debate and the concern with the mind-body problem where there is an over-emphasis on the concept of xin 心 (heart/mind) as it relates to mind. This problem exists because there is an insensitivity to a fact about Chinese concepts: they are often bivalent, existing on lower- and higher-orders. In other words, the term xin can both refer to the “organ of reflection” as well as the entire conceptual network that constitutes a robust theory of mind and a synthetic concept of mind. Said differently, we should not expect there to be a one-to-one correspondence between the concepts of xin and mind, but instead should recognize that we can use the higher-order concept of mind (or xin) to encapsulate a synthetic theory that includes xin as well as a whole set of other terms. This breaking down of the walls of our conceptual focus is what allows us to see how, along with xin, other concepts play an important role in a synthetic Mengzian theory of mind. They do so not because any one of them correlates to an actual thing in the world we call “mind” but rather because they contribute to a higher-order theory of mind that is descriptive of a way of living in the world.

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5 For a related discussion, see Turner (2019, 351‒62).
6 For example, Donald Munro (2002) elevates one of the “four sprouts”—the heart-mind of right/wrong discrimination—to the status of a higher-order concept of mind: “When Mencius refers to the shifei zhi xin [是非之心], or the mind of right and wrong, he is asserting that human beings evaluate. The human mind is an evaluating mind.” (ibid., 320) Yet, does it not make more sense to see this xin in relation to the other three xin as four lower-order concepts that contribute to a higher-order, synthetic concept or theory?
Exposing the Cartesian Mind

In reflecting on the mind-body problem in the Chinese tradition, Roger Ames (1993) claims that

the correlative relationship between the psychical and the somatic militated against the emergence of a mind/body problem. It was not that the Chinese thinkers were able to “reconcile” this dichotomy; rather, it did not arise. (Ames 1993, 163)

The idea that the mind/body dichotomy never arose in the Chinese tradition is of great significance because it clues us into the fact that we should not expect the familiar language of Cartesianism to provide an accurate portrayal of the Chinese philosophical discourse on the parts of experience that we denote by the terms “mind” and “body”.7 Ames’ point here is not to deny that Chinese philosophers made distinctions between what we are accustomed to demarcate as either “mind” or “body” but instead to focus on the language that talk of “mind” and “body” are “couched” in (ibid., 158) because this language reveals the philosophical assumptions that we have taken for granted for so long that we have come to think of them as fixed in metaphysical stone.

Elsewhere, in discussing a “process notion” of the Chinese concept of xing 性 (loosely translated as “human nature”), Ames (2002) argues for the need to make a “gestalt shift” in our interpretation of Chinese philosophy: “to appreciate the difference between ‘human nature’ understood within a substance (or essence) ontology and the term understood within a process ontology requires a gestalt shift, a rethinking of our philosophical language” (ibid., 81). In other words, we have to stop seeing a duck where Chinese philosophers saw a rabbit and this shift in interpretive paradigms is expressed in the language we choose to portray Chinese philosophy.

In trying to effect this gestalt shift by finding the best possible vocabulary to reconstruct a Confucian theory of mind, it is necessary that we move away from the language of Cartesian philosophy. This “gestalt shift” is not directed at René Descartes’ philosophy as laid out in the Meditations or anywhere else. Instead, it is a move away from the philosophical tradition that he initiated and which dominated the early modern period of Western thought all the way to the critical

7 Lisa Raphals has provided supporting evidence for this claim when she argues that the “dualism framework of analysis” loses out on seeing “important dimensions of the mind and spirit or soul” and “how both relate to the body” (2023, 22). She argues that instead of a “dualist framework” we should adopt a “tripartite” one that accounts for the mind, spirit, and body, as well as their relations.
self-reflections of the 20th century.8 This philosophical tradition has been called the “mirror of nature” by Richard Rorty (1979). Its key feature is the bifurcation of human experience into two distinct realms: what is inside the mind and what is outside the mind, including body. The “mirror of nature” is thus the mind of an epistemological subject that through corresponding internal representations with external phenomena achieves clear and distinct knowledge.

We should not confuse this “mirror of nature” as a historical oddity because its influence is far-reaching and today still informs many philosophical arguments regarding the relation between mind and body. For example, Evan Thompson describes a strand of cognitive science known as “cognitivism” thus:

> Cartesian dualism had long ago created an explanatory gap between mind and matter, consciousness and nature. Cognitivism, far from closing this gap, perpetuated it in a materialist form by opening a new gap between subpersonal, computational cognition and subjective mental phenomena. (Thompson 2007, 6)

Hilary Putnam’s famous “Brains in a Vat” (2004, 1–21) thought experiment is a prime example of this because it is presupposed on the separation of the mental activities of the brain and nervous system from the other activities of the body as if they did not provide the physiological scaffolding for them to occur.9 In other words, while the philosophy of Descartes might have gone out of fashion, the way of talking and thinking about the world initiated by him still informs much of our modern philosophical discourse.10

However, this Cartesian language game is of a different “sensibility matrix” (Hall and Ames 1995, 112) whose philosophical assumptions justify a different world than that of Chinese philosophy. Angus Graham has noted that one of the major differences between the Western and Chinese philosophical traditions is that the former asks “What is the truth?” and the latter asks “Where

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8 In addition to the pragmatic tradition discussed here, the phenomenological tradition represented by such figures as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty also severely criticized the Cartesian tradition. Merleau-Ponty, for example, opens his *Phenomenology of Perception* with robust criticisms of what he calls “empiricism” and “intellectualism”—the two poles of the Cartesian language game (2012, 3–65).

9 Thompson and Cosmelli have, on the basis of good cognitive science, debunked this view of the “brainbound mind” (Thompson and Cosmelli 2011, 163–80).

10 While “cognitivism” might mostly be a skeleton in cognitive science’s closet today, Jakob Hohwy is an example of a more recent cognitive scientist who directly aligns himself with Cartesian philosophy (Hohwy 2007, 249–54). Joseph Levine has also provided an argument for a “Cartesian theater” view of phenomenal experience (Levine 2010, 209–25).
is the way?” (Graham 1989, 3). In other words, the Western tradition is focused on what things are in terms of their “being” while the Chinese tradition is focused on how things are in terms of their “becoming”. Similarly, while affirming their commensurability, Mou Zongsan 卜宗三 draws the main distinction between Western and Chinese philosophy as that between the Chinese tradition’s emphasis on “life as such” and the Western tradition’s emphasis on “nature” as “external object” (Mou 1990, 18). The Chinese “sensibility matrix” is summarized by Tang Junyi 唐君毅 in his seven cosmological postulates among which include “no fixed being” (wu dingti guan 無定體觀), “ceaseless activity of procreation” (shengsheng buyi guan 生生不已觀), “inseparability of one and many” (yiduo bufen 一多不分觀), and “no going without returning” (wuwang bufu 無往不復觀) (Tang 2016a, 1–17).

These basic assumptions encourage us to understand the central notion of xin as different from that of mind as it obtains in the Cartesian tradition. In correcting some “misconceptions”, Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 tells us that “Xin in Chinese culture is fundamentally not the mind of an immaterialist philosophy” (Xu 2013a, 295) and that if we consider the xin of Chinese philosophy to belong to an immaterialism then “there will be no path for the most fundamental aspect of Chinese culture to take” (ibid., 296). At the same time, to simply replace “immaterialism” with “materialism” would be to remain playing the Cartesian language game and is thus also a dead-end for interpreting Chinese philosophy. Hence, Lik-kuen Tong 唐力權 describes the xin-world relationship thus: “There is no absolute subject, no absolute object; there is no absolute mind, no absolute thing; in conclusion, the existence of both poles of these complementary pairs is mutually interdependent and they cannot exist on their own” (Tong 1996, 6) and he further describes the Chinese position as “unobstructed suchness between response and its field” (gan-shi ruyi 感一如實) where xin is continuous with the things in its field of relationality (ibid., 36–41). From these considerations of the processual sensibilities of the Chinese tradition we see that the vocabulary of the Cartesian language game is not suited to the translation and interpretation of the Chinese philosophical narrative.

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11 Tang Junyi sees the “fundamental aspect” of xin as the “illuminating awareness” of its “empty activity”: “Xin was not seen as a subjective substance, but instead was viewed as a thing which contains emotions, desires, and intentions and which can be set in correlation to the external world of nature. They [Chinese philosophers] thought that the illuminating awareness of the heart-mind’s empty activity (xin zhi xuling de mingjue 心之虛靈的明覺) is expansive without end so that it could encompass all of the ten thousand things.” (Tang 2016a, 103)
On the Path of Reconstruction: John Dewey’s Theory of Mind

Drawing inspiration from Roger Ames work to achieve a gestalt shift in our understanding of the Chinese concept of *xing* as a “process notion” by appealing to John Dewey, I also want to make the most of Dewey’s philosophy as a valuable resource for reconstructing the Mengzi’s theory of mind. John Dewey’s conception of mind differs radically from that of the Cartesian tradition, a tradition he was highly critical of. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey describes mind as not an “underlying substance” that is an “independent entity which attends, purposes, cares, notices, and remembers” (Dewey 1958, 263; italics in original) but rather “as primarily a verb” that “denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves” (ibid.). In other words, “mind” is not a Cartesian substance but instead

denotes every mode of variety of interest in, and concern for, things: practical, intellectual, and emotional. It never denotes anything self-contained, isolated from the world of persons and things, but is always used with respect to situations, events, objects, persons and things. (ibid., 263)

Mind is a mode of being in the world mediated through attentive engagement: “In short, ‘to mind’ denotes an activity that is intellectual, to note something; affectional, as caring and liking, and volitional, practical, acting in a purposive way.” (ibid.; italics in original) Furthermore, “Mind forms the background upon which every new contact with surroundings is projected.” (ibid., 264) This “minding” is presupposed on a social and cultural tradition: “[A person] would be poorer than a beast of the fields were it not for traditions that become a part of his mind.” (ibid., 270)

Dewey had developed his idea of “minding” as socially and culturally situated in his earlier *Experience and Nature* where he offered a conceptualization of mind as “discourse”. There, even though he finds fault with Greek metaphysics, Dewey still thinks there is some wisdom to be learned in the Greek notion of mind: “*Logos* has been correctly identified with mind,” however, the problem remains for the Greeks that “*logos* and hence mind was conceived supernaturally” (Dewey

12 Ames says: “Fortunately, we do not have to reinvent the wheel. To assist us in considering a process understanding of *renxing*, we have available as analogy the process of philosophy of thinkers such as John Dewey ... I want to identify in Dewey several of the terms that have a bearing on what he would call human nature and to see if they do not suggest a new direction for understanding Mencius. This is not to reduce Mencius to Dewey or to provide a ‘Deweyan’ reading of Mencius but is rather an attempt to use a Deweyan vocabulary to stimulate us to think differently about Mencius.” (Ames 2002, 80–81)
This *logos* is word, discourse. Dewey thinks that while the Greeks were right in seeing discourse as the most important feature of the human mind, he criticizes them for hypostasizing it as a transcendent entity. Moreover, this “mind as discourse” is not a naturally endowed mental language that we can all turn to in our private soliloquys to access the truth. Hence, Dewey says: “Mind as individualized could be recognized in other than a pejorative sense only when its variations were social, utilized in generating great social security and fullness of life.” (ibid., 215) This mind is embodied in and emerges from our learned ability to communicate with others:

If we had not talked to and with others and they with us, we should never talk to and with ourselves ... Through speech a person dramatically identifies himself with potential acts and deeds; he plays many roles, not in successive stages of life but in a contemporaneously enacted drama. Thus mind emerges. (ibid., 170)

For Dewey, mind is not a static, thinking thing, but is instead a function that emerges from the intercourse that takes place between different people and in different communal, social, and cultural fields: “The modern habit of using self, ‘I’, mind, and spirit interchangeably is inconceivable when family and commune are solid realities.” (ibid., 209) Mind is a social reality and exists in and through the relations between discoursing individuals.

As for how this “mind as discourse” brings meaning to the world, it does so, because communication and thus the mutual effort to achieve communal goals literally makes something “common in at least two different centres of behavior” (ibid., 178). That the world should have meaning is a consequence of the fact that things matter through their implication in “situations of shared or social purpose and execution” (ibid., 181). For meaning to exist at all it must exist in such social and shared situations, and therefore Dewey says that “meaning” is the “community of partaking” (ibid., 185). In other words, a thing is only meaningful when it enters a field of communal behaviour. Without such community there is naught but raw existence; meaning is the “essence” of a thing communally distilled out of its existence (ibid., 183).

For someone accustomed to the Cartesian way of thinking of mind, Dewey’s concept of mind as “minding” and as “discourse” is striking. Our relationship with others and the world is not one of pure cogitation, but is rather one of mindful engagement and when we think, we do so with the social and cultural linguistic repertoire given to us by our upbringing in certain social and cultural environments and thereby engage with the world and others. This is why Dewey says...
we should not say that “I think” or “I feel” but that “it thinks” and “it feels” (ibid., 232–33). Therefore, Dewey’s concept of mind is necessarily communal and individual thinkers share in this communal mind as unique instantiations. As is argued below, this alternative definition of mind offered by Dewey provides a vocabulary for discussing mind in the *Mengzi* that better captures its original import.

**Reconstructing the Mengzi’s Theory of Mind through Ren and Tian**

As noted above, the concept of xin 心 is central to discussions on mind in the *Mengzi*; it is highly complex and takes on various dimensions of significance. Among these, commonly noted ones are as (1) the organ of thinking, reflecting, and knowing, (2) the lord of the body, and (3) embedded moral responses.13 There is, however, a dimension of the *Mengzi*’s concept of xin that is often left out of discussions of mind. In *Mengzi* 6A11 it defines ren 仁 (humanity, consummate conduct, love) as the “human heart/mind” (*ren renxin ye* 仁人心也). It is as *ren* that its concept of xin resonates with Dewey’s notion of “minding”. That is to say, *ren* is a mindful engagement with others and the world. Moreover, a proper understanding of xin and *ren* should be connected to the *Mengzi*’s concept of tian 天, which I will argue below is not a metaphysical substance or an anthropomorphic deity14 but instead is the cultural and social values embodied in tradition elevated to a sacred level that serves as the background for xin as “minding”. The following analysis will reveal that when the set of concepts of xin, *ren*, and tian are understood alongside Dewey’s theory of mind, we can generate a higher-order, synthetic Mengzian concept of mind.

When it comes to the *Mengzi*’s concept of *ren* 仁, the best place to start is the character itself. It is composed of two components: *ren* 仁 (i.e. person/humanity) and er 二 (i.e. two). This is our first indication that *ren* is a concept of interpersonality. In other

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13 Regarding the first dimension, *Mengzi* 6A15 says *xin zhi guan ze si* 心之官則思 (the office/organ of the xin is to think/reflect); regarding the second dimension, the *Mengzi*’s use of the terms *dati* 大體 and *xiaoti* 小體 in the same passage reflects its acceptance of its intellectual predecessor’s—the Wuxing 五行—analogy of xin as ruler of the body; regarding the third dimension, *Mengzi* 2A6 refers to “four sprouts” (*siduan* 四端) that constitute the materials out of which moral dispositions are cultivated. For discussions of these various aspects of xin, see Munro (1969, 74–75); Lau (1970, 15–16); Schwartz (1985, 266–77); Chan (2002, 55); Geaney (2002, 84–108), and Ames (2021, 373–80).

14 Despite adopting the translation of tian as “heaven,” Perkins warns against confusing it with familiar Christian notions: “Tian is not a place where good people go when they die” (Perkins 2022, 19) and he says elsewhere that “Heaven simply represents those forces or events in the world that are inexplicable and irresistible” (Perkins 2014, 123). For a fuller discussion on the various interpretations of tian, see Behuniak (2019, 207–42).
words, where only one person exists there is no possibility for ren (in both senses as “person” and “humanity”) to exist. The alternative version of this character found in the Guodian 郭店 excavated manuscripts that is written with shen 身 (body, person) over xin is of great importance not only because it links xin to ren logographically but also because the character shen was not only originally a depiction of a pregnant body (thus two people) but also because this term generally refers to the social body. In other words, as a matter of “mind”, ren involves both the body and others in its conceptual range. This precludes any strict dualism inherent in the notion of ren. An important feature of this concept is that rather than being a moral virtue that we possess, it requires actual ethical practice for its realization in the world.

This moral practice entails the “extension” of one’s moral feelings from what is nearest to what is furthest away. This notion is clearly expressed in Mengzi 7A45’s “Treat your parents with familial affection, treat the people with proper humanity, and love the [ten thousand] things” (qinqin renmin aiwu 親親仁民愛物). We must mind these things lest we fail to treat them properly. Mengzi 1A7 offers a greater account in a dialogue between Mengzi and King Xuan of Qi regarding the latter’s choice to replace a trembling ox on its way to slaughter with a sheep. After interpreting the king’s behaviour in terms of his compassion for the ox whose immediate presence moved him, Mengzi says that the king can “spin the whole world in the palm of his hand” if only he treats the elders and the young of other people as he does is own. He then says:

All this is about is applying this xin to others. Thus, if you extend your grace then it will be sufficient to protect the four seas but if you do not then you won’t even be able to protect your wife and children. The ancients surpassed us in no other regard than this: they were excellent at extending what they did to others. Today, your grace is sufficient to reach beasts, but your deeds do not go as far as the common people. Why is this?

We might translate the “applying this xin to others” (ju sixin jiazhu bi 舉斯心加諸彼) simply as “minding others” and not miss any of its import. The point here is that rather than just being a principle of relationality between two objects, ren is a method by which relations are constructed, enriched, and expanded to ever greater degrees. It is a way of being attentively engaged in the world, a way of minding the world in an ethical manner. The idea of relationality has led Tang Junyi to describe the xin–world relationship in terms of action:

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15 For a detailed discussion of this character in the excavated texts see Wang (2011, 210‒38; 2021, 1‒46).
It is not a way of thinking of the world as an object opposite to the subject. It is a way of thinking which begins by withdrawing the light in the ordinary outward-knowing process back to our inner self; and then throws the light out again, along the very line of the extending of our moral ideal and our moral action; and knows the world as mediated by that very ideal and action, and as the realm for the embodiment of that ideal and action. (Tang 2016b, 27)

Therefore, the key feature of *xin* is the ethical relationality contained in the concept of *ren* that rather than entailing a cognitive comprehension of objects in the world instead entails an ethical minding that expands the scope of our lived-in worlds to ever greater degrees to eventually encompass all of the ten thousand things and the whole world in its moral embrace as we give them attention and engage them in our ethical practice.

This way of understanding *xin* through the concept of *ren* shows great resonance with John Dewey’s concept of “mind” as “minding” because they are both relationally dependent: neither can exist outside of the relationships that obtain between people engaged in social intercourse. Yet neither the *Mengzi* nor John Dewey simply understand their respective concepts of “mind” as the relationships that exist between isolated individuals. Instead, as was pointed out above, “mind” emerges out of the discourse that takes place between people in their mindful interactions who draw on a communal reservoir of meaning that binds them together and gives their relationships value. This communal reservoir is, in short, society, culture, and tradition. An idea very reminiscent of this exists in the *Mengzi*’s concept of *tian* 天 (often translated as “Nature” or “Heaven”).

For the *Mengzi*, there is an undeniable internal and direct relationship between human *xing* 性 (natural dispositions) and *tian* where the latter is seen as the origin or source of the former and which finds expression in *xin* through moral action. *Mengzi* 7A1 says “Those who fully realize their *xin* can know their natural dispositions; those who know their natural dispositions thus know *tian*.” The question is, then, what does this *tian* here mean and how does it relate to *ren*? In order to answer this question, I will elucidate the *Mengzi*’s concept of *tian* to show how it was understood as “human discourse” elevated to a social and sacred level and something that humans share communally.

17 The evolution of this term is quite complex, but Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 has listed five basic meanings: “material”, “sovereignial”, “fatal”, “natural”, and “philosophical” (Feng 2009, 35). Yu Ying-shih 余英時 also notes three kinds of *tian*: religious, metaphysical, and ethical, further saying that “*tian* and humanity (*ren* 人) were often used to distinguish between a transcendent realm and an actual realm” (Yu 2014, 73).
First, the *Mengzi* does not understand the relationship between humans and *tian* as being one of a top-down determinism. It is not the case that *tian* determines absolutely what humans are.\(^{18}\) Instead, the relationship between humans and *tian* is one of interpenetration and mutual determination. Thus, Cheng Chung-ying is right to say that *xin* is “an emergent creation of human nature, just as human nature can be considered an emergent creation of [*tian*]” (Cheng 2003, 442) because the idea of emergence implies a bottom-up relationship rather than a top-down one. However, Cheng only presents half the picture because *tian* is also emergent out of humanity. Luo Anxian 羅安憲 captures the bidirectionality of this relationship when he says that

> The *Mengzi* makes of the cosmos and human life a single thing, bringing about the mergence and concentration of things and people and of *tian* and humanity. Moving from *xin* to natural dispositions and to *tian* is to ascend and to transcend while moving from *tian* to natural dispositions and to *xin* is to cross over and to fall into place. (Luo 2007, 126)

Thus we see that between *tian* and humanity there exists a bidirectional process of emergence. Yet both of these scholars conceive of *tian* along metaphysical lines in a manner that misses its meaning in the *Mengzi* as “tradition sacralized”. In order to see how *tian* functions in the *Mengzi* not as metaphysical substance but as social and cultural values embodied in sacred tradition, we have to take a closer look at the meaning of *tian*.\(^{19}\)

The concept of *tian* had begun to take on new meanings during the time between Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius) and Mengzi. Particularly, it evolved from a more anthropomorphic notion of a deity to a more natural notion of the world.\(^{20}\) This shift is seen taking place, for example, in *Analects* 9.5 where Kongzi, on the one hand,

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\(^{18}\) Andrew Plaks’ translation of the *Zhongyong*’s 中庸 (a Confucian text in the same lineage as the *Mengzi*) opening line, *tianming zhi wei xing* 天命之謂性, as “By the term ‘nature’ we speak of that which is imparted by the ordinance of Heaven” (Plaks 2004, 25) is an example of such an understanding.

\(^{19}\) For an extended discussion of this topic, see Turner (2023).

\(^{20}\) See Zhang X. (2007, 234‒54) and Wang B. (2011, 5‒11). Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 states: “By the Spring and Autumn period, *tian* and *tianming*天命 had already transformed from having the characteristic of an anthropomorphic deity to having the characteristic of a moral rule.” (Xu 2013b, 74) Jana Rošker confirms this when she states that “The Chinese had anthropomorphic deities in the periods of Shang (Yin) and Zhou Dynasties but Confucius and Mencius transformed this anthropomorphic form of heaven (*tian*) into the concept of the Heavenly Mandate (*tian ming*), which was a moral or ideal concept” (Rošker 2016, 181) and that “the idea of Heaven (*tian* 天) was transformed from an anthropomorphic higher force into something which determined the inner reality of every human being” (ibid., 187).
says “If tian wanted to eliminate this culture, then I who have come to it so late would not have acquired it; if tian does not want to eliminate this culture, then what can the people of Kuang do to me?” and on the other hand, in 17.19, he says: “What does tian say? The four seasons cycle and the hundred things are produced. What does tian say?” While Kongzi is notorious for not saying much about tian (Analects 5.13), from this we at least get the idea that he understood it, in part, as the silent power of natural processes.

There are several places in the Mengzi that explicitly discuss tian (2B13 and 5A6 are two key instances), but there is one place that is of particular importance to the present discussion because it shows that the Mengzi carried the transformation of tian as anthropomorphized deity beyond natural forces to turn it into human discourse, into society and culture, in other words, into tradition. Mengzi 5A5 records a dialogue between Mengzi and his student Wanzhang on the transmission of power between the mythical kings of Shun and Yu. Wanzhang asks if it was Shun that “gave” (yu 與) the throne to Yu to which Mengzi replies by saying “the son of the heavenly (tianzi 天子) cannot give the world to other people” and that it is tian who does so. Regarding how tian does this, Mengzi says “Tian does not speak, it reveals its choice through deeds and tasks”. He goes on to say that if whomever is recommended to succeed the throne dutifully serves the spirits and manages the affairs of the people, then that person will be accepted by tian and by the people and will therefore be fit for the throne. As a cap to this argument, Mengzi quotes from the “Taishi 太誓” chapter in the Shangshu 尚書 (Documents): “Tian sees as my people see and hears as my people hear” (tian shi zi womin shi tian ting zi womin ting 天視自我民視天聽自我民聽). In other words, whatever the content of human discourse is, that is what the content of tian is. To say that tian sees and hears as the people do is to replace the notion of tian as anthropomorphized deity not with the notion of natural processes but with the notion of human discourse. The Mengzi has elevated human discourse to the highest level and made society into something sacred. Hence, Pu Pang龐樸 says:

This kind of tian goes beyond humanity; but it also cannot leave behind humanity because its root is society. And humanity cannot leave behind tian because humans are mainly understood to be social beings. Therefore, the relationship between tian and humanity talked about by the Confucians is actually a relationship between society and social individuals or that between greater society and humans themselves… Mengzi clearly affirmed this relationship and sacralized it, elevating society to tian. (Pu 2005, 364)
Jim Behuniak captures this idea when he says that “Tian in this context is understood as the history, experience, culture, institutions, and general processes that have shaped human emergence” (Behuniak 2005, 94). Thus, when the Mengzi says that those who fully realize their xin know their xing and knowing their xing they know tian, and that the capacity of thinking and feeling is “that which tian has given me” (6A15) what it means is that humans have acquired from society a collective means of discourse that makes their worlds meaningful. The social and cultural values of the human community is the source of the ren that is the “human mind”. Thus when it says that one “serves tian” (shitian 事天) it does not mean subservience to a transcendent being but instead the creative process of individuals giving back to and remaking the society from which they have received so much.

That this “thing” given to us by tian is something communal is made clear in Mengzi 6A7:

People all want to eat the same things when it comes to the preferences of the mouth; people all want to hear the same things when it comes to the preferences of the ears; people all want to see the same things when it comes to the preferences of the eyes. How could it be that xin is alone in there being no common preferences between people?

The Mengzi’s point is not that these things that people have in common are part of a ready-made human nature. Instead, because people are “alike” (xiangsi 相似), therefore, the things they want are also alike. Furthermore, that people are “alike” in their various tastes is a product of their belonging to a particular tradition. This is why the Mengzi appeals to the historical gourmet of Yi Ya 易牙, the master musician of Shi Kuang 師曠, and the famed beauty Zi Du 子都 as the standards for the tastes that all people have in common. It is not that these three represent a metaphysical Good but that they are representative of the common goods that have sedimented into human culture that Mengzi the philosopher and his fellows were born into and have grown up in.

Thus, when xin is understood within the proper conceptual web alongside ren and tian, a synthetic conception of mind emerges that does not resemble anything like a subjective knowing mind in the Cartesian style but is instead the socio-culturally situated “minding” one’s way in the world that draws on a shared set of communal values in extending them to ever greater degrees through interaction with one’s peers.

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21 Benjamin Schwartz says, for example: “In dealing with the inborn moral capacity, Mencius describes it in terms of four parts or aspects. The capacity itself may be thought of as a kind of Aristotelian entelechy since the final goal of full moral realization is already present as a potentiality from the beginning.” (Schwartz 1985, 267; italics in original)
Conclusion

Through the above discussion I have attempted to reconstruct the concept of mind in the philosophy of the *Mengzi*. I first rehearsed arguments revolving around the problem of mind-body dualism in the Chinese philosophical narrative in addition to showing how even though these arguments avow themselves of Cartesian dualism, the language they employ is nonetheless suffuse with Cartesian vocabulary thereby undermining their position on Chinese dualism. I then argued that a “gestalt shift” is needed in the kind of philosophical vocabulary we use to translate and interpret Chinese philosophy. Following this, I exposed the Cartesian concept of mind by showing how it operates within what I call the “Cartesian language game” as the “mirror of nature” that differs from Chinese views which understand *xin* within a process “sensibility matrix”. Following this, I paved the way for reconstruction by considering John Dewey’s alternative theory of mind that emerges in social intercourse where it is understood as both “minding” and “discourse”. Finally, through the *Mengzi*’s concepts of *ren* and *tian* I showed how the *Mengzi*’s understanding of *xin* resonates strongly with Dewey’s idea of mind because both entail socially and culturally situated interpersonal engagement that draws on a common reservoir of meaning. Thus, in conclusion, when the *Mengzi*’s concepts of *xin*, *ren*, and *tian* are taken together, they constitute a synthetic conception of mind where mind is understood as an engaged minding informed by society, culture, and tradition.

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