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# The Gendered Feature of Parental Love in Early Confucian Philosophy

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## The Gendered Feature of Parental Love in Early Confucian Philosophy

The *Mencius* strikes a surprisingly modern Freudian note in its observation that sexual love is rooted in feelings for one's parents. Like the concept of libido, desire in the *Mencius* is the same feeling rerouted toward different objects. According to the *Mencius*, not only does love for parents serve as the model for adult sexual desire, it supercedes it and should never be outgrown. That is, ideally, the yearning for one's parents should continue well into old age. (5A.1) Observing that children did not automatically follow this ideal, the early Confucians tried to encourage it by educating children in filial piety. This was understood to be a job for males, and according to the *Xunzi*, women were incapable of participating. However, faced with the task of teaching children to love them, Confucian fathers encountered particular problems. How do you train a child to love without undermining that affection through the process of attempting to force it? In Freud's model the son learns to give up the pleasures of being nursed by his mother, and to identify with and love his father because he becomes aware of his need for his father's protection. Thus civilization defines the son's maturity as relinquishing his oral drives and replacing them with an appropriate genital object. By contrast, in the *Mencius*' model, the aim for children is not to replace the oral desire for the mother with genital desire. In the context of Confucian patriarchy in the Warring States (453–221 B.C.E), producing male offspring was essential, yet the trajectory of substituting genital for oral drives is actually a temporary deviation in the *Mencius*' ideal. This paper will contrast the *Mencius* to the *Xunzi*, in order to argue that in the *Mencius*, the method for achieving mature love is to reinforce the oral drives—with fathers implicitly teaching children to identify with their mothers so that the sons might subsequently become something like wet-nurses for their parents.

The ideal loving son in early Confucian stories is the great ruler Shun, who loved his male relatives, his father in particular, despite being mistreated by them. The *Mencius* describes Shun in this way:

When a person is young, he desires his father and mother. When he knows how to love sex, he desires young and beautiful women. When he comes to have a wife and children, he desires them. When

he obtains office, he desires his sovereign: if he cannot get the regard of his sovereign, he burns within. But the man of great filial piety, to the end of his life, desires his parents. (*Mencius* 5A.1)<sup>1</sup>

For the average person, this desire for one's parents has to be taught. In the early Confucian tradition, no child will automatically grow up behaving filially. The *Xunzi's* position on this is quite straightforward. It states:

A son's deference to his father and a younger brother's deference to his elder brother; a son's relieving his father of work and a younger brother's relieving his elder brother of work—these two modes of conduct are both contrary to *xing* and contradict *qing*. Nonetheless it is the way of the filial son.<sup>2</sup> (*Xunzi* 23/19–20)

The *Mencius* is a bit more complex. On the one hand, *Mencius* 7A.15 says:

What a person is able to do without having to learn is true ability. (...) No child carried in the arms does not know loving its parents.

Yet, *Mencius* 7B.24 contrasts the relations between father and son to things like the desires of the eyes for colors, the mouth for tastes, etc. And it parallels father/son relations to relationships that require effort to cultivate, such as between host and guest, and ruler and minister.<sup>3</sup>

1 My translation. All translations not attributed to others are mine.

2 Knoblock translation modified, *Xunzi* vol. III p. 153. The translations of *qing* and *xing* are much disputed, and since it is not my purpose to resolve such disputes, in the rest of the argument, I will leave controversial terms of this sort untranslated. Knoblock, John, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988–1994.

3 *Mencius* 7B.24 reads: "The mouth in relation to taste, the eyes with regard to color, the ears with regard to sound, the nose with regard to smells, the four limbs with regard to ease and comfort is *xing*. [But] there is *ming* in it; so the noble person does not call it *xing*. Humaneness in relations of father and son, righteousness in relations of ruler and minister, ritual in relations of guest and host, intelligence in relations of the virtuous, the sages in relations of *tian's* way is *ming*. [But] there is *xing* in it, so the noble person does not call it *ming*." The character describing father/son relations here is *ren*, but "humaneness" in this context seems to mean familial love. *Mencius* 7A.15 also uses *ren* of familial relations immediately after

Moreover, even in the *Mencius*, other natural desires constitute clear obstacles to loving one's father.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps for this reason, the *Mencius* makes filial piety the explicit content of education: "(...) teach them duties proper to sons and younger brothers." (*Mencius* 1A.5 and 1A.7). Thus, despite the rhetoric about lessons in filial piety being unnecessary for any child carried in its parents' arms, both texts insist that filial behavior must be taught.

But if filial behavior must be taught, there are problems with determining who must teach it. Mencius, like Confucius himself, faced doubts about whether men should educate their own sons. Such "home-schooling" was risky for father/son intimacy because the morals it aimed to teach included loving the father who did the teaching. The *Mencius* provides a clear statement of the problem. In explaining why the gentleman rejects this role, Mencius is recorded as saying that it is because in the nature of things:

(...) it will not work. A teacher necessarily resorts to correction, and if correction produces no effect, he will end up by losing his temper. When this happens, father and son will hurt each other instead. "You teach me by correcting me, but you yourself are not correct." So father and son hurt each other, and it is bad that such a thing should happen. In antiquity people taught one another's sons. Father and son should not demand goodness from each other. To do so will estrange them, and there is nothing more inauspicious than estrangement between father and son. (*Mencius* 4A.18)<sup>5</sup>

explaining the idea of a child's inevitable love for its parents: "Familial feelings for one's family is *ren*. Respecting elders is *yi*."

- 4 Aside from potential quarrels with fathers who try to take on the role of teachers, both the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi* imply that conflicts with one's parents take place with the adult development of sexual desire, which threatens to replace the love of one's parents. See for example: *Mencius* 5A1 (cited above) and *Xunzi* 23/76, "When a man has both his wife and child, the filial obligations that he observes towards his parents decrease." Perhaps, as Anne Kinney argues, there is a difference between a child's love for his parents and an adult's filial behavior (which entails providing for them—something a child cannot do), and the latter is what is learned. Kinney argues that in the Han dynasty, *xiao* really refers to something only an adult child can do, not a young child (i.e. care for parents) *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995) 33.
- 5 Lau translation, *Mencius* D. C. Lau translation, (Baltimore MD: Penguin Books, 1970) p.125.

The point is repeated in *Mencius* 4B.30, where a father and son's quarrel over a moral issue prompts Mencius to say, "It is for friends to demand goodness from each other. For father and son to do so seriously undermines the love between them." The same concern may be operative in the interrogation of Confucius' son in *Lunyu* 16/13, which shows Confucius to be quite unaware of the progress of his son's education.<sup>6</sup> Yet the end of the *Lunyu* passage looks ironic in terms of the motive in *Mencius* 4A.18 of avoiding estrangement between father and son. It concludes, "a gentleman keeps a distance from his son." Thus, in the interests of avoiding estrangement, they become distant.<sup>7</sup> At best, in this early tradition, the Confucian father guides his son's education only from a distance.

The *Xunzi* shows the Confucian father educating the son, but only with emotional detachment. It suggests that the father does in fact teach the son. In a passage that explains how the ruler can be both father and mother of the people, the *Xunzi* says:

The father can beget the child but he cannot suckle (*yang*) it. The mother can feed (*shi*) the child but is unable to instruct and correct it. The lord not only is able to feed (*shi*) his people, but is adept at teaching and correcting them. (*Xunzi* 19/110)<sup>8</sup>

Although this does not directly address whether the father can teach the child, in saying that the mother cannot, it does not rule out the possibil-

6 Confucius seems to be in a position of having to ask his son whether he has studied the Rites or the Odes.

7 Incidentally, the maxim is taken up by later Confucians with some discomfort. For example, Tu Wei-ming enjoins his readers: "The sternness of the father image in Confucian culture must not be confused with aloofness or indifference. The father is not supposed to be physically close to the son. (...) Nevertheless, the father remains intimate with the son as his constant companion in the most critical stages of his development. The caring father guides the son's education, oversees his maturation, assists in his marriage arrangements and prepares him for his career." Yet, even Tu's rehabilitative formulation of the position does not identify the father as the son's teacher. Tu Wei-ming, "Selfhood and Otherness in Confucian Thought" in *Culture and Self*, Anthony J. Marsella, George DeVos and Francis L. K. Hsu, eds., (New York: Tavistock, 1985), 244.

8 Knoblock translation modified. Knoblock takes both *shi* and *yang* as "suckle," because he takes *yang* to be a graphic error for *shi*, citing Yang Liang, and citing Wang Niansun for interpreting *shi* as "suckle." More on this below. Knoblock, *Xunzi* vol. III p.71.

ity for the father. Moreover, the fact that, *as father and mother of the people*, the ruler *can* teach and correct, suggests that teaching is actually the role of the father. The interpretation is reinforced by another passage that speaks of the noble person teaching his sons and brothers.<sup>9</sup> However, like the *Lunyu*, the *Xunzi* portrays the father's affect as distant, "In his relations with his son, the noble person loves him, but does not show it on his face." (*Xunzi* 27/17) Thus, the *Xunzi* allows that fathers should teach—in fact that it is their role—as long as it is done without showing any signs of affection. In the attempt to instill parental love, the loving bond between fathers and sons is the weak link in the system.

Relations between mothers and sons seem much stronger. In the *Mencius*, *qizi* ("wife and kids") is a set phrase. While it represents a patriarchal perspective to see a man's wife and children as inseparable in this sense, there seems to be no reason to doubt that the two were in fact usually together. For instance, Mencius complains of a ruler who "separates" wives and children, while not allowing fathers "to see" their sons. (2A.6) As the difference between not being together versus not seeing one another indicates, women and their children experience less distance to begin with. Moreover, other texts from early China appear to support this. For instance, a poem from the *Shijing* might indicate the extent of the mother's bond—in contrast to the father, whose sole responsibility in this view seems limited to his role in the sex act. It says, "Oh father, you begat me, oh mother, you nourished me [*jū*]; you comforted me, you cherished me, you brought me up, you reared me [*xū*], you looked after me, constantly attended to me abroad and at home you carried me in your bosom."<sup>10</sup> So too in the *Han Feizi*, love is what defines a mother's relation to her children. By contrast, fathers are credited with teaching (*jiao*), which entails being light on love but not on punishment. The *Han Feizi* says:

Mothers love sons with deep love, but most of the sons are spoilt  
for their love is over-extended; fathers show their sons less love

- 9 According to *Xunzi* 25/17, "below [the *junzi*] instructs and corrects his children and younger brothers, above he serves his grandfather and father."
- 10 Mao #202, Karlgren translation. I take it the comforting, cherishing, carrying etc. all refer to the actions of the mother, though it is possible to read these as referring to both parents. Bernhard Karlgren *The Book of Odes: Chinese Text, Transcription and Translation* (Stockholm: The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1974) 152–53.

and teach them with light bamboos, but most of the sons turn out well, for severity is applied. (*Han Feizi* 18/46)<sup>11</sup>

The terms are the same as those in the *Xunzi*: motherly love contrasts with fatherly teaching. Thus the mother's role is to love and feed. Mothers do not teach, which means presumably they do not alienate themselves from their children in the same way fathers do.

Again, according to the *Xunzi* 19/110, fathers cannot *yang* their children, although they can educate them; while their mothers cannot educate, but can feed. There is no reason for the *Xunzi* to say that the father is *incapable* of *yang*, unless the word means suckle. It would be extremely strange for the passage to deny that fathers are capable of providing nourishment in any broader sense.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the fact that the father cannot *yang* is only understandable if the character is taken to refer to breast-feeding. The fact that, immediately after this claim, the passage refers to wet nursing supports the idea that the topic is suckling. It goes on to say:

Yet mourning for him [the ruler] reaches the third year and ends.

A wet nurse's [literally, "breast-mother"] giving the child drink and food gets three months mourning,

A nanny's [literally "kind-mother"] clothing the child gets nine months,

But the ruler's doing everything only extends until the third year! (*Xunzi* 19/111–112)

Mothering here is split into two functions—suckling and clothing—with suckling seeming the more basic of the two. Although the actual mother is not the agent of either action, the text understands these to be maternal roles, as the two names indicate. Thus again what mothering primarily connotes is suckling, which is what the father cannot do. The refer-

11 Liao translation. The *Han Feizi* also says: "Mothers love children twice as much as fathers do, but a father enforces orders among children ten times better than a mother does." Academia Sinica on-line text p. 950; Liao translation, W. K. Liao, *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*, (London: Probsthain, 1939) vol. II p. 241.

12 Rather than read *shi* as a graphic mistake for *yang*, as Knoblock does, I think the meaning of the terms are similar—it is the same thing that the father cannot do but the mother can. However, in an extended sense, a male can do it, since the passage credits the ruler with the ability to *shi/feed*.

ence to women feeding (*jū*), as distinct from rearing (*xū*), in the *Shijing*, makes that seem a likely reading. Moreover, as Keith Knapp argues, in a story from the *Hou Hanshu*, *yang* appears as part of a compound term referring to a man's miraculous ability to suckle an infant. In the story Li Shan, a filial servant with no means to nurse his master's infant, miraculously manages to supply milk from his own breasts, "[Li Shan] himself suckled (*buyang*) him; on behalf of [the infant] his breasts produced milk."<sup>13</sup> Although the text is from a later period, here the term *buyang* combines *bu*—a bird's regurgitation—with *yang* to indicate breast feeding. Thus, on these grounds, the role that fathers cannot perform is likely to be breast feeding and also likely to be the one thing attributed to mothers; hence mothers' suckling is juxtaposed to the love-threatening process of teaching.

More importantly, this means that mothers have a bond with the child that is apparently outside the scope of human education. There is a certain amount of ambiguity in the *Xunzi* concerning whether animals (who lack the benefit of education) feel enough familial love to manifest filial piety. In one case, the *Xunzi* begins by saying that all animals exhibit strong bonds with their mates and groups:

Having awareness [all creatures] love their own kinds. Consider the case of large birds and animals: if one loses its mate or is separated from its group, then even after a month or season has passed, it is sure to circle when it passes its old home. It looks about, round and round, crying and calling, sometimes moving, sometimes stopping, gazing about uncertainly and hesitantly, before it can leave the place. Even small birds like swallows and sparrows chatter and cry for a few moments before they can leave. (*Xunzi* 19/97–100)<sup>14</sup>

Yet, without ever mentioning parents in this description of creatures with awareness, the passage concludes that humans, as the most aware of animals, must also be the most filial:

13 *Hou Hanshu* 71.2679. As Knapp notes, a second version of the story in *Diaoyu ji* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936, 12.46–47) makes it clear that Heaven produced this miracle. Knapp, "Creeping Absolutism: Parental Authority as seen in Early Medieval Tales of Filial Offspring," forthcoming in *Cultures of Authority in Asia* (SUNY Press).

14 Knoblock translation modified, *Xunzi* vol. III p.70.



Hence since no creature with blood and breath has more awareness than human beings, the feeling of human beings for their parents is not exhausted even till death. (...) Will we follow after those stupid provincials and depraved humans who by evening have forgotten a parent who died in the morning? And if we indulge in such behavior are we not lower than even these birds and beasts? (19/100–101)<sup>15</sup>

However, technically, according to *this* passage, we would not be lower than animals if we forgot our deceased parents, since the passage only notes animals' nostalgia for their *mates* and their *groups*. In fact, in another passage the *Xunzi* contradicts any suggestion that animals mourn their parents, saying "(...) if one should have to bury one's revered parent and if in attending to the ceremonies of the funeral one shows neither grief nor respect, then one has conducted oneself as a beast would."<sup>16</sup> The implication is not that beasts bury their parents without grief, but that they do not do so at all. It is as if the *Xunzi's* authors *want* to use animal behavior to shame humans into behaving filially, but cannot quite bring themselves to contend that animals develop strong relations with their parents. For example, the *Xunzi* also claims that, "Wild animals have fathers and sons, but lack father-and-son affection." (*Xunzi* 5/27)<sup>17</sup>

But perhaps the gender here is significant. Animal mothers in the *Xunzi* who nurse their children, like the sow and the bitch, come across as quite affectionate with their young, and presumably their young reciprocate. Indeed, if we are to reconcile these claims that a) *animals have no affection between father and son*; and b) *humans are lower than beasts if we forget our dead parents*, the most ready solution is that animals *do* recognize their mothers who nursed them, but not their fathers. This might lead the authors of the *Xunzi* to the position that the mother/child bond, based on feeding, is natural. Such a view would be consistent with the fact that, as *Xunzi* 19/111 (above) notes, there is a prescribed period of mourning for wet nurses—i.e. this natural function

15 Knoblock translation modified, *Xunzi* vol. III p.70.

16 Knoblock translation, *Xunzi* vol. III p.65.

17 *Mencius* 3B.9 implicitly makes the same point: "To ignore one's father on the one hand, and one's prince on the other, is to be no different from the beasts." The omission of mothers here may indicate their unimportance, but it is also possible that in the view of the *Mencius*, ignoring one's mother is something even beasts do not do.

itself, even if it is not done by the mother, constitutes the ordinary relationship to be mourned. In sum, the mother-child bond is rooted in an animal feeding process outside the scope of male education.

Perhaps for this reason—capitalizing on the closeness of the mother/child bond—the *Mencius* adopts feeding as the best way to express filial love. That is, in the *Mencius*, aside from funerary rituals, food behaviors are the most frequently cited examples of filial love.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the *Mencius* relates two stories involving the filial hero Zengzi's dietary habits. *Mencius* 4A.19 describes how Zengzi shows himself to be superior to his own son in filial feeding. When Zengzi feeds his aging father, in addition to supplying him with ample food, he always says that there are leftovers to share. (By contrast, Zengyuan denies the existence of leftovers.) *Mencius* 7B.36 takes up another aspect of Zengzi's filial food virtue. In this case, Zengzi goes out of his way to avoid jujubes.<sup>19</sup> When asked to explain his odd avoidance, Mencius points out that Zengzi banned the unusual food that his father preferred, rather than banning ordinary foods, the fondness for which his father might have shared with others. The *Mencius*' examples of virtuous food behavior also extend to elder brothers.<sup>20</sup> In *Mencius* 6B.1, as an example of non-filial behavior, Mencius supplies the case of twisting an elder brother's arm to get food. The *Mencius* does acknowledge that principled eating has its limits—3B.10 relates the story of the man who throws up his brother's goose because he thinks his wealth is ill gotten, which Mencius cites as an example of taking principles to an extreme. However, even this story advances the point that in the *Mencius* food is the locus of filial virtue.<sup>21</sup> Thus it seems the *Mencius* adapts the feeding role of mothers to supplement the fathers' problematic attempts to teach their sons to love them.

- 18 Perhaps, the fact that funeral rituals can only take place rarely (i.e. when a parent dies) gives extra prominence to feeding rituals, which can be practiced regularly.
- 19 Legge translates this as "sheep dates," citing Zhuxi's comment that these small black Northern fruits take their name from their resemblance to "sheep's dirt." James Legge *The Works of Mencius* (New York: Dover 1970, reprint of Oxford: Clarendon Press 1895).
- 20 *Mencius* 7A.15 clearly links elder/younger male sibling relations to the filiality of father/son relations. After noting that no children fail to love their parents, it says: "As they grow, none do not know respect for their elder brothers."
- 21 The *Mencius*' concern about feeding also extends to cases that involve virtues other than filial piety. Both the discussion of bear palms and the discussion of rice served with scorn in *Mencius* 6A.10 present eating as the privileged site of a generic type of virtue.

The significance of this emphasis in the *Mencius* can be seen by comparison to the *Xunzi*, which contains barely any filial food narratives. Most references to food in the *Xunzi* appear in lists—along with clothing and beautiful ornaments—of things that everyone desires but the ruler alone possesses in abundance. The text describes a food sacrifice for the ancestors (*Xunzi* 19/19–23) and notes that, under Confucius' influence, youngsters who went fishing allotted more fish to those with parents to support (*Xunzi* 8/16–17). But with these minor exceptions, none of the food references in the text are directed towards making a filial point. In *Xunzi* 29/15, Confucius teaches Zilu a lesson about a man who plows, weeds, sows, and plants for his parents without ever earning a reputation for being filial. In his description of filial behavior, the *Xunzi*'s Confucius mentions respectful relations, conciliatory speech, and cordial expression, but neither he nor Zilu connects filiality to feeding.

More remarkably, in comparison with other *Ru* texts, the *Xunzi* seems to actively evade opportunities to use food stories as examples of filial piety. For instance, in an explanation of rules for eating, the *Mencius* supplies an elder and younger brother as an example, whereas the *Xunzi* makes the subject an elder and younger man. That is, in order to show that propriety is important in eating, *Mencius* 6B.1 poses the example of a man's reluctance to get food from his elder brother by twisting his arm. The comparable passage in the *Xunzi* simply notes that a younger person will wait for an elder person before eating. It says:

(...) now, when a person sees someone older and he will not dare to eat before him, it is because of deferring [to others]. When he is weary from work, and he does not presume to ask for rest, it is because of relieving [others].

The passage concludes:

A son's deference to his father and a younger brother's deference to his elder brother, a son's relieving his father of work and a younger brother's relieving his elder brother—these two modes of conduct are both contrary to *xing* and contradict his *qing*. (*Xunzi* 23/18–19)<sup>22</sup>

In light of its conclusion, the passage does generally aim to describe filial

22. Knoblock translation modified, *Xunzi* vol. III p.153.

behavior. Nevertheless, it explicitly cites doing a father or elder brother's work as filial, while relegating restraint in eating to respect for elders.

Also tellingly, in contrast to the *Mencius*, the *Xunzi* contains only one story about Zengzi and food, which says:

Master Zeng ate some fish, but had leftovers. He said, "Put rice water over it." A disciple replied, "Putting rice water over it may harm you; it would be better to cook it." Master Zeng wept, saying, "How could I have had so aberrant a mind as not to realize this!" He was hurt that he had heard this so late in life. (*Xunzi* 27/124–125)<sup>23</sup>

Like the story of Zengzi in *Mencius* 4A.19, this one also concerns leftovers, but the filial context is entirely absent. Instead of worrying about the proper way to serve leftovers to a parent, Zengzi in the *Xunzi* is worried about food poisoning.

Similarly, the *Xunzi* and the *Liji* use the same phrase in reference to eating plain food, but in the *Liji* the phrase signifies filial feeding whereas in the *Xunzi* it does not. In the *Liji*, Zilu says, "To be poor is suffering indeed." To which Confucius replies, "When gulping down only a porridge of beans and drinking only water completely satisfy him, such a man may properly be called 'filial.'"<sup>24</sup> The *Xunzi* uses exact same description of eating in a criticism of Mozi's policies. It says, "Although Mozi would have it that one wear clothes of coarsest cloth and only a twisted rope and a sash, gulp down only a porridge of beans and drink only water, how could this be enough?" (10/59) Thus, rather than praising this simple diet as filial food, the *Xunzi* employs it to critique extremism.

This reluctance to connect diet to filial piety seems to reflect a specific cluster of ideas in the *Xunzi* about eating and feeding as animalistic.<sup>25</sup> The *Xunzi* describes dogs and boars as greedy eaters: "quarrelling over food and drink" and "only aware of food and drink." (*Xunzi* 4/17) Indeed, the *Xunzi* seems to say that this greed is rooted in an indiscriminate attitude among animals about what they eat—a notion that the

23 Knoblock translation, *Xunzi* vol. III p.234.

24 *Liji* 3, 10.2a. The passage is cited and explained by Knoblock. *Xunzi* vol II p.306.

25 This is not to say that all of the *Xunzi*'s comments about animals are as negative as the term "animalistic" implies. In fact, the *Xunzi* cites animals in many neutral and positive ways. But the eating habits of animals in the *Xunzi* (and the *Mencius*) do fit the tone of the term "animalistic."

*Xunzi* indicates by imagining an ideal time of the sage kings in which animals might actually reject ordinary food as substandard.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the ability to eat with discrimination seems to be one of the determining characteristics of humans, according to the *Xunzi*. The *Xunzi* offers the fact that we eat apes as proof that not all featherless bipeds are human:

What makes a man really human lies not primarily in his being a featherless biped, but rather in his ability to draw boundaries. For example, the Shengsheng ape resembles man in form and is also a featherless biped, but the gentleman will nonetheless sip a broth and eat minced meat made from him. Hence what makes him human lies not in his being a featherless biped but in his ability to draw boundaries. (5/26)<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the fact that we eat our fellow-featherless-bipeds is not a sign of a failure to discriminate in eating our own kind.<sup>28</sup> If we take this “hence” seriously, the principle here is—if we eat it, it cannot be human, and if it is human, we do not eat it. Thus, the *Xunzi* suggests that discrimination in eating is human and any indiscriminate eating behavior in humans is reminiscent of animals.

The animalistic aspect of feeding may be heightened by the sense in which nursing amounts to a kind of cannibalism, since, according to the *Xunzi*, not eating one’s own kind is part of what distinguishes humans from animals. The lack of discrimination that the *Xunzi* attributes to animal eating habits is perceived as most heinous in that it permits them to dine on one another. There seems to be a general concern about this in both the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*. Indeed, the *Mencius* deems it to be the reason why humans loathe animals. (*Mencius* 1A.4 says, “Beasts eat one another, and thus humans hate them.”) The *Xunzi* links this willingness to eat one’s own kind with the evils of Jie of Zhou. In describing these despicable humans as animals, the *Xunzi* indicts them for cannibalism. It says:

26 Literally, “dogs and pigs throw up at beans and millet” *Xunzi* 18/83.

27 Knoblock translation, *Xunzi* vol. I p.206.

28 The passage goes on to note that animals fail to discriminate between father and son, and males and females, but that does not really affect the circularity of this part of the argument.

How bestial is their [Jie and Zhou] conduct, and their avarice is like tigers and wolves! Thus, they will “make dried meat out of great men” and “roast infants on spits” (...) Those kind of men would eat his [a buried man’s] flesh and gnaw on his bones with their teeth. (*Xunzi* 18/91)<sup>29</sup>

In addition to disgust about cannibalism, a fear of being eaten (by animals or humans) seems to lurk behind this condemnation.<sup>30</sup> The *Xunzi* cites, among its examples of external disgrace, being “quartered and hacked apart and made into diced dried meat” (*Xunzi* 18/108)<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in addition to its anxiety about humans being eaten, the *Xunzi* seems uncomfortable with the very idea of nursing. In spite of its frequent citation of the cliché that the ruler should treat the people like an infant, the *Xunzi* seems oddly opposed to what appears to be a description of such infantile care on the part of the ruler. It condemns this as attempting “to steal an ephemeral renown” and calls it a thieving way:

To pet and *yang* the people, to make a fuss over them, babbling and prattling as with a child, to make a thick rice gruel for them on winter days and in summer to give them melons and pudding in order to steal an ephemeral renown—this is a thieving way.

The passage concludes:

Thus in antiquity, men did not act in this way. They caused the people in summer not to suffer from the oppressive heat of the sun and in winter not to freeze from coldness. They did not through haste impair people’s strength, nor through delay did they initiate projects after the proper season. (*Xunzi* 10/71)<sup>32</sup>

And so on. In other words, the passage ends without any description of how the rulers in antiquity provided food to their people, other than assigning seasonally-timed projects that presumably would not alter

29 Knoblock translation, *Xunzi* vol. III p.44.

30 The *Mencius* also shows fear of being eaten by animals. It credits the fear of being eaten by foxes with originating human burial (3A.5) and it expresses another fear that current rulers are leading animals to devour humans (1A.4).

31 Knoblock translation, *Xunzi* vol. III p.46.

32 Knoblock translation modified, emphasis added, *Xunzi* vol. II p.131.

natural food production.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the *Xunzi* does not seem fond of what it sees as “coddling” infants.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, while the *Xunzi* never quite says that breast-feeding is a model that might encourage children to eat human beings, it does express a fear of being eaten by animals, while it also condemns animals for eating their own kind. In addition, it shows distaste for infantile nursing and coddling and it aligns women’s suckling with an animalistic nature that must be replaced by education.

In this way, the absence of feeding narratives in the *Xunzi* and its distaste for maternal suckling makes the emphasis on such narratives in the *Mencius* more apparent. This contrast in the texts seems to confirm that the *Mencius* makes a particular choice in emphasizing feeding as way to express filial piety. It is a choice that in later times seems to lead to the very things the *Xunzi* might fear. As Knapp’s work on filial feeding in medieval China shows, stories of filial behavior took on a certain cannibalistic quality. Medieval tales feature sons who suck the pus out of their parents’ wounds, eat their vomit and sample their feces.<sup>35</sup> There is evidence that both males and females masticated food for infants and children well past infancy.<sup>36</sup> In return, children did become something like their parents’ wet nurses—accepting the task of masticating food

33 Another passage (*Xunzi* 27/111) notes that the worthy in antiquity also just ate congee and gruel, like the poor people, hence arguably the *Xunzi* opposes the excess represented by rice gruel, melons, and pudding, but this idealization of the ancient rulers conflicts with the assertion in *Xunzi* 11/47 that the ruler understandably gets the best of all things to eat. In any case, the coddling tone that *Xunzi* 10/71 rejects is unmistakable.

34 In fact, the *Xunzi* does not seem all that fond of infants themselves. *Xunzi* 23/16 is notoriously unimpressed by the innocence of infantile simplicity, as it critiques those who maintain that the *xing* is good based on praising whatever has not departed from *pu*. Moreover, the *Xunzi* 19/111–112 seems to speak with slight indignation about the allotment of time for mourning, when it contrasts someone as insignificant as a wet nurse with someone as important as the ruler.

35 Citing stories from the *Taiping yulan*, Knapp writes, “Filial sons, thus, do distasteful, even appalling things to restore or ensure their parent’s health, such as sucking pus out of wounds, tasting vomit, or sampling feces.” “Reverent Caring: The Parent-Son Relationship in Early Medieval Tales of Filial Offspring” in *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History*, Alan K. L. Chan and Sor-hoon Tan, eds., New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004) 51.

36 Knapp (2004) 59.

for aged parents with no teeth.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as Knapp argues, the models for this filial feeding was animals, in particular crows, who according to the stories masticate food for their aged parents in return for being fed as infants. Thus maternal animal feeding provided the bonds that taught men's sons how to love them.

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37 Knapp, 2004, 59. Charlotte Furth makes the point about infant feeding in "From Birth to Birth" in ed. Anne Kinney *Chinese Views of Childhood*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995) 188.