



GenEd1091



Week 5 Mencius

GenEd1091: Classical Chinese Philosophy and Political Theory



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Share your favorite passage from the *Mengzi*



Human Nature



Mengzi, 2A6 Mengzi said, “Humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others. The former kings had hearts that were not unfeeling toward others, so they had governments that were not unfeeling toward others. If one puts into practice a government that is not unfeeling toward others by means of a heart that is not unfeeling toward others, bringing order to the whole world is in the palm of your hand.



Human Nature



Mengzi, 2A6 “The reason why I say that humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child’s parents, not because one wanted fame among their neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child’s cries.



If you suddenly see a baby about to fall into a well, how would you feel?



Human Nature



“From this we can see that if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of disdain, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of deference, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of approval and disapproval, one is not a human. The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The heart of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The heart of deference is the sprout of propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom.



Benevolence



Righteousness



Propriety



Wisdom



Human Nature: A Willow Tree



6A1 Gaozi said, “Human nature is like a willow tree; righteousness is like cups and bowls. To make human nature benevolent and righteous is like making a willow tree into cups and bowls.”

Mengzi said, “Can you, sir, following the nature of the willow tree, make it into cups and bowls? You must violate and rob the willow tree, and only then can you make it into cups and bowls. If you must violate and rob the willow tree in order to make it into cups and bowls, must you also violate and rob people in order to make them benevolent and righteous? If there is something that leads people to regard benevolence and righteousness as misfortunes for them, it will surely be your doctrine, will it not?”





The proper role of government



Mengzi, 1A1

Mengzi had an audience with King Hui of Liang. The King said, “Sir, you have come, not regarding one thousand *li* as too far. Surely you will have something to profit my state?”

Mengzi said in response, “**Why must Your Majesty say ‘profit’?** Let there be benevolence and righteousness and that is all. Your Majesty says, ‘How can my state be profited?’ The Counselors say, ‘How can my family be profited?’ The scholars and commoners say, ‘How can I be profited?’ **Those above and those below mutually compete for profit and the state is endangered.**

“In a case where the ruler of a state that can field ten thousand chariots is murdered, it must be by a family that can field a thousand chariots. In a case where the ruler of a state that can field a thousand chariots is murdered, it must be by a family that can field a hundred chariots. One thousand out of ten thousand, or one hundred out of a thousand, cannot be considered to not be a lot. But if righteousness is put behind and profit is put ahead, one will not be satisfied without grasping from others.

“There have never been those who were benevolent who abandoned their parents. There have never been those who were righteous who put their ruler last. Let Your Majesty say, ‘Benevolence and righteousness,’ and that is all. Why must you say ‘profit’?”



Consequences for rulers who do not live up to their responsibility

Mengzi, 1B6

Mengzi spoke to King Xuan of Qi, saying, “If, among Your Majesty’s ministers, there were one who entrusted his wife and children to his friend, and traveled to the state of Chu, and when he returned, he discovered that his friend had let his wife and children become cold and hungry—how should one deal with this?”

The King said, “Abandon him.”

Mengzi said, “If the sergeant-at-arms is not able to keep order among the scholars, how should one deal with this?”

The King said, “Discharge him.”

Mengzi said, “If the region within the four borders is not well-ordered, then how should one deal with this?” The King turned toward his attendants and changed the topic.



A Genuine/Compassionate King



Mengzi, 1A7

The King was sitting up in his hall. There was an ox being led past below. The King saw it and said, ‘Where is the ox going?’ Someone responded, ‘We are about to consecrate a bell with its blood.’ The King said, ‘Spare it. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground.’ Someone responded, ‘So should we abandon the consecrating of the bell?’ The King said, ‘How can that be abandoned? Exchange it for a sheep.’”

Mengzi said, “... You saw the ox but had not seen the sheep. As for the relation of gentlemen to birds and beasts, if they see them living, they cannot bear to see them die. If they hear their cries, they cannot bear to eat their flesh. Hence, gentlemen keep their distance from the kitchen.

...

In the present case, your kindness is sufficient to reach birds and beasts, but the benefits do not reach the commoners. Why is this case alone different? Hence, not lifting one feather is due to not using one’s strength. Not seeing a wagon of firewood is due to not using one’s eyesight. The commoners not receiving care is due to not using one’s kindness. Hence, Your Majesty’s not being a genuine king is **due to not acting; it is not due to not being able.**”



Extending Benevolence



Mengzi, 1A7 [continue from the ox and sheep example]

Mengzi said, ... “Treat your elders as elders, and extend it to the elders of others; treat your young ones as young ones, and extend it to the young ones of others; then you can turn the whole world in the palm of your hand. The *Odes* say,

He set an example for his wife,

It extended to his brothers,

And so, he controlled his family and state.

This means that he simply took this feeling and applied it to that. Hence, if one extends one’s kindness, it will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas. If one does not extend one’s kindness, one will lack the wherewithal to care for one’s wife and children. That in which the ancients greatly exceeded others was no other than this. They were simply good at extending what they did. In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach birds and beasts, but the benefits do not reach the commoners.



Extending Benevolence



Mengzi, 7A15

Mengzi said, “That which people are capable of without studying is their best capability. That which they know without pondering is their best knowledge.

“Among babes in arms there is none that does not know to love its parents. When they grow older, there is none that does not know to respect its elder brother. Treating one’s parents as parents is benevolence. Respecting one’s elders is righteousness. There is nothing else to do but extend these to the world.”



Extending Benevolence vs. Impartiality



How does Mozi's "impartial caring" differ from Mencius's extended benevolence?

Aspect	Mozi's Impartiality	Mencius's Extending Benevolence
Core Principle		
Natural Human Tendencies		
Practical Approach		
Human Nature		
Ultimate Goal		



Summary: Human Nature

Mencius compares humans to water by contending that “there is no water that does not trend downwards” just like “there is no human who does not trend towards goodness” (*Mengzi*, pg. 145). Mencius thus argues that humans naturally trend towards being good, akin to how water naturally behaves the laws of gravity and flows downward barring external factors. However, simply the trend of inherently flowing towards goodness does not guarantee that all humans will be good. He continues that one can make water “remain on a mountaintop ... by damming it” (*Mengzi*, pg. 145). The intrinsic tendency of water can be impeded due to “circumstances” of external intervention. Moreover, Mencius draws a parallel between water and humans as he contends “humans can be caused to not be good due to their nature also being [hindered by certain circumstances]” (*Mengzi*, pg. 145). Thus, through similar interference, Mencius argues that the natural tendency of humans to trend towards goodness can also be impeded by particular circumstances. In saying that human nature’s tendency towards goodness is the same as water’s tendency to flow down, Mencius is also suggesting that goodness is our nature’s ‘path of least resistance.’ As it is easier and natural for water to flow down, it is more natural and easier for humans to be good.



Summary: The Four Sprouts

Mencius asserts that there are four “sprouts” (*Mengzi*, 2A6) that define human nature: he parallels a “heart of compassion” with the “sprout of benevolence”, a “heart of disdain” with the “sprout of righteousness”, a “heart of deference” with the “sprout of propriety”, and “the heart of approval and disapproval” with the “sprout of wisdom” (*Mengzi*, 2A6). By defining each sprout with more accessible emotions such as “compassion” and “disdain,” Mencius concisely delineates and defines what he believes to be the fundamentals of all humans. Mencius moreover claims that not being good does not indicate a lack of these sprouts; rather, if we are not-good, “It is simply that we do not reflect upon them,” (*Mengzi*, pg. 148). That is to say, even a not-good person has the potential for goodness.



Summary: Heart - mind

Mencius claims that all humans are innately endowed with four key attributes that are defining traits of humanity. Referring to these attributes as “hearts,” Mencius demonstrates that they are inherent qualities; denying a person’s heart is to deny his humanity itself. He begins by explaining how all people instinctively react to the sight of a child falling into a well with shock and apprehension, not for a selfish reason such as the desire for fame or the wish to avoid hearing a child’s cries, but simply because it causes distress to one’s sense of compassion for other human beings. He continues to say that compassion is one “heart” of human nature—along with disdain, deference, and approval—without which one “is not a human” (Mencius, 2A6, 125). Mencius then argues that these “hearts” form “sprouts” that give each person the ability to be virtuous. This is a key component of Mencius’s conception of human nature because he believes it is therefore impossible to dismiss any person as incapable of virtue. All that must be done is to “fill them out” – doing so will be sufficient to “care for all within the Four Seas,” i.e., to cultivate one’s internal sprouts is paramount to achieving life’s purpose.



Summary: Righteousness

While arguing with his rival philosopher Chunyu Kun, Mencius points out that “the core of righteousness is obeying one’s elder brother” (Mengzi, pg. 134). As Mencius considers righteousness to be one of our four sprouts, following rituals does not necessarily grant righteousness since some might not reflect the true individual character. Thus, little things such as respecting and treating our elders well can help ‘grow’ a person’s righteousness.



Summary: Benevolence

When discussing the topic of benevolence and good nature of humans, Mencius argues that “all humans have hearts that are not unfeeling towards others” (2A6, 125). To support this argument, Mencius provides the example of someone seeing a child falling into a well and that anyone in that such situation would have the same feeling of alarm and compassion to save that infant (2A6, 125). He argues that if someone did not act in this way, meaning that they lacked a heart of compassion, then they would not be human (2A6, 125).



Summary: Qi (and ‘floodlike qi’)

Mencius believed that people could receive satisfaction through righteousness if they possessed “floodlike qi” (2A2). Mencius claims that qi is “that which fills up the body” when one has a strong resolution (*Mengzi*, 100). Strong resolutions lead to strong qi; righteous actions completed with strong resolution then creates “floodlike qi” that is “supremely great and supremely unyielding” (*Mengzi*, 100). According to Mencius, this floodlike qi then “can fill up the space between Heaven and earth” (2A2). In other words, righteousness can become one with The Way through determination. However, “if some of one’s actions leave one’s heart unsatisfied, it [qi] will starve” (2A2).



Summary: A Genuine King

When asked by Xuan what one must do to be a genuine king, Mengzi responded with, “One cares for the people and becomes a king,” decisively concluding: “This is something no one can stop” (*Mengzi*, 119). In other words, a genuine king is someone who follows goodness and is thus followed by the people. Mengzi follows with a story about the king, who spares an ox on its way to the slaughterhouse. Mengzi suggests that “this feeling” or compassion is “sufficient to be a king” (1A7, pg 115), if only he would extend that compassion to his subjects. Here, Mengzi is arguing that becoming a genuine king comes from caring for one’s subjects. Furthermore, Mengzi argues that becoming a genuine king is not in the control of one person, but rather an automatic process based on the potential ruler’s inherent qualities. The passivity of becoming a genuine king is explained more in depth when Mengzi tells Xuan, “Suppose Your Majesty were to bestow benevolence in governing. This would cause all under Heaven who serve others to all want to take their place in Your Majesty’s court” (*Mengzi*, 122). Mengzi appears to think that the people will, of their own volition, turn to the kindest, most benevolent ruler.



Post a reflection on Ed

- Prompt: Apply **one** concept from the *Mengzi* to a real-world scenario and share your thoughts. You may either agree or disagree with Mengzi's ideas.
- Post it on Ed Discussion under “Sections” and “Week 5 Mengzi”
- Submit the link of your post under Assignment
- If you can't finish it by the end of the section, please finish it by the end of the day.