

# Mencius

*Translated with an Introduction and Notes by*  
D. C. LAU

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## BOOK VI · PART A

1. Kao Tzu said, 'Human nature is like the *ch'i* willow. Dutifulness is like cups and bowls. To make morality out of human nature is like making cups and bowls out of the willow.'

'Can you,' said Mencius, 'make cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow? Or must you mutilate the willow before you can make it into cups and bowls? If you have to mutilate the willow to make it into cups and bowls, must you, then, also mutilate a man to make him moral? Surely it will be these words of yours men in the world will follow in bringing disaster upon morality.'

2. Kao Tzu said, 'Human nature is like whirling water. Give it an outlet in the east and it will flow east; give it an outlet in the west and it will flow west. Human nature does not show any preference for either good or bad just as water does not show any preference for either east or west.'

'It certainly is the case,' said Mencius, 'that water does not show any preference for either east or west, but does it show the same indifference to high and low? Human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards.'

'Now in the case of water, by splashing it one can make it shoot up higher than one's forehead, and by forcing it one can make it stay on a hill. How can that be the nature of water? It is the circumstances being what they are. That man can be made bad shows that his nature is no different from that of water in this respect.'

3. Kao Tzu said, 'That which is inborn is what is meant by "nature".'

'Is that,' said Mencius, 'the same as "white is what is meant by 'white'"?'<sup>1</sup>

'Yes.'

'Is the whiteness of white feathers the same as the whiteness of white snow and the whiteness of white snow the same as the whiteness of white jade?'

'Yes.'

'In that case, is the nature of a hound the same as the nature of an ox and the nature of an ox the same as the nature of a man?'

4. Kao Tzu said, 'Appetite for food and sex is nature. Benevolence is internal, not external; rightness is external, not internal.'

'Why do you say,' said Mencius, 'that benevolence is internal and rightness is external?'

'That man there is old and I treat him as elder. He owes nothing of his elderliness to me, just as in treating him as white because he is white I only do so because of his whiteness which is external to me. That is why I call it external.'

'The case of rightness is different from that of whiteness. "Treating as white" is the same whether one is treating a horse as white or a man as white. But I wonder if you would think that "treating as old" is the same whether one is treating a horse as old or a man as elder? Furthermore, is it the one who is old that is dutiful, or is it the one who treats him as elder that is dutiful?'

'My brother I love, but the brother of a man from Ch'in I do not love. This means that the explanation<sup>o</sup> lies in me. Hence I call it internal. Treating an elder of the Ch'u people as elder is the same as treating an elder of mine as elder. We use elderliness as explanation.<sup>o</sup> Hence I call it external.'

1. *That which is inborn . . . is meant by 'white':* In '*sheng chih wei hsing*' ('that which is inborn is what is meant by "nature"'), the two words '*sheng*' and '*hsing*', though slightly different in pronunciation, were probably written by the same graph in Mencius' time. This would make the

'My enjoyment of the roast provided by a man from Ch'in is no different from my enjoyment of my own roast. Even with inanimate things we can find cases similar to the one under discussion. Are we, then, to say that there is something external even in the enjoyment of roast?'

5. Meng Chi-tzu asked Kung-tu Tzu, 'Why do you say that rightness is internal?'

'It is the respect in me that is being put into effect. That is why I say it is internal.'

'If a man from your village is a year older than your eldest brother, which do you respect?'

'My brother.'

'In filling their cups with wine, which do you give precedence to?'<sup>2</sup>

'The man from my village.'

'The one you respect is the former; the one you treat as elder is the latter. This shows that it is in fact external, not internal.'

Kung-tu Tzu was unable to find an answer and gave an account of the discussion to Mencius.

Mencius said, '[Ask him,] "Which do you respect, your uncle or your younger brother?" He will say, "My uncle." "When your younger brother is impersonating an ancestor at a sacrifice, then which do you respect?" He will say, "My younger brother." You ask him, "What has happened to your respect for your uncle?" He will say, "It is because of the position my younger brother occupies." You can then say, "[In the case of the man from my village] it is also because of the position he occupies. Normal respect is due to my eldest brother; temporary respect is due to the man from my village."'

When Meng Chi-tzu heard this, he said, 'It is the same respect whether I am respecting my uncle or my younger brother. It is, as I have said, external and does not come from within.'

statement at least tautological in written form and so parallel to 'pai chih wei pai' ('white is what is meant by "white"').

2. *In filling their cups . . . give precedence to:* I.e. it is at a village gathering that precedence is given in accordance with seniority.

'In winter,' said Kung-tu Tzu, 'one drinks hot water, in summer cold. Does that mean that even food and drink can be a matter of what is external?'

6. Kung-tu Tzu said, 'Kao Tzu said, "There is neither good nor bad in human nature," but others say, "Human nature can become good or it can become bad, and that is why with the rise of King Wen and King Wu, the people were given to goodness, while with the rise of King Yu and King Li, they were given to cruelty." Then there are others who say, "There are those who are good by nature, and there are those who are bad by nature. For this reason, Hsiang could have Yao as prince, and Shun could have the Blind Man as father, and Ch'i, Viscount of Wei and Prince Pi Kan could have Tchou as nephew as well as sovereign."<sup>3</sup> Now you say human nature is good. Does this mean that all the others are mistaken?'

'As far as what is genuinely in him is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good,' said Mencius. 'That is what I mean by good. As for his becoming bad, that is not the fault of his native endowment. The heart of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect, and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom.<sup>4</sup> Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from the outside; they are in me originally. Only this has never dawned on me. That is why it is said, "Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it."<sup>5</sup> There are cases where one man is twice, five times or countless times better than another man, but this is only because

3. *Ch'i, Viscount of Wei and Prince Pi Kan . . . as well as sovereign:* According to the *Shih chi* (*Records of the Historian*), p. 1607, the Viscount of Wei was an elder brother of Tchou, and son of a concubine of low rank. For this reason, it has been pointed out that the description of having Tchou as nephew applies only to Pi Kan. Cf. the coupling of the name of Chi with that of Yu in IV. B. 29.
4. *The heart of compassion is possessed . . . to wisdom:* Cf. II. A. 6.
5. *'Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it':* Cf. VII. A. 3.

there are people who fail to make the best of their native endowment. The *Odes* say,

Heaven produces the teeming masses,  
And where there is a thing there is a norm.  
If the people held on to their constant nature,  
They would be drawn to superior virtue.<sup>6</sup>

+ Confucius commented, "The author of this poem must have had knowledge of the Way. Thus where there is a thing there is a norm, and because the people hold on to their constant nature they are drawn to superior virtue."

7. Mencius said, "In good years the young men are mostly lazy, while in bad years they are mostly violent. Heaven has not sent down men whose endowment differs so greatly. The difference is due to what ensnares their hearts. Take the barley for example. Sow the seeds and cover them with soil. The place is the same and the time of sowing is also the same. The plants shoot up and by the summer solstice they all ripen. If there is any unevenness, it is because the soil varies in richness and there is no uniformity in the benefit of rain and dew and the amount of human effort spent on it. Now things of the same kind are all alike. Why should we have doubts when it comes to man? The sage and I are of the same kind. Thus Lung Tzu said, "When someone makes a shoe for a foot he has not seen, I am sure he will not produce a basket." All shoes are alike because all feet are alike. All palates show the same preferences in taste. Yi Ya was simply the man first to discover what would be pleasing to my palate. Were the nature of taste to vary from man to man in the same way as horses and hounds differ from me in kind, then how does it come about that all palates in the world follow the preferences of Yi Ya? The fact that in taste the whole world looks to Yi Ya shows that all palates are alike. It is the same also with the ear. The fact that in sound the whole world looks to Shih K'uang shows that all ears are alike. It is the same also

6. Heaven produces . . . to superior virtue: Ode 260.

with the eye. The whole world appreciates the good looks of Tzu-tu; whoever does not is blind. Hence it is said: all palates have the same preference in taste; all ears in sound; all eyes in beauty. Should hearts prove to be an exception by possessing nothing in common? What is it, then, that is common to all hearts? Reason and rightness. The sage is simply the man first to discover this common element in my heart. Thus reason and rightness please my heart in the same way as meat pleases my palate.

8. Mencius said, "There was a time when the trees were luxuriant on the Ox Mountain, but as it is on the outskirts of a great metropolis, the trees are constantly lopped by axes. Is it any wonder that they are no longer fine? With the respite they get in the day and in the night, and the moistening by the rain and dew, there is certainly no lack of new shoots coming out, but then the cattle and sheep come to graze upon the mountain. That is why it is as bald as it is. People, seeing only its baldness, tend to think that it never had any trees. But can this possibly be the nature of a mountain? Can what is in man be completely lacking in moral inclinations? A man's letting go of his true heart is like the case of the trees and the axes. When the trees are lopped day after day, is it any wonder that they are no longer fine? If, in spite of the respite a man gets in the day and in the night and of the effect of the morning air on him, scarcely any of his likes and dislikes resemble those of other men, it is because what he does in the course of the day once again dissipates what he has gained. If this dissipation happens repeatedly, then the influence of the air in the night will no longer be able to preserve what was originally in him, and when that happens, the man is not far removed from an animal. Others, seeing his resemblance to an animal, will be led to think that he never had any native endowment. But can that be what a man is genuinely like? Hence, given the right nourishment there is nothing that will not grow, and deprived of it there is nothing that will not wither away. Confucius said, "Hold on to it and it will remain; let go of it and it will disappear. One never knows the time it comes or goes,

neither does one know the direction." It is perhaps to the heart this refers.'

9. Mencius said, 'Do not be puzzled by the King's lack of wisdom. Even a plant that grows most readily will not survive if it is placed in the sun for one day and exposed to the cold for ten. It is very rarely that I have an opportunity of seeing the King, and as soon as I leave, those who expose him to the cold arrive on the scene. What can I do with the few new shoots that come out? Now take *yi*,<sup>7</sup> which is only an art of little consequence. Yet if one does not give one's whole mind to it, one will never master it. Yi Ch'iu is the best player in the whole country. Get him to teach two people to play, one of whom concentrates his mind on the game and listens only to what Yi Ch'iu has to say, while the other, though he listens, dreams of an approaching swan and wants to take up his bow and corded arrow to shoot at it. Now even though this man shares the lessons with the first, he will never be as good. Is this because he is less clever? The answer is, "No."'

10. Mencius said, 'Fish is what I want; bear's palm is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take bear's palm than fish. Life is what I want; dutifulness is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would choose dutifulness rather than life. On the one hand, though life is what I want, there is something I want more than life. That is why I do not cling to life at all costs. On the other hand, though death is what I loathe, there is something I loathe more than death. That is why there are troubles I do not avoid. If there is nothing a man wants more than life, then why should he have scruples about any means, so long as it will serve to keep him alive? If there is nothing a man loathes more than death, then why should he have scruples about any means, so long as it shows him the way to avoid trouble? Yet there are ways of remaining alive and ways of

7. *yi*: The ancient name for the game of *wei ch'i*, better known in the West by the name *go* which is simply the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word *ch'i*. This game is also mentioned in IV. B. 30.

avoiding death to which a man will not resort. In other words, there are things a man wants more than life and there are also things he loathes more than death. This is an attitude not confined to the moral man but common to all men. The moral man simply never loses it.

'Here is a basketful of rice and a bowlful of soup. Getting them will mean life; not getting them will mean death. When these are given with abuse, even a wayfarer would not accept them; when these are given after being trampled upon, even a beggar would not accept them. Yet when it comes to ten thousand bushels of grain one is supposed to accept without asking if it is in accordance with the rites or if it is right to do so. What benefit are ten thousand bushels of grain to me? [Do I accept them] for the sake of beautiful houses, the enjoyment of wives and concubines, or for the sake of the gratitude my needy acquaintances will show me? What I would not accept in the first instance when it was a matter of life and death I now accept for the sake of beautiful houses; what I would not accept when it was a matter of life and death I now accept for the enjoyment of wives and concubines; what I would not accept when it was a matter of life and death I now accept for the sake of the gratitude my needy acquaintances will show me. Is there no way of putting a stop to this? This way of thinking is known as losing one's original heart.'

11. Mencius said, 'Benevolence is the heart of man, and rightness his road. Sad it is indeed when a man gives up the right road instead of following it and allows his heart to stray without enough sense to go after it. When his chickens and dogs stray, he has sense enough to go after them, but not when what strays is his heart.<sup>8</sup> The sole concern of learning is to go after this strayed heart. That is all.'

8. *Benevolence is the heart of man . . . what strays is his heart*: As quoted in the *Han shih wai chuan* 4/27, this goes on as follows: 'Does he think less of his heart than of his chickens and dogs? This is an extreme case of a lack of knowledge of priorities. How sad! In the end such a man is sure only to perish.' This further passage must have dropped out of the present text by accident.

12. Mencius said, 'Now if one's third finger is bent and cannot stretch straight, though this neither causes any pain nor impairs the use of the hand, one would think nothing of the distance between Ch'in and Ch'u if someone able to straighten it could be found. This is because one's finger is inferior to other people's. When one's finger is inferior to other people's, one has sense enough to resent it, but not when what is inferior is the heart. This is what is called ignorance of priorities.'

13. Mencius said, 'Even with a *t'ung* or a *tzu* tree one or two spans thick, anyone wishing to keep it alive will know how it should be tended, yet when it comes to one's own person, one does not know how to tend it. Surely one does not love one's person any less than the *t'ung* or the *tzu*? This is unthinking to the highest degree.'

14. Mencius said, 'A man loves all parts of his person without discrimination. As he loves them all without discrimination, he nurtures them all without discrimination. If there is not one foot or one inch of his skin that he does not love, then there is not one foot or one inch that he does not nurture. Is there any other way of telling whether what a man does is good or bad than by the choice he makes? The parts of the person differ in value and importance. Never harm the parts of greater importance for the sake of those of smaller importance, or the more valuable for the sake of the less valuable. He who nurtures the parts of smaller importance is a small man; he who nurtures the parts of greater importance is a great man. Now consider a gardener. If he tends the common trees while neglecting the valuable ones, then he is a bad gardener. A man who takes care of one finger to the detriment of his shoulder and back without realizing his mistake is a muddled man. A man who cares only about food and drink is despised by others because he takes care of the parts of smaller importance to the detriment of the parts of greater importance. If a man who cares about food and drink can do so without neglecting any other part of his person, then his mouth and belly are much more than just a foot or an inch of his skin.'

15. Kung-tu Tzu asked, 'Though equally human, why are some men greater than others?'

'He who is guided by the interests of the parts of his person that are of greater importance is a great man; he who is guided by the interests of the parts of his person that are of smaller importance is a small man.'

'Though equally human, why are some men guided one way and others guided another way?'

'The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things. When one thing acts on another, all it does is to attract it. The organ of the heart can think. But it will find the answer only if it does think; otherwise, it will not find the answer. This is what Heaven has given me. If one makes one's stand on what is of greater importance in the first instance, what is of smaller importance cannot usurp its place. In this way, one cannot but be a great man.'

16. Mencius said, 'There are honours bestowed by Heaven, and there are honours bestowed by man. Benevolence, dutifulness, conscientiousness, truthfulness to one's word, unflagging delight in what is good, – these are honours bestowed by Heaven. The position of a Ducal Minister, a Minister, or a Counsellor is an honour bestowed by man. Men of antiquity bent their efforts towards acquiring honours bestowed by Heaven, and honours bestowed by man followed as a matter of course. Men of today bend their efforts towards acquiring honours bestowed by Heaven in order to win honours bestowed by man, and once the latter is won they discard the former. Such men are deluded to the extreme, and in the end are sure only to perish.'

17. Mencius said, 'All men share the same desire to be exalted. But as a matter of fact, every man has in him that which is exalted. The fact simply never dawned on him. What man exalts is not truly exalted. Those Chao Meng exalts, Chao Meng can also humble. The *Odes* say,

Having filled us with drink,  
Having filled us with virtue, . . .<sup>9</sup>

The point is that, being filled with moral virtue, one does not envy other people's enjoyment of fine food and, enjoying a fine and extensive reputation, one does not envy other people's fineries.'

18. Mencius said, 'Benevolence overcomes cruelty just as water overcomes fire. Those who practise benevolence today are comparable to someone trying to put out a cartload of burning firewood with a cupful of water. When they fail to succeed, they say water cannot overcome fire. For a man to do this is for him to place himself on the side of those who are cruel to the extreme, and in the end he is sure only to perish.'

19. Mencius said, 'The five types of grain are the best of plants, yet if they are not ripe they are worse than the wild varieties. With benevolence the point, too, lies in seeing to its being ripe.'

20. Mencius said, 'In teaching others archery, Yi naturally aims at drawing the bow to the full, and the student naturally also aims at drawing the bow to the full. In teaching others, the master carpenter naturally does so by means of compasses and the square, and the student naturally also learns by means of compasses and the square.'

9. *Having filled us . . . with virtue*: Ode 247.