

8 Mengzi

1. Mencius' Central Thesis: Human Nature Is Good

- Claim: Human nature is **good** in the sense that:
 - All humans have an **innate tendency** toward moral goodness.
 - Specifically, we all have at least the “**sprout**” (**beginning**) of **benevolence**.
 - “Good” here does **not** mean:
 - Everyone is already virtuous.
 - No one ever acts badly.
 - It means:
 - Everyone has **built-in moral capacities** that, if properly developed, can grow into full virtue.
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2. The Sprout of Benevolence

- **Benevolence (ren)** = compassion, concern for others' well-being.
- A “**sprout**” is:
 - A small, initial tendency or capacity.
 - Needs **nourishment and cultivation** to grow.
- Mencius thinks everyone has:
 - At least a **sprout of benevolence** (concern for others).
 - (He also mentions sprouts of shame, respect, and right/wrong, but for this exam focus on benevolence.)

Key idea:

Even if people often act selfishly, there is a **natural, spontaneous capacity** in everyone to feel concern for others.

3. Mencius' Arguments for Innate Goodness

3.1 Thought Experiment: The Child at the Well

Setup

- Imagine you suddenly see a small child on the verge of falling into a well.

Mencius' claim about our reaction

- Any normal human would feel:

- **Alarm and distress.**
- Immediate urge: “Someone must save that child!”
- Crucial point: This reaction is:
 - **Immediate**, not calculated.
 - Present **even if**:
 - * You do not know the child.
 - * There is no chance of reward.
 - * No one else will see what you do.
 - * Helping could even be costly or risky to you.

Argument structure

1. We all have spontaneous feelings of **compassion** in such cases.
 2. These feelings are **not best explained** as self-interested calculations.
 3. The best explanation: we have an **innate sprout of benevolence**.
 4. Therefore, **human nature includes an innate tendency toward goodness**.
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3.2 Thought Experiment: The King and the Ox

Story

- A king orders an ox to be led to slaughter for a ritual.
- Seeing the ox trembling with fear, he **cannot bear its suffering**.
- He spares the ox and orders a sheep to be used instead (which he does not see).

Mencius’ interpretation

- The king’s reaction shows:
 - A natural **compassion** when suffering is **vividly presented** to him.
- Mencius tells the king:
 - This is the **same kind of feeling** needed to be a benevolent ruler.
 - He already has the **sprout of benevolence**.
 - He merely fails to **extend** it:
 - * From an ox he sees □ to his people whose suffering he doesn’t see as vividly.

Role in Mencius’ theory

- Again, best explanation of the king’s reaction:
 - He has an **innate compassionate tendency**, not merely a calculated self-interest.
 - Supports claim: **everyone**, including rulers, has some **natural benevolent motivation**.
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3.3 Other Analogies Supporting Innate Goodness (Brief)

- **Water analogy**: Water naturally flows **downward**; it can be forced upward, but that’s not its nature.
Similarly:
 - Humans naturally tend toward **goodness**.

- They can be pushed into bad behavior by external forces, but this does **not** change their underlying nature.
 - **Barley analogy**: Same kind of seed, same soil, same time will normally all grow; differences in outcome come from **differences in environment and cultivation**, not from different “natures.”
 - Likewise, all humans share a **common good nature**, even if outcomes vary.
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4. The Egoist’s Alternative View

4.1 Egoist’s Basic View of Human Nature

- Human beings are, deep down, **self-interested**.
 - When people act “morally,” they are really:
 - Seeking **pleasure, advantage, security, or reputation**.
 - Avoiding **pain, guilt, or punishment**.
 - So:
 - Human nature is **not good** (not fundamentally benevolent).
 - At best, it is **neutral** or driven by **self-interest**.
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4.2 Egoist’s Objection to the Child-at-the-Well Argument

Egoist reinterpretation

- When you feel alarm/distress seeing the child:
 - You anticipate:
 - * **Feeling bad** (guilty) if you do nothing.
 - * **Social blame** or loss of reputation if people find out you didn’t help.
 - You feel **uncomfortable** watching suffering.
 - Therefore:
 - Your impulse to help is really:
 - * A desire to **stop your own discomfort**.
 - * A desire to **protect your reputation**.
 - That is **self-interest**, not genuine concern for the child.
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4.3 Egoist’s Objection to the King-and-Ox Case

Egoist reinterpretation

- The king is disturbed by the **unpleasant sight** of the trembling ox.
- Sparing the ox:
 - Relieves **his own emotional discomfort**.
- He switches to a sheep he doesn’t see:
 - Suggests he cares mainly about **avoiding a disturbing scene**, not about the animal’s suffering.

- Therefore, egoist says:
 - This is still **self-regarding**, not genuine benevolence.
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5. Mencius' Replies to the Egoist (Focus on Motivation)

5.1 Phenomenology of the Emotion

- Mencius emphasizes:
 - The **felt character** of the reaction in the child-at-the-well case:
 - * You are focused on the **child's danger**, not on "my reputation" or "my comfort."
 - The **natural interpretation** of your own experience:
 - "I am worried about what is happening to the child."
 - This looks like a **genuinely other-regarding concern**, not a disguised self-interest.
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5.2 Original Impulse vs Later Reflection

- Mencius can distinguish:
 - **Original motive**: immediate compassion for the child or ox.
 - **Additional thoughts**: about reputation, rewards, or guilt that might come later.
 - Claim:
 - The **sprout of benevolence** is seen in the **first, uncalculated reaction**.
 - Even if we later notice side benefits, this does not show that the **original cause** was self-interest.
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5.3 Counterexamples to Pure Egoism

- People sometimes:
 - **Accept serious risks or sacrifices** to save others, with **no chance** of reward or praise.
 - Still feel they **ought** to help, and **would be ashamed** not to.
 - Mencian reading:
 - This shame is tied to an **internal standard of rightness**, not just fear of external punishment.
 - Shows we value **rightness and benevolence** more than mere self-preservation in some cases.
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5.4 Best Explanation Argument

- Both sides admit:
 - We have certain emotional reactions (alarm, distress, "cannot bear" others' suffering).
- Question: **What best explains these reactions?**
 - Egoist: pure self-interest.
 - Mencius: an **innate benevolent tendency**.

- Mencius' position:
 - Self-interest may often **accompany** our actions.
 - But it **cannot fully explain**:
 - * The immediacy.
 - * The universality.
 - * The willingness sometimes to act **against** self-interest.
 - Therefore, the best explanation is that we have a **real sprout of benevolence**.
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6. Objection: If Nature Is Good, Why So Much Non-Benevolent Behavior?

Objection

- People often:
 - Ignore suffering.
 - Exploit, harm, or even enjoy others' misery.
 - If our nature is really good and benevolent, **how is this possible?**
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Reply #1: The Good Nature Can Be Overwhelmed

- Mencius' idea:
 - Our sprout of goodness is **not irresistible**.
 - It can be **overpowered** by:
 - * Strong desires (wealth, power, pleasure).
 - * Bad social conditions (poverty, war, corrupt leadership).
 - Analogy:
 - Water naturally flows downward, but:
 - * It can be **dammed** or **forced upward**.
 - * That doesn't change its **underlying direction**.
 - Conclusion:
 - Wrong actions show that our good nature can be **blocked**, not that it doesn't exist.
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Reply #2: Goodness Needs Cultivation and Can Be Damaged

- Our sprout of benevolence is like:
 - A small plant that needs **care** to grow.
- Without cultivation:
 - The sprout becomes **weak and easily destroyed**.
- Analogy: **Ox Mountain**
 - Mountain originally covered with beautiful trees.
 - Repeated cutting and grazing make it look barren.
 - People think "This mountain was always bare," but:
 - * In reality, its **original nature** included rich vegetation.
 - Likewise:

- ★ Repeated bad actions, social pressures, and lack of moral education:
 - “Cut down” our moral sprouts day after day.
 - Eventually, the person **appears** to have no goodness.
 - Conclusion:
 - Bad behavior often results from **neglect and damage** to our sprouts, not from an originally bad nature.
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7. Objection: What About People Who Show No Benevolence at All?

Objection

- Some individuals seem:
 - Completely cruel.
 - Utterly indifferent to others’ suffering.
 - Doesn’t this show that **not everyone** has a sprout of benevolence?
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Mencius’ Reply

1. Appearance vs reality

- Like Ox Mountain:
 - The person may look morally “barren.”
 - But that doesn’t mean they **never had** a sprout.
- Their goodness may be:
 - **Severely damaged.**
 - **Covered over** by habits, desires, or trauma.

2. Capacity vs development

- Everyone has the **capacity** for benevolence.
- But people differ greatly in:
 - How much they **develop** this capacity.
 - How much it has been **nurtured or harmed.**

3. Degrees of difference

- Some people become **sages** (fully developed goodness).
- Others develop only **a little** and act mostly selfishly.
- These differences do **not** show different natures; they show different **levels of cultivation.**

4. Near-animal state

- A person may be at “scant remove from the animals”:
 - Almost no visible benevolence.
 - Still, Mencius insists this is a result of **long-term damage**, not an absence of the original sprout.
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8. Extending Benevolence

8.1 From Sprout to Full Virtue

- Having a sprout of benevolence is:
 - Only a **beginning**.
 - Full morality requires a **lifetime of cultivation**.
 - Cultivation practices (general idea):
 - Reflecting on others' situations.
 - Developing habits of considerate action.
 - Engaging in rituals and social practices that **reinforce** benevolence.
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8.2 The Problem of Limited Benevolence

- Natural benevolence starts out:
 - **Partial and biased**:
 - * Strongest toward family and close friends.
 - * Stronger when suffering is **vividly seen** (e.g., the ox), weaker when distant or abstract.
- Challenge:
 - How to **extend** this concern:
 - * From family □ to wider community □ to all humans (and possibly animals).

King and the ox as example of extension

- King already pities the ox he sees.
 - Mencius urges:
 - “What you did to the ox, you can do to your people.”
 - Use the **same emotion**, but **extend its scope**:
 - * From one animal □ to all your subjects.
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8.3 The Farmer Who Pulled Up His Plants

Story

- A farmer is impatient for his crops to grow.
- He goes into the field and **pulls the plants upward** to “help” them grow.
- Result:
 - The plants **wither and die**.
- He later boasts that he has “assisted their growth.”

Moral

- Benevolence cannot be:
 - **Forced** or **rushed** by extreme measures or harsh self-treatment.
- Proper cultivation:
 - Is like good farming:
 - * Provide **nourishment** (good environment, reflection, practice).

- * Protect from **harm** (bad influences).
 - * Allow **time** for natural growth.
 - Wrong approach:
 - Trying to **drag oneself or others into goodness** too quickly or violently.
 - This can actually **destroy** the sprout.
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8.4 Lifelong Project

- Extending benevolence is:
 - The **work of a lifetime**.
- Goal:
 - Make your natural, initial concern:
 - * **Stronger** (more stable, resilient).
 - * **Wider** (applies to strangers, distant people, even future generations).
- Mencius' overall picture:
 - You start with a **small sprout** (e.g., feeling for the child at the well).
 - Through **consistent, appropriate cultivation**, this can grow into a **robust, all-embracing benevolence**.