

8 Mengzi

1. Mencius' Central Thesis: Human Nature Is Good

Claim

- Human nature is good: every human has an innate tendency toward goodness.
- Specifically, we all have at least a “sprout” of benevolence (compassion).

“Sprout” Metaphor

- Virtue begins as a small, fragile tendency, like a plant sprout:
 - It is natural (comes from within us).
 - It requires nurturing (education, practice, good conditions).
 - It can be damaged or destroyed if treated badly.
- Benevolence is not a fully developed virtue in everyone, but the capacity and inclination are universal.

Four Sprouts (only benevolence is crucial for this exam, but context helps)

Mencius says all humans have four innate “minds”: 1. Pity/compassion → sprout of humaneness (benevolence). 2. Shame/dislike → sprout of rightness. 3. Respect/reverence → sprout of propriety. 4. Sense of right/wrong → sprout of wisdom.

For the exam: focus on (1) pity/compassion as the sprout of benevolence and as evidence that human nature is good.

2. Mencius' Arguments for Innate Goodness

Mencius' strategy: look at how people actually react in certain situations, and argue that the best explanation is that humans have innate benevolence.

Argument 1: The Child and the Well

Thought experiment: - Imagine you suddenly see a small child about to fall into a well. - Mencius: any normal observer will feel alarm and distress.

Key points about this reaction: - It is immediate and spontaneous, not calculated. - It is directed at the child's danger, not at your own benefit.

Mencius: what explains this reaction? - Not: - Desire for reward. - Fear of punishment. - Worry about reputation. - Instead: - A natural “unbearable” heart: you cannot bear to see another suffer. - This is the sprout of benevolence.

Conclusion from the child-at-the-well case: 1. We all have this immediate, non-calculated concern. 2. This concern is best understood as concern for the child’s welfare for its own sake. 3. So we all possess at least a sprout of benevolence. 4. Therefore, human nature is good in the sense of having an innate tendency toward benevolence.

Argument 2: The King and the Ox

Story: - A king sees an ox being dragged to sacrifice, terrified and trembling. - He spares the ox, ordering it replaced with a sheep. - People say he is being “stingy,” unwilling to sacrifice an ox. - The king says: it was not stinginess; he just could not bear the ox’s suffering.

Mencius’ interpretation: - The king clearly felt compassion for the ox. - This shows he has the sprout of benevolence. - The problem is not that he lacks benevolence, but that he fails to extend it: - He pities the ox he sees. - But he does not yet extend the same compassion to his own suffering people.

Key lesson: - Even rulers who seem cruel may show moments of compassion. - These moments reveal an underlying good nature. - Morality consists in developing and extending these sprouts, not creating them from scratch.

3. The Alternative Egoist View & Their Objections

The Egoist’s Basic Position

Egoist thesis: - Human beings are fundamentally self-interested. - Every action is ultimately motivated by self-benefit: - Pleasure, safety, comfort. - Avoiding guilt or inner discomfort. - Reputation, praise, social approval. - Apparent benevolence is instrumental: we help others only because it benefits us.

This directly conflicts with Mencius: - Mencius: humans have genuinely other-regarding motives. - Egoist: apparently altruistic actions are actually covert self-interest.

Egoist’s Objection to the Child-and-the-Well Case

Egoist reinterpretation of motivation: - When you see the child, your reaction can be explained egoistically: - You imagine the disturbing scene and want to avoid your own emotional pain. - You fear that others would blame you if you did nothing. - You feel discomfort at not living up to your self-image as a decent person. - So, they argue, your real motive is: - Avoiding your own emotional distress. - Protecting your reputation. - Therefore, the egoist claims: - Mencius has not shown any genuinely altruistic motive. - He has merely described a complex form of self-interest.

Egoist's Objection to the King-and-the-Ox Case

Egoist reinterpretation: - The king spares the ox not because he cares about the ox. - Rather: - He cannot stand his own feeling of discomfort at seeing the ox's fear. - Sparing the ox is simply a way to stop his own unpleasant feelings. - If he really cared about animals or people, he would be consistently benevolent. - His selective compassion indicates that this is about managing his own feelings, not a stable other-regarding concern.

4. How Mencius Might Reply to the Egoist (Focus on Motivation)

Mencius' core reply: the egoist misdescribes the structure and timing of our motivations.

Reply 1: The Phenomenology of the Reaction

- Our first reaction to the child-at-the-well or the ox is:
 - Immediate alarm and pity aimed at the other's danger or suffering.
- Thoughts about:
 - Reputation,
 - Guilt,
 - Self-image, come later, if at all.

So: - The primary motive is concern for the child/ox. - Self-interested thoughts are, at most, secondary and derivative. - This supports Mencius' view that we have a basic benevolent motivation.

Reply 2: Best Explanation of Sacrifice

- In many cases, people help others at real cost to themselves:
 - Risking safety to save a child.
 - Giving up resources with no audience watching.
- If they were purely egoistic, it would be irrational to incur real cost when:
 - No one is watching.
 - They get no compensation.

Mencius' point: - The best explanation is that people sometimes: - Value others' good for its own sake. - Are moved by the "unbearable" heart of compassion.

Reply 3: The King-and-the-Ox — What He Could Have Done

Mencius' interpretation emphasizes what the king could have done if he were only self-interested:

- If the king's sole aim were to avoid his discomfort, he might:
 - Look away.
 - Stay away from sacrifices.
 - Delegate everything and never see the suffering animal.
- Instead, he:

- Acts to protect the ox itself, even at some cost (must find another animal, risk criticism).
 - This suggests:
 - His ultimate concern is not just “I don’t want to feel bad,” but “I don’t want it to suffer.”
 - That looks like a genuinely other-directed motive.
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Reply 4: Having Mixed Motives

Mencius can allow: - People often have mixed motives: - Compassion + concern for reputation + desire to avoid guilt. - But: - The existence of any genuine other-regarding component is enough to show that: - Human nature is not purely egoistic. - There is at least a sprout of benevolence operating alongside self-interest.

5. Objection: If Nature Is Good, Why So Much Bad Behavior?

Objection

- If human nature is innately benevolent:
 - Why do people frequently lie, cheat, harm, and kill?
 - Why are there cruel rulers, criminals, and indifferent bystanders?
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Reply #1: Good Nature Can Be Overwhelmed (Water & Barley Analogies)

Water analogy: - Water naturally flows downhill. - You can make it splash upward or flow uphill by force (dams, channels). - But: - That doesn’t change its nature; its tendency is still downward.

Similarly: - Human nature tends toward goodness (benevolence). - People can be forced or conditioned into bad behavior by: - Poverty, social chaos, bad role models, corrupt leaders, trauma, etc. - This is like forcing water uphill: against its natural tendency.

Barley analogy: - Plant barley in the same field, same time: - With good soil, rain, and care → healthy crop. - With poor conditions → stunted or withered. - The seeds still have the same natural capacity.

Applied to humans: - All have the same basic moral capacities, but: - Environment + upbringing affect how far they develop. - So bad behavior reflects corrupted, blocked, or stunted sprouts, not a bad nature.

Reply #2: Multiple Motivations in Human Nature

- Mencius can accept that we also have:
 - Desires for food, sex, survival, comfort, power.
- Human nature contains competing tendencies:
 - Benevolence vs. self-interest vs. fear, etc.
- Saying “human nature is good” means:

- Our distinctively moral core (the heart-mind) has an inclination toward goodness.
- But this can be overridden by other drives if not cultivated.

So: - Failure to act benevolently does not show that the benevolent sprout is absent. - It shows that it is too weak, ignored, or overpowered.

6. Objection: What About People Who Seem to Have No Benevolence at All?

Objection

- Some people appear utterly cruel or indifferent:
 - Tyrants, violent criminals, cold manipulators.
 - Do they disprove Mencius' claim that everyone has the sprout of benevolence?
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Mencius' Reply: Ox Mountain Analogy

Ox Mountain story: - Ox Mountain was once covered in beautiful trees. - But: - Constant cutting by woodcutters stripped the trees. - New shoots tried to grow with the help of rain and dew. - Then cattle and sheep ate the shoots. - Eventually the mountain looked barren, and people assumed: - "This mountain has always been bare."

Mencius' lesson: - The mountain's nature was never to be barren; it was made barren. - Human beings are similar: - Everyone starts with sprouts of benevolence and rightness. - Bad upbringing, trauma, constant vice, lack of rest and reflection: - "Hack away" at the moral sprouts. - Over time: - A person can look morally "barren," like Ox Mountain. - Observers may wrongly think: "they were always like that." - But in Mencius' view: - Their original nature was not bad. - Their sprouts were destroyed or buried, not absent from birth.

This maintains: - Universality of good human nature. - While explaining how some people come to appear completely vicious.

7. Extending Benevolence: The Work of a Lifetime

Starting Point: Partial and Local Benevolence

- Most people naturally feel stronger compassion for:
 - Family, close friends, those nearby, beings they can directly see.
 - Many examples (like the king and the ox) show:
 - Compassion is triggered by vivid, close-up suffering.
 - Moral growth involves extending this natural compassion more widely.
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What "Extending Benevolence" Means

- Recognizing that:

- The suffering of distant or unfamiliar people/animals is morally like the suffering of those near you.
- Deliberately cultivating:
 - Concern for strangers, subjects, foreigners, etc.
- For rulers:
 - Extending the same compassion felt for an ox or a family member to the entire populace.
- For individuals:
 - Treating the suffering of unknown people as genuinely important, not negligible.

This is not creating a new motive from scratch, but:

- Taking the existing sprout (e.g., compassion for a child at a well, or for one's own family),
- And broadening its scope through:

 - Reflection (seeing similarities),
 - Habit,
 - Education and ritual.

The Farmer Who Pulled Up the Sprouts (Warning Against Forcing Development)

Mencius' parable:

- A farmer is impatient for his plants to grow.
- He goes out and pulls them upward to "help" them grow.
- Result: the crops wither and die.

Moral:

- Virtue cannot be forced unnaturally.
- Proper cultivation of benevolence involves:

 - Providing the right nourishing conditions:

 - Good education, moral reflection, decent material conditions, good examples.

 - Avoiding:

 - Ignoring the sprouts (neglect).
 - Forcing them in an artificial or harsh way (self-torturing, showy moralism).

 - The development of benevolence is:

 - A gradual, lifelong process.
 - Like carefully watering and protecting a plant, not violently transforming it.

8. Benevolence and Happiness

Mencius' implied view on the relation:

- Because:
 - Our true nature is benevolent,
 - Acting in accordance with benevolence is:
 - * Deeply satisfying,
 - * Central to a flourishing life.
 - A life of cruelty or pure egoism:
 - Conflicts with our innate moral tendencies.
 - Likely leads to inner disturbance, not true happiness.
 - So:
 - Pursuing benevolence and pursuing genuine happiness are ultimately aligned.
 - Developing and extending the sprout of benevolence is not a sacrifice of happiness, but a way of fulfilling our nature.
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Summary of Key Exam Points

- Human nature is good: everyone has innate moral tendencies, especially a sprout of benevolence.

- Child at the well: shows spontaneous, non-calculated compassion → evidence of innate benevolence.
- King and the ox: king's pity shows benevolent sprout; problem is failure to extend it to his people.
- Egoist view: all actions are ultimately self-interested; reinterpret Mencius' cases as about avoiding personal discomfort or reputational harm.
- Mencius' replies: timing and focus of our reactions, willingness to sacrifice, and better explanatory power of genuine altruism.
- Bad behavior: explained by good nature being overwhelmed (water forced uphill, barley in poor conditions) and competing motivations.
- Apparently vicious people: like Ox Mountain; original sprouts destroyed or buried, not absent from birth.
- Extending benevolence: main task of moral life; broaden natural compassion, but do not "pull up the sprouts" by forcing; proper, gradual cultivation leads to both virtue and happiness.