



## BOOK 6A

[6A1] Gaozi said, “Human nature is like the willow tree; rightness is like cups and bowls. To make humaneness and rightness out of human nature is like making cups and bowls out of the willow tree.”

Mencius said, “Are you able to make cups and bowls while following the nature of the willow tree? You must do violence to the willow tree before you can make cups and bowls. If you must do violence to the willow tree in order to make cups and bowls, must you also do violence to human beings in order to bring forth humaneness and rightness? The effect of your words will be to cause everyone in the world to think of humaneness and rightness as misfortunes.”

[6A2] Gaozi said, “Human nature is like swirling water. Open a passage for it in the east, and it will flow east; open a passage for it in the west, and it will flow west. Human nature does not distinguish between good and not-good any more than water distinguishes between east and west.”

Mencius said, “It is true that water does not distinguish between east and west, but does it fail to distinguish between up and down? The goodness of human nature is like the downward course of water. There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward. Now, by striking water and splashing it, you may cause it to go over your head, and by damming and channeling it, you can force it to flow uphill. But is this the nature of water? It is force that makes this happen. While people can be made to do what is not good, what happens to their nature is like this.”

[6A3] Gaozi said, “Life is what is called nature.”

Mencius said, "When you say that 'life is what is called nature,' is this like saying that 'white is what is called white?'"

"Yes."

"Is the whiteness of a white feather like the whiteness of snow, and the whiteness of snow like the whiteness of white jade?"

"Yes."

"Then is the nature of a dog like the nature of an ox, and the nature of an ox like the nature of a human being?"

- [6A4] Gaozi said, "The appetites for food and sex are human nature. Humaneness is internal rather than external; rightness is external rather than internal."

Mencius said, "Why do you say that humaneness is internal while rightness is external?"

Gaozi said, "One who is older than I, I treat as an elder. This is not because there is in me some sense of respect due to elders. It is like something being white and my recognizing it as white; I am responding to the whiteness, which is external. Therefore I call rightness external."

Mencius said, "There is no difference between the whiteness of a white horse and the whiteness of a white man. But is there no difference between the age of an old horse and the age of an old man? What is it that we speak of as rightness—the man's being old or my regarding him with the respect due to one who is old?"

Gaozi said, "Here is my younger brother; I love him. There is the younger brother of a man from Qin; him I do not love. The feeling derives from me, and therefore I describe it as internal. I treat an elder from Chu as old, just as I treat our own elders as old. The feeling derives from their age, and therefore I call it external."

Mencius said, "Our fondness for the roast meat provided by a man of Qin is no different from our fondness for the roast meat provided by one of our own people. Since this is also the case with a material thing, will you say that our fondness for roast meat is external as well?"

- [6A5] Meng Jizi asked Gongduzi, "Why do you say that rightness is internal?"

Gongduzi said, "We are enacting our respect, and therefore it is internal."

"Suppose there were a villager who was one year older than your older brother—whom would you respect?"

"I would respect my older brother."

"For whom would you pour wine first when serving at a feast?"

"I would pour it first for the villager."

"You respect the one, but treat the other as older. So in the end, rightness is external and not internal."

Gongduzi, being unable to reply, told Mencius about it. Mencius said, "Ask him, whom does he respect more, his uncle or his younger brother? He will say that he respects his uncle. You then ask him, if his younger brother were impersonating the deceased at a sacrifice, whom would he respect more? He will say that he would respect his younger brother. Then ask, where is the respect due to his uncle? He will say that it is because of his younger brother's position that he shows him greater respect. Then you may also say that it is because of the position of the villager that you show him respect. While ordinarily the respect belongs to your brother, on occasion the respect belongs to the villager."

Jizi heard this and said, "When respect is due to my uncle, I show him respect; when respect is due to my brother, I show the respect to him. So respect is after all determined by externals and is not internally motivated."

Gongduzi said, "In the winter we drink hot water, while in the summer we drink cold water. Does this mean that drinking and eating too are externally determined?"

- [6A6] Gongduzi said, "Gaozi said that human nature is neither good nor not-good. Others say that human nature can be made to be good or not-good, which is why, during the reigns of Kings Wen and Wu, the people were inclined to goodness, whereas under the reigns of You and Li, the people were inclined to violence. Still others say that the natures of some are good and the natures of others are not good, which is why, when Yao was the ruler, there could be Xiang,<sup>1</sup> while, with a father like

1. According to this view of human nature, which is obviously not that of Mencius, the fact that a violent man like Xiang could have lived during the reign of the sage-king Yao is evidence that people differ widely in their natures. Xiang was the depraved brother of Yao's exemplary successor, Shun.

Gusou, there could be Shun,<sup>2</sup> and with *Zhou*<sup>3</sup> as the son of their older brother as well as their ruler, there could be Qi, the Viscount of Wei, and Prince Bigan. Now, you say that human nature is good. Does this mean that these others are all wrong?"

Mencius said, "One's natural tendencies enable one to do good; this is what I mean by human nature being good. When one does what is not good, it is not the fault of one's native capacities. The mind of pity and commiseration is possessed by all human beings; the mind of shame and dislike is possessed by all human beings; the mind of respectfulness and reverence is possessed by all human beings; and the mind that knows right and wrong is possessed by all human beings. The mind of pity and commiseration is humaneness; the mind of shame and dislike is rightness; the mind of respectfulness and reverence is propriety; and the mind that knows right and wrong is wisdom. Humaneness, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are not infused into us from without. We definitely possess them. It is just that we do not think about it, that is all. Therefore it is said, "Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it."<sup>4</sup> That some differ from others by as much as twice, or five times, or an incalculable order of magnitude is because there are those who are unable fully to develop their capacities. The ode says,

Heaven, in giving birth to humankind,  
Created for each thing its own rule.  
The people's common disposition  
Is to love this admirable Virtue.<sup>5</sup>

Confucius said, 'How well the one who made this ode knew the Way!' Therefore, for each thing, there must be a rule, and people's common disposition is therefore to love this admirable Virtue."

2. Gusou, the Blind Man, was the paradigm of the cruel father, to whom Shun nonetheless remained filial and devoted.

3. Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang dynasty, was universally believed to have been a monstrous tyrant. His older brother, Qi, and his uncle, Bigan, attempted, with notable lack of success, to counsel him.

4. See also the statement attributed to Confucius at the end of 6A8.

5. Ode 260 (Legge, *Chinese Classics*, 4:541-45).

[6A7] Mencius said, "In years of abundance, most of the young people have the wherewithal to be good, while in years of adversity, most of them become violent. This is not a matter of a difference in the native capacities sent down by Heaven but rather of what overwhelms their minds.

"Now, let barley be sown and covered with earth; the ground being the same, and the time of planting also the same, it grows rapidly, and in due course of time,<sup>6</sup> it all ripens. Though there may be differences in the yield, this is because the fertility of the soil, the nourishment of the rain and the dew, and the human effort invested are not the same.

"Things of the same kind are thus like one another. Why is it that we should doubt this only when it comes to human beings? The sage and we are the same in kind. So Longzi<sup>7</sup> said, 'If someone makes shoes without knowing the size of a person's feet, I know that he will not make baskets.' That shoes are similar is because everyone in the world has feet that are alike. And when it comes to taste, all mouths are alike in their preferences. Yi Ya was first to apprehend what all mouths prefer. If, with regard to the way mouths are disposed to tastes, human nature differed from person to person, as is the case with dogs and horses differing from us in kind, why should it be that everyone in the world follows Yi Ya in matters of taste? The fact that everyone in the world takes Yi Ya as the standard in matters of taste is because we all have mouths that are similar. It is likewise with our ears: when it comes to sounds, everyone in the world takes Music Master Kuang as the standard because the ears of everyone in the world are similar. And so likewise with our eyes: when it comes to Zidu,<sup>8</sup> there is no one in the world who fails to recognize his beauty because one who failed to recognize the beauty of Zidu would have to be without eyes. Therefore I say mouths find savor in the same flavors; ears find satisfaction in the same sounds; eyes find pleasure in the same beauty. When it comes to

6. David S. Nivison takes *zhi yu ri zhi zhi shi* 至於日至之時 to mean "by midsummer," with *ri zhi* meaning "the summer solstice" ("On Translating Mencius," in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden [La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1996], 184).

7. See 3A3.

8. A man famous for his good looks.

our minds, could they alone have nothing in common? And what is it that our minds have in common? It is order and rightness.<sup>9</sup> The sage is just the first to apprehend what our minds have in common. Thus order and rightness please our minds in the same way that meat pleases our mouths."

- [6A8] Mencius said, "The trees on Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But being situated on the outskirts of a large state, the trees were cut down by axes. Could they remain beautiful? Given the air of the day and the night, and the moisture of the rain and the dew, they did not fail to put forth new buds and shoots, but then cattle and sheep came along to graze upon them. This accounts for the barren appearance of the mountain. Seeing this barrenness, people suppose that the mountain was never wooded. But how could this be the nature of the mountain? So it is also with what is preserved in a human being: could it be that anyone should lack the mind of humaneness and rightness? If one lets go of the innate good mind, this is like taking an ax to a tree; being cut down day after day, can [one's mind] remain beautiful? Given the rest that one gets in the day and the night, and the effect of the calm morning *qi*, one's likes and dislikes will still resemble those of other people, but barely so. And then one can become fettered and destroyed by what one does during the day; if this fettering occurs repeatedly, the effect of the night *qi* will no longer be enough to allow one to preserve his mind, and he will be at scant remove from the animals. Seeing this, one might suppose that he never had the capacity for goodness. But can this be a human being's natural tendency? Thus, given nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow; lacking nourishment, there is nothing that will not be destroyed. Confucius said, 'Hold on and you preserve it; let

9. Following A. C. Graham, Nivison points to a parallel here with a passage in chap. 4 of the *Lushi chunqiu* (*The Springs and Autumns of Master Lu*), in which the hedonist Zihuazi is quoted as saying: "True kings enjoy the conduct by which they rise to power, the ruined likewise enjoy the conduct by which they are ruined.' . . . If this is so, true kings have a taste for order and duty, the ruined likewise have a taste for tyranny and idleness. Their tastes are not the same, so their fortunes are not the same" (A. C. Graham, "The Background of the Mencian (Mengzian) Theory of Human Nature," cited in Nivison, "On Translating Mencius," 183–84).

it go and you lose it. The time of its going out and coming in is not fixed, and there is no one who knows the place where it goes.' In saying this, he was referring to the mind."

- [6A9] Mencius said, "The king's lack of wisdom is hardly surprising. Take something that is the easiest thing in the world to grow. Expose it to the heat for a day, and then expose it to cold for ten days. It will not be able to grow. I see the king but seldom, and when I withdraw, the agents of cold arrive. Even if I have caused some buds to appear, what good does it do?

"Now, chess is one of the minor arts, but without concentrating one's mind and applying one's will, one cannot succeed in it. Chess Qiu is the finest chess player anywhere in the state; suppose that Chess Qiu is teaching two people to play chess. One of them concentrates his mind and applies his will, listening only to Chess Qiu. The other, while listening to him, is actually occupying his whole mind with a swan that he believes is approaching. He thinks about bending his bow, fitting his arrow, and shooting the swan. While he is learning alongside the other man, he does not compare with him. Is this because his intelligence is not comparable? I would say that this is *not so*."

- [6A10] Mencius said, "I desire fish, and I also desire bear's paws. If I cannot have both of them, I will give up fish and take bear's paws. I desire life, and I also desire rightness. If I cannot have both of them, I will give up life and take rightness. It is true that I desire life, but there is something I desire more than life, and therefore I will not do something dishonorable in order to hold on to it. I detest death, but there is something I detest more than death, and therefore there are some dangers I may not avoid. If, among a person's desires, there were none greater than life, then why should he not do anything necessary in order to cling to life? If, among the things he detested, there were none greater than death, why should he not do whatever he had to in order to avoid danger? There is a means by which one may preserve life, and yet one does not employ it; there is a means by which one may avoid danger, and yet one does not adopt it.

"Thus there are things that we desire more than life and things that we detest more than death. It is not exemplary persons alone who have