

8 Mengzi

1. Mencius' Central Thesis: Human Nature Is Good

Claim:

All humans have an innate tendency toward goodness.

More specifically: every person has at least a “sprout” of benevolence (compassion).

- “Nature is good” = our inborn dispositions, if properly developed, lead toward virtue, not toward cruelty.
 - Bad behavior is explained by obstruction, damage, or lack of cultivation, not by an evil nature.
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2. The Sprout of Benevolence (and the Other Sprouts)

Mencius thinks we are born with small, natural moral “sprouts” that can grow into full virtues:

1. Sprout of benevolence (humaneness):
 - A “mind of pity and commiseration” – immediate compassion for others’ suffering.
 - This is the key focus for the exam.
2. (For context – briefly)
 - Sprout of shame/disgust → rightness
 - Sprout of reverence/respect → propriety
 - Sprout of judgment about right and wrong → wisdom

These are not given from outside; they are in us by nature.

But they are tiny like sprouts: can grow or wither.

3. Mencius' Main Arguments that Human Nature Is Good

3.1 Child-at-the-Well Thought Experiment

Setup: - You suddenly see a small child about to fall into a well.

Mencius’ claim: - Any normal person will instantly feel alarm and compassion. - This feeling arises: - Spontaneously - Before any calculation of: - Gaining praise - Avoiding blame - Getting a reward - So the best explanation is: humans have a natural compassionate reaction.

Moral: - This shows a basic benevolent sprout in everyone. - Not everyone will actually save the child (fear, cowardice, etc.), but the initial feeling reveals our nature.

3.2 King-and-the-Ox Case

Setup: - A king orders an ox to be taken to sacrifice (to be killed). - He sees the ox trembling with fear. - He spares the ox and orders a sheep to be used instead.

Mencius' interpretation: - The king's decision is motivated by pity for the ox's visible fear. - This shows the king has benevolence. - His problem is not lack of a good nature, but failure to extend this compassion from the ox to his suffering people.

Moral: - Even rulers who behave badly still show moments of compassion. - This supports the claim that all humans have benevolent sprouts.

3.3 Water Analogy

Opponent (Gaozi):

- Human nature is like water flowing east or west—can go any way; neither good nor bad.

Mencius' reply: - True: water doesn't care about east vs. west. - But water naturally flows downward. - Only by force (splashing, pumping, damming) can you make water go upward. - Likewise: - Humans naturally tend toward goodness. - People can be forced, corrupted, or channeled into bad behavior, but that is against their nature.

3.4 Barley Analogy

- Plant barley in similar soil at the same time:
 - In general, the barley all grows in similar ways.
 - Differences in outcome depend on sun, rain, and care, not different “barley natures.”
- Likewise:
 - Humans share a common nature.
 - Differences in virtue arise from environment and cultivation, not different basic natures.

Conclusion:

These analogies together support: our default tendency is toward goodness, unless blocked or damaged.

4. The Egoist's Alternative View

Egoist (psychological egoist) view: - All human actions are ultimately self-interested. - There is no genuine benevolence; apparent concern for others is always: - For pleasure, reputation, social approval - To avoid guilt or blame - To secure future benefits

So, egoists deny: - That we have any truly other-regarding motives. - That compassion is fundamental rather than a tool for self-interest.

5. Egoist's Objection to Mencius' Argument (Motivation Focus)

5.1 Egoist Reading of Child at the Well

Egoist might say:

- When you see the child:
 - You imagine being blamed if you do nothing.
 - You feel distress because you don't like seeing suffering.
 - You want to avoid guilt or preserve a good self-image.
- So your motive is really:
 - To protect your own feelings
 - To preserve your reputation
 - To avoid future regret

Thus, the egoist claims: - Your concern is really about yourself, not about the child.

5.2 Egoist Reading of King and the Ox

- The king spares the ox to avoid feeling bad about watching its suffering, or to appear merciful to his court.
 - Again: the motive is self-directed, not compassion for the ox as such.
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6. How Mencius Might Reply to the Egoist (Motivation)

6.1 Immediate Reaction vs. Calculated Self-Interest

Mencius emphasizes timing and phenomenology:

- The compassionate impulse is:
 - Instantaneous
 - Pre-reflective: occurs before any thinking about reputation, blame, future feelings.
- When you see the child:
 - You feel an immediate "shock" of pity.
 - You don't first think: "I might be blamed; I'd better help."
- Best explanation:
 - The child's danger itself moves you.
 - Your attention is on the child, not your own advantage.

So: - Even if you later notice that helping feels good, the primary motive is the child's safety, not your own gain.

6.2 Distinguishing Side Effects from Motives

- It's true that:
 - Helping others often makes you feel good.
 - Not helping can lead to guilt.
- But this doesn't show the motive is self-interest.
- Analogy:

- You may get paid for doing work you value.
- The existence of a paycheck doesn't prove money is your only or main motive.
- For Mencius:
 - We have genuine concern for others.
 - The fact that this concern is pleasant or rewarded is a side-effect, not the essence of the motivation.

6.3 Internal vs. External Origin of Moral Feelings

- Mencius argues that key moral feelings (pity, shame, respect, judgment) are internal:
 - They arise from our own minds, not imposed from outside.
- This suggests:
 - The emotional push to help others is a basic feature of human psychology, not merely a tool we use for selfish ends.

Overall reply:

The best explanation of our immediate, uncalculated reactions in Mencius' examples is that we possess a genuine, intrinsic sprout of benevolence, not that we are purely self-interested.

7. Objection: If We're Naturally Good, Why Do We Sometimes Act Badly?

Objection

- If human nature is good and we have benevolent sprouts:
 - Why do people so often act selfishly, cruelly, or indifferently?
 - Why do we sometimes fail to help when we clearly could?

Reply #1: Sprouts Can Be Overwhelmed

Mencius: what is in our nature can be blocked or overwhelmed.

- Hunger, fear, greed, social pressure, bad education:
 - Can suppress the compassionate impulse.
- Analogy to water:
 - Water naturally flows down.
 - Yet with dams, channels, force, it can be made to go uphill.
 - That doesn't change water's basic tendency.
- So:
 - Wrongdoing shows obstacles to our natural goodness, not the absence of it.

Reply #2: Sprouts Require Cultivation

Mencius: moral sprouts are like young plants:

- They start small and need care:
 - Good upbringing
 - Good social environment
 - Reflection and practice

- Without cultivation, sprouts:
 - Wither, become weak
 - Can be almost unrecognizable

Analogy: Ox Mountain

- Once a beautiful forest.
- After repeated cutting and grazing, it becomes barren.
- People then say: “It’s just a barren mountain by nature.”
- But its barrenness is due to damage, not its original nature.

Similarly: - People may appear to lack goodness because their moral sprouts have been repeatedly “cut down”. - This does not show they never had them.

8. Objection: What About People Who Seem Completely Cruel?

Objection

- Some people seem to show no benevolence at all:
 - Cruel tyrants
 - Serial abusers
- Doesn’t this disprove Mencius’ claim that everyone has benevolent sprouts?

Mencius’ Reply

- Even the worst people once had sprouts; but:
 - They were neglected,
 - Overwhelmed by bad influences,
 - Or systematically destroyed, like trees on Ox Mountain.
- There is no one who entirely lacks the basic capacities for:
 - Pity
 - Shame
 - Respect
 - Moral judgment
- Extreme vice is like a plant:
 - So damaged it no longer looks like a plant.
 - The original nature has been corrupted, not absent from birth.

Key idea:

Differences in virtue reflect degree of development of a shared good nature, not fundamentally different kinds of nature.

9. Extending Benevolence: The Work of a Lifetime

9.1 Natural Starting Point: Partial Benevolence

- Our benevolence is most obvious toward:

- Family
- Close friends
- We naturally care more about those close to us.

Mencius' project: - Extend this benevolence: - From family → neighbors → citizens → all humans (and even animals). - Not making us love everyone equally, but: - Making us consistently acknowledge others' humanity and worth.

9.2 How to Extend Benevolence

Key methods: - Reflection: - Notice your reactions (like pity for the child or ox). - Realize these show your true nature. - Practice: - Repeatedly act on your benevolent impulses. - Gradually widen the circle of those you treat humanely. - Environment: - Seek good teachers, rituals, laws, and institutions that support benevolent behavior.

Over time: - The small sprout becomes a strong, stable virtue. - You come to feel genuine concern for a wide range of people, not just your inner circle.

9.3 The Farmer Who Pulled Up His Plants

Story: - A farmer is eager for his crops to grow. - He pulls the plants upward to "help" them grow faster. - They all wither and die.

Mencius' point: - Moral growth must be gradual and organic. - Two mistakes to avoid: 1. Neglect: never working on moral cultivation → sprouts wither. 2. Forcing: harsh, artificial methods; expecting instant sainthood → damages moral life.

Proper approach: - Provide regular nourishment (good habits, learning, reflection). - Be patient with the process of extending benevolence.

10. Summary for Exam Answers

- Human nature is good: we all have built-in moral sprouts, especially the sprout of benevolence (pity for others' suffering).
- Key arguments:
 - Child at the well: spontaneous compassion shows innate benevolence, not calculated self-interest.
 - King and the ox: even flawed rulers show moments of pity; problem is failure to extend their compassion.
 - Water and barley analogies: goodness is our natural tendency; badness comes from external interference and lack of cultivation.
- Egoist objection:
 - All actions, including these, are ultimately self-interested (reputation, feelings, etc.).
- Mencian reply:
 - Our initial responses are immediate, other-directed, and best explained by genuine benevolence.
 - Pleasure, reputation, etc. are by-products, not the core motive.
- Failure of benevolence explained by:

- Sprouts being overwhelmed by circumstances, or
 - Uncultivated, like Ox Mountain's trees after repeated cutting.
- People with no visible benevolence:
 - Have had their nature badly damaged, not born without goodness.
- Extending benevolence:
 - Lifelong task of growing and expanding natural compassion.
 - Avoid both neglect and forcing (farmer pulling up plants).
 - Aim: stable, wide-reaching humaneness consistent with our good nature.