

Mencius, Readings 3

The Doctrine of the Goodness of Human Nature

I. The “Four Sprouts”

In 2A.2, we saw Mencius at pains to refute Gaozi’s notion that we must learn what is right from external authorities rather than from spontaneous moral notions given by our hearts. The portrait of the moral heart is most fully developed in 2A.6. (This begins us here with a passage repeated from Reading 2.)

2A.6 Mencius said: All people possess within them a moral sense that cannot bear the suffering of others. The former kings had such a moral sense and thus they devised means of government that would not allow people to suffer. If a ruler were to employ the moral sense that makes human suffering unendurable in order to implement such humane government, he would find bringing the entire empire into order to be simple, as though he were turning the world in his hand.

Why do I say that all people possess within them a moral sense that cannot bear the suffering of others? Well, imagine now a person who all of a sudden sees a small child on the verge of falling down into a well. Any such person would experience a sudden sense of fright and dismay. This feeling would not be one that they summoned up in order to establish good relations with the child’s parents. They would not purposefully feel this way in order to win the praise of their friends and neighbors. Nor would they feel this way because the screams of the child would be unpleasant.

Now by imagining this situation we can see that one who lacked a sense of dismay in such a case could simply not be a person. And I could further show that anyone who lacked the moral sense of shame could not be a person; anyone who lacked a moral sense of deference could not be a person; anyone who lacked a moral sense of right and wrong could not be a person.

Now the sense of dismay on another’s behalf is the sprout of *ren* planted within us, the sense of shame is the sprout of righteousness (*yi*), the sense of deference is the sprout of ritual *li*, and the sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom. Everyone possesses these four moral senses just as they possess their four limbs. For one to possess such moral senses and yet to claim that he cannot call them forth is to rob oneself; and for a person to claim that his ruler is incapable of such moral feelings is to rob his ruler.

As we possess these four senses within us, if only we realize that we need to extend and fulfill them then the force of these senses will burst through us like a wildfire first catching or a spring first bursting forth through the ground. If a person can bring these impulses to fulfillment, they will be adequate to bring all the four quarters under his protection. But if a person fails to develop these senses, he will fail to protect even his own parents.

Although Mencius here identifies four innate moral senses, three of these are only claimed, not illustrated or proven to be universal and spontaneous within us. There is, however, a demonstration meant to persuade us that the seed of *ren* is universal and spontaneous, and therefore innate. It is important to think through this proof, as the interest of the *Mencius* as a serious philosophical work rests very largely on the intellectual quality of this proof, whether one regards it as valid or not. The

significance of the child-by-the-well example has nothing to do with whether the imagined person – *any* person – would or would not save the child. The focus is entirely on whether any imaginable person would or would not – if presented the situation with no warning – experience “fright and dismay.” Mencius’s goal is to find a single, strong, non-self-regarding impulse that could plausibly be claimed to be both universal and unmediated by any cognitive act of reference to “external” moral standards. Any such component of our “natural” heart/mind will refute the Mohist claim that there is no Tian-endowed barrier to adopting the counter-intuitive, rational imperatives of universality and action choice by rational calculus.

II. The goodness of human nature

The debates with Gaozi, Book 6A.1-6, and other passages

6A.1 Gaozi said, “Human nature is like the willow tree and right is like cups and bowls. Drawing humanity and right from human nature is like making cups and bowls from willow wood.”

Mencius said, “Can you make cups and bowls from willow wood by following its natural grain or is it only after you have hacked the willow wood that you can make a cup or bowl? If you must hack the willow to make cups and bowls from it, must you hack people in order to make them humane and righteous? Your words will surely lead the people of the world to destroy humanity and right.”

6A.2 Gaozi said, “The nature is like water swirling at a wellspring. If you dig a channel towards the east it will flow east; if you dig a channel towards the west it will flow west. Human nature makes no distinction between good and bad, just as water makes no distinction between east and west.”

Mencius said, “It is true that water makes no distinction between east and west, but does it make no distinction between high and low? The good disposition of human nature is like water’s tendency to flow down. There are no men innately bad, just as there is no water that does not flow down. Now, by splashing you can make water leap up higher than your forehead, and by applying force you can make it stay up on a mountain, but how could this be the nature of water? It is merely a result of circumstances. The fact that men can be made to act badly just shows that human nature is like this as well.”

The first two passages of Book 6 show Gaozi arguing by analogy, and arguing very poorly. Mencius finds the weaknesses in the analogy with an ease not likely unrelated to the fact that his followers are the authors of the passages. It’s good to bear in mind that these “debates” may only be artifacts of this text – no other source records a meeting between these two men.

6A.3 Gaozi said, “The term ‘nature’ simply means ‘life’.”

Mencius said, “Do you mean that ‘nature’ means ‘life’ as ‘white’ means ‘white’?”
“Precisely.”

“As the white of white feathers is the white of snow, and the white of snow is the white of white jade?”

“Yes.”

“Then the nature of a hound would be the same as the nature of an ox, and the nature of an ox would be the same as a man’s?”

The Chinese characters involved here explain the passage. The term translated as “nature,” was at one time a near homonym of the word for “life / to be born,” and the two were written identically (生). (Today, both pronunciation and written forms are distinct.) Gaozi attempted to use this etymological fact to argue for a minimalist portrait of human nature; his misstep was in agreeing to the parallel with white, which was conceived as identical even when inhering in different types of things. In these passages, we can see that the *Mencius* has learned much from the logical disputations that had followed the advent of Mohist thought.

6A.4 Gaozi said, “Appetites for food and sex are part of our nature. Humanity (*ren*) is internal rather than external; right (*yi*) is external rather than internal.”

Mencius said, “Why do you say humanity is internal and right external?”

Gaozi said, “If a man is my elder and I treat him as an elder, there is nothing of the elder about me. It is as if he were white and I treated him as white, I merely follow the external fact of his being white. This is why I treat it as external.”

“It is different than the case of white, where one treats a white horse as white in the same sense that one treats a white man as white. Would you say treating an elderly horse as an elder is no different from treating an elderly man as an elder? Moreover, would you say the elder is right or the man who treats the aged as elderly is right?”

Gaozi said, “I love my little brother; I don’t love the little brother of some fellow from Qin. In this case, I am the one who experiences the sense of pleasure and so I say this is an ‘internal’ matter. I treat elders from Chu as elders just as I treat elders from my home town as elders. In this case, I take the elders as the ones I must please, thus I say this is an ‘external’ matter.”

Mencius said, “I like the roast meat served by the man from Qin no differently from my own roast meat, thus one could make the same argument with regard to things. So would you say that my love of roast meat is external?”

Note that after its first sentence, this passage moves the argument from the goodness of human nature to the related one of the internality of right, or *yi*. Mencius’s reply to Gaozi’s first argument focuses on the locus of *yi* – whether an action’s property of rightness belongs to the object of the act or the actor. (There is a near parallel here to Socrates’ debate with Euthyphro about whether “loved by the gods” can be a definition of “holy.”) Mencius’s reply to the second argument is more difficult to understand, but more important. Since Mencius wishes ultimately to maintain that we each possess a “seed of *yi*” that allows us to *intuit* when actions are right or wrong, he counters Gaozi’s point that our feelings for the object of an act of *yi* are irrelevant to its rightness by suggesting that the relevant feelings are towards *yi* itself – the satisfaction of right action, which, like satisfaction in roast meat, is not concerned with how one feels about the individuals involved.

Note here that in his disavowal of love for “the little brother of some fellow from Qin,” Gaozi is aligned with Mencius in rejecting the universal love criterion of Mohism.

6A.5 Meng Jizi asked Mencius’s disciple Gongduzi, “What do you mean by saying that right is internal?”

Gongduzi said, “My acts are guided by my sense of respect, so we say right is internal.”

“If a villager happens to be a year older than your elder brother, to whom do you pay higher respect?”

“I respect my brother.”

“In serving wine, whom do you serve first?”

“I serve the villager first.”

“The one you respect more, but the other you serve as elder, so after all, the matter of right is external; it does not come from within you.”

Gongduzi had no answer and reported this to Mencius.

Mencius said, “Ask whether he respects his uncle or his younger brother more; he’ll say, ‘I respect my uncle.’ Say, ‘When your younger brother is playing the ritual role of the dead spirit, whom do you respect more?’ He’ll say, ‘I respect my younger brother.’ Say, ‘Where did your greater respect for your uncle go?’ He’ll say, ‘It is because of the role my brother is playing.’ You say too, ‘So it is in my case to – I have abiding respect for my brother, but I momentarily pay respect to the villager.’”

When Meng Jizi encountered this approach he said, “When I pay respect to my uncle, that is respect; when I pay it to my brother, that is respect. After all, it’s external, not internal.”

Gongduzi said, “In winter we drink hot water and in summer we drink cold water. Are appetites for food and drink therefore external?”

The problem again is an issue of whether we act in accord with right because we *feel* the imperative or because we know the imperative. Mencius here seems to suggest that the feelings are spontaneously present, but we use knowledge to guide them and motivate action. Just as in the case of what temperature water we drink, external circumstances affect our actions, but that may be because they affect our feelings, not because we distort or deny our feelings to respond rightly.

The following three passages are among the most famous in the *Mencius*. 6A.6 lays out the core of the doctrine of the good nature most extensively, in parallel with 2A.6. 6A.7 and 8 elaborate analogies with a high level of literary, and are clearly designed not only to persuade readers but to move them.

6A.6 Gongduzi said, “Gaozi says that human nature is neither good nor bad. Others say human nature is such that people can become good or become bad, and that this is why when the sage Kings Wen and Wu arose the people loved to be good, and when the tyrannical Kings You and Li arose people loved to be violent. Still others say there are people whose nature is good and people whose nature is bad, and that is why there could be a bad man like Shun’s brother Xiang living under Yao’s sagely rule, why Shun could be a sage even though his father was a bad man like Gusou, and why Weizi Qi and Prince Bigan could be outstanding, though Zhòu was their brother’s son and their ruler as well. Now you say human nature is good – is everyone else wrong?”

Mencius said, “What I mean by saying it is good is that there is that in our nature which is spontaneously part of us and can become good. The fact that we can become bad is not a defect in our natural endowment. All men possess a sense of commiseration; all men possess a sense of shame; all men possess a sense of reverence; all men possess a sense of right and wrong. The sense of commiseration is humanity (*ren*); the sense of shame is righteousness (*yi*); the sense of respect is propriety (*li*); the sense of right and wrong is wisdom. Thus humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us from outside. We possess them inherently; it’s just that we do not focus our minds on them. This is the meaning of the saying, ‘Seek for it and you will get it; let it go and you will lose it.’ The reason why some men are twice as good as others – or five or countless times better – is simply that some men do not exhaust their endowment to the full. The *Poetry* says:

Tian gave birth to the teeming people,
For every thing there is a norm.

The constant for people, in their grasp,
Is love of beautiful virtue's form.

Confucius said, 'The man who wrote this poem certainly understood the Dao!'

"Thus for every type of thing there is a norm; that is why the constant that lies within people's grasp is inherently a love of beautiful virtue."

6A.8 Mencius said, "There was once a time when the woods of Ox Mountain were lovely. But because they lie close beside the capital of a great state, the ax and adze hack away at them – could they remain lovely long? By dawn and evening they are nourished by the rains and the dew, and surely there is no lack of shoots that spring up. But then cattle and sheep follow and graze, and thus it remains barren. When people observe how it is barren, they assume it could never have been covered with lumber, but how could that possibly be the nature of a mountain?"

"And could what exists within people possibly be without humanity and righteousness? That a man may have let go of his original heart is indeed like the hacking of ax and adze on the mountain's woods – morning after morning, how can its beauty remain? Despite the rest such a man may get between day and night, and the restorative *qi* that the morning brings, the things he does day after day destroy these effects, and in time little will he resemble other men in what he likes and hates. When this destruction is repeated, the *qi* he stores up each night will not be enough to preserve what was originally in him, and when the night *qi* can no longer preserve that, he is not far from a beast. Others see that he has become a beast and they assume he never possessed a human endowment, but how could that possibly be the nature of a person?"

"There is nothing that does not grow when it receives its proper nourishment, and there is nothing that does not shrivel when it loses that which it was nourished by. Confucius said, 'Grasp it and you will preserve it; let it go and it will vanish; when it comes and where it goes, no one knows.' Was it not the heart that he meant?"

4B.26 Mencius said, "When people speak of 'nature,' they refer only to our primitive being, and that is moved only by profit. What they dislike about intelligence is that it forces its way. If intelligence acted as Yu did in guiding the rivers, then they would not dislike it. When Yu guided the rivers, he followed their spontaneous courses. If intelligence also followed its spontaneous course, it would be great wisdom indeed. Heaven is high and the stars are distant, but if we seek after their primitive being, we can predict the solstices for a thousand years."

Yu, one of the three early Sage Kings, was also the hero of China's "flood myth." In early mythology, Yu was a demigod who, when China was covered by a great deluge, single handedly dredged the silt-clogged channels of the great rivers, and so drained the land. Later Confucian versions of the legend made him the Minister of Works under Emperor Shun, and cast him as the pioneering state director of hydraulic engineering. This complex passage may be paraphrased as follows:

"When people talk about 'human nature,' they restrict the meaning of the term to our most primitive thoughts, and these are moved only by profit. They refuse to allow that intelligence is a part of the nature because they see it as a distorting, rather than a spontaneous force. But if intelligence were to act as Yu did when he dredged the rivers of China, then they could have no objection to including intelligence in their concept of the nature. When Yu dredged the rivers, he followed their spontaneous courses. If intelligence

also followed its spontaneous course, it would be great wisdom indeed. Heaven is high and the stars are distant. But if we apply our intelligence in the study of their spontaneous courses, our intelligence can run ahead of their spontaneity without distortion, and the solstices of the next thousand years will merely verify our intelligence.”

The underlying issue here is whether human beings have a natural ability to think valid thoughts that are, in structure, like the Tian-created world. Such intelligence would reflect Tian-endowed capacities of the mind (heart), and would tend to confirm Mencius’s claim that wisdom is one of the four seeds of human nature. If that is the goal here, then the *Mencius*’s best proofs of the “four seeds” would be expressed in 2A.6 (*ren*), 6A.5 (right; *li*), and 4B.26 (wisdom). In 2A.6 and 6A.6 the “sense” that correlates to the “seed of wisdom” is the “sense of right and wrong.” However, in Chinese, the phrase “right and wrong” equally means “so and not so,” dimensions of value and fact not being differentiated. Were we to relate the issue in 4A.26 of innate abilities to understand, predict, and act appropriately (like Yu) to the formula of the four innate “moral” senses, we would have to allow the two different interpretations of the phrase to be simultaneously in play.

6A.7 Mencius said, “In years when the harvests have been good, most young men are lazy; in years when the harvests fail most are vicious. This is not a matter of Tian endowing men differently; it is whether or not circumstances have entrapped their hearts.

“Take barley for comparison. If you broadcast the grains and rake the soil over them, and if the soil and planting times are comparable for all, they will all shoot up and ripen by the summer solstice. If there are differences it is because of differences in the fertility of the soil, or in the nourishment of rain and dew, or in the labor of the farmer. Thus things that are alike in kind resemble one another in all respects – why would we suspect it to be any different with people?

“The sage and I are of the same kind, and as Longzi said, ‘Even though a man may weave a sandal for a foot he’s never seen, I know he won’t weave a basket!’ Sandals are all more or less alike because all feet in the world are similar.

“The responses of our mouths to flavors are similar in this way. The famous chef Yi Ya was first to grasp what our mouths took pleasure in. If the response of our mouths to flavor differed by nature from those of other people in the way that they do from other kinds, such as dogs and horses, how could it be that everyone in the world follows the recipes of Yi Ya? When it comes to flavor, everyone in the world wishes to cook like Yi Ya because we all have similar tastes. And so it is too with our ears. When it comes to music, everyone in the world wishes to be like Music Master Kuang because we all have similar hearing. And so it is too with our eyes. All the world knows that Zidu is supremely handsome; anyone who doesn’t is blind.

“So I say, our mouths all share similar tastes when it comes to flavor, our ears all share similar pleasures in listening when it comes to sound, our eyes all share similar standards of beauty when it comes to looks. How could it be that our hearts alone are different? What quality do we share in our hearts? It is the sense of what is proper and right. It is the sage that was first to grasp what our hearts all took pleasure in. And in this way, what is proper and right pleases my heart in just the way that meats please my mouth.”

The “sage chef” Yi Ya was not an “inventor” of recipes that we follow through external formulas (like Gaozi’s external right); he was a discoverer, who explored the world of spontaneous human tastes.

The following short passages touch on two features bearing on the issues of identifying our moral nature – the aesthetic joy experienced in discovering and following our spontaneous moral impulses and the ease that is provided by realizing that we are endowed with simple moral compasses that will allow us to point ourselves right in every situation.

4A.27 Mencius said, “The substance of humanity (*ren*) is serving one’s parents; the substance of right is obeying one’s elders. The substance of wisdom is unswerving awareness of these two. The substance of *li* is the measured embellishment of these two. The substance of music is taking joy in these two, from which springs the joy of music. Once it springs forth, what can stop it? Unstoppable, all unaware one’s feet begin to prance and one’s hands begin to dance.”

7A.15 Mencius said, “Those things that people can do without studying comprise their inherent abilities, and that which they know without reflection is known inherently. No toddler does not know to love his parents, and when they grow older, none does not know to respect his elders. Love of parents is humanity (*ren*); respect for elders is right (*yi*). All that need be done is to extend them throughout the world.”