

MENGZI AND HUMAN NATURE

The doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mozi fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward Yang, then it leans toward Mo.

—Mengzi 3B9



Mengzi is sometimes called the Second Sage (second only to Kongzi) because of his immense influence on Confucianism.

It is the year 319 BCE. We are in Liang, capital city of the state of Wei. King Hui of Liang has invited the wisest scholars from all of China to come and offer their advice on how to govern. The royal court is a raised hall, looking down onto a courtyard. The architecture is intimidating: those going to see the king must cross the courtyard and then ascend the steps under his august gaze. Even the most distinguished dignitary could be forgiven feeling some trepidation.

Today, the Confucian Mengzi has been favored with a royal audience. He ritually bows to the king before ascending the steps to enter the hall. The king addresses Mengzi with the utmost respect as he says, “Venerable sir, you have not regarded hundreds of leagues too far to come, so you must have a means to profit my state.”

Immediately, Mengzi shoots back, “Why must Your Majesty speak of profit?! Let there simply be benevolence and righteousness!”

Everyone is shocked, reeling from Mengzi’s audacity in rebuking the king. Before they can catch their breath, Mengzi explains,

If Your Majesty says, “How can I profit my state?” the Chief Counselors will say, “How can I profit my clan?” and the nobles and commoners will say, “How can I profit my self?” Superiors and subordinates will seize profit from each other and the state will be endangered. When the ruler in a state that can field ten thousand chariots is assassinated, it will invariably be by a clan that can field a thousand chariots. When the ruler in a state that can field a thousand chariots is assassinated, it will invariably be by a clan that can field a hundred chariots. A thousand out of ten thousand or a hundred out of a thousand is certainly not a small amount. But if one merely puts righteousness last and profit first, no one will be satisfied without stealing more. Never have the benevolent left their parents behind. Never have the righteous put their ruler last. Let Your Majesty speak only of benevolence and righteousness. Why must one speak of “profit”? (*Mengzi* 1A1)

Mengzi’s courageous reply puts the king on notice that, unlike so many other people in the royal court, he is not a sycophantic toady who will tell the king only what he wants to hear. Mengzi’s response is also a brilliant philosophical argument. He might seem to be objecting to profit itself. But on what grounds does Mengzi instruct King Hui to avoid emphasizing profit? Emphasizing profit is itself unprofitable. A later Confucian summed up Mengzi’s point concisely: “A gentleman never fails to desire profit, but if one is singlemindedly focused on profit, then it leads to harm. If there is only benevolence and righteousness, then one will not seek profit, but one will never fail to profit.”ⁱ Mengzi is here elaborating in much more detail a position hinted at by Kongzi, who warned, “If in your affairs you abandon yourself to the pursuit of profit, you will

arouse much resentment” (4.12), but also remarked “those who are wise follow Goodness because they feel that they will profit from it” (4.2).

Who is this brilliant but brash defender of the Way of Kongzi?

We have few details about Mengzi’s life, other than those contained in his eponymous text, the *Mengzi*. He was born in Zou, a small state near Kongzi’s home state of Lu, both of which were in what is now Shandong province. His father died when he was young. In his patriarchal society, this must have left him and his mother in precarious circumstances. However, his mother still managed to send him to study in the Confucian school of Zisi, Kongzi’s grandson.

There are several famous stories about Mengzi’s mother that are charmingly edifying, whether or not they are true. One is that “Meng’s mother moved thrice” (*Mèng mǔ sān qiān* 孟母三遷) in order to find a suitable environment in which her son could grow up. After the death of her husband, she first moved with her son next to a cemetery, and the young sage pretended to perform funeral rituals. Thinking this inappropriate for a child, Mengzi’s mother moved to a house near a marketplace, but there her son began imitating someone hawking goods. Still dissatisfied, Mengzi’s mother moved to a home beside a school. There Mengzi pretended to be a teacher, which finally pleased his mother.

When Mengzi began attending school, his mother would ask him every day what he had learned. One day his answer showed casual indifference toward his studies. In response, “Meng’s mother cut the weft” (*Mèng mǔ duàn jī* 孟母斷機) of the fabric that she had been weaving, thereby ruining it. Her weaving was probably one of their few sources of income, so Mengzi was startled that she would waste a piece of fabric. His mother explained that if he wasted a day of learning it was as bad as her wasting a day of work. Thereafter, Mengzi always applied himself fully in his schoolwork.

As an adult, Mengzi traveled from state to state, trying to find a ruler who would put into effect “benevolent government.” By this he meant rule by virtuous “gentlemen” who aimed at the well-being of the people as a whole. Mengzi stressed that most people will engage in crime if they are poor and hungry:

To lack a constant livelihood, yet to have a constant heart—only a scholar is capable of this. As for the people, if they lack a constant livelihood, it follows that they will lack a constant heart. No one who lacks a constant heart will avoid dissipation and evil. When they thereupon sink into crime, to go and punish the people is to trap them. When there are benevolent persons in positions of authority, how is it possible for them to trap the people? (1A7; *Readings*, p. 122)

Consequently, it is the obligation of government to ensure that the basic needs of the people are met. Mengzi offered much more specific advice than had Kongzi about how to secure the livelihood of the people, including recommendations about everything from tax rates to farm management to the pay scale for government employees (e.g.,

3A3). However, as the references to “a scholar” and “a constant heart” suggest, Mengzi agreed with Kongzi that ethical cultivation is crucial for both individual and social well-being. Thus, Mengzi advocated an educational system that instructs people in how to be a good parent, child, ruler, minister, spouse, and friend (3A4).

We find in Mengzi an emphasis on the five themes that we saw are characteristic of all Confucians: achieving happiness in the everyday world, a revivalistic appropriation of tradition, familial relations as the basis of other ethical obligations and of differentiated caring, ritual as a means of expressing and reinforcing one’s ties to others, and the ethically transformative power of education.¹ In addition, Mengzi agreed with Kongzi in regarding war as, at best, a regrettable last resort. In what has become a Chinese proverb, he stated that to try to rule via brute force is as ineffectual as “climbing a tree in search of a fish” (*yuán mù qiú yú* 緣木求魚, 1A7).²

However, Mengzi could not simply repeat what Kongzi had said. Confucianism was now under attack by a variety of alternative philosophies. Mengzi saw two positions as the primary competitors to the Way: “the doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mozi fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward Yang Zhu, then it leans toward Mozi. Yang Zhu is ‘for oneself.’ This is to not have a ruler. Mozi is ‘impartial caring.’ This is to not have a father. To not have a father and to not have a ruler is to be an animal” (3B9; *Readings*, pp. 135–36).

In response to the Mohists, Mengzi argued that the impartiality they demanded was inconsistent with human nature, hence neither practical nor desirable. In this, Mengzi agreed with Yang Zhu. However, Yang Zhu was also wrong, because there is more to human nature than self-interested desires. Rather than being artificial deformations of human nature, benevolence and righteousness are as natural as the fruit that grows from a peach tree. Let’s look in more detail at how Mengzi argues for these claims.

1. The Mohists, Profit, and Impartiality

We have already seen part of Mengzi’s argument against Mohism. When Mengzi chides King Hui “Why must one speak of ‘profit (*li*)’?” (1A1) he is also implicitly criticizing the Mohists, who state that “the business of a benevolent person is to promote what is beneficial (*li*) to the world and eliminate what is harmful” (68). For example, the Mohists argue against aggressive warfare on the grounds that it is not beneficial, even to the aggressor state. When Mengzi encounters someone who plans to dissuade rulers from fighting a war by arguing that the war would be unprofitable, he objects,

Your intention, venerable sir, is indeed great. But your slogan is unacceptable. If you persuade the kings of Qin and Chu by means of profit, the kings of Qin and Chu will set aside the three armies because they delight in profit. This is for the officers of the three armies to delight in being set aside because they delight

in profit. Those who are ministers will embrace profit in serving their rulers. Those who are children will embrace profit in serving their fathers. Those who are younger brothers will embrace profit in serving their elder brothers. This is for rulers and ministers, fathers and children, elder and younger brothers to end up abandoning benevolence and righteousness. For people to embrace profit in their contact with one another, yet not be destroyed—such a thing has never happened. (*Mengzi* 6B4*)

As he did with King Hui, Mengzi here argues that aiming to maximize profit or benefit is self-defeating. What would really benefit everyone is a society in which people act in accordance with benevolence and righteousness. But if everyone is thinking only in terms of profit, they will end up betraying and harming other people and groups in the name of what they perceive to be beneficial. Mengzi's critique has something in common with that of modern philosophers who say that our society is so obsessed with quantifiable benefits that we ignore considerations of morality in favor of the bottom line.

Mengzi's most fundamental objection to Mohism is that the impartiality it demands is impractical and perverse because it is contrary to human nature. This comes out most directly in his dialogue with the Mohist Yi Zhi (*Mengzi* 3A5). Mengzi points out that Yi Zhi had himself given his parents elaborate funerals. Yi Zhi's natural attachment to his parents was thus so strong that it led him to ignore his abstract commitment to the Mohist principle of frugal burials.

As we saw, a theoretical weakness of early Mohism is that it regards human motivations as almost infinitely malleable. Yi Zhi holds what seems to be a modified version of Mohism, designed to make it more psychologically plausible. He suggests "love is without distinctions, but it is bestowed beginning with one's parents." Yi Zhi thus seems to be agreeing with the Confucian claim that children first learn to love and have compassion for others in the family (*Analects* 1.2), but argues that this natural compassion should be redirected until it reaches everyone equally, thereby achieving the Mohist goal of "impartial caring."

Mengzi suggests that Yi Zhi's revisionist Mohism still results in a position that is psychologically impractical: "Does Yi Zhi truly hold that one's affection for one's nephew is like one's affection for a neighbor's child?" Mengzi sums up his objection with the aphorism, "Heaven, in producing the things in the world, causes them to have one source, but Yi Zhi gives them two sources." The first source is our innate love for family members (which is naturally stronger for them than for strangers), while the second source is the Mohist doctrine of impartiality. Now, for the Mohists (as much as for the Confucians) the will of Heaven and the Way coincide. So once the Mohists acknowledge that our greater love for family members is part of the nature implanted in us by Heaven, they cannot consistently claim that it is part of the Way to override these motivations in order to achieve impartiality.

In some respects Mengzi's argument against the Mohists is structurally similar to Yang Zhu's. Yang Zhu and Mengzi agree that we should follow our nature, and that the Mohist Way is contrary to that nature. However, Yang Zhu claims that human nature is purely self-interested, while Mengzi argues that human nature is good (6A6). Let's see how.

II. Yang Zhu and Human Nature

In what is perhaps the most famous passage in the *Mengzi*, our philosopher argues for the goodness of human nature with a thought experiment:

The reason why I say that humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among their neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries. From this we can see that if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human. (*Mengzi* 2A6)

Mengzi's thought experiment specifies that the situation happens "suddenly." This suggests that the reaction is natural, because one has no time to calculate the potential advantages or disadvantages to oneself. Notice also what Mengzi does *not* say here. He does not claim that anyone would actually act to save the child. A person might freeze in the moment or crisis, or might (after a moment of reflection) think of selfish reasons to allow the child to drown. Mengzi only needs us to share his intuition that any human would have at least a momentary twinge of compassion at the sight of a child about to fall into a well; conversely, "if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human."

Mengzi uses a similar thought experiment to argue for the existence of other innate ethical reactions:

Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness. ... It is not the case that only the worthy person has this heart. All humans have it. The worthy person simply never loses it.

A basket of food and a bowl of soup—if one gets them then one will live; if one doesn't get them then one will die. But if they're given with contempt, then even a homeless person will not accept them. If they're trampled upon, then even a beggar won't take them. (*Mengzi* 6A10)

The previous passage argued for an innate “heart of compassion,” which is the basis of benevolence; this second passage argues that all humans disdain to do certain shameful things that would otherwise benefit them, and this “heart” is the basis of righteousness. So whereas Yang Zhu claimed that human nature consists only of self-interested desires for food, sex, physical comfort, and survival, Mengzi uses these thought experiments to argue that human nature also includes distinctively ethical motivations.

But aren’t Mengzi’s claims falsified by the simple fact of human wrongdoing? If we are all innately benevolent and righteous, why does anyone ever hurt another person or compromise his integrity? This objection misinterprets Mengzi’s position, though. Mengzi does not claim that *humans* are innately good; he claims that *human nature* is innately good. Recall our earlier discussion of the concept of the “nature” of a thing (Chapter 5). It is the nature of a peach tree to bear fruit, but it will fail to realize this nature if denied a healthy environment (with water, sunlight, etc.). It is the nature of a frog to have four legs, but it will never develop them if it is eaten as a tadpole. Mengzi uses a carefully chosen agricultural metaphor to explain how this applies to human nature. He says that the “heart of compassion” (manifested when one sees the child about to fall into a well) is “the *sprout* of benevolence,” while the “heart of disdain” (illustrated by the starving beggar who refuses a handout given with contempt) is the “*sprout* of righteousness” (2A6, 6A10). Just as the sprout of a Chinese Juniper is not yet a tree but does have an active potential to develop into a mature tree, so are the “sprout of benevolence” and “sprout of righteousness” potentials for full benevolence and righteousness. But we must develop this potential in order to become fully virtuous. As Mengzi explains when asked to clarify his position, “As for what they genuinely are, humans can become good. That is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential” (6A6). Until our potential for virtue is fully developed, the reactions of the sprouts will be haphazard and inconsistent. This is why humans can show great kindness and even self-sacrifice in one situation but stunning indifference to the suffering of others in a slightly different situation.

Consequently, Mengzi’s doctrine that human nature is good is perfectly consistent with the fact that humans often fail to do good. But is Mengzi right in claiming that all humans have at least the *sprouts* of benevolence and righteousness? We are all too familiar with the chilling example of the psychopath: a “human” (such as a serial killer) who lacks ordinary compassion or sympathy. Mengzi’s metaphor of Ox Mountain is his explanation for the rare cases of people who seem to lack the sprouts of virtue:

The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because the mountain bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the respite it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, it was not that there were no sprouts or shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep then came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were

barren. People seeing it barren, believed that there had never been any timber there. Could this be the nature of the mountain?

When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? That by which they discard their genuine hearts is simply like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? ... Others see someone who is like an animal, and think that there was never any capacity there. Is this what a human genuinely is? (*Mengzi* 6A8)

Mengzi acknowledges that some people seem to lack the sprouts of virtue. However, this is not “what a human genuinely is” (6A6, 6A8). Mengzi maintains that a bad environment (such as physical deprivation, lack of ethical guidance, or even abusive parenting) destroyed their sprouts.

***Fact:** Gunpowder, the magnetic compass, and printing with moveable type were all invented in China long before they were used in the West. It has been said that these are the primary technological breakthroughs responsible for the rise of the modern world.*

III. The Virtues

Mengzi agreed with Kongzi that flourishing or living well is something that humans should do while in this world (rather than something to be achieved after death) through life with one’s family and friends and participation in communal ritual activities. However, Mengzi gives a much more specific and clear account than does Kongzi of human nature, ethical cultivation, and the virtues. Mengzi identifies four cardinal virtues, each of which is grounded in our innate emotional reactions:

Humans all have the heart of compassion. Humans all have the heart of disdain. Humans all have the heart of respect. Humans all have the heart of approval and disapproval. The heart of compassion is benevolence. The heart of disdain is righteousness. The heart of respect is propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is wisdom. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them. Hence, it is said, “Seek it and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it.” (*Mengzi* 6A6)

Benevolence is compassion or sympathy for others. The benevolent person is pained by the suffering of others and takes joy in their happiness. The Mohists also emphasized this term, but for them it is ideally a purely impartial concern for others. For a Confucian like Mengzi, though, compassion should extend to everyone but should be

stronger for those tied to one by bonds such as kinship and friendship. Confucian benevolence is thus like the ripples around a stone dropped into a pond, proceeding out from the center but gradually decreasing in strength as they move outward. This is related to the Confucian hypothesis that it is loving and being loved in the family that germinates our capacity for compassion.

Righteousness is the integrity of a person who disdains to demean herself by doing what is base or shameful, even if doing so would reap benefits. So, for example, a righteous person will not accept a gift given with contempt (6A10), beg in order to obtain luxuries (4B33), or cheat at a game (3B1). As with benevolence, the capacity for righteousness is innate, but its growth is first stimulated in the family, where respect for the opinions of one's elders is internalized as an ethical sense of shame. Put in deontological terms, benevolence is a virtue particularly manifested in our *obligations* to help others, while righteousness involves *prohibitions* against actions that would violate our integrity.

Wisdom has many aspects, each of which is illustrated by the story of the sage Boli Xi (5A9). When the ruler of Yu made foolish concessions to the state of Jin, Boli Xi knew that these policies would result in the destruction of Yu. Recognizing that this ruler was too stubborn to listen to his advice, Boli Xi fled to the state of Qin, whose ruler showed great promise. Boli Xi waited until he was approached respectfully by the ruler of Qin, but then served so ably as his minister that the ruler became illustrious. Boli Xi thus showed great wisdom in judging the characters of the rulers of Yu and Qin. He manifested great skill at instrumental reasoning (i.e., finding the best means to achieve a given end) in the fine advice he gave when he was minister to the ruler of Qin. He revealed his commitment to righteousness by insisting that the ruler of Qin show him respect in requesting an audience. He also demonstrated prudence in fleeing Yu when the situation was hopeless. It may surprise some readers that running away was virtuous in this situation, but keep in mind that a good person does care about her own well-being; she just doesn't care about herself excessively (cf 4B31). Boli Xi thus combines the four parts of wisdom: being a good judge of the character of others, skill at means-end reasoning, an understanding of and commitment to the other virtues, and prudence.

The word rendered "propriety" is the same as the word for "rites" or "rituals." This is appropriate because propriety is the virtue that consists in performing the rites with the proper motivations. In comparison with some other Confucians, Mengzi has relatively little to say about the rites (hence little to say about propriety as a virtue). But one way of conceptualizing propriety is that it is manifested when we express deference or respect to others through ritualized actions (such as bowing, allowing someone else to walk first through a door, etc.).

IV. Ethical Cultivation

Mengzi holds that we are born with only sprouts of the four cardinal virtues. How do we get from the sprouts to the full virtues? As we have already noted, it is the responsibility of a ruler to make sure the people are safe and have the basic necessities of life, because few people will be able to cultivate virtue if subject to hunger, cold, homelessness, and violence. Mengzi also emphasizes two other factors as impediments to the growth of virtue: pernicious doctrines and lack of individual ethical effort.

In Mengzi's era, as in our own, many people either denied that they were capable of virtue or opposed virtue as naive. Mengzi categorizes "those who say 'I myself am unable to dwell in benevolence and follow righteousness'" as "throwing themselves away" and "those whose words are opposed to propriety and righteousness" as "destroying themselves" (4A10). Both attitudes are roadblocks to moral growth. So a significant part of Mengzian moral self-cultivation is simply being aware of and delighting in the manifestations of the sprouts when we do have them. In other words, we reinforce and strengthen our benevolent and righteous motivations when we act out of them with awareness and approval. As Mengzi puts it, "If one delights in them then they grow. If they grow then how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped, then without realizing it one's feet begin to step in time to them and one's hands dance according to their rhythms" (4A27).

Mengzi more than once says that people fail to develop morally simply because they do not engage in "reflection" (6A6, 6A15). The Chinese term can also mean "to concentrate upon" or "to long for," as when someone longs for an absent loved one (*Analects* 19.6). As Arthur Waley explains, "reflection" refers to

a process that is only at a short remove from concrete observation. Never is there any suggestion of a long interior process of cogitation or ratiocination, in which a whole series of thoughts are evolved one out of another, producing on the physical plane a headache and on the intellectual, an abstract theory. We must think of [reflection] rather as a fixing of the attention ... on an impression recently imbibed from without and destined to be immediately re-exteriorized in action.ⁱⁱ

Reflection is thus a mental activity with a focus that is both internal and external. One reflects upon one's own virtuous feelings, but one also reflects upon the aspects of situations that call forth those feelings.

A much-discussed dialogue between Mengzi and King Xuan of Qi illustrates the stages of moral development. Mengzi asks the king about how he had spared an ox being led to slaughter because, as the king put it, "I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground." Mengzi explains to the king that the kindness he showed to the ox is the same feeling he needs to exercise to be a great king. King Xuan is pleased and replies, "I examined myself and sought it out, but did not understand my heart. You spoke, and in my heart there was a feeling of compassion."

Mengzi helped the king to *reflect upon* and appreciate his own innate kindness. This is an important first step in stimulating the growth of the king's sprouts of virtue. Then Mengzi challenges the king:

In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach birds and beasts, but the benefits do not reach the commoners. Why is this case alone different? Hence, not lifting one feather is due to not using one's strength. Not seeing a wagon of firewood is due to not using one's eyesight. The commoners not receiving care is due to not using one's kindness. Hence, Your Majesty's not being a genuine king is due to not acting; it is not due to not being able. (*Mengzi* 1A7; *Readings*, p. 120)

This dialogue raises many intriguing and complicated questions. Is Mengzi presenting some sort of *argument* to the king about why he ought to care for the commoners? Perhaps Mengzi is effectively saying to the king: you agree that it is right to show compassion on the suffering ox (Case A), but your people are also suffering due to your exorbitant taxes, wars of conquest, corrupt government, and so on (Case B). Case B is similar to Case A in all relevant respects. Therefore, in order to be consistent, you ought to show compassion on your people. Alternatively, perhaps Mengzi merely wishes to convince the king that he is *capable* of ruling with benevolence: you can show compassion for a simple animal, so certainly you can also show compassion for a suffering human.

My own view is that neither analysis is completely correct. I think Mengzi is leading the king to *reflect upon* relevant similarities between the suffering of the ox and the suffering of his subjects. But this is not an argument for simple consistency. After all, Mengzi also makes clear in the passage that slaughtering animals is ethically permissible, even if "gentlemen" are too kind-hearted to do it themselves. So Mengzi is asking the king to treat his subjects better than he treated the ox, not the same. Mengzi does want the king to recognize his own demonstrated capacity for compassion. However, it is not merely the capacity that Mengzi is getting at. He wants to frame the comparison between the ox and the commoners in a way that encourages the king's compassion to flow from one case to the other. For example, Mengzi reminds the king that he spared the ox because of its "frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground." He hopes the king will be led from this to reflect upon, and sympathize with, the suffering of his own innocent subjects. In other words, Mengzi is helping the king to achieve cognitive ethical growth as a means to achieving affective ethical growth.³

Mengzi describes this process of ethical growth as "extending" or "filling out" the manifestations of the sprouts. In other words, all of us will have righteous or benevolent reactions to certain paradigmatic situations. We feel love for our parents, which is a manifestation of benevolence, or we disdain allowing ourselves to be addressed

disrespectfully, which is a manifestation of righteousness. However, there are other situations in which we do not have these reactions, even though they are in the same “category” (3B3). For example, a person who would find it shameful to have an illicit affair might think nothing of lying to his ruler to achieve some political benefit. “Reflection” is the process by which we identify the relevant similarities between those cases in which we already have the appropriate reactions and other cases in which we do not yet react appropriately. This guides our emotions so that we come to feel similarly about the cases. Or, as Mengzi succinctly put it: “People all have things that they will not bear. To extend this reaction to that which they will bear is benevolence. People all have things that they will not do. To extend this reaction to that which they will do is righteousness” (7B31).

Extension is not a matter of learning to apply a set of explicit rules. Mengzi is not, in other words, a rule-deontologist. Mengzi is similar to Kongzi in having a comparatively particularistic conception of wisdom. For example, a rival philosopher once attempted to trap Mengzi with an ethical dilemma. He began by asking, “That men and women should not touch in handing something to one another—is this the ritual?” When Mengzi acknowledged that it is, his interlocutor asked, “If your sister-in-law were drowning, would you pull her out with your hand?” His opponent thinks that he has Mengzi trapped, but Mengzi replies,

To not pull your sister-in-law out when she is drowning is to be a beast. That men and women should not touch in handing something to one another is the ritual, but if your sister-in-law is drowning to pull her out with your hand is discretion. (*Mengzi* 4A17)

The ritual Mengzi discusses might initially seem quaint or overly strict. But consider the fact that prudent teachers and bosses in our own society know that it is wise to avoid any unnecessary contact with their students or subordinates. But suppose you were standing near a student who was about to fall from a stepladder. Would you let the student fall or use your discretion and grab her?

This particularism is not relativism. Mengzi thinks that there is a best way to respond in any given situation, and it is not a matter of personal or cultural opinion. So after describing how differently sages of the past have acted, Mengzi insists that if they “had exchanged places, they all would have done as the others did” (4B29; cf 4B1* and 4B31*). In addition, Mengzi does recognize some absolute ethical prohibitions. When asked if there is anything that all sages have in common, he explains that there is: “if any could obtain all under Heaven by performing one unrighteous deed, or killing one innocent person, he would not do it” (2A2). However, there is much more to the Confucian Way than can be captured in any set of rules.

Mengzi thinks that we generally have the capacity to “extend” to what is ethically required of us. Once, when someone gave him excuses for not immediately doing what

is right, Mengzi replied,

Suppose there is a person who every day appropriates one of his neighbor's chickens. Someone tells him, "This is not the Way of a gentleman." He says, "May I reduce it to appropriating one chicken every month, and wait until next year to stop?" If one knows that it is not righteous, then one should quickly stop. (*Mengzi* 3B8*)

However, Mengzi stresses the importance of acting with appropriate feelings and motivations. Thus, Mengzi praises Sage-King Shun by saying that "he acted out of benevolence and righteousness. He did not act out benevolence and righteousness" (4B19). To force oneself to do what one abstractly believes is right is to treat virtue as "external" (6A4–5). This not only fails to be genuinely virtuous, it is ethically damaging. Mengzi illustrates this using another agricultural metaphor, the story of the farmer from Song:

One must work at it, but do not aim at it directly. Let the heart not forget, but do not "help" it grow. Do not be like the man from Song. Among the people of the state of Song there was one who, concerned lest his grain not grow, pulled on it. Wearily, he returned home, and said to his family, "Today I am worn out. I helped the grain to grow." His son rushed out and looked at it. The grain was withered. Those in the world who do not "help" the grain to grow are few. Those who abandon it, thinking it will not help, are those who do not weed their grain. Those who "help" it grow are those who pull on their grain. Not only does this not actually help, but it even harms it. (*Mengzi* 2A2; *Readings*, p. 127)

To use a modern illustration, I cannot simply decide today that I will be the next Mother Teresa and expect to suddenly have the unwavering compassion to save the world. If I tried to do so, I would fail, and probably end up being a bitter cynic. Instead, I should begin by showing more consistent kindness to my family and friends and gradually grow into a better person.

V. Cosmology

Mengzi situates his philosophical anthropology in a broader worldview: "To fathom one's heart is to understand one's nature. If one understands one's nature, then one understands Heaven" (7A1). For Mengzi, Heaven is not as anthropomorphic as it was for the Mohists (whose Heaven is as personal as the God of the mainstream Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions), but neither is it as naturalized as it was for later Confucians like Xunzi. So, on the one hand, Mengzi sometimes treats Heaven as almost

identical with the natural (and amoral) course of events (2B1*, 4A7*). But, on the other hand, Heaven provides a moral standard. Thus, Mengzi approvingly quotes an ode that says: “Heaven gives birth to the teaming people. / If there is a thing, there is a norm” (6A6). We see both the naturalistic and the moral aspects of Heaven in 1B3*, where Mengzi discusses the problem of diplomacy between powerful and weak states: “Those who serve the small with the big delight in Heaven; those who serve the big with the small are in awe of Heaven.” In other words, it should be the case (normatively) that the powerful are generous enough to serve the weak. But it is the case (descriptively) that antagonizing powerful states has dangerous consequences.

The complexity of Mengzi’s view is also evident in his comments about political justification. He stresses that Heaven is the ultimate source of political legitimacy. However, Heaven primarily manifests itself in the reactions of the common people rather than in any supernatural agency: “Hence, I say that Heaven does not speak but simply reveals the mandate through actions and affairs” (5A5*). Heaven is a causal agent that affects the course of human history: “When no one does it, yet it is done—this is due to Heaven. When no one extends to it yet it is reached—this is fate.” (5A6*). Nonetheless, when “gentlemen” find themselves unable to restore order to the world, they must not be “bitter toward Heaven” (2B13). Rather, they must accept Heaven’s will while still striving to make the world a better place (7A1).

In order to persevere in the face of adversity without becoming bitter, one must cultivate one’s *qi* 氣. This is one of the most intriguing yet difficult-to-understand aspects of Mengzi’s thought. *Qi* has been rendered various ways, including “ether,” “material force,” and “psychophysical stuff.” There is really no adequate translation, because this is a concept for which we have no precise analogue. For Mengzi and his contemporaries, *qi* is a kind of fluid, found in the atmosphere and in the human body, closely connected to the kind and intensity of one’s emotional reactions. *Qi* therefore straddles the dualism between mind and body that has become a fixture of post-Cartesian philosophy in the West: *qi* is physically embodied emotion. Here are two examples that give an intuitive understanding of *qi*.

1. You are with a group of people in someone’s living room, having a pleasant, casual conversation. Someone tries to make an offhand joke, but it sounds like a cutting personal criticism of another guest. It seems as if the literal atmosphere in the room has suddenly changed, like there is some-thing palpably heavy in the air, making further conversation difficult and awkward. That “something” is a kind of negative *qi*, which is both expression and reinforcement of the feelings of those present.⁴
2. Imagine a beautiful April morning. The sun is already bright when you arise. The air smells crisp and fresh. You feel energized for the day ahead. You laugh off any minor problems and annoyances. Your positive mood is partially a product of absorbing some of the vibrant *qi* that circulates on this spring day.⁵

These examples should not lead us to assume that we are purely passive to the influence of the *qi*. Our hearts can resist the effects of negative *qi*, such as when I refuse to allow my fear to dissuade me from doing what I know is right. Mengzi describes this as “maintaining one’s will.” However, for success in the long run I cannot continue to force myself to act against the promptings of the *qi*. To do so would be to “injure one’s *qi*,” eventually producing a person who is dispirited (whose *qi* is “starved”). Instead, one must cultivate an ethically informed *qi* (“a *qi* that harmonizes with righteousness and the Way”). This *qi* gives one the moral stamina to persevere in the face of dangers, challenges, and setbacks. Among the highly cultivated, this reservoir of fortitude is so deep that it is essentially inexhaustible (or “floodlike,” as Mengzi puts it). The way to develop this *qi* is simply through the gradual cultivation of the sprouts of virtue (2A2; *Readings*, pp. 126–27).

VI. Historical Significance

Mengzi claimed that he had developed the “floodlike *qi*,” and it turned out that he needed the fortitude that comes with it; he spent much of his adult life wandering from state to state, hoping to find a ruler who would put the Way into practice, but his efforts failed. He refused to meet with rulers unless they treated him with the ritual propriety due a distinguished advisor. This might seem arrogant, and his disciples encouraged him to bend his principles in order to obtain audiences with more rulers. However, Mengzi said that there was no hope in transforming a ruler who did not demonstrate that he was willing to accept his guidance: “those who bend themselves have never been able to make others upright” (3B1*; 2B10*). Sometimes rulers did meet with him and praised his teachings but did not give him any official position. He did accept a position as high minister in the state of Qi, but he resigned when it became clear that the king was ignoring his advice (2B6–12*; 2B13).

Mengzi eventually retired from public service and, with the help of some of his disciples, edited his collected sayings and dialogues. Like Kongzi, Gandhi, or Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., he was a person actively engaged in the struggle for positive social change. However, he never saw the social transformation he worked for, which saddened him. Toward the end of his life, he moaned, “From Kongzi to the present time is a little more than one hundred years. It is not long from the era of a sage, and we are close to the home of a sage. Yet where is he? Where is he?” (7B38*). Nonetheless, Mengzi assured his disciples that he was not bitter: he had faith that Heaven would, in its own time, raise up a sage to bring peace to the world (2B13).

Ironically, it was not until more than a thousand years after Mengzi’s death that he achieved his greatest influence. When the movement known in English as Neo-Confucianism revived Confucianism as an alternative to Buddhism, it praised Mengzi as the Second Sage (after only Kongzi himself). Thinkers such as Han Yu, Zhu Xi, and

Wang Yangming, although they disagreed about much else, agreed that Mengzi was the one who truly understood the Way that Kongzi transmitted, and made *explicit* many things that were only *implied* in the sayings of Kongzi. In particular, Mengzi's doctrine that human nature is good was implicit in the teachings of Kongzi.

I am not sure the Neo-Confucians were right that Mengzi simply made explicit what was implicit in Kongzi's thought. Although Kongzi says next to nothing about human nature, his comments about the difficulty of cultivating virtue sound much more like those of Xunzi, the later Confucian critic of Mengzi who claimed "human nature is bad" (Chapter 10). Kongzi approves of the comparison between ethical cultivation and the laborious process of grinding and carving jade (1.15), while Xunzi compares ethical cultivation to steaming and bending wood into a wagon wheel, or grinding a metal blade until it is sharp (*Readings*, pp. 256–57). These are precisely the sort of metaphors for ethical cultivation to which Mengzi objects (6A1). I think that the Neo-Confucians were also guilty of anachronism in attributing to Mengzi certain metaphysical concepts that only developed much later in Chinese thought.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, I heartily agree with the Neo-Confucians that Mengzi deserves his place as not only one of the greatest Confucian sages but as one of the greatest philosophers in world history. In particular, he provided a unique and inspiring vision of humans as having innate but incipient dispositions toward virtue that require cultivation in order to reach full maturity.

Review Questions

1. According to tradition, "Meng's mother moved thrice" and "Meng's mother cut the weft." Why did she do these things?
2. What does Mengzi mean by "benevolent government"?
3. According to Mengzi, what activity is like "climbing a tree in search of a fish"?
4. Explain Mengzi's argument that aiming at profit or benefit is self-defeating.
5. What is the position of the Mohist Yi Zhi, and why does Mengzi think that it is incoherent?
6. What does Mengzi mean by the claim that "human nature is good"?
7. Explain the thought experiment of the child at the well. What point do you take Mengzi to be arguing for?
8. Explain the story of Ox Mountain. What claim do you take Mengzi to be illustrating with this metaphor?
9. What are Mengzi's four cardinal virtues? Give an example of how each one manifests itself.
10. Explain the story of King Xuan and the ox. What are at least two interpretations of what Mengzi is trying to achieve in his discussion with Xuan?
11. Explain how extension occurs. What is the role of reflection in this process?

12. Explain the story of the farmer from Song. What claim do you believe Mengzi is illustrating with this metaphor?
13. In what ways does Mengzi conceive of Heaven as like a personal God, and in what ways does he conceive of it as simply the impersonal operations of the universe?
14. Give a concrete example to illustrate what *qi* is. Why does Mengzi think it is important to cultivate one's *qi*? How does one cultivate it?
15. What later movement praised Mengzi as the Second Sage? What did they think was especially important about him?

1. See Chapter 2 for these themes.
2. For more on Mengzi's views on war, see 4A14*, 6B8*, and 7B1*, 7B2*, 7B3, and 7B4*.
3. For more on "reflection," see *Mengzi* 4A1*, 4B20*, 6A6, and 6A15 and *Analects* 2.15 and 15.31.
4. Compare this to Mengzi's example in 7A36* of the effect of an august person's *qi* on how one feels in his presence.
5. Compare this to Mengzi's example in 6A8 of the effects of morning and evening *qi* on restoring one's ethical feelings.