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The historical context, generative logic, and method of argumentation of Mencius's doctrine of the goodness of human nature

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Abstract. Mencius's doctrine of the goodness of human nature responded to the ethical disputes of the Warring States period and reflected the development of early Confucian theories of human nature. By examining the intellectual line of the natural temperament theory of human nature between Confucius and Mencius, together with the Mencius–Gaozi debate, this paper analyzes Mencius's redefinition of xing (human nature) and his method of argumentation. While acknowledging human beings' natural endowments and the actual differences between good and evil in conduct, Mencius attributed the internal ground of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom to the human heart, and on the basis of the manifestation of moral feeling established an argumentative path from "the capacity to become good" to "the goodness of human nature". The distinction between xing and ming (destiny) further linked human moral endowment with conscious choice, endowing the goodness of human nature with a normative demand. In argumentative method, Mencius examined the content of xing through conceptual disputation and analogical inference, confirmed the innateness of the sprouts of goodness through the first-person moral experience of "a child about to fall into a well", and then explained the transformation of moral capacity into actual virtue through "reflection" and "filling out and extending". The doctrine of the goodness of human nature thus formed a theoretical structure moving from the definition of human nature through moral experience to the practice of self-cultivation, providing a systematic argument for the internal ground of benevolence and righteousness and for its practical possibility.

Keywords: Mencius, goodness of human nature, four sprouts

1. Introduction

The core of Mencius's doctrine of the goodness of human nature lies in affirming that the human heart possesses an inherent moral endowment, on which the ground of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom is established. *Mencius*, Gaozi I, states: "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not infused into me from outside; they are originally inherent in me". This judgment implies that the emergence of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom has a ground internal to human beings. Yet human beings have natural desires, and their actual conduct differs in good and evil; how, then, could Mencius conclude that

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human nature is good? This question concerns Mencius's reinterpretation of xing and the way in which he argues, from human moral experience, for the inner possibility of goodness.

Mencius's formulation of the doctrine of the goodness of human nature was closely related to the intellectual disputes of the Warring States period over human nature, virtue, and ethical order. Confucius's discussions of the practice of benevolence and of what human beings have in common provided Mencius with an intellectual foundation; early Confucian explorations of temperament, moral education, and the internalization of virtue gradually turned the relation between human nature and morality into an independent theoretical problem. The ethical disputes of the mid-Warring States period and the divergent interpretations of the goodness or evil of human nature further brought into relief the problem of the relation between the ground of benevolence and righteousness and the actual differences between good and evil. Within this intellectual context, Mencius grounded benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom in the human heart by redefining the content of xing. Understanding Mencius's doctrine therefore requires an examination of its historical context, an analysis of the generative logic of the concept of xing, and a further test of the specific way in which he argues for the goodness of human nature.

2. The historical context of Mencius's doctrine of the goodness of human nature

Changes in the ethical order during the Warring States period made the ground of benevolence and righteousness a central issue in the disputes among the various schools. With the decline of the authority of the Zhou royal house, the intensification of wars of annexation among the feudal lords, and changes in social and economic relations, the political and ethical order sustained by the traditional institutions of ritual and music was confronted with challenges. *The Book of Lord Shang*, "Agriculture and War", states: "That by which a state flourishes is agriculture and war". This claim reflected the emphasis of state governance at the time on agricultural production and military competition. Mencius was likewise concerned with the influence of material conditions on ethical life. He held that "those with constant means have constant hearts; those without constant means have no constant hearts" (*Mencius*, Teng Wen Gong I), and advocated that, once the people's livelihood was secured, they be "led toward goodness". In Mencius's view, a stable livelihood provided the actual conditions for the people to follow ritual and righteousness, while moral education further acted upon human conduct. Material conditions and moral education can influence the formation of virtue, but whether the actual differences between good and evil in conduct imply a corresponding difference in human nature still requires examination from the perspective of human nature itself.

This problem manifested itself in the disputes of the various schools as a conflict among different ethical views. *Mencius*, Teng Wen Gong II, states: "To be without a father and without a ruler—this is what the Duke of Zhou struck down". Mencius believed that the abuses of Yang Zhu's "acting for oneself" and the Mohist "universal love" would endanger the relations of ruler and minister and of father and son, which Confucianism held dear; he therefore declared his argumentative stance with the words "I am not fond of disputing, but I am compelled to do so". Mencius also said: "What is produced in the heart harms the affairs; what is produced in the affairs harms the government" (Teng Wen Gong II). In Mencius's view, ideas can influence people's actual conduct and thereby act upon political and social order. Mencius's criticism of Yang Zhu and Mozi expressed a self-consciousness of defending benevolence and righteousness, but whether benevolence and righteousness could become a moral requirement commonly observed by people still depended on how Confucianism understood the moral capacity possessed by human beings. Confucius's discussions of benevolence and human nature offered a clue to this question. *Analects*, Yan Yuan, states: "The practice of benevolence depends

on oneself—how could it depend on others?" Confucius linked the realization of the virtue of benevolence to people's self-conscious practice and emphasized human initiative in moral cultivation. *Analects*, Yang Huo, further states: "By nature people are close to one another; through practice they grow far apart". The relation between human beings' inborn endowments and their acquired differences is set forth in greater detail in the Guodian bamboo slip text *Xing Zi Ming Chu* (Human Nature Arises from Destiny). For convenience of discussion, the relevant passages are quoted as follows:

The bamboo text states: "Human beings all have a nature, but the heart has no fixed intent; it becomes active only after being stirred by things, proceeds only after being pleased, and becomes settled only after practice". "Human nature arises from destiny, and destiny descends from Heaven; the Way begins with feeling, and feeling is born from nature. What is at the beginning is close to feeling; what is at the end is close to righteousness". "Liking and disliking are nature; what is liked and disliked are things". "The qi of joy, anger, grief, and sorrow is nature; when it reaches the outside, things draw it forth". It further states: "Within the four seas, human nature is one and the same; that the use of the heart differs is due to teaching". "What nourishes nature is practice; what develops nature is the Way"[1]. The text also mentions: "The *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Rites*, and the *Music* all originally arose from human beings". "Teaching is that by which virtue is produced within"[2]. "If people are trustworthy before any words are spoken, it is because they have fine feeling. If people are constant before any teaching, it is because their nature is good"[3].

The above passages take natural endowment as the basis of nature and bring the emergence of feeling, actual conduct, and the cultivation of virtue within the scope of inquiry into human nature. "Human nature arises from destiny, and destiny descends from Heaven" traces nature back to what is conferred by Heaven, while "liking and disliking are nature" and "the qi of joy, anger, grief, and sorrow is nature" define the specific content of nature in terms of affective endowment. "Feeling is born from nature" shows that feeling is rooted in human beings' inner endowment, while "it becomes active only after being stirred by things" points out that the activity of the human heart requires the provocation of external things. Thus, between nature as the endowment possessed by human beings and the actual manifestation of feeling, there is a relation of the internal and its outward expression. "Human nature is one and the same" affirms what human beings share, while "the use of the heart differs" attributes differences in actual manifestation to acquired teaching. A common natural endowment does not mean that people's feeling and conduct must be identical; teaching therefore becomes a necessary link in the formation of virtue. Yet *Xing Zi Ming Chu* does not regard virtue as a merely external constraint upon natural endowment. "The Way begins with feeling" and "what is at the end is close to righteousness" already connect human feeling with ethical norms, while "what nourishes nature is practice; what develops nature is the Way" treats habitual cultivation as a process of the development of human nature. The *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Rites*, and the *Music* arose from human activity, were arranged by the sages, and were used for teaching, so that virtue was finally formed within the human heart. This line of thought explains the formation of virtue starting from human temperament, but the fact that natural endowment can be developed into virtue through teaching does not yet directly prove that this endowment is necessarily good in itself. Although the expression "good nature" already appears in *Xing Zi Ming Chu*, the

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[1] Guodian Chu Tomb Bamboo Slips: Xing Zi Ming Chu, edited by the Editorial Group of Selected Calligraphy from Silk Manuscripts, Cultural Relics Press, 2002 edition, p. 68.

[2] Guodian Chu Tomb Bamboo Slips: Xing Zi Ming Chu, edited by the Editorial Group of Selected Calligraphy from Silk Manuscripts, Cultural Relics Press, 2002 edition, p. 69.

[3] Guodian Chu Tomb Bamboo Slips: Xing Zi Ming Chu, edited by the Editorial Group of Selected Calligraphy from Silk Manuscripts, Cultural Relics Press, 2002 edition, p. 71.

statement "if people are constant before any teaching, it is because their nature is good" refers to particular individuals endowed with fine qualities and does not establish goodness as a determination of nature shared by all. Early Confucianism had thus already linked natural endowment, affective activity, and the cultivation of virtue, while whether human nature universally possesses a determination of goodness remained open to different interpretations.

The relation between what human beings share and actual virtue is addressed in Mencius's discussion of the sage and the ordinary person: "Mencius spoke of the goodness of human nature and in his words always appealed to Yao and Shun" (Teng Wen Gong I). When Mencius expounded the goodness of human nature to Duke Wen of Teng, he also cited Yan Yuan's words, "What sort of man was Shun? What sort of man am I? Those who act can become like him", linking the sage's moral achievement with the cultivation of ordinary people. The sage possesses perfected virtue, whereas ordinary people must realize benevolence and righteousness through cultivation; the actual difference between the two and their common human endowment therefore require analysis. Mencius said: "In years of plenty, young people are mostly indolent; in years of famine, young people are mostly violent. This is not because the capacity Heaven bestows differs; it is what plunges their hearts that makes them so" (Gaozi I). Through the different conduct displayed in years of plenty and years of famine, Mencius distinguished the influence of innate capacity from that of actual circumstances upon the human heart. The differences in good and evil that people display under different conditions of life coexist with a commonality in the capacity they receive. The statement that "the sage and I are of the same kind" (Gaozi I) serves precisely to show that the sage and the ordinary person both rest upon a common foundation of human nature. The doctrine of the goodness of human nature therefore concerns the relation between what human beings share and the actual differences between good and evil. In the disputes over human nature at the time, this relation received different interpretations. In *Mencius*, Gaozi I, Gongduzi enumerated three different views for Mencius: "nature is neither good nor not good"; "nature can be made good and can be made not good"; and "there are natures that are good and natures that are not good". The first view does not determine human nature by good and evil; the second holds that the formation of good and evil depends on whether or not there is teaching; the third, basing itself on the differences in good and evil between Yao and Shun and their relatives, holds that different people have different endowments of good and evil. The three views explain actual conduct respectively through the determination of human nature as good or evil, through acquired conditions, and through individual differences, yet they make different judgments as to whether human nature itself possesses a common moral ground.

In response to Gongduzi's challenge, Mencius said: "As for what is genuinely so in them, they can become good—this is what I mean by good. As for those who become not good, it is not the fault of their capacity" (Gaozi I). This answer distinguishes differences in good and evil conduct from the inner capacity possessed by human beings, and supports the proposition of the goodness of human nature with human beings' own capacity to become good. The debate accordingly concentrated further on the specific content of xing: how natural endowment includes moral capacity, and why this capacity constitutes a determination common to human nature. The debate between Mencius and Gaozi over "what is inborn is called nature" and over "benevolence is internal while righteousness is external" unfolds this question precisely from different determinations of nature.

3. The generative logic of Mencius's concept of xing

In *Mencius*, Gaozi I, Gaozi proposed that "what is inborn is called nature" and used the statement "food and sex are nature" to explain human beings' natural desires. To define nature by the endowment inherent in life is

to indicate the characteristics of human existence and its natural needs. Liang Qichao's remark that "nature is simply that by which a person is born" [1] likewise explains the basic orientation of early theories of nature from this level. Gaozi's interpretation incorporated natural desires such as food and sex into the category of nature, whereas Mencius's response to "what is inborn is called nature" proceeded by analyzing the relation between natural life and the specific content of human nature, incorporating the inner ground of benevolence and righteousness into the definition of xing and giving human nature a clear moral meaning. Gaozi said: "Benevolence is internal, not external; righteousness is external, not internal" (Gaozi I). Although Gaozi acknowledged the internality of benevolence, he attributed righteousness to the external. His statement that "he is senior and I treat him as senior—it is not that there is seniority in me" (Gaozi I) likewise connects the ground of the conduct of respecting elders to an external object. Mencius retorted: "Do you mean that the seniority is righteousness, or that the one who treats him as senior is righteousness?" (Gaozi I). The disagreement here concerns the distinction between the object in an ethical relation and the moral conduct of the person. An elder, as an object of respect, stands in an objective relation of status, but the conduct of respecting an elder also involves the person's own recognition of and response to this relation. Mencius thereby traced the ground of righteousness further back to the human heart: although benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are manifested in the actual relations among people, their emergence has a moral ground internal to human beings.

The internality of benevolence and righteousness also involves the relation between "the capacity to become good" and "the goodness of human nature". In response to the different theories of nature enumerated by Gongduzi, Mencius answered: "As for what is genuinely so in them, they can become good—this is what I mean by good. As for those who become not good, it is not the fault of their capacity" (Gaozi I). "The capacity to become good" affirms that human beings themselves possess the ability to do good, and this ability is manifested through the moral feeling that the human heart issues in specific situations. Zhu Xi said: "Feeling is the movement of nature" [2]. On this interpretation, feeling is what nature issues forth; the arousal of moral feeling in the heart enables a person to trace back, from what feeling issues, to what nature possesses. Mencius then said: "The heart of compassion is possessed by all; the heart of shame and dislike is possessed by all; the heart of reverence is possessed by all; the heart of right and wrong is possessed by all" (Gaozi I), thereby locating the ability to do good concretely in the moral heart shared by human beings. The hearts of compassion, of shame and dislike, of reverence, and of right and wrong together manifest the heart's inner orientation toward benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. The statement that "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not infused into me from outside; they are originally inherent in me" (Gaozi I) precisely affirms that this moral capacity is inherent in human beings; "this is what I mean by good" is the acknowledgment of the moral feeling in the heart, from which the orientation toward goodness belonging to human nature is inferred, so that "the capacity to become good" becomes the argumentative ground of the proposition that human nature is good. This inner moral endowment is in turn realized through people's conscious reflection and seeking. Mencius's statements "they simply do not reflect on it" and "seek it and you will get it; let it go and you will lose it" (Gaozi I) further connect the goodness of human nature with moral cultivation, so that the inherent ability to do good can develop into virtue in actual conduct.

The transition from "the capacity to become good" to "the ought to tend toward goodness" also concerns how human beings understand their own desires and how they choose and cultivate their own moral endowment. As Liu Minjiao puts it: "The proposition of the doctrine of the goodness of human nature can in fact be understood in two senses—the capacity to become good and the ought to tend toward goodness—so that the doctrine can be given an empirical account and goodness can also be provided with normative

guidance" [3]. Mencius therefore did not deny natural desire as a content inherent in life, and in *Mencius*, Jin Xin II, he set out how the noble person should regulate his own virtue in actual conduct.

Mencius, Jin Xin II, states: "For the mouth to be drawn to flavors, the eye to colors, the ear to sounds, the nose to odors, and the four limbs to ease and rest—this is nature, yet there is destiny in it, and so the noble person does not call it nature. For benevolence to be exercised between father and son, righteousness between ruler and minister, propriety between host and guest, wisdom toward the worthy, and for the sage to be related to the Way of Heaven—this is destiny, yet there is nature in it, and so the noble person does not call it destiny".

This passage acknowledges that natural desire and benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom exist together in human beings, and through the mutual determination of xing and ming it indicates how the noble person should treat the two. Sensory desire belongs to human beings' natural endowment, but its satisfaction is constrained by external conditions; the practice of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom is likewise affected by circumstance and situation, yet it has a moral ground rooted in human beings themselves. In saying of the former that the noble person "does not call it nature", Mencius stresses that natural desire alone cannot serve as the standard of conduct; in saying of the latter that the noble person "does not call it destiny", he stresses that external conditions cannot be made a reason for abandoning the practice of benevolence and righteousness. Nature and destiny here both concern the life that human beings receive and their actual situation, and the noble person's different treatment of the two brings into relief the moral requirement that benevolence and righteousness take precedence.

Mencius further explained this moral choice through "the greater body" and "the lesser body". *Mencius*, Gaozi I, states: "He who follows his greater body becomes a great man; he who follows his lesser body becomes a petty man". The senses of ear and eye are easily drawn along by external things, whereas the heart possesses the capacity to think and judge. Both belong to human life activity, yet they play different roles in the orientation of conduct. To "follow the greater body" means that a person can, through the judgment of the heart, bring his conduct into accord with the requirements of benevolence and righteousness; to "follow the lesser body" is the drawing of natural desire upon the person. Mencius thereby distinguished the standing of different human capacities in moral practice. Thus, "the capacity to become good" affirms the moral endowment possessed by human beings, while "the ought to tend toward goodness" requires people to guide their conduct by this endowment self-consciously. The relation between nature and destiny accordingly also expresses Mencius's account of how the noble person establishes his destiny. *Mencius*, Jin Xin I, states: "To preserve one's heart and nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven. Whether one dies young or lives long, to be of one mind and to cultivate oneself while awaiting one's end is the way to establish one's destiny". In Mencius's view, human longevity or early death, adversity or success are affected by external conditions, whereas preserving the heart and nourishing nature belong to the cultivation that a person can practice himself. By preserving his original heart and cultivating his virtue, the noble person ensures that his moral requirements are not abandoned through changes of external circumstance. The meaning of establishing one's destiny is precisely the content of the statement that "what the noble person has as nature is that benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are rooted in his heart" (Jin Xin I). Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom constitute the noble person's explicit identification with his own nature, and this identification must be realized in sustained moral practice. Mencius thus connected the inherent endowment in the doctrine of the goodness of human nature with its normative requirement, so that the moral determination of xing includes both the inherent capacity to do good and the self-conscious activity through which people realize benevolence and righteousness in cultivation.

4. The method of argumentation in Mencius's doctrine of the goodness of human nature

The process of disputation between Mencius and Gaozi over xing presents the course of Mencius's argument for the goodness of human nature. After Gaozi's statement that "what is inborn is called nature", Mencius immediately pressed him with "is whiteness called white?", and after Gaozi conceded that "the whiteness of a white feather is like the whiteness of white snow, and the whiteness of white snow is like the whiteness of white jade", he retorted: "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?" This retort exploits the fact that different things can share the same color in order to question further whether different lives can be judged to have the same nature on the basis of shared vital properties. Although white feathers, white snow, and white jade share the property of whiteness, the nature of different kinds also involves their own specific characteristics. Mencius thus advanced the dispute from "what may be called nature" to "by what characteristics human nature should be defined". This argument exposes the inadequacy of defining human nature by shared vital properties and also raises the question of the moral capacity possessed by human beings.

The analogy of the willow and the cup concerns how benevolence and righteousness arise from human nature. Gaozi said: "Nature is like a willow tree; righteousness is like a cup or a bowl. To make human nature into benevolence and righteousness is like making a willow into cups and bowls" (Gaozi I). This analogy matches human nature and benevolence and righteousness respectively with the material of manufacture and the finished utensil. Mencius retorted: "Can you make cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow, or must you injure and mutilate the willow before you can make them?" Mencius's rebuttal focuses on the relation between the vital characteristics of the material itself and external working. A willow can be worked into cups and bowls, but what working it into a utensil realizes is the use conferred by the maker, and the willow's own vital growth is thereby altered. Mencius uses this to question the explanation that treats the formation of benevolence and righteousness as external manufacture, and to stress that the realization of benevolence and righteousness should accord with human beings' own endowment. Human nature and benevolence and righteousness thus stand in an internal relation of generation, and the formation of virtue should likewise be grounded in human moral capacity.

Mencius further used the analogy of rushing water to distinguish the orientation inherent in human nature from the actual changes produced by external conditions. Gaozi held that "human nature is neither good nor not good, just as water is neither eastward nor westward", to which Mencius retorted: "Water is indeed indifferent to east and west, but is it indifferent to up and down?" He then proposed: "The goodness of human nature is like the downward flow of water. There is no human being who is not good, just as there is no water that does not flow downward" (Gaozi I). Water can be made to change its direction by external force, but the upward movement produced by "beating it and making it leap" or "damming it and making it run" does not mean that water itself has a natural upward orientation. Mencius accordingly points out that although people's actual conduct may appear not good under the influence of external conditions, such conduct must still be distinguished from their nature. The analogy of rushing water understands nature as an orientation inherent in life itself, giving the goodness of human nature an analogical basis in natural orientation. At the same time, the downward flow of water and the tendency of human beings toward goodness respectively concern natural motion and moral value, and their correspondence still requires further support from human beings' own moral experience.

In the scenario of "a child about to fall into a well", Mencius directs the argument for the goodness of human nature toward people's direct apprehension of their own moral feeling. *Mencius*, Gong Sun Chou I,

states: "All human beings have a heart that cannot bear to see others suffer. The former kings had such a heart, and so they had a government that could not bear to see others suffer". Mencius then sets out the scenario in which "a person suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well", holding that when someone is suddenly confronted with a child in danger, he will be moved by "a heart of alarm and compassion". He further rules out such possible utilitarian motives as "wishing to gain the favor of the child's parents", "seeking the praise of neighbors and friends", and "disliking the child's cries", thereby separating the emergence of compassion from the calculation of external advantage. Mencius here invites his interlocutor to place himself within a concrete situation and to observe the psychological response that arises in him when confronted with another's danger. "A child about to fall into a well" can therefore be understood as a first-person mode of confirming moral experience: through the direct apprehension of his own compassion, a person confirms that moral feeling has a ground issuing from within the heart. This confirmation bears first upon the heart of compassion and shows that human concern for the suffering of others has a possibility beyond utilitarian calculation; extending it further to the claim that all human beings possess the four sprouts still requires Mencius's judgment concerning what the human heart has in common. This first-person mode of confirmation is displayed more concretely in the dialogue between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi. *Mencius*, Liang Hui Wang I, records that King Xuan, unable to bear seeing an ox "going innocently to its death", ordered a sheep to be substituted for it. Mencius observed on this basis: "This heart is sufficient to become a true king". Under Mencius's interpretation, King Xuan reexamined his own conduct and said, "When the Master spoke of it, I felt a stirring in my heart". Moral understanding here arises in the reflection upon an experience already had. King Xuan had originally displayed a heart that could not bear to see suffering, but had failed fully to recognize the moral significance contained in this feeling; through his questioning, Mencius enabled him to reconfirm this inner feeling from his own conduct. "A child about to fall into a well" leads the interlocutor, through a hypothetical situation, to observe his own compassion, while "substituting a sheep for an ox" leads him, through reflection on actual conduct, to recognize a moral response that has already occurred. Both take human beings' own experience as their starting point and make the inner ground of benevolence and righteousness something that a person can apprehend for himself. Mencius thus uses "seeing the ox but not the sheep" to explain the situational limitation upon compassion, and from this derives the requirement that moral feeling be extended to a wider range of objects. First-person confirmation therefore constitutes the starting point of moral self-awareness, while the realization of benevolence and righteousness still depends on whether a person can turn this confirmation into sustained practice.

Mencius's doctrine of the four sprouts connects direct moral feeling with benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. He said: "The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence; the heart of shame and dislike is the sprout of righteousness; the heart of deference is the sprout of propriety; the heart of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom" (Gong Sun Chou I). Compassion, shame and dislike, deference, and right and wrong respectively involve people's different responses to the suffering of others, to their own conduct, to ethical relations, and to good and evil, right and wrong, and manifest the initial capacities in the human heart that bear moral significance. The term duan (sprout) here is explained by Yang Zebo as "the first beginning of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom" [4], so that between the four sprouts and benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom there is a relation of development from initial feeling to mature virtue. Mencius also said: "That human beings have these four sprouts is like their having four limbs" (Gong Sun Chou I). This analogy appeals to the universality with which human beings possess four limbs in order to stress that the four sprouts likewise belong to human beings. The analogy of the four limbs here performs the argumentative function of a common endowment, while the existence of the four sprouts still requires confirmation through actual moral feeling. Thus "a child about to fall into a well" and the analogy of "the four

limbs" support the doctrine of the four sprouts respectively from inner experience and from universal endowment, enabling benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom to be explained in terms of human beings' own moral capacity. The direct emergence of moral feeling must further be transformed into sustained moral practice through people's self-conscious reflection. *Mencius*, Gaozi I, states: "The function of the heart is to reflect; reflecting, one gets it; not reflecting, one does not get it". Through the distinction between the function of the senses and the function of the heart, Mencius stresses that the heart can reflect upon and judge the orientation of its own conduct. Compassion can arise directly "when one suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well", whereas the preservation and realization of the four sprouts requires that people remain self-conscious of their moral capacity. Xu Fuguan distinguishes reflection (fanxing) from thinking (sikao) in Mencius's notion of si and stresses the role of reflection in moral practice. He says: "Mencius placed particular emphasis on reflection. Benevolence and righteousness are inherent in the human heart, and with a single thought of reflection and self-awareness they immediately manifest themselves; hence the saying 'reflecting, one gets it'" [5]. This interpretation discloses the process by which Mencius moves from the immediate manifestation of moral feeling to self-conscious cultivation. The statement "seek it and you get it; let it go and you lose it—seeking is beneficial for getting, because what is sought lies within oneself" (Jin Xin I) connects the preservation and loss of moral capacity with people's own practical choices. A person can, through reflection, observe his own conduct and make the moral beginnings originally present in the heart the basis of judgment and action. The saying "reflecting upon oneself and being sincere—no joy is greater" likewise expresses the cultivation through which a person, by reflecting upon himself, brings moral requirements to self-conscious confirmation.

The realization of the four sprouts must ultimately be carried out in the effort of "filling out and extending". Mencius said: "Whoever has these four sprouts in himself knows how to fill them out and extend them all, like the first kindling of a fire or the first flowing of a spring" (*Mencius*, Gong Sun Chou I). Fire grows from its first kindling to full blaze, and a spring from its first emergence to ceaseless flow; both develop further by virtue of the power inherent in themselves. Mencius uses this to explain that although the four sprouts are moral shoots inherent in human beings, their actual efficacy must still be unfolded through preservation and extension. "Filling out and extending" means that a person extends his initial moral feeling to more objects and situations, so that the heart of compassion develops into benevolence, and the hearts of shame and dislike, deference, and right and wrong are practiced respectively as righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. The emergence of moral consciousness and the performance of moral conduct thus form a continuous process: the initial sprouts of goodness manifest themselves in concrete situations, a person preserves them through reflection and practice, and in constant extension they form stable virtue. Mencius's statement that "if one can fill them out, one is sufficient to protect all within the four seas; if one cannot fill them out, one is not sufficient to serve one's parents" connects individual moral cultivation with social and political practice.

The extension of the sprouts of goodness also involves sustained preservation. *Mencius*, Gaozi I, uses the trees of Ox Mountain as an analogy, pointing out that although the mountain forest once flourished with vegetation, it was left bare through repeated felling and grazing. Mencius connects this with the human conscience, holding that the heart of benevolence and righteousness possessed by human beings may likewise be damaged by the repeated drawing of external things. Mencius said: "If it gets its nourishment, nothing does not grow; if it loses its nourishment, nothing does not perish". This analogy complements those of fire and spring: fire and spring stress that the moral beginnings possess in themselves the possibility of growth and development, while the trees of Ox Mountain show that whether this possibility is realized depends on acquired conduct and the state of cultivation. The goodness of human nature thus includes an inner moral

ground and also requires that people sustain its growth through continuous practice. The actual differences between good and evil conduct can be explained in terms of the degree to which the moral beginnings are preserved, damaged, or extended.

From the immediate manifestation of the four sprouts to their preservation and extension, Mencius's doctrine of the goodness of human nature forms an argumentative process leading from inner endowment into moral practice. "He who fully realizes his heart knows his nature; knowing his nature, he knows Heaven" (Jin Xin I) raises the full realization of human moral capacity to the recognition of the connection between nature and Heaven. Zhao Qi explains "fully realizing one's heart" as "exhausting one's heart to the utmost, so as to think and practice goodness" [6], highlighting thinking and acting in moral practice. Yang Bojun, by contrast, renders it as "fully expanding the good original heart" [7]. The difference between the two lies in this: in the former, jin (exhausting) refers to reaching the highest level of cultivational effort, whereas the latter tends toward the expansion of the four sprouts from the beginnings of goodness in the heart. Thus the inner moral capacity affirmed by the doctrine of the goodness of human nature, through the functioning of the sprouts of goodness in the heart, connects the goodness of human nature with personal cultivation, social ethics, and political practice, and establishes the Way of benevolence and righteousness grounded in inner moral capacity.

5. Conclusion

A fundamental difficulty for Mencius's account of the goodness of human nature lies in the contrast between the moral differences evident in actual human conduct and the universal claim that human nature is good. By examining the moral feelings that arise in the heart-mind, Mencius locates the grounds of goodness in an innate human endowment and explains wrongdoing in terms of the loss, obscuring, or incomplete realization of moral capacities. The force of this account depends on whether such moral feelings can establish a universal human orientation toward goodness. The immediate experience invoked by the example of a child about to fall into a well supports the claim that moral feelings arise from within. Yet the inference from this experience to a moral endowment shared by all human beings presupposes Mencius's understanding of what human heart-minds have in common. His argument thus establishes, at a minimum, that differences in actual conduct do not by themselves disprove the human capacity for goodness. The ethical significance of the thesis follows from this point: since human beings possess within themselves the grounds for acting well, the practice of humaneness and rightness becomes a moral demand upon each person, while the development of moral sprouts into actual virtues depends on how individuals respond to their innate endowment.

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