



An Altruistic Self-cultivation of the Seeds of Goodness

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Abstract

Meng Zi (孟子) or Mencius –known in the West – expanded and developed Kong Zi’s (Confucius) ideas. To counter the obstinate interpretations of *Mo Zi*, *Yang Chu*, and *Gao Zi* on *Kong Zi*’s teachings, *Meng Zi* elaborated on the ethical system of *Kong Zi* by emphasizing the natural goodness of human nature and the self-improvement of the innate qualities, which he calls ‘seeds of goodness.’

This paper explores *Meng Zi*’s view that human nature is inherently good and that people can cultivate their moral potential through the self-cultivation of the ‘seeds of goodness.’ Furthermore, this paper analyzes *Meng Zi*’s concept of the self-cultivation of innate qualities towards a virtuous life and a sense of moral responsibility for others.

Keywords: Meng Zi, seeds of goodness, self-cultivation, moral responsibility

Introduction

Considered second to *Kong Zi* (Confucius) as the most influential philosopher of the *Ru Jia*, *Meng Zi* (孟子) or Mencius – in Latinized form – is the first amplifier of the Confucian tradition. He was heavily inspired by the thoughts of *Kong Zi*, which he received from *Zi Si*, *Kong Zi*'s great-grandson. Aside from both being born in Shandong Province, many aspects of *Meng Zi*'s life are similar to that of *Kong Zi*, e.g., as a private teacher, a giver of advice to rulers, as a state official, etc.¹ Like *Kong Zi*, who is attributed with *Lun Yu* or the *Analects*, the Book of *Meng Zi*² - which is a seven-book composition of the discourses of *Meng Zi* with his disciples and others such as lords, kings, and ministers - is attributed to *Meng Zi*.

In his defense of the teachings of *Kong Zi* from the 'perverse doctrines' of *Mo Zi*, *Yang Chu*, and *Gao Zi*, *Meng Zi* developed further the virtue-based ethics of *Kong Zi* by accentuating the innate goodness of human nature and the self-cultivation of the innate qualities, which *Meng Zi* calls 'seeds of goodness'.³ *Meng Zi* believes that moral development through self-cultivation of the 'seeds of goodness' leads man to a virtuous life.

It could be asked: Is *Meng Zi*'s notion of man's self-cultivation of the 'seeds of goodness' selfish? According to *Meng Zi*, how will man's self-cultivation of the seeds of goodness lead him to moral responsibility for others? In this paper, I argue that *Meng Zi*'s emphasis on man's self-cultivation of the 'seeds of goodness' is not selfish but altruistic. With that as a point of departure, I will examine how man's self-cultivation of the 'seeds of goodness' leads him to a life of virtue and a realization of moral responsibility for others. The next section briefly interprets and discusses the innate goodness of human nature according to *Meng Zi* and the innate qualities in man, the 'seeds of goodness.'

Human Nature and the Seeds of Goodness

One of the contributions of *Meng Zi* to Confucian tradition is his theory that human nature is innately good. At his time, the "nature" (*xing* 性) of a thing is understood to refer to the course on which life completes its development if not injured and adequately nourished (Graham, 1967, p. 232). It is proper to the thing and the way the thing will develop. By that, *Meng Zi* understands human nature as a proper and natural tendency of human

beings (Jiang, 2002, pp. 142-159).

In his dialogue with *Gao Zi*, *Meng Zi* disagrees with *Gao Zi*'s argument that human nature is neither good nor bad (Mencius 6A6).⁴ *Gao Zi* provides two metaphors as proof of his view of human nature: first, human nature is like a willow tree, and to make humaneness and righteousness of human nature is like to make cups and bowls out from the willow tree (Mencius 6A1); second, human nature cannot be distinguished either good or bad for it is like a swirling water that depends on its flow to an open passage either east or west (Mencius 6A2).

Challenging the two metaphors of human nature – making cups and bowls out of the willow tree⁵ and a swirling water that does not distinguish either east or west⁶ – given by *Gao Zi*, *Meng Zi* questions the ability of the listener to create useful objects while respecting the natural essence of the willow tree. He states that the willow tree must be harmed before it can be transformed into cups and bowls. *Meng Zi* then wonders if the same logic applies to humans and if harming them is necessary to produce humaneness and rightness. He implies that such a view would make everyone regard humaneness and rightness as misfortunes.

In the latter, *Meng Zi* asserts that water does not care about directions, except for the downward one. This is similar to human nature, which has an innate tendency to do good. However, external forces can make water go against its nature and flow upward or make people act evilly. This does not change their true nature but only distorts it.

Meng Zi's reply to *Gao Zi* points out that if human nature is not determined, either good or bad, man's natural tendency to goodness and righteousness will be denied. Turning the willow tree into cups and bowls destroys the nature of the willow tree. But training oneself to be humane and righteous is an act of goodness that cannot be understood to violate human nature. *Meng Zi* clearly specifies that man, by nature, is disposed to goodness just as swirling water is disposed to flow downward. And by doing bad, human nature is violated, like forcing the swirling water to go uphill by striking or splashing when its nature flows downward.

Since man is originally good, it follows that he possesses the innate knowledge of the good and innate ability to do good; that if one develops his mind to the utmost, he can fulfill the destiny endowed by the Heaven; that evil is not inborn but due to man's own failures and his inability to avoid evil

external influences; that serious efforts must be made to recover our original nature; and that the end of learning is none other than to seek for the lost mind (Chan, 1963, pp. 49-50).

For *Meng Zi*, man, with innate goodness, cannot bear to see the suffering of others. When a man sees a child about to fall into a well, he, by instinct, will instantly save the child from falling. Man is considered human because he feels a commiseration for others. *Meng Zi* then believes all humans are born with four innate ‘seeds of goodness.’ Inherent in each person are the sense of pity, the sense of right and wrong, the sense of good and evil, and the sense of truth and falsity. And according to Im (1999), these [innate seeds of goodness] are "hard-wired" into man’s heart.

Meng Zi explains that human nature is good because we have natural tendencies to do good. It is not because of our innate abilities that humans do bad things. All men have four moral minds: pity and commiseration, which is humaneness; shame and dislike, which is rightness; respectfulness and reverence, which is propriety; and knowing right and wrong, which is wisdom. These moral minds are not given to us by others. We already have them. We need to think about them (Mencius 6A6).

For *Meng Zi*, humaneness [*ren* 仁] comes from the mind's feeling of pity and compassion (sense of pity); rightness [*yi* 義] comes from the mind's feeling of shame and aversion (sense of right and wrong); propriety [*li* 禮] comes from the mind's feeling of modesty and compliance (sense of good and evil); and wisdom [*zhi* 智] comes from the mind's sense of right and wrong (sense of truth and falsity) (Mencius 2A6).

According to Birdwhistell (2007, pp. 112-113), this “feeling of commiseration for others” or “a heart that cannot endure the suffering of others” refers to the four innate seeds of goodness as a whole interrelating each other within the person. She claims that such feeling is usually attributed to mothers, thus speculating that all men have a maternal good heart that cannot endure the suffering of others. Furthermore, Co (2009, p. 313) clearly states, “[For *Meng Zi*] man, having these four innate seeds of goodness should then cultivate them to the fullest, the limit in each being ultimate perfection, as all human nature is ultimately perfectible.” With the innate ‘seeds of goodness’, all humans are disposed to be virtuous. *Meng Zi* suggests that if these four innate ‘seeds of goodness’ are adequately developed and cultivated, man acquires virtue: the virtue of *Ren* is acquired when man develops well the sense of pity; the virtue of *Yi* is acquired when he fully

develops the sense of right and wrong; the virtue of *Li* when he develops properly the sense of good and evil; and the virtue of *Zhi* when he fully develops the sense of truth and falsity (Co, 2009, p. 314).

For *Meng Zi*, man is born not with perfect virtues but with innate ‘seeds of goodness’ as natural grounds for moral perfection. To quote Co (2009, p. 314): “*Meng Zi* affirms that [human] nature is intrinsically good; and that this is morally perfectible because man has already within him the seeds of innate goodness.” However, *Meng Zi* warns that man must not allow himself to be led by his sensual desires to avoid becoming evil; to remain good, man must use reason. *Meng Zi* (6A15) explained that:

The faculties of hearing and sight do not think and are obscured by things. When one thing comes into contact with another, it is led astray. The faculty of the mind is to think. By thinking, it apprehends; by not thinking, it fails to apprehend. This is what Heaven has given to us. If we first establish the greater part of ourselves, then the smaller part is unable to steal it away. It is simply this that makes the great person.⁷

Meng Zi entails that human beings do not differ in the natural endowment of Heaven (*Tian*) but in the cultivation of such natural endowment. Having the innate ‘seeds of goodness,’ man will not naturally become virtuous, rather a man’s self-cultivation of the ‘seeds of goodness’ will turn him to “becoming a *Yao* or a *Shun*,”⁸ And it must be “guarded jealously at all times lest he falls into the temptation of the eyes and the ears” (Co, 2009, p. 315).

An Altruistic Self-cultivation of the Seeds of Goodness

The formation of man’s moral character is conditioned externally and internally: the environment and self-cultivation, respectively. On the one hand, *Meng Zi* considers the environment where man grows and lives to be an important external condition for man to be virtuous. With the influence of external forces, such as social norms, propaganda, peer pressure, etc., a man might become bad, although his human nature is disposed to virtue. *Meng Zi* (6A8) writes:

The trees on Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But being situated on the outskirts of a large state, the trees were cut down by axes. Could

they remain beautiful? Given the air of the day and the night, and the moisture of the rain and the dew, they did not fail to put forth new buds and shoots, but then cattle and sheep came along to graze upon them. This accounts for the barren appearance of the mountain. Seeing this barrenness, people suppose that the mountain was never wooded. But how could this be the nature of the mountain? So it is also with what is preserved in a human being: could it be that anyone should lack the mind of humaneness and rightness? If one lets go of the innate good mind, this is like taking an ax to a tree; being cut down day after day, can [one's mind] remain beautiful?

This metaphor of *Meng Zi* on Ox Mountain indicates the influence of external force that causes man to violate his innate goodness. The cutting of the trees by axes and grazing the sheep upon the sprouts resulted in Ox Mountain appearing bald and barren. According to *Meng Zi*, a man's natural state is good, and he can develop his innate potential for virtue by nurturing the 'seeds of goodness' within him. However, if he is corrupted by external factors that make him evil, he will lose his original goodness, just like the Ox Mountain will lose its trees if they are chopped down by axes or eaten by sheep.

On the other hand, *Meng Zi* emphasizes the self-cultivation of the innate 'seeds of goodness' in the fulfillment of man's moral development and the realization of moral responsibility for others. As explained earlier, man should choose the way of the majority over the minority to avoid becoming wicked and betraying his natural goodness. If a man is "both uninjured and properly nurtured," (Lee, 1990, p. 59) he can generate actions according to the cultivation of his innate goodness. For *Meng Zi*, the more man cultivates the innate 'seeds of goodness' in him, the more he becomes virtuous, achieving higher moral perfection. In this high level of moral perfection, man, claims Fung (1948, p. 78) acquires "a flood-like energy" (*hao ran zhi qi* 浩然之氣). *Meng Zi* determines that a man who obtains "a flood-like energy" will demonstrate moral boldness for goodness and righteousness. *Meng Zi* (3B2) said:

When he is able to realize his intentions, carries them out for the sake of the people of the world, and when he cannot realize them, practices the Way alone. He cannot be led astray by riches and honor, moved by poverty and privation, or deflected by power or force. This is what I call a great man.

According to *Meng Zi*, if the 'seeds of goodness' are nurtured and grown properly, then no external forces from the environment can corrupt the innate goodness of man. According to Co (2009, p. 315), "*Meng Zi's* moral crusade, however, went beyond self-cultivation to include others."

When man cultivates the innate 'seeds of goodness assiduously' to grow into a firm virtue, he is ready to take moral responsibility for others. According to *Meng Zi*, a great or virtuous man begins with the self-cultivation of the innate 'seeds of goodness' and 'carries them out for the sake of the people of the world.' *Meng Zi* (4A4) says one should examine one's humaneness, wisdom, and reverence when others do not reciprocate one's love, rule, and propriety. One should turn within and examine oneself when one's actions are ineffective. One should correct one's own person before expecting the rest of the world to follow. He adds that being honest with yourself requires clarity about what is good. This is the Way of Heaven. Reflecting on honesty is the human Way. Sincerity always influences others, while insincerity never does (Mencius 4A12).

Meng Zi somewhat provides his own version of *Zho Yong* or Doctrine of the Mean. Man must first examine his own self if he had well-cultivated and well-developed the 'seeds of goodness' and had acquired the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom for a sincere moral responsibility for others. As Jiang (2002, p. 157) puts it, "Men have responsibility for their own self-cultivation but also have a heavy responsibility for the world."

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that *Meng Zi's* idea of man's assiduous self-cultivation of the innate 'seeds of goodness' is not a selfish pursuit but a way of achieving altruism and virtue. By cultivating the 'seeds of goodness,' man can attain a 'flood-like energy' that enables him to act benevolently, righteously, properly, and wisely toward others. This argument has implications for understanding *Meng Zi's* moral psychology and ethics, as well as his political philosophy and social vision. It also raises some questions that merit further investigation, such as the role of external factors in influencing man's moral development, the criteria for judging man's moral progress, and the relationship between *Meng Zi's* concept of innate seeds of goodness and other Confucian doctrines. These questions are beyond this paper's scope but can be explored in future research.

Notes

¹ *Meng Zi* was born in Zhou, the modern day *Zou Xian* country in Shandong Province while *Kong Zi* was born in *Zhu Yi*, the modern *Qu Fu* county of Shandong Province. See Co (2009, pp. 110, 310). See more similarity in the translated and compiled work of Chan (1963, p. 76).

² In this paper, I will be using Mencius translated by Bloom (2009) and edited by Ivanhoe.

³ Many authors translated it as ‘beginnings of benevolence’ or ‘sprouts of benevolence’. Here, I would like to use ‘seeds of goodness’ as taken from Co (2009).

⁴ This book of Mencius is from the translation of Bloom (2009). Henceforth, all cited books of Mencius found in the text come from this translation.

⁵ This is *Meng Zi*’s reply to *Gao Zi* (Mencius 6A1).

⁶ Here is another reply of *Meng Zi* to *Gao Zi* (Mencius 6A2).

⁷ In Chinese, the ‘great part’ refers to the faculty of the heart, which also refers to reason, and the ‘small part’ refers to the senses i.e. sight and hearing (Co, 2009).

⁸ At *Meng Zi*’s time, to be a virtuous man is to be like a sage. And both Yao and Shun were considered legendary sage-rulers of the 3rd millennium B.C. See *Meng Zi*’s dialogue with Cao Jiao (Mencius 6B2).

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