

# Virtue Ethics in the Philosophy of Mencius

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A third generation philosopher in the interpretative line founded by Confucius, Mencius' thoughts on the subject of ethics extended further into political domains than did the Master's. This is seen, for example, in the emphasis that he gave to the significance of a government structure based on an ethic of "humaneness" 仁 (*ren*), which signifies the central Confucian concept of moral conduct in its original and primary sense. This somewhat differs from what Confucius is recorded as having said on the topic. For his part, Confucius generally discussed ideal government as a combination of two basic concepts, humaneness (*ren*) and "ritual propriety" 禮 (*li*), whereas Mencius discussed it in terms of a combination of humaneness and "rightness" 義 (*yi*). While humaneness and rightness most immediately pertain to the highest qualities of an ethical government in the thought of Mencius, their significance to virtuous conduct cannot be ignored.

Admittedly, both Mencius and Confucius develop their thoughts on morality in similar directions, but, as I argue in this paper, it is still possible to find new aspects to Mencius' moral theory that have not been sufficiently explored in recent scholarship. Unlike Confucius, Mencius pays greater attention to virtue itself, rather than moral behavior, and it is precisely this that makes it possible for us to study the moral theory of Mencius from the perspective of virtue ethics.

## Humaneness and Family Intimacy

Mencius writes, "To be affectionate toward those close to one—this is humaneness. To have respect for elders—this is rightness" 親親仁也敬長義也 (*qin qin ren ye jing zhang yi ye*) (*Mencius* 7A15). In terms of categories of virtue, "to be affectionate toward those close to one" (*qin qin*) belongs to humaneness, but

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humaneness is not limited to this alone. Similarly, “to have respect for elders” (*jing zhang*) belongs to rightness, but rightness is not limited to this alone.

Humaneness and rightness both generally connote moral behavior, but each concept separately refers to a wide range of content. For example, humaneness is grounded in the basic meaning of loving one’s parents, but it also extends to common friendships. Rightness is grounded in “respecting elders” (*jing zhang*), but it also is not strictly limited to family ethics, first of all because it applies to respect for elders over and beyond family members. According to Mencius,

The most authentic expression of humaneness is serving one’s parents; the most authentic expression of rightness is following one’s older brother; the most authentic expression of intelligence is knowing these two things and not departing from them; the most authentic expression of propriety is regulating and adorning these two. (*Mencius* 4A27)

This passage demonstrates that rightness is not merely a personal sentiment directed to respecting elders (including elder brothers), but rather the systematic practice of cultivating such sentiments; in other words, it is a virtue that specifies a form of moral behavior. Mencius’ approach to humaneness and rightness recognizes an important distinction between them: he stresses that “serving parents” 事親 (*shi qin*) is the primary meaning of humaneness, and “following elder brothers” 從兄 (*zong xiong*) is the primary meaning of rightness, marking the most fundamental components of such practices. Both designate general principles applicable to various situations and specific examples.

Mencius is famous for providing a systematic discussion of the “four sprouts” 四端 (*si duan*) that develop into the four cardinal virtues of humaneness (*ren*), correctness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), and wisdom 智 (*zhi*). Humaneness and rightness are the fundamental pillars of this theory, while the other two virtues, propriety and wisdom, primarily work to manifest and bolster the first two; in other words, their function is to regulate the practice of humaneness and rightness in the normative sense. My point here, however, is to show that Mencius emphasizes an intelligent, thoughtful understanding of rightness, and this is how he situates it.

Mencius expresses the characteristics of Confucian family ethics from the perspective of family intimacy with specific attention to humaneness. He does this at one point through a discussion with one of his students of the “Xiaopan” 小弁 and “Kaifeng” 凱風, two ancient songs collected in *The Book of Songs* 詩經 (*Shijing*):

“The resentment in the ‘Xiaopan’ is an aspect of the intimacy one feels with one’s parents, and intimacy with one’s parents is humaneness. How narrow-minded Old Gao was in his interpretation of poetry.”

“Why is there no resentment expressed in the ‘Kaifeng’?”

“In the ‘Kaifeng,’ the fault of the parent was small, while in the ‘Xiaopan’ the fault of the parent was great. When one is not resentful, despite the fact that a parent’s fault is small, an unwarranted obstacle is also not filial. Confucius said, ‘Shun was consummately filial, yet at the age of fifty he still longed for his parents.’” (*Mencius* 6B3)

Here, Mencius affirms the close links between loving one’s parents and humaneness. While I will not analyze the details of these ancient songs, it suffices to

note that they represent the relationship with family members who do evil as being one of estrangement, at least in an ideal perspective. According to his thinking, when others love the evildoing family member without resentment, they can still voice complaints when they do wrong with the intent to point out what proper conduct means when it reflects deep love to them. In any case, the passage makes clear that loving one's parents is a central feature of humaneness.

Another central feature for any demonstration of humaneness is seen in the manner in which one buries one's parents when they pass, and this also involves the inability to bear witness to any harm done to their bodies. This feature of humaneness also reveals a difference between the ways in which the Confucian and Mohist schools valued it. The Mohists advocated loving all people equally, but in doing so, as repeatedly pointed out by Confucians including most importantly Mencius, they ignore a more intimate love for family members, which violates human nature. While Confucian virtues are based on a special love for family members, they also speak of loving others, but only by the extension of family intimacy to those not of one's family, as Mencius describes below:

Wan Zhang asked, "Xiang took as his daily occupation the cause of murdering Shun. Why, then, was it that Shun, upon becoming Son of Heaven, banished him?" Mencius said, "He enfeoffed him. Some referred to this as banishing him." Wan Zhang said, "Shun sent the minister of works to Youzhou and banished Huan Dou to Mount Chung. He put the Sanmiao to death in Sanwei and imprisoned Kun on Mount Yu. When he responded thus to the crimes of these four, everyone in the world was in agreement. He had cut off those who were not humane. Yet Xiang, who was the most inhumane among them, was enfeoffed at Youbi. What crime had the people of Youbi committed? How could a humane person have done this? In the case of other people, he punished them, but when it came to his brother, he enfeoffed him." [Mencius said,] "A humane man does not store up anger against his brother, nor harbor grievances against him. He simply loves him, that is all. Loving him, he desires him to be honored; loving him, he desires him to be wealthy. His enfeoffment at Youbi was to make Xiang wealthy and honored. If, while Shun himself was sovereign, his brother remained a common man, could he be said to have loved him?" (*Mencius* 5A3)

Mencius uses many stories like this to advance his arguments about the extension of family love to others. This one refers to the famous story of Xiang 象, Shun's 舜 younger brother, who was a heartless person who made repeated attempts on his life. However, after Shun became emperor, Xiang was not executed or exiled, but rather enfeoffed as the governor of Youbi. In this passage at hand, a student of Mencius questions how Shun was justified in executing or exiling four others for their inhumaneness with the result that people wholeheartedly endorsed his judgments on them, but then he not only did not punish the most inhumane individual of them all, but went so far as to appoint him as the governor of a small country? Is a humane man someone who is somehow at odds with the principles of treating others and his own younger brother well? Is favoritism a behavior? Was this action determined by private interest and disobedience of the law? Is this unjust?

Mencius defends Shun by saying that under no circumstances does the humane man hate his brother, but rather only acts with intimate feelings towards him. Although Xiang's attempts to kill him were far from humane, Shun still hoped for him to enjoy a better life because of his feelings of brotherly love so he enfeoffed

him in Youbi. Xiang's enfeoffment did not allow him to control state affairs nor threaten the people's well-being; it only allowed him luxury without political responsibility. Shun's method of handling this case might not be praised in modern society, but in ancient Chinese society more than 2000 years ago, it yet shows the virtue of humaneness: he did not care about any injuries caused by his loved ones to his own person. Did Shun deviate from the ethical norms of loving his family members? Clearly he did not, but at what price? Did he put the interests of the common people at stake in his appointment of Xiang? However we look at this, Mencius describes Shun's behavior as that of the humane person, and he does so in the terms of brotherly love, which sufficiently explains the significance of such affection, at least in his own mind.

Mencius says, "It has never happened that one given to humaneness abandons his parents, nor that one given to rightness subordinates the interests of his lord. Let the King speak only of humaneness and rightness. What need has he to speak of profit?" (*Mencius* 1A1). According to this statement, abandoning one's parents is contrary to humaneness, and subordinating the interests of one's lord is the contrary to rightness. Mencius here reaffirms his recognition of the direct links between humaneness as "loving one's parents," and rightness as "respecting one's elders." He pursues this in the following:

The responses of the mouth to flavors, of the eye to colors, of the ear to sounds, of the nose to fragrances, and of the four limbs to comfort are our nature. But there is destiny in them, and the noble person does not call them "nature." Humaneness between parent and child, rightness between ruler and minister, propriety between guest and host, wisdom for the worthy, and the Way of Heaven for the sage are all destiny. But our nature is in them, and the noble person does not call them "destiny." (*Mencius* 7B24)

Mencius reiterates that the relationship between father and son is a central component of humaneness, and it refers to the moral conduct at stake in such a relationship. However, it is not the only focus of humaneness that comprises moral behavior within familial relationships; in addition to the feelings of intimacy in the relationship between a child and its parents, the love between elder and younger brother is also a central example of humaneness. Briefly, all of the love in kinship belongs to the category of humaneness. While it is evident that within the context of family, the content of "loving one's parents" (*qin qin*) supervenes upon filial piety in many respects, humaneness is a moral concept that, for Mencius, still applies in a wider context.

In the above passage, rightness is exhibited in the example of the monarch and his subjects with particular respect to the moral conduct expected from a minister to the ruler. While rightness pertains first of all to the respect shown to one's elders, whether or not they are members of one's family lineage, it also pertains to all individuals senior in rank, and this is precisely why rightness involves what we moderns would reckon as two entirely different ciphers, age and rank, which tended to be collapsed in ancient and early China. This is the main reason that explains why the ruler-minister relationship falls under the category of correctness, which centers on moral conduct defined most simply as "respect to elders" (*jing zhang*),

where “elders” are understood either in terms of age or rank. Is there a contradiction in this? To figure this requires a deeper analysis of the thought of Mencius.

## Humaneness and Loving Other People

Leaving aside debates about the ancient meanings of humaneness (whether it primarily referred to loving one’s parents or loving all people), we can say that a central component of humaneness for Confucius is to love others. Although he was asked many times about the meaning of humaneness, and he gave many different answers, one instance stands out, namely when Fan Chi asked him about the meaning of humaneness, to which he responded with the simple words, “Love others” 愛人 (*ai ren*) (*Analects* 12.22). I argue that, for Confucius, humaneness begins with loving your family and only then extends to others, and I also argue that Mencius inherits this very same idea.

Mencius believes that a person who cannot extend love for family members to all people cannot be considered humane. His argument is that “the humane begin with what they love and proceed to what they are not required to love” 仁者以其所愛及其所不愛 (*ren zhe yi qi suo ai ji qi suo bu ai*) (Mencius 7B1). This claim expresses the spirit and features of his understanding of humaneness, as well as the internal relationship between love and humaneness. He also says:

That whereby the noble person differs from others is that he preserves his mind. The noble person preserves his mind through humanness, and preserves his mind through propriety. One who is humane loves other people; one who possesses propriety respects other people. One who loves others is always loved by them; one who respects others is always respected by them. (*Mencius* 4B28)

According to Mencius, preserving humaneness in the mind means that the person who preserves their mind with humaneness is humane. Hence he says that “one who is humane loves other people” 仁者愛人 (*ren zhe ai ren*), but immediately after, he says that “one who possesses propriety respects other people” 有禮者敬人 (*you li zhe jing ren*) (*Mencius* 4B28). Mentioned right next to humaneness, this shows that propriety is both a moral behavior as well as a virtue, and in fact they represent primary virtues in the thought of Mencius.

I have already cited Mencius’ words that “showing respect to elders is rightness,” and this is rightful moral conduct. So we might ask, what is the difference between rightness and propriety, given that both of them are based in respectful moral conduct? Propriety more fully embodies the emotions, while rightness indicates an attitude geared more to a sense of equality between guest and host rather than the admiration or worship of one for the other. Admiration has the special meaning of worshipping a person of greater status; rightness lies more in giving respect to those in a higher position than oneself. Therefore, we can say that propriety is respect in a broad sense, and rightness is a particular form of respect in any given situation.

Before Mencius, propriety was not necessarily counted as a virtue, and the spirit of respect was often classified under the category of rightness, and it was expected from younger people in their attitude to all who were elder to them. Mencius, however, did regard propriety as a virtue, and this was the virtue that embodies respect. At the same time, rightness is also a virtue, but one that embodies the emotions of shame and repulsion, and, for him, no longer defines respect to elders.

In the historical periods preceding Mencius, there were many other virtues that related to respect, such as obedience. These ideas are reflected in a later Han Dynasty writing, *The Book of Filial Piety* 孝經 (*Xiaojing*), which states, “He who loves his own parents would not presume to hate the parents of others; he who respects his own parents would not presume to be rude to the parents of others. With love and respect being fully expressed in this service to parents, such conduct will educate and transform the common people, serving as an exemplary in all corners of the world” (*Xiaojing* 2.1).

Mencius, however, uniquely combines humaneness with rightness and while also regarding propriety as a virtue. In the following passage, it can be seen how he interprets the meaning of rightness in a new sense:

There is nothing that the wise do not know, but what is urgent for them is confronting what is fundamental. There is no one whom the humane do not love, but what is fundamental for them is earnestly caring for the worthy. Even in the cases of Yao and Shun, their wisdom did not extend to everything, but they earnestly attended first to what was fundamental. The humaneness of Yao and Shun did not involve loving every person, but they earnestly cared for the worthy. (*Mencius* 7A46)

According to Mencius, the most basic manifestation of humaneness is to love and serve one's parents, but we have also seen that he extends this to loving other people, because the early Confucian consensus regarding humaneness goes beyond dear affection among family members in the moral conduct of love. For Mencius, humaneness in practice that was extended to non-family members was a moral priority that society prescribed for the good person. Mencius points to this in the following passage, but he also draws a clear distinction between living things other than people, and people themselves, with respect to the “noble person” 君子 (*junzi*):

The noble person loves living things without being humane toward them and is humane toward the people without being affectionate toward them. That he is affectionate toward his family is what allows him to be humane toward the people and loving toward creatures. (*Mencius* 7A45)

While “love” 愛 (*ai*), “humaneness” (*ren*), and “affection” 親 (*qin*) are all sensibilities, the question may be asked whether there are any actual differences between them. Mencius defines them respectively as affection for family members, humaneness for the people, and love for all creatures. This demonstrates that humaneness is specifically directed at people in general, and it is not the exclusive affection of kinship; it can and should be an interpersonal, fraternal attitude that transcends kinship. Note that Mencius here marks a stark difference between humaneness toward people and loving creatures. Affection, humaneness and love

are sentiments more than the features contained in character. It is obvious that early Confucians like Mencius did not distinguish between virtue, moral conduct and sensibility, as all of them are contained within the broader category of virtue.

## Humaneness and Rightness

In an earlier section of this paper, I focused on humaneness and rightness as ethical categories in part of a broader discussion of the quote, “To be affectionate toward those close to one—this is humaneness. To have respect for elders—this is rightness” (*qin qin ren ye jing zhang yi ye*). Although Mencius sometimes uses these two terms, “humaneness” and “rightness,” in combination, humaneness is, nevertheless, the most important part of moral behavior in his philosophy, as is indicated in the two passages below:

One who is humane will be distinguished; one who is inhumane will be disgraced. Now, to dislike disgrace yet abide in inhumaneness is like disliking dampness yet abiding in a low place. If one dislikes disgrace, there is nothing better than to honor virtue and to esteem men of service, giving positions to the worthy and office to the capable. (*Mencius* 2A4)

The way the three dynasties gained the empire was through humaneness, and the way they lost the empire was through inhumaneness. So it is in the flourishing or decline of states, and in their preservation or loss. If the Son of Heaven is not humane, he will be unable to protect all within the four seas. If a feudal lord is not humane, he will be unable to protect the altars of the soil and grain. If a high officer is not humane, he will be unable to protect the ancestral temple. If an ordinary person is not humane, he will be unable to protect his four limbs. Now, to dislike death and ruin yet to take pleasure in not being humane is like disliking drunkenness and yet forcing oneself to drink to excess. (*Mencius* 4A3)

These two passages make clear that humaneness is the most important ethical category for Mencius, and this is entirely consistent with Confucius’ thinking. However, there is a noteworthy difference in the way that they present their ideas: Confucius tends to give equal stress to humaneness and propriety, and he never mentions humaneness and rightness together. On the other hand, Mencius often couples humaneness and rightness, despite the fact that he prioritizes humaneness over rightness, as I have shown already several times. The following passage also brings this out in full clarity:

With those who do violence to themselves, one cannot speak, nor can one interact with those who throw themselves away. To deny propriety and rightness in one’s speech is what is called “doing violence to oneself.” To say, “I am unable to abide in humaneness or to follow rightness” is what is called “throwing oneself away.” For human beings, humane-ness is peaceful dwelling, and rightness is the correct path. To abandon the peaceful dwelling and not abide in it and to reject the right road and not follow it —how lamentable! (*Mencius* 4A10)

Humaneness is the home in which the morally upright spirit resides and the place to which it always returns, and Mencius calls it “the peaceful dwelling” 安宅 (*an zhai*). Rightness is the principle of action or behavior, and he calls it “the correct

path” 正路 (*zheng lu*) because it is that which guides or leads us. The difference between “the peaceful dwelling” of humaneness and “the correct path” of rightness seems to be that a dwelling starts from within, while a path is external, something to be followed. This seems consistent with early Confucian thought, which typically held that humaneness is internal to human nature and that rightness was external to it. Mencius, as is well known, opposed the idea of rightness being external, but those theories nonetheless had an impact on his thinking. However we look at this in view of his thinking, humaneness remains internalized virtue, while rightness corresponds to the principle of conduct, as is expressed in the following passage:

Humaneness is the human mind, and rightness is the human path. To quit the path and not follow it, to abandon this mind and not know enough to seek it, is indeed lamentable. If a man has chickens and dogs that become lost, he knows enough to seek them. But when he has lost his mind, he does not know enough to seek it. The way of learning is none other than this: to seek for the lost mind. (*Mencius* 6A11)

Mencius repeatedly emphasizes that rightness is the path, which shows that it is a principle of behavior, and as such it is objective or external. Humaneness is the virtue that sprouts from inner nature, and as such it is subjective or internal. In this sense, rightness is not a virtue, but rather a principle. It is noteworthy that humaneness refers to a condition of human existence, and Mencius criticizes those who do not know humaneness as “wasting the peaceful dwelling by not living in it” 曠安宅而弗居 (*kuang an zhai er fei ju*), and he criticizes those who do not know rightness as “abandoning the correct path and not following it” 舍正路而不由 (*she zheng lu er bu you*).

The two criticisms are different, and Mencius brings this out by showing humaneness as inner nature and rightness as performance in action. We can extrapolate on this by recognizing that, for Mencius, humaneness is the principle of love, while rightness is the principle of justice; this is clarified in the following passage:

The King’s son Dian asked, “What is the work of a scholar?”  
Mencius said, “To exalt his intention.”  
“What do you mean by his intention?”

“Being committed to humaneness and rightness, that is all. To put one innocent person to death contravenes humaneness. To take what is not one’s own contravenes rightness. Where does he dwell? He dwells in humaneness. Where is his path? His path is rightness. In dwelling in humaneness and following the path of rightness, the work of the great man is complete.” (*Mencius* 7A33)

According to this passage, to kill an innocent man violates the principle of humaneness, and to take things that do not belong to one violates the principle of rightness. In these ways, we can see that Mencius often refers to rightness and humaneness together; at the same time, we also recognize that he seldom explains the independent meaning of rightness apart from humaneness. The following passage displays this clearly:



All human beings have that which they cannot bear. Getting this attitude to reach to what they can bear is humaneness. All human beings have that which they will not do. Getting this attitude to reach to that which they will do is rightness. When human beings are able to bring to fulfillment the mind that desires not to harm others, their humaneness is inexhaustible, and when they are able to bring to fulfillment the mind that refuses to break through or jump over a wall, their rightness is inexhaustible. (*Mencius* 7B31)

While people do not typically have the heart to hurt others (and this is humaneness), we also recognize that different people have different boundaries of behavior, and what is shameful for one person might fall within the bounds of rightness for another. To say that humaneness acts out of repulsion and rightness acts out of shame, then rightness cannot be considered a principle of behavior, but a principle of the heart. But does an understanding of humaneness in terms of a principle of the heart allow us to take rightness itself as a virtue?

I have provided three indications of rightness that show it to involve respect for elders, feelings of shame, and also a path to follow, but it is a more complex ethical category than what is contained in these indications. In terms of “loving parents and respecting elders,” rightness originally centers on the love given to one’s family and then extends to the respect given to elders beyond family relationships, and this includes those who may not be elder in age but who are superior in social ranking.

One component of rightness is respecting one’s elders, but another component of it involves the feelings of shame and repulsion that can be experienced in various existential situations. Such feelings spring from within, as I have mentioned earlier, and Mencius bluntly states that “the heart of shame and repulsion against wrong behavior is rightness” 羞惡之心義也 (*xiu e zhi xin yi ye*) (*Mencius* 6A6). Such a heart marks the boundary of moral perception, which is the source of the moral insight into what one should and should not do. Mencius uses the example of “digging a hole in a wall (in order to steal)” to illustrate the meaning of rightness and what is not right. In this sense, “shame” 羞 (*xiu*) and “repulsion” 惡 (*e*) are themselves the vital forces compelling all innate rejections of immoral behavior.

Respect for elders belongs to the virtue of rightness, but respect for other people in general is more consistent with the virtue of propriety. The difference between rightness and propriety is that propriety takes respect as an emotion having to do with status, while rightness refers to a deep-seated respect to be accorded to all people irrespective of status. Before Mencius, propriety was not generally seen as a virtue as such, so the spirit of respect rested in the performance of rightness. Mencius, however, classified propriety as a virtue and he defined respect as an emotion in so far as the virtue of rightness would embody the emotions of shame and repulsion specifically. It is possible that Mencius at first understood rightness as exclusively referring to the emotions of shame and repulsion, and that he later came to depict propriety in somewhat related terms having to do with respect.

In any case, his idea that “the heart of respect is propriety” is consistent with the early spirit of Confucian thought, which claims that respect is the main component of propriety. While the notion of propriety as a behavioral norm became a standard for moral judgment in the Spring and Autumn period, it is obvious that defining propriety as respect is the consensus of Confucians and other thinkers in his era.

Mencius inherits this idea, because he also illustrates propriety in terms of respect. But the content of respect or propriety deals with the spirit of propriety itself rather more than definitions of propriety as the heart of respect. When Mencius combined propriety with a respectful heart, he brought about an important change in the development of this theory, and propriety as a virtue was one of the major ethical categories from that point on.

Zhu Bokun 朱伯崑 points out that there are many examples in *The Analects* referring to rightness, but there is no clear explanation of what it is; he writes, “In terms of the morality of people, rightness is consciousness of obedience, abiding by the hierarchy ... rightness also refers to the sentiments of wishing to obey the hierarchical order” (Zhu 1984, 49). Zhu’s view is based on the description in *The Analects* of “acting with rightness for propriety” 禮以行之 (*li yi xing zhi*) (*Analects* 15.18), where the original term is “to do it for propriety” where the “it” refers to rightness. In this case, rightness is the main idea of propriety and not a matter of subjective consciousness.

In fact, there are many examples in *The Analects* referring to moral rightness, such as the remarks that “it is cowardly to do nothing when one is faced with rightness” 見義不為無勇也 (*jian yi bu wei wu yong ye*) (*Analects* 2.24); “thinking about rightness when faced with the profit” 見利思義 (*jian li si yi*) (*Analects* 14.12); “becoming rich and honored through incorrectness is as meaningless for me as floating clouds” 不義而富且貴於我如浮雲 (*bu yi er fu qie gui yu wo ru fu yu*) (*Analects* 7.16); “the gentleman differs from others by his rightness” 君子喻於義 (*junzi yu yu yi*) (*Analects* 4.16). In some places, rightness also involves awareness of obligation. Confucius said, “The gentleman regards rightness as one’s nature, then practices it with propriety, expresses it with a self-effacing attitude, accomplishes it with honesty. Isn’t this a gentleman?” 君子義以為質禮以行之孫以出之信以成之君子哉 (*junzi yi yi wei zhi li yi xing zhi sun yi chu zhi xin yi cheng zhi junzi zainalects*) (*Analects* 15.18). “A gentleman regards rightness as the first principle” 君子義以為上 (*junzi yi yi wei shangnalects*) (*Analects* 17.23). We can see from these examples that although Confucius attaches great importance to rightness, the concept of rightness here does not mean moral rightness, but rightness in terms of deontology, or justice. It is not necessary to discuss it in terms of an ethical theory of virtue.

This view regards humaneness as human nature. In view of the theory of virtue, a single virtue taken on its own is not enough to make someone a good person, when a person with loyalty, courage or intelligence may yet follow an evil leader, despite there being no doubt that the person in question is virtuous in terms of their loyalty or bravery or intelligence. In any case, it is certain that this person could not be considered good. An evil leader may possess firmness, calmness, generosity, and other such virtues, whilst the leader’s overall character is not good. A brave person may be arrogant, a wise person may be lazy, a loyal person may be stupid, and so on. In such a situation, can having one kind of virtue and lacking another help in certifying one as a good person? Humaneness can do precisely that. Humaneness is the essential virtue of a good person, the most important ethical virtue to being a

good person. This is the significance of the idea that “humaneness refers to the people” in view of the ethical theory of virtue.

## The Theory of Four Virtues

In early Confucian theory, thinkers like Gaozi claim that humaneness springs from an internal source, namely human nature. This means that humane conduct is an outgrowth of inherent traits, and hence moral or humane conduct comes from the virtue of humaneness. Rightness, on the other hand, is acquired from the external world, and its correct practice conforms to social principles. This means that rightness is moral behavior but not a virtue. Mencius pays great attention to the internalization of virtue, so he advocates that humaneness, rightness, propriety and intelligence all are virtues that can and should be performed as virtues. Therefore, he affirms that the emotions of “loving one’s parents” and “respecting one’s elders” are immanent features of human nature, and humaneness and rightness are therefore inherent virtues. As a result, he disagrees with Gaozi who argues that humaneness is an internal virtue while rightness is an external behavior, as depicted below:

The mind’s feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humaneness; the mind’s feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness; the mind’s feeling of modesty and compliance is the sprout of propriety; and the mind’s sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom. Human beings have these four sprouts just as they have limbs. For one to have these four sprouts and yet say of oneself that one is unable to fulfill them is to injure oneself. (*Mencius* 2A6)

Different from Confucius, Mencius established humaneness, rightness, propriety and intelligence as the four main virtues. More importantly, he internalized humaneness and regarded it as the primary virtue immanent and inherent in the mind, and claimed that a compassionate mind is the start and foundation of humaneness, which is why it is called a “sprout” 端 (*duan*). To extend the range of one’s compassion is the perfection of humaneness, but this demonstration of compassion is not the total representation of the virtue of humaneness; Mencius says,

One’s natural tendencies enable one to do good; this is what I mean by human nature being good. When one does what is not good, it is not the fault of one’s native capacities. The mind of pity and commiseration is possessed by all human beings; the mind of shame and dislike is possessed by all human beings; the mind of respectfulness and reverence is possessed by all human beings; and the mind that knows right and wrong is possessed by all human beings. The mind of pity and commiseration is humaneness; the mind of shame and dislike is rightness; the mind of respectfulness and reverence is propriety; and the mind that knows right and wrong is wisdom. (*Mencius* 6A6)

Here the notion that commiseration is humaneness does not contradict the claim made in *Mencius* 2A6, namely that “the heart of compassion is the sprout of humaneness” 惻隱之心仁之端也 (*ce yin zhi xin ren zhi duan ye*), which emphasizes that compassion to babies is the starting point of humaneness, rather than its

completion. The inherent virtue of humaneness (together with the other three virtues) is the source of goodness, as described below by Mencius:

The noble person has as his nature humaneness, rightness, decorum and wisdom, which, being rooted in his heart, grow apparent in the brightness of his countenance and the suppleness of his back and spread to his four limbs, in which are displayed a wordless illustration. (*Mencius* 6A21)

Humaneness, rightness, propriety and intelligence are all of them virtues and are rooted in the immanent mind, such that the performance of these virtues corresponds with the expressions of the face and the body. This is also a prevailing view within early Confucianism, for example “the virtues run across inner shoots, then find expression as outgrowths” (Sun 1989, 563).

Mencius’ theory of the four virtues is, for the most part, congruent with earlier Confucian theories, although he presented many innovative ideas in his novel arrangement of them. One example of this is in his idea that the mind of shame and dislike signifies the boundary of moral perception, which is the boundary of what one should and should not do. Mencius had no precedents to illustrate rightness as the mind of shame and dislike. He also identified the mind of respectfulness and reverence with propriety, unlike earlier thinkers who regarded propriety as a normative state rather than as a quality of a respectful mind. Further, Mencius described intelligence in terms of the standard of right and wrong; the concept of intelligence is quite important in Zisi’s theories, but he paid more attention to distinguishing good and bad persons, while Mencius stressed distinguishing right and wrong by moral standards.

In any case, the theory of four immanent virtues takes humaneness, rightness, propriety and intelligence as virtues instead of moral behaviors, and this marked a significant phase in the development of Confucian moral theories which embraced Mencius’ ideas about the process of the internalization of virtue. This, however, does not mean that Mencius takes humaneness, rightness, propriety and intelligence only as virtues and no longer sees them as moral behaviors.

As one part of the inherent four virtues theory, the idea of four sprouts implies some other aspects of Mencius’ moral philosophy, such as commiseration and the mind of shame and dislike, which obviously can be classified within the sentiments. Hence, the four-sprout theory is not only connected with the four-virtue theory, but also calls attention to the problem of the relationship between sentiment and virtue. Among the four virtues, compassion is the most important element. Commiseration, which is characterized by “a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others” 不忍人之心 (*bu ren ren zhi xin*), plays an important role in Mencius’ thought. Later, the virtues of humaneness and commiseration are criticized by the Legalist, Han Feizi. Commiseration comprises the emotional sentiments of sympathy within the imminent feelings of human beings and not as utilitarian and selfish matters. Commiseration is not only the originator behind the performance of the virtue of humaneness, but it is also wherein the essence of human nature lies. Mencius does not discuss the relationship between sentiments and virtue in depth; rather, he discussed it in terms of the idea of the destiny of Heaven.

This theory of virtue is based on his belief that the foundation of human nature is its innate goodness. The minds of commiseration, of shame and repulsion, of respect, and of right and wrong are something like a pre-given a priori moral conscience which do not come from habits and experience. Therefore, if humaneness, rightness, propriety and intelligence are virtues, then they are natural features of the mind. From this perspective, the virtues are innate and represent the main character of human nature. However, we can still raise the question, is it true that the theory of innate goodness of human nature claims that people are born with these virtues? If not, how could one obtain these virtues and act upon them? What is the relationship between these virtues and human nature? Of course, if we review the later thoughts of Xunzi as an example, a theory of virtue is not necessarily connected with the theory of the innate goodness of human nature. Theories of virtue can also co-exist with theories of an inherently evil human nature. It would appear that the Confucian theory of virtue itself does not necessarily require a particular theory of human nature as a basis, at least among the views from the pre-Qin era.

## Conclusion

Mencius takes humaneness as the primary moral virtue, which is a staple of all earlier Confucian thought, but he gave new insights into many classical Confucian moral ideas concerning rightness, propriety, and intelligence. Mencius takes humaneness, rightness, propriety, and intelligence as the four main virtues, and he especially emphasized the idea of inherent virtues that guide virtuous conduct. Compared to Confucius, Mencius developed classical Confucian moral thoughts in a quite different direction. As a rigorous philosophical paradigm in the Warring States period, Mencius' theory of the four main virtues was much more reasonable than, for example, Zisi's theory of *wuxing*. By studying the moral philosophy of Mencius, we learn that classical Confucian moral concepts usually contain several complex layers of meanings, particularly as virtue, virtuous conduct, and principles. Thus, in classical Confucian thought, these concepts cannot be interpreted only in terms of virtues and ethics alone. In Confucian moral philosophy, there is no rupture between inherent virtues and practical virtuous conduct. In other words, what I ought to do and what kind of person I ought to be are really one and the same thing. The philosophical resources of classical Confucian moral thinking can contribute to discussions of contemporary ethical problems.

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