Mencius

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Human Nature

- Human nature is innately good
  - There is a benevolent element in human beings
- But, this benevolent element is not always predominant
  - Other elements of human nature can over-power human benevolence

Themes

- Human nature is innately good
- Human virtue creates vital energy
Empirical Basis for Innate Benevolence

- Mencius thinks human's innate benevolence is ultimately an empirical thesis
- Two sources of evidence
  1. Goodness is a natural tendency: there are moments of benevolent thought and behavior that cannot be explained by appeal to self-interest (Four Sprouts Argument)
  2. What would you do?
     - Mencius's thought experiment: what would you do if a small child within your reach was about to take a fatal fall into a well?
     - Mencius thinks we would try to save the child
     - This he takes as evidence for innate benevolence

Four Sprouts Argument
(from Liu p. 75 [Bk. VI, A, 6])

1. “All humans naturally have feelings of commiseration, awareness of shame and dislike, the sentiment of respect and reverence, and a sense of right and wrong.
2. “The feeling of commiseration = the sprout of humanity; the awareness of shame and dislike = the sprout of righteousness; the sentiment of respect and reverence = the sprout of propriety; the sense of right and wrong = the sprout of wisdom.
3. “Humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom constitute goodness.
4. “Therefore, all humans have the sprouts of goodness within their nature.”

Human Response to Distress Argument
(from Liu p. 73 [Bk. II, A, 6])

1. “Anyone who sees a young child about to fall into a deep well is bound to feel anxiety and commiseration in the heart. He feels this way not to gain friendship with the child’s parents, not to seek the praise of others, and not because he detests hearing the child’s screaming.
2. “This example shows that people cannot bear to see the suffering of others.
3. “This very feeling is the beginning of humanity.
4. “Therefore, humans have the beginning of humanity in their nature.”

"Innate" and "Benevolence"

- Mencius is concerned with how someone becomes a moral person
- What's meant by "innate"?
  - Plato and Descartes say we have innate ideas of things like god, mathematics, moral truths, and other a priori truths
  - But, this claim is questionable in a literal sense
  - Rather, innate ideas should be seen as psychological capacities that reveal themselves as humans develop
  - In this sense, "innate" means preset
"Benevolence"

• What acts count as benevolent? What is benevolence?
  • Many acts of benevolence focus on benefiting others, making them happy, and preventing harm
  • But, what really benefits another?
• Defining benevolence is difficult because good actions may not be considered good given certain contexts in which the action occurs
  • The difficulty is in determining when an action is benevolent because it is the right thing to do and carried out for the right reasons
  • Actions performed with too much emphasis on results may not be benevolent

Benevolence Is Essential to Being Human

• Benevolence is a natural inclination of human behavior
  • Humans are naturally inclined toward altruism
  • Becoming moral will satisfy basic human needs
  • Knowing one's own nature leads one to benevolence and acting benevolently is following one's own nature

Confucianism and the Supernatural

• Appeals to “heaven” in Confucianism and Mencius's thought is not an appeal to some supernatural place or being
• Appeals to heaven are appeals to a personally neutral cosmic order which is not morally neutral
  • I Ching sees no difference between the way things are and the way things should be
• The universe is purposeful and as part of the universe, humans can live in harmony with the ways of heaven (tian)
• This emphasis on the harmony between humans and the cosmic order is more predominant in Daoism

Cosmic Order Tilts Toward Benevolence

• The cosmic order is not morally neutral
  • But, this does not mean that all things are good--the world is a collection of good, bad, and indifferent
  • But, in crucial moments the cosmic order tilts in the direction of benevolence
    • Knowing our hearts and human nature is to understand this cosmic order
    • Humans, in special moments like a child falling into a well, will act benevolently
    • Being aware of and acting upon one's inner, benevolent nature will make one feel complete and satisfied
Benevolence-Is-Part-of-Human-Nature Argument

1. “When you act benevolently, it will feel good; it will feel like self-realization.

2. “It wouldn't feel that way if benevolence weren't part of your nature.

3. “All of this is part of a universal human experience connected with acting benevolently.

4. “Therefore benevolence is not merely part of your nature; it is part of human nature.” (pp. 83-4)

Explaining Failures to Act Benevolently

- If human nature is benevolent, how come we do not always act benevolently?
  - Poor Environment: While we are all benevolent in nature, that nature can be usurped or overshadowed by how we think of things and the context in which we find ourselves
  - Upbringing and education play a role in the presence of benevolent behaviors
  - A gentleman (the superior man) is one whose training and upbringing has refined his character to act benevolently

Total Loss of Benevolence

- What about when there is a total loss of benevolence? How do we explain the problem of evil?
  - Mencius thinks the total loss of benevolence is a loss of humanity; one abandons one’s innate goodness
  - But, how can one lose one's humanity?
  - One can lose one's humanity by being deprived of or putting oneself in situations which do not support benevolent behavior
  - Being insensitive to or lacking concern for others, not being mindful of one's actions and their effects on others, and perhaps abusive environments in which one's standards for human decency are warped contribute to the loss of humanity

Extending Benevolence

- How can people consistently act benevolently? How can we be "full-time" virtuous individuals?
  - Consistently acting benevolently is not just a matter of willing oneself to be benevolent
  - Mencius thinks benevolence needs to be "ripe"
  - Part of "ripening" oneself for virtuous behavior requires that one become aware and mindful of one's actions, how one's action can be virtuous, and how one's action effect others
Refinement

- Music and ritual refine individuals and their actions
- Refinement requires mindfulness and critical evaluation of one's actions
- One should be constantly vigilant in one's motives for acting virtuously

Moral Fulfillment and Ch'i

- Mencius thought that the benevolent person displayed his moral refinement in his demeanor, posture, and energy
  - Ch'i is the Chinese concept of vital energy, or sense of vitality
  - A truly virtuous person will have a sense of vitality
  - "Mencius's image of fulfillment, in short, goes far beyond a record of good conduct. It is an image of a psychological system that is liberated from conflict by its wholehearted adherence to its innate benevolence, and that in the process is energized." (90)

Mencius’s Influence on Confucianism

1. Since Heaven is the source of goodness, it must be good. Since Heaven is good and the source of goodness, it is the ultimate determinate of human action and human goodness.
   - Heaven grounds Confucian spirituality

2. The development of one’s innate goodness results from moral development and training. As a result, learning is seen as a process of self-cultivation and moral development.
   - Learning and education become a fundamental Confucian practice

3. The path to being a sage is through the cultivation of the virtuous self through learning about the nature of one’s self