

4.6 The four seeds of the heart-mind



Mencius frequently resorts to a plant-growth analogy in elaborating his heart theory. The bio-growth metaphor allows Mencius to treat morality as an endowment at birth (innate) and still explain how its mature **shape**, which is not evident at birth, can emerge gradually and still be internal, innate. It is internal the way the genetic potential to flower is internal to a sunflower seed. Viewing the left 4 capacities as **seeds** allows us to treat the target virtues as the naturally endowed, foreordained **shape** of the moral character (the plant).

Mencius introduces four “beginnings” (seeds) in the human heart-mind.

The seed...

1.

compassion

惻隱 cèyǐn

The capacity to feel happiness or sadness when others feel happiness or sadness.

2.

shame

羞惡 xiū è

The first character, 羞 xiū, also means something like “shy”. But the second character 惡 è has to do with disgust.

*(Note that shame has to do with **social judgement**, while guilt is about external standards of right and wrong. Shame in Confucian morality, contrasts with the more self-directed guilt-of Western, law-metaphor moralities.)*

3.

deference

辭讓 círàng

Allowing other people to go first, showing respect for them, holding back, being modest.

4.

'choosing this and not that'

是非 shìfēi

Unlike Mozi, Mencius doesn't direct much focus on language, so 是非 shìfēi is less about distinctions in word use. Rather, 是非 shìfēi is about the **un-mediated (intuitive) choice of a path** option.

... which will develop into the virtue of...

benevolence

仁 rén

Mencius, influenced by Mozi, sees the *mature* virtue, 仁 rén, as altruistic concern for other people.

morality

義 yì

If the seed of morality is shame, one might expect the morality to be a *social* morality, based on shame. But Mencius often uses a taste analogy to describe moral reactions, a sort of internal “ugh”. So the two seem to be mixed in Mencius, and it is that mixture which leads to morality.

ritual, politeness

禮 lǐ

Usually translated as “ritual”, but having to do with following social conventions in general. However, Mencius's inclusion of 禮 lǐ as a virtue leads to a puzzle: if moral virtues are **internal**, then how is it that what counts as polite and conventional **differs from society to society**?

wisdom

智 zhì

Thus for Mencius, wisdom, i.e., moral guidance is **innate** and **intuitive**. Knowing is knowing to do **this** and **not-that**.

(Notice how much Mencius has been influenced by Mozi: 禮 lǐ is only third on the list, while 仁 rén and 義 yì, both of which became central in Mozi's critique, are first and 2nd, and the 4th is distinctively Mozi's.)

We can also see that Mencius's response to the **discourse and performance** worries relating to Confucian ritual (see lectures 2.10pt1 and 2.10pt2) is going to be based on reliance on **intuition**. For Mencius, there is no worry about whether we are reading the ritual or discourse correctly, or about how the sages knew to set up the ritual that way in the first place. Why? Because our heart-minds are all the same; **everyone is a potential sage**. We simply follow our heart-mind's guidance and we'll be both moral and polite.