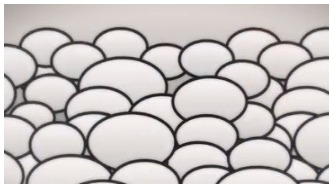
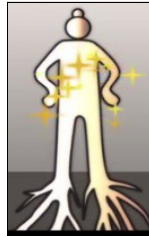


4.8 Mencius's plant analogy

Mencius's plant analogy makes his **innatism** (the view that morality is strongly innate) less stark: we are **not born with full moral knowledge**, instead, we are born with the capacity for such knowledge and it emerges after a period of natural growth, in the way a plant grows from a seed into a full plant. But just as a plant can only develop under the **right conditions**, so our development into **sages** requires the right conditions.

sagehood



Fertile soil

(The right political/economic conditions)

Just as throwing a seed amongst stones will prevent its growth, so too a human being cannot develop morally if placed in conditions of war, starvation, dislocation, and so on.

However, infertile soil doesn't **destroy** a seed's potential: place it in fertile soil, it will still grow.

So it is a **ruler's duty** to ensure the well being of his people, share his desire for meat, mates, home, all the basic goods that allow morality to flourish.



Protect young, vulnerable sprouts

(The first, simple moral prompt is to filial obedience and respect. Heeding early moral prompts fuels more growth.)

Early sprouts are **vulnerable**; they need protection and care from parents & society. They are also threatened by competition from evil "weeds". Our natural respect for **parents** helps us nourish **filiality** and starve rival impulses. Gradually the plant gains strength, height, and more shì-fei structure, signalling the next level of moral development.



Watering and nourishment

(Paying attention to our moral impulses)

We must pay **attention** to our moral impulses: notice them, value them. When a person reflects on, values and honors the moral part of his character by following its prompts, it will grow. Thus we nourish our moral plant.

(One might wonder what Mencius thinks is the part of a person that values his moral organ. Is it that organ valuing itself? or another part of him body. Whatever is the 'I', it must value the guidance faculty (plant) for it to eventually reach full maturity.



Don't allow weeds to grow

(Selfish desires compete for nourishing attention. Deny them and they wither..)

To cultivate a plant is to nourish it and remove **weeds** (by neglect). The weeds, our **selfish desires** are 性 **xìng** (nature) and 命 **mìng** (fate). Proper cultivating deems them fate and not nature—a way of showing respect. A sage consistently thinks this way.