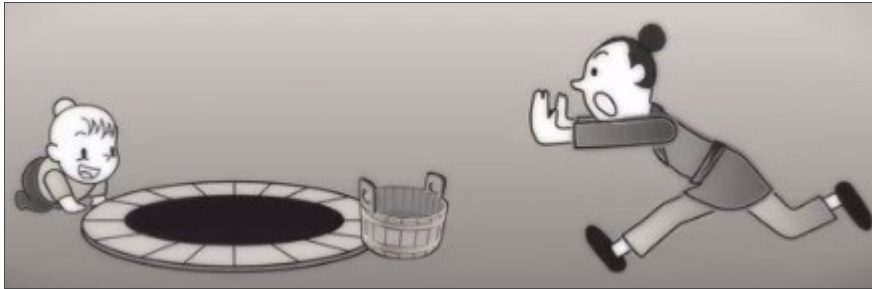


## 4.7 Mencius's examples: the child by the well

Mencius's most famous story is one that is designed to show that compassion 惻隱 *cèyǐn* is felt by **every human being** for other human beings.

### The child by the well



所以謂人皆有不忍人之心者，今人乍見孺子將入於井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也 ...

Consider why we say that all humans have a heart that cannot bear others' sufferings: Now, if people suddenly notice a child about to crawl into a well, they will all have alarm and distress in their heart (guiding organ). That is not dependent on their desire to build a bond with the child's father and mother; nor will it depend on a desire be accepted or befriended by neighbours or other residents; nor does it derive from recoiling at the sound of the baby's crying. Viewing this case, we see that what lacks such a compassionate guiding organ, that is not a natural human. . . . (Mencius: Book 2A6)

Mencius implies that **every** human being will have this reaction of distress and anxiety to seeing a child about to crawl into a well. It is a very clear example of Mencius's defense of compassion 惻隱 *cèyǐn* as a natural, other-regarding or altruistic psychological disposition.

*This is puzzling as a Mencian response to Mozi because Mencius otherwise champions the Confucian strategy of **defending moral partiality** rather than **denying** that Confucian **morality is partial**. (see Handout 3.3). Mencius's elaboration of the pivotal child-by-the-well story seems to provide Mozi with the moral psychology he could use (and which Mozi himself treats as socially instilled.) We have a natural concern for the well-being of other human beings regardless of closeness to us—are psychological altruists.*

### The beggar's disgust at soiled food



Here is another one of Mencius's examples, this one having to do with the reaction of **disgust** and its relation to **morality**.

一簞食，一豆羹，得之則生，弗得則死。噍爾而與之，行道之人弗受；蹴爾而與之，乞人不屑也。

Here are a small basket of rice and a platter of soup, and the case is one in which the getting them will preserve life, and the want of them will be death; if they are offered with an insulting voice, even a trampler will not receive them, or if you first tread upon them, even a beggar will not stoop to take them.

(Mencius: Book 6A10, trans. James Legge)

The beggar's reaction of **disgust** to the spoiled food is the beginnings in him of 義 *yì* (morality). What the story seems to imply, very interestingly, is that a certain degree of **self-respect** lies at the heart of **morality**, as shown by the beggar who feels offended by this behaviour, even though he's totally dependent on food handed out by other people.

Mencius's stories about the child by the well and the beggar, however, seem to leave out the **social** aspect of his account of morality, such as learning ritual and etiquette, and feeling social shame. How can we tie these elements together so we have a unified explanation of the development of the four seeds of morality?

(See next page.)

## Two interpretations of Mencius's four seeds account of morality

### Weak version

We have natural moral **capacities**, such as a natural capacity for concern for others, which we **might** develop into a virtue of benevolence. We have **natural tendencies** to be ashamed, to want the approval of others, to fit in with society, to accept the ways of showing respect, the local right-wrong judgements etc. that lead us to conventional morality (mores), manners and conventional "wisdom."

It counts as the **weak** version because it doesn't claim that actual moral behaviour is innate. The **tendencies** lie within us, but the actual moral content comes from the **outside**, from education, society, and so on.

This weak version doesn't make any **new**, bold claims; it doesn't entail anything that Mozi or Yang Zhu need deny.

### Strong version

The **whole** of morality, its entire content is contained within each of us. There is **no contribution from the outside** and no variation across locals or through time.

It counts as the **strong** version: not merely moral tendencies, but **full moral knowledge** and actions are contained within us.

But this strong version is rather **implausible**. Especially when we consider the case of etiquette; people already knew the rules of etiquette differ in different societies (See handout 3.1)

Many interpreters now prefer the **weaker** version, and see **education** as mixing in with the heart-mind's guidance. One school of medieval Confucianism tended in this orthodox direction and its rival toward the strong version. Mencius at many points approves of education, and wants to have rulers provide for it. So the weak version is a plausible interpretation. But it undermines Mencius attempt to use Yang's strategy to rebut Mozi. Mozi would be happy to have an natural impulse to acquire, through public education, a reformed set of mores and manners that yield more benefit and less harm (a real morality). It becomes unclear how Mencius theory of the 4 hearts fails to support Mohism as much or more than it does Confucianism—whatever Mencius's own attitudes and identification.