

4.9 Sagehood and the problem of evil



Mencius's plant analogy is particularly apt when we come to explaining the growth of moral knowledge and virtue. When a plant first starts to sprout, it is **vulnerable** to harmful influences, to being overshadowed by weeds, and so on. But as it grows, it develops a thicker base, taller so competes better for light and less **vulnerable**. Similarly, as morality matures its impulses are stronger and naturally attracts more respect from us. Its 是非 **shì-fei** branching of guiding knowledge is more complex and responsive. He has fewer temptations, easier compliance and more sound judgment. Thus Mencius reads a famous passage from *the Analects*.

子曰：「吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。」

The Master said, "At fifteen, I my ambition was learning. At thirty, I stood up. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew my natural status. At sixty, I my ear was attuned [to dào] . At seventy, I could follow my hearts desire, without going outside the norms. (Analects 2:4)

Mencius's problem of evil

At this point, a problem for Mencius arises. Our natural tendencies seem to include tendencies towards sloth, greed, lust, and so on. These tendencies are also natural to all humans. So if natural inclinations are moral, So why must we wait until we are 70 to follow the **natural guidance** of our **hearts**? If morality is programmed in our hearts, why are we not following all of its guidance, including the selfish as well as the moral from the start?



Mencius's response

Mencius's response is classic **name rectifying**. He distinguishes between my inclinations a sage would deem as my **nature**, and those a sage would deem as my **fate**—**despite also** being my **nature**. That seems to imply that to become a moral sage, I have to already be one.

性

xìng
(human nature)

These natural inclinations are the "seeds". They include my love of morality, of doing good, of concern for others, filial piety, and so on.

命

mìng
(fate)

These natural inclinations are the "weeds". They include my love of eating meat, of sloth, of sex, and so on.

Mencius, however, never uses the term, **rectifying names** in spelling this out. He is not comfortable with the rigorous Mohist approach to language—doesn't like to 辯 **bian** (make clear distinctions). He is obviously begging the question, here, of what is moral to bias cultivating our heart toward developing his favored moral intuition. He offers no **objective** standard for his 辯 **bian** (distinction) between what is 性 **xìng** (nature) and what is 命 **mìng** (fate).

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The plant analogy provides Mencius with a way of justifying **liberal politics**. He reinterprets the doctrine of 天命 **tiān mìng** (Mandate of Heaven) in an interesting way. Mencius thinks of a ruler as winning battles not because nature allowed him to do so, but because he **won over the hearts and minds of the people**—including the **opponent's soldiers**. The Mandate of Heaven, for Mencius, is about people "voting with their feet". And that implies that **each person** is able to **distinguish** a **good ruler** from a **bad ruler**. Mencius's theory explains how every human being has as much ability as the sage to tell who is moral, and who is not.