

# Exploration of Mencius' Motivation Theory of "Benevolence and Righteousness" Based on the Existence of Human Meaning

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**Abstract:** This paper abandons the usual thinking pattern of "arguing between righteousness and profit" under the study of Mencius' general level of good of "benevolence and righteousness", attempts to take the path of "motivation", which is less concerned by the academic circle, from the first chapter of *Mencius* with "benevolence and justice" to show the tension of argumentation brought by the propositions within it, according to the times, Confucian thinking mode and the general review of foreign motivation theory and so on, and briefly responds to the disadvantages of the opposition of "motivation theory and effect theory". Based on the existence of human meaning, this paper redefines the connotation and direction of Mencius' "benevolence and righteousness" in motivation theory, and holds that Mencius' "benevolence and righteousness" motivation theory is the transcendence of moral ideals or values over moral argumentation. Mencius put the moral motivation of Confucianism above the external utilitarian demand, which is the internal reflection of Mencius' basic thought of "good human nature". This motivation can be regarded as the high recognition and expectation of the existence in human nature on the basis of the Confucian concept of virtue. Therefore, we can say with certainty that Mencius' "motivation theory" has a value of guiding people to "follow the good".

**Keywords:** Mencius, Motivation Theory, "Benevolence and Righteousness", Comprehensive Implication

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## 1. Introduction

In the first chapter of *Mencius*, the core of the thesis is "Why should Your Majesty have mentioned the word 'profit'? What count is 'benevolence and righteousness'." (1C1 of *Mencius* [1]). It can be used as the key to understand the whole book and study Mencius. Although there are many analyses and judgments in later studies, they often lead to different opinions. Starting from the controversial theory of motivation, this paper attempts to clarify the key point of Mencius' core thought by "understanding will by heart-mind". At the same time, the author generally combs the "motivation theory" and "effect theory" at home and abroad, and finds that Mencius' motivation theory of "benevolence and righteousness", which is pure in argument and resolute in speech, is not in a relative level of "effect theory", but a footnote implied in all Mencius' philosophical thoughts, that is, based on the existence of

human meaning. It can be said to be a sublation of the theory of natural human nature [2].<sup>1</sup> It also can be a high recognition of human being and expectations. Although this kind of existence can be said to be the manifestation of the theory of "human nature" under the analysis of Mou Chung-san's

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<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, "good human nature" is the representative of Mencius' many theories, but few people investigate the "ideological origin" of Mencius' theory. The investigation here is not based on the text of *Mencius*, but must be explored from its historical background. Through the "*Guodian Chu bamboo slips*", We found that from Confucius to Zisi to Mencius, the pursuit of "human nature" is just a process from "natural human nature" to Mencius' "good nature". It is Mencius' emphasis on the motivation of "benevolence and righteousness" that makes "human status" improved and human awakening out of a broader path. Man is not a thing in a general sense, but mainly as a kind of "spiritual existence" that man can appear and be respected. This is the significance of Mencius' motivation theory of "benevolence and righteousness", which has a far-reaching impact on the Confucian sense of life and responsibility. Refer to Chen Lai, *Bamboo and Silk "Five Elements" and Bamboo and Silk Research*, (Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 2009), pp. 76-77.

"human value" [3],<sup>2</sup> it is better to say that it is Mencius' highlighting of the value of man under the comprehensive concept of "heaven (*tian*), earth (*di*) and man", which is a kind of comprehensive containment, then "benevolence and righteousness" is the concentrated expression of Mencius' motivation theory and the key vision of human nature.

## 2. The Origin of Mencius' "Benevolence and Righteousness"

When discussing "human nature" and "morality", scholars want to ask how Mencius' theory of "good human nature" is carried out in real life; at the same time, how is it effective to make moral evaluation on Mencius' dynamic development of human nature. The 24th World Philosophy Conference, with the theme of "learning to be an adult", is to inspire people to think about why "adult" has become a concern of philosophy; and how to do "adult" in the first place. How to solve such problems? Perhaps, from Mencius' theory of "benevolence and righteousness" motivation can provide us with reference.

The reason why human nature is the object of human concern is that human beings are different from things in the general sense. Human beings are not simply satisfied with themselves, but should give full play to the spiritual world of human beings and transform it into a real power. It should be emphasized that, no matter what period of history, as long as "economy" and "business" are emphasized, the evaluation of "morality" will often become a problem for people to discuss. For example, Sima Guang of the Song Dynasty, standing on the traditional Confucian moral position, criticized Wang Anshi's "utilitarian" thought in the "reform" of economic reform, and put forward the criticism that "only profit is to follow, regardless of reputation and integrity, to the decline of the Tang Dynasty". [4] In addition, the "market economy" of the current period will involve similar moral evaluation issues, which urgently need a reasonable response from the philosophical circles.

So, in what sense a person is "good" and how to ensure that a thing is "good" are related to a person's motivation.

2 In his book of *Theory of Perfect Good* Mou Chung-san believes that Mencius' statement of human nature has two meanings: one is the animal nature in the perceptual aspect, which belongs to "the nature of life" (Mencius does not say that human nature is good in this statement, but does not deny that people say that human nature is animal in this statement.); The other is the true nature of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom, which is why Mencius established "good nature". In this book, Mr. Mou mentioned "human value" many times. If the value of "human" is defined by the difference between "animal", Mencius' theory of "human nature" is obviously more than that. If Mencius wants to break the heresy such as the school of "Yang, Mo", it is necessary to highlight the difference and value between "people". At the same time, if, as Mr. Mou said, "*tian* is a transcendent entity" and "people should flatter but not violate it", it is difficult to understand Mencius' idea that "the people are superior to the monarch, and the country is inferior" if he places "humanity" under the obedience of "the way of *tian*". From "the nature of *tian* and *di* is precious" in the *Xiaojing* to "there is nothing outside the heart-mind, and there is no reason outside the heart-mind" in the school of Lu, Wang, the line of "high humanity" also will disappear. See Mou Chung-san, *Theory of Perfect Good*, (Taipei: Lianjing Publishing Co., Ltd., 1985), p. 18; 133; 147.

Motivation is the idea that motivates people to engage in certain activities. Although Mencius didn't use the word "motivation" directly, Mencius said that "What is worth our admiration is called 'good'" (14C25 of *Mencius* [1]). In this place, "admiration" can be understood as motivation, which is an intrinsic value consideration. This value is "good", and this is the essence of "admiration". On the contrary, it is evil that cannot be admired. Sima Qian said: "When I read Mencius' books, I saw that King Hui of Liang asked 'how can we profit our country?' I often abandoned the books and sighed: 'Profit is really the beginning of trouble! Confucius seldom mentioned profit, which was often the reason why he was afraid of becoming a bad thing. Therefore, it is said that 'If we allow our profit to be carried out, we will often arouse people's resentment.' From the emperor to the common people, why aren't the disadvantages different!'" [5] Obviously, the analysis of these problems points to the earlier and representative Mencius. This shows that the study of Mencius' motivation theory of "benevolence and righteousness" is a long-standing problem. This paper attempts to make an analysis of this problem, in order to find the main line of Mencius' motivation theory of "benevolence and righteousness".

## 3. Debate Between the Theory of Motivation and Effect in China

Generally speaking, motivation theorists believe that "the good and evil of human behavior depends on whether the motivation is good or not, but has nothing to do with the effect of behavior; judging or evaluating the good and evil of behavior only depends on the motivation, not the effect." [6] On the contrary, the effect theorists believe that "the good and evil of human behavior depends on the effect; to judge or evaluate the good and evil of behavior, we need not examine the motivation, just look at its effect." [7] In China, the opposition between the two views can be described as the dispute of "righteousness and profit".

During the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, "eight sets of choristers (an imperial prerogative) in their family chapel" (3C1 of *Analects of Confucius* [8]) "There was no just wars in Spring and Autumn Period" (14C2 of *Mencius* [1]) was the social status at that time. Confucius defined "righteousness" as "A wise and good man makes right the substance of his being; he carries it out with judgment and good sense; he speaks it with modesty; and he attains it with sincerity; such a man is a really good and wise man." (15C17 of *Analects of Confucius* [8]). Zhu Xi annotated it as "righteousness is the root of making things, so it is the essence". [9] In this place, Confucius defined "righteousness" as dealing with practical things. Confucius also said that "A gentleman esteems what is righteousness as of the highest importance" (17C23 of *Analects of Confucius* [8]) and "A good and wise man who enters the public service, tries to carry out what he thinks to be righteousness." (18C7 of *Analects of Confucius* [8]). It can be seen that Confucius attaches great

importance to righteousness, which is generally considered in the first place. At the same time, Confucius did not deny “profit”, but required “One who when he sees a personal advantage, can think of what is righteousness” (14C13 of *Analects of Confucius* [8]). Mozi thought that “If you get profit, you will be happy, you will get profit; if you get harm, you will get evil” (*Jingshuo* part A of *Mozi* [10]). In the later period, Mozi directly said “If you are righteous, you will get profit” (*Jing* part A of *Mozi* [10]). Obviously, Mozi school regards righteousness and profit as the result of “utility”, which blurs the boundary between them to make them the same. “Righteousness and profit” are the most discussed topic in Mencius, and Mencius clearly considered righteousness as a motivation. In addition to “What count is ‘benevolence and righteousness’”, Mencius said that “Yang advocates the theory of ‘each one for himself’ and this is equivalent to a denial of the ruler of one’s country. Mocius advocates the theory of ‘love without discrimination’, and this is equivalent to a denial of one’s father. He who denies his ruler and his father is no different from a beast.” (6C9 of *Mencius* [1]) This negates Yang Zhu’s and Mohist’s thoughts of “private interest” and “public interest” from the perspective of “motivation”. At the same time, Mencius emphasized that “To be benevolent and righteous. It goes against benevolence to put an innocent man to death. It goes against righteousness to take what one is not entitled to. Where is one’s residence? In benevolence. Where is one’s road? In righteousness. To reside in benevolence and follow righteousness is all that the intellectuals occupy themselves in.” (13C33 of *Mencius* [1]) In addition to emphasizing “benevolence and righteousness” in motivation, Mencius also attached importance to “profit”. He clearly put forward “the means of support decided on for the people” (1C7 of *Mencius* [1]). Xunzi’s “If there is less profit and more righteousness, we should do it” (25C of *Xunzi* [11]) and “controlling profit with righteousness” (18C of *Xunzi* [11]) show that Xunzi also attaches great importance to “righteousness” and should control profit with righteousness.

From this we can see that Confucius attached importance to profit, but he still put “righteousness” in the first place. Although Mozi emphasized that “righteousness” and “profit” were equally important, he considered them from the perspective of result, that is utility indeed. Although Xunzi didn’t deny “righteousness” and saw the side of “using righteousness to control profit”, he also made quantitative analysis of “righteousness” and “profit” from the results. Only Mencius clearly and exactly thought of “benevolence and righteousness” directly from “motivation”, and did not take “profit” into consideration in this “motivation”.

The debate of “righteousness” and “profit” in the Song and Ming Dynasties is mainly reflected in the views of Wang Anshi, Cheng Hao, Zhu Xi, Chen Liang, Ye Shi and Li Zhi. Wang Anshi said, “financial management is the so-called righteousness.” [12] Cheng Hao said that “all things in the world are just righteousness and profit.” [13] Zhu Xi once said that “the theory of righteousness and profit is the first meaning of Confucianism”. [14] Meanwhile Zhu Xi inherited Dong Zhongshu’s thought of “benevolent people, correct their way,

and do not seek their profit; cultivate their reason, and do not rush their work” [15], and took it as the key point of doing things. But Chen Liang, the representative of Shigong school, thought: “why did Yu<sup>3</sup> have the six Warehouses if he didn’t make achievement? Why do you have four virtues if Qian<sup>4</sup> doesn’t make a profit?” [16] We can see that “Chen Liang obviously also has his inherent contradictions. If he shows virtue and reason by his achievements, he blurs the difference between matter and reason.” [17] Similarly, Ye Shi further refuted the motivative view that righteousness is not for profit, and the way is not for profit. he pointed out: “the ancients used to profit others instead of claiming their merits, so the way is bright. When the later Confucianists did Dong Zhongshu’s theory, they were not utilitarian, but moralists were useless empty words.” [18] This leads the question to a vague direction.

This paper argues that although Chen Liang, Ye Shi and other “Shi gong schools” have exposed the current maladies of Confucianism’s “empty words to heart-mind and nature” and “not paying attention to state affairs” in the special diplomatic and political environment of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, is Confucianism’s broad sense of utility for its own interests? Let’s take another look at Li Zhi of Ming Dynasty: “If a man wants righteousness, he will profit. If he does not seek profit, he will not be right. If my way is not clear, then my work will be finished. If I ignore my work, when will my way be clear?” [19] Obviously, Li Zhi also saw the side of the conflict between justice and profit, but he did not understand Mencius’ motivation of “benevolence and righteousness” and did not rule out the side of “utilitarian” result. Mencius just did not mix utilitarianism into his motivation. On the whole, Chen Liang, Ye Shi and other “Shi gong schools” inevitably exaggerate the harm of this theory of motivation since Mencius. It is possible to put the cart before the horse. They don’t know that “Yu’ contribution and Qian’ virtue” are the result of the positive realization of human subjective motivation.

#### 4. Comparison with the Foreign “Motivation Theory”

There are, in addition, debates about the relationship between the two in foreign countries, such as J. Bentham and J. S. mill, the 19th century British utilitarian, who advocated “hedonism”. There is little difference between their basic line and China’s utilitarianism. They all start from the external effect. We don’t need to make another comparison between them. We need to compare Mencius’ “benevolence and righteousness” motivation theory with foreign “motivation theory”, which is a research approach. Hume and Kant are the representatives of motivation theory abroad.

Hume, a master of empiricism, is a moderate advocate of

3 Yu is a sage emperor in ancient Chinese legend. It is said that he has made great achievements in controlling torrential floods.

4 Qian is the first Hexagram in *the book of changes*. It has the characteristics of “improvement”.

motivation theory. He thinks that "morality is better to be felt than judged" [20]. Hume's anti-rationalism analysis of morality and the concept of "moral sense" is a contribution to the theory of motivation. It seems that "motivation" has a concrete and sensible reference, but Hume attributes it to "sympathy". He says: "in human nature, the most attractive thing is to attract people's attention. We need to count our tendency to sympathize with others, because the nature of this tendency and the result of it will make us naturally accept the experience of others, whether they are similar or opposite to us. [21] Hume seems to be similar to Mencius' "unbearable heart-mind", but he thinks that this "sympathy" is "confined generosity". In the end, it inevitably turned to skepticism, far less than Mencius' theory of "benevolence and righteousness" which has the function of long-lasting and absorbing the people's mind, and the function of "guidance" on the later Confucian motivation.

Kant is the representative of moral motivation theory of practical rationalism. He believes that "in this world or outside the world, nothing can be qualified to be considered or called good, except good will." [22] At the same time, Kant believes that "free will and the will under the moral law are the same." [23] In other words, Kant believes that "unlike those whose essence is only presupposed technical orders and prudent orders, real moral orders are absolute. This absolute order is applied to all people and requires that it is an inevitable action, that is, an objective and inevitable action, without involving other purposes. It directly requires some kind of action without any other intention as a condition." [24] Obviously, from "free will" to "moral law", Kant finally led it to "thing in itself", which is Kant's logic of "congenital pure reason". Therefore, Kant's "theory of obligation motivation" obviously has the mysticism color of agnosticism. In addition, the reason why Kant can't reach the state of "practicing the utmost nature" like Mencius, by Mou Chung-san's analysis, "one is that his thinking mode of step-by-step decomposition and construction limits him, and he lacks the original and transparent concrete wisdom; the other is that he has no concrete, clear, sincere, compassionate circle of performance, and God's saint, which should be the first rules." [25] Mou Chung-san's expressions of "the original and transparent concrete wisdom" and "compassionate circle of performance, and God's saint" can be regarded as a higher generalization of Confucian "benevolence and righteousness" motivation theory since Mencius.

Similarly, Korean scholar Dobin CHOI puts forward the view of "evaluator centered moral evaluation" [26] and questions Mencius' motivation theory of "benevolence and righteousness" derived from "heart-mind". In fact, it is still confined to external moral evaluation, which is far away from Mencius' thought. What's different is that American scholar Rex A. Wright sees the inconsistency between "motivation" and "effect", and thinks that motivation is not a simple function (power), but has its complexity. [27] Another American scholar, Mark T. Nelson, thinks that utilitarianism is based on a kind of public moral evaluation, which is not suitable for the individual level. [28] These two scholars not

only see the disadvantages of moral evaluation from the perspective of "utility", but also point out that motivation is the primary object of concern and should be given enough attention from the relationship between "motivation and result".

As I said earlier, this theory of motivation since Mencius is not a theory that only talks about "motivation" and does not care about the results. But Mencius wanted to promote the Confucian moral thought of "human" standard. Therefore, Mencius' theory of "benevolence and righteousness" as a kind of value system of respecting "human being" ideologically and formally has become the mainstream consciousness of history. However, this paper needs to say that Mencius' motivation theory of "benevolence and righteousness" is not Kant's "freedom of will" and "obligation", but a deep understanding of "the unity of man and nature". "The relationship between heaven and man" is reasonably interpreted by the Confucian classic the *Yijing (the Book of Changes)* as "pushing the way of heaven to clarify human affairs" [29]. It can be seen that the relationship between heaven and man is harmonious and unified in the eyes of ancient sages. Kant's "freedom of will" actually regards the will in the moral field as a kind of absolute and unknown "pure reason", which Kant called "order". Although people also have the freedom of choice, on the whole, it is opposite to Kant's understanding that is beyond human beings' forces (also known as "heaven" in western consciousness). Because, in the field of Kant's "transcendental logic", people are unknowable to "heaven", so people can only obey, which has a sense of religion. However, even Mencius has the will here, it can only be said that the will activity is a kind of potential energy after the judgment of the heart-mind, that is, the promotion of human nature under the communication between heaven and man. In a word, Mencius' motivation theory is still the harmonious unity of man and nature.

On the whole, Mencius put Confucian moral motivation above "external things", which is also the main point of Mencius' theory of "good human nature". This kind of motivation can be regarded as the recognition and expectation of human being on the basis of Confucian basic thought. Therefore, we can also say that "to achieve the unity of good and truth in the process of understanding oneself and the world." [30].

## 5. Conclusion: The Definition of Mencius' Motivation Theory

Through these comparisons, this paper holds that such "motivation theory" has become a kind of judgment and a logic model that Confucianism pays close attention to. In other words, is it from the motivation of people or from the utilitarian results of behavior to judge "whether it is moral"? This is a commonplace topic. There is no need to make a long discussion here, because if we only look at the problem from the result, we will lose the grasp of the original and process. If we only judge from the "motivation", we will have the doubt

of “which is right and which is wrong”. Of course, we can also combine “motivation” with “Results” are considered in a unified way, but there are still problems such as “whether the standards are unified, the level of standards” and so on. The reason why this paper chooses “Mencius’ motivation theory of ‘benevolence and righteousness’” as the theme of argument is that Mencius’ theory of motivation does not exclude “utilitarianism”. Of course, it is a mistake of “not discussing way (*dao*) at the same level” to set it against the “theory of effect” simply. Mencius’ “motivation theory” has a value of guiding people to “follow the good”. Therefore, since Mencius, the Confucianists have paid more attention to this “motivation theory” and adhered to the position of “benevolence and righteousness”, so that the later Confucians such as Dong Zhongshu and Zhu Xi especially respected it. Therefore, it can be affirmed that as one of Mencius’ thoughts, the theory of “benevolence and righteousness” motivation provides a moral value for Confucian moral thought.

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