

MENCIUS' EXPLANATION OF THE VIRTUES

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According to Mencius, each of the fundamental Confucian virtues (which we are to cultivate) grows from "sprouts" (*tuan*) already inside us, as we can sometimes see in our daily lives:

THE VIRTUE

THE "SPROUT"

1. JEN (or ren), "magnanimity": the innate human disposition to react compassionately to others' real or potential suffering.

2. LI, "propriety": appropriate actions, which show appreciation and respect for the true meaning of a social situation. Society has formalized these modes of behavior, in order to train the young, and to remind everyone of the social and moral importance of proper attitudes.

3. CHIH (or zhih), "moral judgment": the mature judgmental response to particular situations. This is not just a matter of applying rules: it is the responsible exercise of independent moral judgment.

4. I (or yi), "correctness, dutifulness": acting to do what is morally right. We know what is morally right by observing what we react to as being wrong: the opposite must be the right.

1. Spontaneous feelings of pity and human sympathy when we see others suffer, or about to suffer (e.g., the child at the edge of the well, or the ox about to be sacrificed).

2. Spontaneous feelings of deference to elders, or to those in authority (e.g., the respect that children give to adults). Also: spontaneous feelings of concern for those who are less capable of taking care of themselves

3. Spontaneous feelings of approval or disapproval of others' actions.

4. Spontaneous feelings of shame (when we are caught doing something that we know to be wrong) or aversion (to the idea of doing something that we know to be wrong, e.g., when we see someone do something that we know to be wrong, and we are repulsed).

NOTE: ALL FOUR ARE INTERRELATED. For instance, if we saw someone molesting a child, we would spontaneously feel aversion (#4) and disapproval (#3), as well as compassion for the child (#1), and would at least feel an impulse to intervene, whether or not we actually did so. By **following li** (#2), we become habituated to doing what is right, so that we fortify our natural disposition toward moral behavior, and do not end up, for example, molesting children.

* Based upon ideas of Professor Lee Yearley, Stanford University

