Introduction

Mengzi 孟子 was a Chinese Confucian philosopher who lived in the fourth century B.C.E. He was born after Kongzi died, so he never studied under Kongzi, or even met him. However, Mengzi tried to teach, practice, and defend the Way of Kongzi as he understood it. Although he is not nearly as well known in the West as Kongzi, Mengzi has long been regarded in China (and throughout East Asia) as second only to Kongzi himself in importance as a Confucian thinker.

The collection of Mengzi’s sayings, dialogues, and debates with others is known simply as the Mengzi (or, following the Jesuit Latinization of his name, the Mencius). It is divided into seven “books,” each of which is subdivided into two parts (called the “A” and “B” parts), which are then further divided into “chapters.” So, for example, Mengzi 1B3 is book 1, second part, chapter 3.

Mengzi saw the main intellectual opponents of the Way of Kongzi as being the teachings of Yang Zhu and Mozi (3B9, 7A26). Mozi, as we saw in Chapter 2, advocated a kind of universalistic consequentialism. There are few, if any, texts that have survived to the present day that we can confidently identify as presenting the teachings of Yang Zhu, so we do not know exactly what his philosophy was. However, it seems clear that Yang Zhu emphasized following one’s xing 性, “nature” (see Important Terms), and claimed that the teachings of both Mohism and Confucianism ask us to act contrary to our natures by making what Yang Zhu saw as excessive sacrifices for others. (See the Supplemental Text on Yangism [“Robber Zhi”], pp. 369–75.) On this basis, Mengzi accused Yang Zhu (perhaps unfairly) of being a sort of extreme egoist.
Mengzi agrees with Yang Zhu that humans have a nature, which they should follow. Indeed, he criticizes a rival philosopher, Gaozi, for suggesting that ethical cultivation must involve violating one's nature (Mengzi 6A1). However, Mengzi argues against Yang Zhu that there are incipient virtuous inclinations in one's nature (Mengzi 6A6). He frequently describes these inclinations using a metaphor of “sprouts,” and compares ethical cultivation to tending these sprouts (Mengzi 2A6, 2A2, 6A7–8). Mengzi presents various kinds of evidence for the existence of ethical “sprouts” in humans, including the “giveaway” actions of adults who spontaneously manifest these inclinations (such as King Xuan, whose sympathy for an ox being led to slaughter shows his nascent compassion [Mengzi 1A7]), and “thought experiments” (such as asking us what our intuitions are about how a normal human would react to the sight of a child about to fall into a well [Mengzi 2A6], or to the sight of the corpses of loved ones rotting by the roadside [Mengzi 3A5]).

It is important to understand that, although the presence of the sprouts guarantees the goodness of human nature, this does not entail that most humans are actually good. Mengzi stresses that a bad environment (and failure to cultivate oneself) can almost destroy one’s original nature (Mengzi 6A8). Furthermore, our compassion for others and disdain to do what is wrong are innate, but only incipient. Thus the task of moral cultivation is to “extend” or “fill out” the reactions from the paradigmatic cases where we already have them to the relevantly similar cases where we do not yet have them, but ought to (Mengzi 7A15, 7A17, 7B31).

Mengzi thinks that most people will be unable to develop their nature without having their basic needs for things such as food met (Mengzi 7A27). Indeed, Mengzi provides specific advice about proper farm management (Mengzi 3A3), showing his concern with the practicalities of governing. Once their fundamental needs are met, basic—but universal—ethical education is crucial (Mengzi 1A7, 3A4). However, Mengzi recognizes that, while everyone has the capacity to become a sage, not everyone will realize that ability.

Advanced ethical cultivation requires education under a wise teacher. Mengzi’s students pose him questions, often involving conundrums from two works that were already quite old and almost canonical by Mengzi’s time: the History and the Odes (Mengzi 5A2, 7B3, see also Important Texts). It is significant that much of Mengzi’s teaching is based on concrete cases, rather than abstract principles. Although he clearly thinks that there is a best Way to live, and a best choice in every situation (Mengzi 4B29), his
approach is “particularistic” in emphasizing the context-sensitivity of virtue (Mengzi 4A17). Thus, he tries to cultivate in his students a skill that goes beyond any simple tool or technique (Mengzi 7B5). This is perhaps part of his reason for suggesting that you should “seek for in your heart” what “you do not get from doctrines” (Mengzi 2A2).

Mengzi uses his particular conception of human nature to provide a response to both Mohism and Yangism. As we have seen, Mengzi agrees with the Yangists that humans have a nature that they should follow, but argues that the Yangists have supplied an impoverished account of the contents of that nature. Against the Mohists, Mengzi argues that there is a natural order of development of human compassion, and that, as a matter of psychological fact, humans must learn to love members of their own family before they can learn to love strangers (Mengzi 7A15, 7A45). Some Mohists in Mengzi’s era seem to have conceded this point, but argued that the feeling of compassion cultivated in the family should be extended outward to love everyone equally. However, Mengzi claims that, given the way in which our compassion develops out of love of kin, any effort to love everyone equally violates our naturally greater compassion for family members (Mengzi 3A5). Finally, Mengzi argues that the effort to base one’s actions on 于 “benefit” or “profit,” even if it is the profit of one’s kingdom as a whole, will be self-defeating (Mengzi 1A1).

**Book One**

1A1 Mengzi had an audience with King Hui of Liang. The King said, “Sir, you have come, not regarding one thousand 里 as too far. Surely you will have something to profit my state?”

Mengzi said in response, “Why must Your Majesty say, ‘profit’? Let there be benevolence and righteousness and that is all. Your Majesty says, ‘How can my state be profited?’ The Counsellors say, ‘How can my family be profited?’ The scholars and commoners say, ‘How can I be profited?’ Those above and those below mutually compete for profit and the state is endangered.

“In a case where the ruler of a state that can field ten thousand chariots is murdered, it must be by a family that can field a thousand chariots. In a case where the ruler of a state that can field a thousand chariots is murdered, it must be by a family that can field a hundred chariots. One thousand out of ten thousand, or one hundred out of a thousand, cannot be
considered to not be a lot. But if righteousness is put behind and profit is put ahead, one will not be satisfied without grasping from others.

“There have never been those who were benevolent who abandoned their parents. There have never been those who were righteous who put their ruler last. Let Your Majesty say, ‘Benevolence and righteousness,’ and that is all. Why must you say ‘profit?’”

1A3 King Hui of Liang said, “In relation to the state, We exert our heart to the utmost. When there is a famine in the region inside the river, then We move people to the region east of the river, and move grain to the region inside the river. When there is a famine in the region east of the river, We do the converse. When We examine the government of neighboring states, there is none that exerts itself as We do. Yet the people of neighboring states do not grow fewer, and Our people do not grow more numerous. How is this?”

Mengzi responded, “Your Majesty is fond of war. Allow me to use an illustration from warfare: Thunderingly, the drums beat the soldiers forward, their swords have already clashed, casting aside their armor and trailing their weapons they run away. Some run a hundred paces and then stop, others run fifty paces and then stop. How would it be if those who ran fifty paces laughed at those who ran a hundred paces?”

He responded, “That is unacceptable. They simply did not run a hundred paces. But what they did is running away too.”

Mengzi said, “If Your Majesty understands this, then you will not expect your people to be more numerous than those of neighboring states.”

1A7 King Xuan of Qi asked, “May I hear from you of the actions of the Lord Protectors Huan of Qi and Wen of Jin?”

Mengzi said in response, “The disciples of Zhongni [i.e., Kongzi] did not give accounts of the actions of Huan and Wen. Because of this, they were not passed on to later generations, and I, your servant, have not heard of them.¹ But, if you insist, then may we talk about being a genuine king?”²

Xuan said, “What must one’s Virtue be like so that one can become a king?”

¹Mengzi is not being truthful here. In Mengzi 4B21 (not in this volume) Mengzi says there are historical records of Huan and Wen. See Mengzi 4B11 on honesty.

²Xuan is a king in name only. See Important Terms.
Mengzi said, “One cares for the people and becomes a king. This is something no one can stop.”

Xuan said, “Can one such as I care for the people?”

Mengzi said, “He can.”

Xuan said, “How do you know that I can?”

Mengzi said, “I heard your attendant Hu He say,

The King was sitting up in his hall.3 There was an ox being led past below. The King saw it and said, “Where is the ox going?” Someone responded, “We are about to consecrate a bell with its blood.” The King said, “Spare it. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground.” Someone responded, “So should we abandon the consecrating of the bell?” The King said, “How can that be abandoned? Exchange it for a sheep.”

Mengzi continued, “I do not know if this happened.”

Xuan said, “It happened.”

Mengzi said, “This feeling is sufficient to be a king.4 The commoners all thought Your Majesty was being stingy. But I knew that Your Majesty could not bear the frightened appearance of the ox.”

The King said, “That is so. There really were commoners like that. Although Qi is a small state, how could I be stingy about one ox? It was just that I could not bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground. Hence, I exchanged it for a sheep.”

Mengzi said, “Let Your Majesty not be surprised at the commoners’ taking you to be stingy. You took a small thing and exchanged it for a big thing. How could they understand? If Your Majesty were pained at its being innocent and going to the execution ground, then what is there to choose between an ox and a sheep?”

The King laughed, saying, “What was this feeling really? It’s not the case that I grudged its value and exchanged it for a sheep. But it makes sense that the commoners would say I was stingy.”

3Since ancient times in China, royal palaces have included halls raised above the ground, often looking out onto the courtyard below. See the web page for this volume for an image of such a hall. Cf. Zhuangzi, chapter 13, p. 244.

4“Feeling,” xin, 心, here and below, is literally “heart.” See Important Terms.
Mengzi said, “There is no harm. This is just the way benevolence works. You saw the ox but had not seen the sheep. As for the relation of gentlemen to birds and beasts, if they see them living, they cannot bear to see them die. If they hear their cries, they cannot bear to eat their flesh. Hence, gentlemen keep their distance from the kitchen.”

The King was pleased and said, “The Odes say,

Another person had the heart,
   But I measured it.\(^5\)

This describes you. I was the one who did it. I reflected and sought it out, but did not understand my heart. You spoke, and in my heart there was a feeling of compassion. In what way does this heart accord with being a king?”

Mengzi said, “Suppose there were someone who reported to Your Majesty, saying, ‘My strength is sufficient to lift five hundred pounds, but not sufficient to lift one feather. My eyesight is sufficient to examine the tip of an autumn hair,\(^6\) but I cannot see a wagon of firewood.’ Would Your Majesty accept that?”

Xuan said, “No.”

Mengzi said, “In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach birds and beasts, but the benefits do not reach the commoners. Why is this case alone different? Hence, not lifting one feather is due to not using one’s strength. Not seeing a wagon of firewood is due to not using one’s eyesight. The commoners not receiving care is due to not using one’s kindness. Hence, Your Majesty’s not being a genuine king is due to not acting; it is not due to not being able.”

Xuan said, “What is the difference between concrete cases of not doing and not being able?”

Mengzi said, “‘Pick up Mount Tai and leap over the North Sea.’ If you say, ‘I cannot,’ this is truly not being able. ‘Massage the stiff joints of an elderly person.’ If you say, ‘I cannot,’ this is not acting; it is not a case of not being able. So Your Majesty’s not being a king is not in the category of picking up Mount Tai and leaping over the North Sea. Your Majesty’s not being a king is in the category of massaging the stiff joints of an elderly person.

\(^5\)Mao # 198.

\(^6\)An animal’s hair is most fine (and hence thin) during the autumn.
Mengzi said, "No. Since humans were first born there has never been another Kongzi."

Gongsun Chou said, "In that case, were there any similarities?"

Mengzi said, "There were. If any became ruler of a territory of a hundred li, he would be able to possess all under Heaven by bringing the various lords to his court. And if any could obtain all under Heaven by performing one unrighteous deed, or killing one innocent person, he would not do it. In these things they are the same."

Gongsun Chou asked, "I venture to ask wherein they differed?"

Mengzi said, "Zai Wo, Zigong, and You Ruo had wisdom sufficient to recognize a sage. Even if they exaggerated, they would not have done so to the extent of flattering someone they were fond of. Zai Wo said, 'In my view of Kongzi, he is far more noble than Yao and Shun!' Zigong said, 'He sees their rituals and appreciates their government; he hears their music and appreciates their Virtue; from a hundred generations later, through the succession of a hundred kings, nothing gets away from him. Since humans were first born, there has never been another like the Master.' You Ruo said, 'Is it only true of people? The unicorn among beasts, the phoenix among birds, Mount Tai among hills, and rivers and seas among flowing waters, are all of a kind. The sage among people is also of the same kind. Some stand out from this kind; some stick up from the row; since humans were first born, there has never been one who does this more so than Kongzi.'"

Mengzi said, "Humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others. The former kings26 had hearts that were not unfeeling toward others, so they had governments that were not unfeeling toward others. If one puts into practice a government that is not unfeeling toward others by means of a heart that is not unfeeling toward others, bringing order to the whole world is in the palm of your hand.

"The reason why I say that humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among their neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries.

"From this we can see that if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of disdain, one is not a

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26That is, the sage-kings of antiquity, such as Yao and Shun.
human. If one is without the heart of deference, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of approval and disapproval, one is not a human. The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The heart of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The heart of deference is the sprout of propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom.

“People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts but to say of oneself that one is unable to be virtuous is to steal from oneself. To say that one’s ruler is unable to be virtuous is to steal from one’s ruler. In general, having these four sprouts within oneself, if one knows to fill them all out, it will be like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through! If one can merely fill them out, they will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas. If one merely fails to fill them out, they will be insufficient to serve one’s parents.”

Mengzi left the state of Qi. While on the road, Chongyu asked, “It seems that you, Master, have an unhappy countenance. The other day, I heard it from you, Master, that [Kongzi said], ‘The gentleman does not resent Heaven for his troubles, nor does he cast aspersions upon other people.’”

Mengzi said, “That time [in which Kongzi spoke] is the same as this time. Every five hundred years, there must arise a sage-king. Between them, there must be those whose names are known to a generation for their accomplishments. From the founding of the Zhou dynasty, it has already been more than seven hundred years. Numerically, this is excessive. And if one examines it in terms of the conditions of the world, then it is possible that a new sage-king will arise. Now, Heaven does not yet desire to pacify the world. If it desired to pacify the world, who besides me in the present time is there to help do it? Why would I be unhappy?!”

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27 The words here rendered “approval” and “disapproval” are shi 和 and fei 我, respectively. A common meaning of these terms is “right” and “wrong” but in this context Mengzi intends not only knowledge but approval of what is right and disapproval of what is wrong.

28 Mengzi also discusses these four cardinal virtues in Mengzi 4A27 and 6A6. For more on ren 仁, “benevolence,” see Mengzi 1A7. For more on yi 义, “righteousness,” see Mengzi 6A10. For more on shi 知, “wisdom,” see Mengzi 5A9. On Mengzi’s general view of self-cultivation, see Mengzi 7A17 and 7B31. “Propriety” here is the same as the character for “ritual” elsewhere. Mengzi is suggesting that an inclination toward ritual activity is innate in us. See Mengzi 3A5 for a possible illustration of this.

29 Mengzi left the state of Qi because his efforts to persuade the ruler to implement the “benevolent government” policies he advocated had failed. See Mengzi 1A7, 1B5, 1B6, and 1B8.

30 Cf. Analects 14.35.
Meng Jizi said, “The one whom you respect is the former, but the one whom you treat as elder is the latter. Hence, it really is external. It does not come from [how you feel] internally.”

Gongduzi was not able to answer. He told Mengzi about it. Mengzi said, “Next time, ask him, ‘Do you respect your uncle? or do you respect your younger brother?’ He will say, ‘I respect my uncle.’ Then you say, ‘When your younger brother is playing the part of the deceased in the sacrifice, then whom do you respect?’ He will say, ‘I respect my younger brother.’ Then you say, ‘What happened to the respect for your uncle?’ He will say, ‘The reason [why my respect changes] has to do with the role my younger brother occupies.’ Then you also say, ‘In the case you asked about in our previous discussion, the reason why my respect changes has to do with the role the fellow villager occupies. Ordinary respect is directed toward my brother, but temporary respect is directed toward the fellow villager.’”

Meng Jizi, upon hearing all this, said, “If you respect your uncle, then it is respect. If you respect your younger brother, then it is respect. So it really is external. It does not come from [how you feel] internally.”

Gongduzi said, “On a winter day, one drinks broth. On a summer day, one drinks water. Are drinking and eating also, then, external?”

Gongduzi said, “Gaozi says, ‘Human nature is neither good nor not good.’ Some say, ‘Human nature can become good, and it can become not good.’ Therefore, when Wen and Wu arose, the people were fond of goodness. When You and Li arose, the people were fond of destructiveness. Some say, ‘There are natures that are good, and there are natures that are not good.’ Therefore, with Yao as ruler, there was Xiang. With the Blind Man as a father, there was Shun. And with Zhou as their nephew, and as their ruler besides, there were Viscount Qi of Wei and Prince Bi Gan. Now, you say that human nature is good. Are all those others, then, wrong?”

Mengzi said, “As for their essence, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential. Humans all have the heart of compassion. Humans all have the heart of disdain. Humans all have the heart of respect. Humans all have the heart of approval and disapproval. The heart of compassion is benevolence. The heart of disdain is righteousness. The

6A6 Gongduzi said, “Gaozi says, ‘Human nature is neither good nor not good.’ Some say, ‘Human nature can become good, and it can become not good.’ Therefore, when Wen and Wu arose, the people were fond of goodness. When You and Li arose, the people were fond of destructiveness. Some say, ‘There are natures that are good, and there are natures that are not good.’ Therefore, with Yao as ruler, there was Xiang. With the Blind Man as a father, there was Shun. And with Zhou as their nephew, and as their ruler besides, there were Viscount Qi of Wei and Prince Bi Gan. Now, you say that human nature is good. Are all those others, then, wrong?”

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70See *Mengzi* 5A2 for a story illustrative of the evil of Shun’s brother Xiang and his father, the so-called “Blind Man.”
heart of respect is propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is wisdom. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them. Hence, it is said, ‘Seek it and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it.’ Some differ from others by two, five, or countless times— this is because they cannot exhaust their potentials. The Odes say,

Heaven gives birth to the teeming people.
If there is a thing, there is a norm.
This is the constant people cleave to.
They are fond of this beautiful Virtue.

Kongzi said, ‘The one who composed this ode understood the Way!’ Hence, if there is a thing, there must be a norm. It is this that is the constant people cleave to. Hence, they are fond of this beautiful Virtue.”

Mengzi said, “In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are cruel. It is not that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies like this. They are like this because of that by which their hearts are sunk and drowned.

“Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them. The soil is the same and the time of planting is also the same. They grow rapidly, and by the time of the summer solstice they have all ripened. Although there are some differences, these are due to the richness of the soil, and to unevenness in the rain and in human effort. Hence, in general, things of the same kind are all similar. Why would one have any doubt about this when it comes to humans alone? We and the sage are of the same kind. Hence, Longzi said, ‘When one makes a shoe for a foot one has not seen, we know that one will not make a basket.’ The similarity of all the shoes in the world is due to the fact that the feet of the world are the same.

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71Mengzi also discusses these virtues in Mengzi 2A6 and 4A27. For more on ren 仁, “benevolence,” see Mengzi 1A7. For more on yi 義, “righteousness,” see Mengzi 6A10. For more on zhi 智, “wisdom,” see Mengzi 5A9. For more on si 思, “reflection” or “concentration,” see Mengzi 6A15. For all four terms, also consult the appropriate entries under Important Terms. On Mengzi’s general view of self-cultivation, see Mengzi 7A17 and 7B31.

72Mao # 260.

73No quotation such as this is found in the received text of the Analects.
“Mouths have the same preferences in flavors. Yi Ya was the first to discover that which our mouths prefer. If it were the case that the natures of mouths regarding flavors varied among people—just as dogs and horses are different species from us—then why is it that throughout the world all preferences follow Yi Ya in flavors? The fact that, when it comes to flavors, the whole world looks to Yi Ya is due to the fact that mouths throughout the world are similar.

“Ears are like this too. When it comes to sounds, the whole world looks to Shi Kuang. This is due to the fact that ears throughout the world are similar. Eyes are like this too. When it comes to a handsome man like Zidu, no one in the world does not appreciate his beauty. Anyone who does not appreciate the beauty of Zidu has no eyes. Hence, I say that mouths have the same preferences in flavors, ears have the same preferences in sounds, eyes have the same preferences in attractiveness. When it comes to hearts, are they alone without preferences in common?”

“What is it that hearts prefer in common? I say that it is fine patterns and righteousness. The sages first discovered what our hearts prefer in common. Hence, fine patterns and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths.”

6A8 Mengzi said, “The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because it bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the rest it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, it was not that there were no sprouts or shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep then came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. People, seeing it barren, believed that there had never been any timber there. Could this be the nature of the mountain?!

“When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness?!” That by which they discard their good heart is simply like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. That by which they discard their good heart is simply like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? With the rest it gets during the day or night, and the restorative effects of the morning qi 氣, their likes and dislikes are sometimes close to those of others. But then what they do during the day again fetters and destroys it. If the

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74On “the hearts of benevolence and righteousness,” compare Mengzi 2A6 and 6A6.

fettering is repeated, then the evening qi is insufficient to preserve it. If the evening qi is insufficient to preserve it, then one is not far from a bird or beast. Others see that he is a bird or beast, and think that there was never any capacity there. Is this what a human truly is?!

“Hence, if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not vanish. Kongzi said, ‘Grasped then preserved; abandoned then lost. Its goings and comings have no fixed time. No one knows its home.’ Was it not the heart of which he spoke?”

Mengzi said, “Fish is something I desire; bear’s paw is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake fish and select bear’s paw. Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness. Life is something I desire, but there is something I desire more than life. Hence, I will not do just anything to obtain it. Death is something I hate, but there is something I hate more than death. Hence, there are calamities I do not avoid. If it were the case that someone desired nothing more than life, then what means that could obtain life would that person not use? If it were the case that someone hated nothing more than death, then what would that person not do that would avoid calamity? From this we can see that there are means of obtaining life that one will not employ. From this we can also see that there are things that would avoid calamity that one will not do. Therefore, there are things one desires more than life and there are also things one hates more than death. It is not the case that only the worthy person has this heart. All humans have it. The worthy person simply never loses it.

“A basket of food and a bowl of soup—if one gets them then one will live; if one doesn’t get them then one will die. But if they’re given with contempt, then even a homeless person will not accept them. If they’re trampled upon, then even a beggar won’t take them. However, when it comes to a salary of ten thousand bushels of grain, then one doesn’t notice propriety and righteousness and accepts them. What do ten thousand bushels add to me? Do I accept them for the sake of a beautiful mansion? for the

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76 No quotation like this is found in the received text of the Analects.
77 A culinary delicacy.