



## Revisiting Mengzi: An Ethical Examination of Voluntary Childlessness

*Charintorn Burapa\**

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Thailand

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\* Corresponding author

E-mail address:

[charintorn.n@arts.tu.ac.th](mailto:charintorn.n@arts.tu.ac.th)

### Abstract

“Voluntary childlessness” refers to the deliberate and permanent decision of an individual or couple to remain child-free. There are various reasons behind this choice, such as financial concerns, personal values, and the desire for autonomy. Some individuals prioritize personal freedom and the ability to manage their own time. However, societies often view voluntarily childless individuals as selfish, irresponsible, or immature, considering their decisions deviant. In ancient Chinese philosophy, thinkers like Mengzi discussed the importance of raising children. This study examines how Mengzi might respond to the modern phenomenon of voluntary childlessness. By analyzing Mengzi’s ethical views in the context of contemporary reasons for choosing not to have children, this article concludes that, although Mengzi lived in ancient China, he would place greater value on the compassionate and responsible rearing of children to become virtuous human beings than on viewing reproduction as a mere moral obligation. Thus, in certain cases, voluntary childlessness could be considered acceptable within Mengzi’s ethical framework. This study underscores the enduring relevance of Chinese philosophy in addressing modern social issues.

## 1. Introduction

Today, many people are choosing not to have children. Even individuals who have had children or have extensive experience in raising them may eventually find themselves repelled by the idea of having more and decide not to have another child (Pajarcic, 2024)<sup>1</sup>. This helps explain why a growing number of young adults are opting for a child-free life. This trend is referred to as “voluntary childlessness,” which describes the deliberate, confident, and permanent decision by an individual or couple to remain without children (Shapiro, 2014). There are a variety of reasons behind this choice, ranging from personal and social factors to global concerns. These include personal values, financial difficulties, fears, lifestyle preferences, environmental concerns, and even challenges in marital adjustment (Houseknecht, 1987; Shapiro, 2014). Consequently, for some, having children is viewed as a source of hardship rather than happiness.

When considering the concept of “having children,” some Pre-Qin Chinese thinkers likely addressed this topic as well. The Chinese philosophy we study today stems from the ideas of thinkers who lived during the Spring and Autumn period (*Chunqiu*, 春秋時代; 722 BCE - 476 BCE) and the Warring States period (*Zhanguo*, 戰國時代; 475 BCE - 221 BCE). The thoughts and philosophies from these two periods are collectively referred to as “Pre-Qin Chinese thought.” Both of these periods are part of ancient Chinese history. The concept of having children as a social obligation was already well-established during these times, and in fact, it predates the emergence of these thinkers. In ancient China, having children, particularly sons, was viewed as both a societal and moral duty. In a feudal and agricultural society, sons were essential for helping with farm work, supporting family businesses, or even ruling a kingdom. Additionally, sons were responsible for continuing the family line, performing ancestor worship rituals, and caring for their aging parents (Watts, 1989, pp. 3-4). Therefore, the idea of being childless, especially voluntarily, would have been considered highly unusual in ancient Chinese society.

Pre-Qin Chinese thought was diverse, with numerous schools of philosophy emerging during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The *Zhuangzi* 莊子,

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that *voluntary childlessness* does not necessarily mean that a person is repelled by babies. For instance, the term “PANK” (Professional Aunt, No Kids) refers to women who have chosen not to have children but are still happy to spend time with and support the children of others. In contrast, a genuine feeling of disgust toward babies or children suggests a more extreme aversion and, in such cases, it would of course be irrational for such people to desire to have them.

one of the main Daoist texts, highlights the plurality of ideas during this time, referring to them as the “one hundred schools of thought” (*baijia zhi xue*, 百家之學) (*Zhuangzi* 17). Among these schools, Mozi, the founder of Mohism (*Mojia*, 墨家), introduced a moral philosophy that resembles a form of utilitarianism, guiding individuals to seek and maximize the collective good of the state (Lai, 2017, p. 78). His utilitarian ethics led to the famous principle of “universal love” or “impartial care” (*jianai*, 兼愛). Mozi argued that the collective good is achieved through actions that enrich the state, increase the population, and establish order (Lai, 2017, p. 79). For Mozi, having children was a moral obligation, as increasing the population was one of the ways to measure the state’s overall well-being, which was central to his ethical framework. Therefore, Mozi would likely not accept “voluntary childlessness.”

Mengzi is another significant Pre-Qin Chinese thinker who lived during the early Warring States period. He offers valuable insights on the topic of “having children,” particularly in terms of the filial duty to have children. For Mengzi, having children is viewed as a filial obligation, prioritized over other duties (*Mengzi*, 4A26). This is because filial piety (*xiao*, 孝) forms the root of benevolence (*ren*, 仁), one of the core virtues in Confucian philosophy, which also includes ritual propriety (*li*, 禮), righteousness (*yi*, 義), and wisdom (*zhi*, 智) (*Mengzi*, 1A1). Filial piety, in turn, serves the foundation for nurturing a deeper emotional and moral connection between individuals, as it fosters respect, care, and love across generations. Thus, in Mengzi’s thought, there is a crucial link between having children and practicing filial piety.

In addition to viewing having children as a filial duty, Mengzi also sees raising children as deeply connected to moral development. Mengzi’s philosophy emphasizes the cultivation of humans’ innate moral potential. When discussing the nurturing of a child, he uses the metaphor of growing sprouts (*Mengzi*, 2A6). Just as sprouts require proper care and a suitable environment to thrive, humans can only reach their moral potential by cultivating their innate moral goodness (*Mengzi*, 4B12). Like sprouts, these innate qualities cannot flourish without the support of attentive parenting and a conducive environment (*Mengzi*, 6A8). Therefore, the cultivation of virtue in children is one of the most important responsibilities of both parents and society.

This study thus asks: “*How would Mengzi view the choice of voluntary childlessness in contemporary society?*” This question is significant because it addresses a fundamental aspect of human relationships and moral responsibility—specifically, the duty to have and raise children. In contemporary society, however, voluntary childlessness has become increasingly common, with individuals and couples prioritizing

career, personal freedom, or simply a different vision of life. As a result, this choice raises important ethical and philosophical questions about personal responsibility, societal obligations, and the future of family and social structures.

In other words, asking this question of Mengzi is particularly relevant because his philosophy places profound value on filial piety and the moral cultivation of children. For Mengzi, having and raising children is not merely a biological or social obligation; it is a moral duty deeply connected to the development of virtue, both for the individual and for society. His belief in human nature as inherently good—capable of flourishing through proper nurturing—directly links the act of parenting with the moral education of future generations.

In contrast, other schools of thought—such as Mohism, Legalism (*Fajia*, 法家), and Daoism (*Daodejia*, 道德家)—offer different perspectives on family and social duty, often placing less emphasis on the cultivation of virtue through filial piety. While these schools may view social roles and familial responsibilities differently, Confucianism, particularly as espoused by Mengzi, stresses the importance of cultivating goodness and moral responsibility through relationships, especially those between parents and children. By asking this question of Mengzi, we gain valuable insight into how a deeply relational and virtue-centered thinker might approach the modern concept of voluntary childlessness. This allows us to explore the intersection of ancient moral philosophy with contemporary ethical dilemmas, providing a framework for understanding modern decisions through the lens of traditional Confucian values.

## **2. Objectives**

To address this question, the study examines the definitions and reasons for “voluntary childlessness,” explore the ethical perspectives in Mengzi’s philosophy, and analyze how these ethical perspectives apply to the various motivations for choosing voluntary childlessness.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This research employs conceptual analysis and interpretation as its primary methods to examine key concepts in both primary and secondary texts.

#### **4. Conceptual Analysis of Relevant Literatures and Interpretations**

##### **4.1 Conceptual Analysis of “Voluntary Childlessness”**

This section will explore the concept of ‘voluntary childlessness’ by examining its relationship with ‘involuntary childlessness’ and the distinct definitions provided by various scholars.

##### **4.1.1 The Complementary Opposites: “Voluntary Childlessness” and “Involuntary Childlessness”**

The study finds that some scholars define “voluntary childlessness” by contrasting it with its opposite, “involuntary childlessness.” Gouni et al. (2022) define childlessness as the absence of children in one’s life, which can be understood in three ways. First, childlessness may be involuntary, meaning it results from medical reasons, such as infertility, whether known or unknown. This is referred to as “involuntary childlessness.” Second, childlessness may occur by choice, referred to as “voluntary childlessness.” Finally, the third type of childlessness arises when individuals desire children but delay having them, only to find, in the later years of their childbearing age, that they are childless due to social or physiological reasons (Gouni et al., 2022).

However, here, I disagree with Gouni et al.’s view that medical reasons are the only cause of involuntary childlessness. For instance, some individuals may be childless not by choice because they are unable to find suitable partners to raise children with, which can be considered “involuntary childlessness” due to social factors. Additionally, I believe the third category of childlessness, which I refer to as “pregnancy-delayed childlessness,” can also be seen as “involuntary childlessness,” as it reflects a person’s desire to have children but being unable to do so due to delays in pregnancy or other circumstances.

Houseknecht (1987, p. 369) appears to share a similar view on this matter. Her definitions of “involuntary childlessness” and “voluntary childlessness” are based on motivation and the questions we ask (Houseknecht, 1987). To clarify, Houseknecht suggests that we should ask whether the childless individuals are “those who prefer no children” or “those who want children but cannot have them.” Essentially, it all comes down to their motivations. In other words, individuals who “prefer no children”—regardless of whether they are aware they can or cannot have children—are considered voluntarily childless. Conversely, those who “cannot have but want children,” for any reason, are deemed involuntarily childless.

Houseknecht further elaborates that these two types of childless individuals can be understood in terms of two states—“permanent” and “temporary” (Houseknecht, 1987, p. 369). In my view, “permanent involuntary childlessness” refers to situations where individuals desire children but are unable to have them at any point in time. “Temporary involuntary childlessness” refers to cases in which individuals desire children but cannot have them at a particular time. On the other hand, “temporary voluntary childlessness” applies to individuals who may perceive themselves as childless at a specific moment but could change their decisions or motivations at any time. Finally, “permanent voluntary childlessness” refers to individuals who identify as childless and, for the entirety of their lives, do not have children.

From my perspective, defining and analyzing the term “voluntary childlessness” alongside its opposite, “involuntary childlessness,” is philosophically valuable. While this research focuses on “voluntary childlessness,” examining both concepts in tandem can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the former. Similar to the relationship between the opposite concepts of “darkness” and “brightness,” one cannot fully grasp the concept of “brightness” without first understanding “darkness.”

#### **4.1.2 The Independent Definition**

The term ‘voluntary childlessness’ can also be defined independently, without reference to its opposite, ‘involuntary childlessness,’ and some scholars prefer to do so. In the study “Effective factors on ‘voluntary childlessness’ and one-child tendency from couples’ perspective: Compulsory childlessness or child-avoidance?” (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2023), the researchers define “voluntary childlessness” as individuals who consciously decide not to have children (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2023, p. 657). In my view, this definition is somewhat tautological, as it doesn’t provide additional insight into the concept itself. The study further explains that voluntary childless people are those who are capable of having children but do not wish to, and are typically in the later years of their childbearing age (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2023). However, this definition seems to apply only to those in the final stages of childbearing. What about younger adults?<sup>2</sup> Are they excluded from this definition? It seems to overlook those who might also choose to remain childless at a younger age.

On the other hand, Kelly (2009) argues that women’s “voluntary childlessness” is not necessarily a complete rejection of motherhood but rather a means of gradually detaching the female identity from the societal expectation of mothering children. Kelly

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<sup>2</sup> Young adults are defined as those between the ages of 18 and 26.

offers her own definition of the term, describing “voluntary childlessness” as the choice of fertile women who decide not to have or raise children (Kelly, 2009, pp. 157-159). Interestingly, Kelly also includes women who experience infertility and wish to have children in her definition of voluntary childlessness (Kelly, 2009, p. 158). From my perspective, Kelly’s definition takes a feminist approach, suggesting that women’s identities should not be defined solely by motherhood. This perspective allows readers to see the concept of “voluntary childlessness” through a feminist lens, where a woman’s sense of self is not necessarily shaped by the role of mother.

#### **4.2 Reasons for Being Voluntarily Childless**

There are various reasons why individuals may choose voluntary childlessness. This study highlights some of the most prominent reasons and categorizes them as follows:

##### **4.2.1 Medical Reasons**

As mentioned earlier, Gouni et al. (2022) define “involuntary childlessness” as referring only to those who are childless not by choice, due to known or unknown medical reasons. However, I disagree with this definition. I believe that medical or physiological reasons can also contribute to “voluntary childlessness.” Specifically, some individuals may choose not to have children due to medical conditions that prevent conception or increase the risks associated with pregnancy. For example, women with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) face a higher risk of miscarriage if the condition is present at the time of conception (Winter et al., 2022). As a result, some individuals may decide against having children. Sheetal R. Marri et al. (2007) found a significant connection between the rise in “voluntary childlessness” among women and IBD. Therefore, medical conditions can indeed be a factor in the decision to be voluntarily childless.

Some people choose not to have children for medical reasons, even when these conditions do not directly prevent them from conceiving. For example, individuals with a family history of fatal or genetic diseases, such as certain types of cancer (e.g., endometrial cancer or liver cancer) or severe thalassemia, may choose to remain childless. While these conditions may not physically prevent conception, they pose a risk of transmitting these diseases to their offspring. In such cases, the decision to be voluntarily childless is motivated by a desire to avoid transmitting these health issues to future generations. Therefore, these are examples where “voluntary childlessness” is influenced by medical considerations.

#### 4.2.2 Individualistic reasons

I use the term “being individualistic” in a broad sense to refer to “individualism,” which emphasizes the primacy of the individual over society, community, or institutions. It values personal autonomy, freedom, and independence, often prioritizing the rights and desires of the individual over collective interests or societal obligations. Individualistic reasons for not having children are driven by personal gain, where one prioritizes what is best for oneself rather than for others. In this context, some individuals choose not to have children because they value personal autonomy and the freedom to manage their time and focus on their own well-being. Financial considerations often play a key role in these individualistic decisions, as raising a child is a significant financial commitment. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the estimated cost of raising a child in 2023 is \$331,933 (Northwestern Mutual, n.d). Consequently, some people opt not to have children to avoid the financial strain.

Houseknecht (1987, pp. 377-378) reviewed 47 studies, 29 of which focused on why individuals choose to be voluntarily childless. From my perspective, most of the factors identified in these studies can be classified as individualistic reasons, including freedom from childcare responsibilities, greater opportunities for self-fulfillment and mobility, improved marital satisfaction, career considerations, financial benefits, and a general dislike of children (Houseknecht, 1987). Additionally, Gilla Shapiro (2014, p. 6) notes that many researchers who have examined the motivations behind “voluntary childlessness” have found that the desire for freedom (or autonomy) is a key factor. This includes freedom from the responsibilities of parenting and providing for the family, as well as the opportunity to pursue self-development and personal fulfillment, such as through careers or hobbies.

#### 4.2.3 Parenting-related reason

In Houseknecht’s (1987) study, factors such as “doubt about parenting abilities,” “concern for children given the state of the world,” and “concern about population growth” are identified as reasons why some people choose not to have children. Houseknecht refers to these as “collective altruistic motivations” (Houseknecht, 1987, p. 378). From my perspective, these concerns can be categorized as “parenting-related reasons” since they stem from worries about the challenges and responsibilities of raising children in an increasingly uncertain world. Notably, female participants in Houseknecht’s study expressed a strong connection between these concerns—particularly challenges posed by global issues, like climate change, geopolitical instability, and economic uncertainty, and doubts about their ability to effectively raise children.

While Houseknecht's research was published in 1987, these concerns remain relevant today. The world's population continues to grow, albeit at a slower rate, as noted by the United Nations (United Nations, n.d.). Consequently, concerns about overpopulation and the impact of global issues on children remain highly relevant in current discussions surrounding voluntary childlessness.

#### **4.3 The Societal Rejection of Voluntary Childlessness**

The choice to remain child-free is not a recent development, but historically, societies have often viewed childlessness negatively. In ancient civilizations, childless individuals, especially women, were often stigmatized, with some cultures even viewing them as cursed and seeking divine intervention to remedy the situation (Gouni et al., 2022). These negative perceptions have persisted into modern times, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, where voluntarily childless women are sometimes labeled as selfish or irresponsible (LaMastro, 2001). Interestingly, even women who experience infertility, despite wanting children, are sometimes categorized as "voluntarily childless" (Jeffries & Konnert, 2002). This suggests that, regardless of the reason, those without children often face societal criticism. As a result, the choice of voluntary childlessness has never been fully accepted by society.

Some might wonder why women are often condemned by society, especially when the decision not to have children is made by both individuals (a man and a woman). There are two points I would like to clarify.

First, while having children typically results from intercourse between a female and a male, this does not necessarily mean that the decision to remain childless by choice must come from both individuals or, in other words, from a couple (whether female-male, male-male, or female-female). In some cases, the decision may be made by just one person. For example, after graduating, Alex decides not to marry or have children. However, after working for some time, his attitudes toward marriage and family change, and he decides to marry his colleague and have a child with her. In Alex's case, he perceives himself as childless at a specific moment—the post-graduation period—but later changes his decision and motivations after working for some time. Alex's case aligns with the concept of "temporary voluntary childlessness" (Houseknecht, 1987), which applies to individuals who may perceive themselves as childless at a specific moment but could change their decisions or motivations at any time. Therefore, his decision not to have children during the post-graduation period is made solely by him, before he later reconsiders.

Second, women are often condemned by society for not having children by choice because, since ancient times, women's identities have been closely tied to the image of motherhood and the nurturing of a child (Kelly, 2009). Bearing a child has traditionally been viewed as a woman's duty and responsibility for the survival of human society. Having children also symbolizes fertility (Lupton, 1999). Thus, for whatever reasons—whether by choice or not—women who do not fulfill the societal expectation of motherhood are often stigmatized. As a result, societies have long associated women's identities with motherhood, and this perception continues to persist today. This view aligns with Kelly's (2009) assertion that women's identities should not be defined solely by motherhood.

From my perspective, furthermore, the societal rejection of voluntary childlessness has become even more pronounced in recent years, partly due to declining birth rates worldwide. With populations aging at a rapid pace, many countries are facing challenges, such as a shrinking workforce and increased economic pressure to support an elderly demographic. This could lead to higher inflation, reduced labor force participation, and economic stagnation. In this context, those who choose to remain childless may be seen as not contributing to the sustainability of the population, social welfare, or future economic growth. As a result, in the 21st century, voluntary childlessness is increasingly viewed as a controversial choice that undermines the long-term stability of society.

In sum, Sections 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 have explored the concept of "voluntary childlessness" by analyzing its relationship with "involuntary childlessness", considering independent definitions proposed by various scholars. By contrasting voluntary childlessness with its opposite, involuntary childlessness, this study highlights the complexity of the term and demonstrates its value in philosophical and sociological discussions. The examination of both concepts reveals that understanding one is often reliant on understanding the other, much like the relationship between complementary opposites. Furthermore, while some definitions of voluntary childlessness are tautological or limited in scope, others, such as Maura Kelly's feminist approach, offer more nuanced perspectives that emphasize the autonomy of individuals, particularly women, in choosing not to conform to societal expectations of motherhood.

This analysis has also addressed the motivations behind voluntary childlessness, particularly in relation to personal autonomy, medical considerations, and societal pressures. These factors will be discussed in the "Discussion" section, where I will apply Mengzi's ethical framework to assess whether these reasons for being voluntarily childless are acceptable within his philosophical perspective.

#### 4.4 Mengzi's Ethical Framework

##### 4.4.1 Is Having Children a Moral Obligation?

To answer this question, we must explore the teachings of Mengzi. In the *Mengzi*, there are only two passages that address the topic of having children. The first passage I will discuss is *Mengzi* 4A26, which states:

孟子曰：「不孝有三，無後為大。舜不告而娶，為無後也，君子以為猶告也。」

Mengzi said “Among the three unfilial things, to have no posterity is the worst. Shun’s taking a wife without informing his parents was in order to avoid having no posterity. Gentlemen regard it as if he had informed them.” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 100).

According to the passage above, Shun marries his wife without informing his parents to avoid being unfilial because the worst unfilial thing of all three is not having children. There is a clear connection between having children and the virtue of filial piety (*xiao*, 孝)<sup>3</sup>. Upon further exploration of the text, I found a reason why Shun does not inform his parents about taking a wife. In *Mengzi* 5A2, it is revealed that Shun is already married. Emperor Yao betrothed his daughters to Shun. However, Shun does not tell his parents about his marriage, and even the emperor does not inform Shun’s parents, because Shun knows that his parents had malicious intentions towards him. His parents had attempted to kill him on several occasions. If his parents had known about the marriage, Shun knew that they would have definitely tried to prevent it. As a result, this would lead to the loss of his wives, which would then lead to Shun having no children—an outcome that, according to *Mengzi* 4A26, is the worst form of unfilial behavior.

Interestingly, Shun emphasizes the importance of filial piety by having children, but by not informing his parents about his marriage, he also violates the principle of ritual propriety (*li*, 禮).<sup>4</sup> In this context, it seems that Shun prioritizes filial piety over ritual

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<sup>3</sup> Filial piety (*xiao*, 孝) is a fundamental Confucian virtue that emphasizes the importance of honoring and caring for one’s parents, elders, and ancestors (as illustrated in *Analects* 1.2, 1.6, 1.11, 2.5).

<sup>4</sup> In Confucianism, ritual propriety (*li*, 禮) has multiple meanings. It encompasses social roles, institutions, and conventional norms, as well as the ethical codes that govern human behavior (as seen in *Analects* 1.11, 3.18, 9.3).

propriety by keeping the marriage secret, as ensuring the continuation of his family line is morally more important than adhering to traditional customs.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is important to note that the original Chinese passage does not mention the other unfilial acts. To clarify, Mengzi identifies three forms of unfilial behavior, with 'having no children' being the most severe. He does not, however, elaborate on the other two. Nonetheless, Zhan Qi, the earliest commentator of the *Mengzi*, offers the following commentary on the original passage from *Mengzi* 4A26:

According to ritual, there are three actions that are said to be unfilial. Flattering and tempting one's parents to do what is not righteous is one. When one's household is poor and one's parents are old, to not take a job for a salary is a second one. To not take a wife and have no children, cutting off the sacrifices to one's ancestors is a third. Among these three, to have no posterity is the worst. (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 100)

According to the passage from *Mengzi* 4A26 and Zhan Qi's further explanation of the three unfilial acts, having children appears to be a moral obligation, as it is closely tied to the virtue of filial piety. In *Mengzi's* view, not having children is considered unfilial, and among the three forms of unfilial behavior, it is regarded as the most severe. This is because, according to Zhan Qi's commentary, having no children means lacking a successor to continue the sacrificial rites for one's ancestors. These practices, which had been established long before *Mengzi*, held that sons were responsible for continuing the family line, performing ancestor worship rituals, and caring for aging parents (Watts, 1989, pp. 3-4). In Confucianism, sacrificial rites are considered part of ritual propriety. Accordingly, Shun's decision not to inform his parents about his marriage reflects his concern with avoiding the most severe form of unfilial behavior and the violation of ritual propriety—that is, having no successor to continue the sacrificial rites.

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<sup>5</sup> This is not the only instance in the *Mengzi* where virtues take precedence over ritual propriety. For example, in *Mengzi* 4A17, Mengzi asserts, "Only a beast would fail to rescue his sister-in-law if she were drowning. While the ritual dictates that men and women should not touch when passing something to one another, if your sister-in-law is drowning, it is a matter of moral discretion to pull her out by hand" (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 97). In this passage, the ritual prohibition on physical contact between men and women is clearly set aside in favor of a moral obligation to rescue the sister-in-law. This demonstrates that benevolence (*ren*, 仁) should override ritual propriety (*li*) when they come into conflict.

Put differently, informing them about his marriage with the intent of having no children would violate both virtues of filial piety and ritual propriety.

This suggests that, within Mengzi's ethical framework, "having no children" is morally unacceptable. However, it is crucial to note that *Mengzi* 4A26 does not specify whether "having no children" refers to a voluntary or involuntary circumstance. The passage simply asserts that "having no children" is morally wrong in this context.

However, *Mengzi* 1A4 also refers to "having no children," but it does not stress that "having no children" is morally unacceptable. The passage reads as follows:

King Hui of Liang said, "We are willing to calmly accept your instruction."

Mengzi replied, "Is there any difference between killing a person with a club and killing him with a blade?"

The king said, "There is no difference."

Mengzi continued, "Is there a difference between using a blade and government?"

The king said, "There is no difference."

Mengzi said, "In Your kitchens there is fat meat, and in Your stables there are fat horses. Yet the people appear starved, and there are corpses of the starved in the wilds. This is to lead animals to devour people. People are appalled even when animals eat others of their kind. Now, one who governs is the people's parent. But in what respect is one a parent to the people if one leads animals to devour them? Kongzi said, 'May the one who first created tomb figurines have no posterity!' That was merely because that person buries *images* of people. What about someone who causes the people to die from starvation?"

(*Mengzi*, 2008, pp. 5-6).

In his conversation with King Hui, Mengzi points out that a ruler who allows the people to suffer must be cursed to have no children, like the one who first created tomb figurines. In my interpretation, "having no children" in this passage represents an unfortunate circumstance or a curse that most people would not desire, as having children was both a social and moral obligation in ancient Chinese society. As discussed earlier, for Mengzi, having children is considered a moral duty, as seen in *Mengzi* 4A26.

However, the main focus of this passage is not on reproduction as a moral or social duty but on the importance of good parenting and governance. Mengzi uses the

analogy of parenthood to explain benevolent governance. Just as a parent must care for their children, a ruler must care for the people. A ruler who allows the people to suffer is like a parent who neglects their children. Thus, the moral emphasis here is on the responsibility of both parents and rulers to provide for and care for those under their charge. My interpretation aligns with David Elstein's (2010) view. He emphasizes the importance of the parent metaphor in *Mengzi* 1A4. According to him, the metaphor is meant to encourage rulers to act in the best interest of their people, just as parents strive to act in the best interest of their children (Elstein, 2010, p. 437). While the passage mentions "having no children," the central idea is not reproduction as a moral obligation but rather the moral responsibility of being a virtuous parent and governing well. In other words, regardless of the societal role chosen, Mengzi emphasizes that individuals must treat others with humanity and benevolence. In Confucianism, this is how one becomes a virtuous human being, or *junzi* (君子).<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, for both Confucius and Mengzi, ruling people and raising a child are not merely about meeting their physical needs but also about helping them cultivate themselves to be virtuous individuals (*Analects*, 2.1, 12.19; *Mengzi*, 2A6)<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, a ruler must help his subjects morally cultivate themselves, just as parents must help their children develop into virtuous human beings with care and humanity, in addition to providing for their physical needs. This suggests that the path to becoming a virtuous person, or *junzi*, is not only to treat others with humanity and benevolence, but also to help others become virtuous individuals.

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<sup>6</sup> *Junzi* (君子) is a key concept that is often translated as "gentleman," "superior person," or "noble person." The term refers to someone who embodies moral excellence, virtue, and ethical integrity. A *junzi* is not defined by birth or social status but by his or her actions, moral character, and commitment to cultivating virtues (e.g., *Analects* 1.2, 1.14, 2.12).

<sup>7</sup> In *Analects* 2.1:

The Master said, "One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars." (*Confucius*, 2003, p. 8).

In *Analects* 12.19:

Ji Kangzi asked Confucius about governing, saying, "If I were to execute those who lacked the Way in order to advance those who possessed the Way, how would that be?"

Confucius responded, "In your governing, Sir, what need is there for executions? If you desire goodness, then the common people will be good. The Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend." (*Confucius*, 2003, p. 134)

To answer the question, 'According to Mengzi, is having children a moral obligation?' my response is 'Yes.' However, for Mengzi, becoming a virtuous person and raising children to become virtuous individuals with care and benevolence holds greater moral significance than simply having children. Moreover, aside from *Mengzi* 1A4 and 4A26, no other part of the *Mengzi* explicitly states that having children is a moral imperative. On the contrary, Mengzi places a higher moral emphasis on becoming a virtuous person than on the act of having children. Both are moral obligations in Mengzi's ethics, but the former is far more important.

In the next section, I will explore Mengzi's views on moral cultivation and child-rearing, demonstrating that, for him, becoming a virtuous person is far more important than the moral obligation of having children.

#### **4.4.2 Mengzi's Moral Cultivation: Raising Children to Become Virtuous Individuals**

Having children is a natural part of life and can also be an adoptive process. For Mengzi, it does not matter whether the parents are biological or adoptive, as adoption has been practiced in China since prehistoric times (Waltner, 1990). What matters is how parents raise their children to become virtuous individuals with care and benevolence. According to Mengzi, becoming moral exemplars for their children, guiding them toward virtue, and providing a nurturing environment are key to fostering moral development.

##### **(i) Becoming their moral exemplars**

To become moral exemplars, parents must first engage in self-examination and self-cultivation to raise a virtuous child. As moral exemplars, they shape their children's character by embodying the virtues they wish to pass on, such as benevolence (*ren*, 仁), ritual propriety (*li*, 禮), righteousness (*yi*, 義), and wisdom (*zhi*, 智). In this way, moral education begins with the parents' own moral development.

Firstly, to be a moral exemplar for their children, parents must embody and demonstrate benevolence (*ren*), which is the principle of treating others with respect, empathy, and compassion. Benevolence is the foundation of both moral conduct and healthy relationships, as emphasized in the *Analects* (e.g., 1.2, 1.4, 4.3, 4.4, 4.15, 6.30, 12.2, 12.22, 15.24). For Mengzi, benevolence forms the core of moral philosophy, encompassing kindness, compassion, and concern for others' well-being. In *Mengzi* 2A6, Mengzi asserts that humans are naturally inclined toward benevolence, and it is the parent's responsibility to nurture this natural inclination through their own actions and guidance.<sup>8</sup> Parents must exemplify compassion in their everyday interactions, particularly

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<sup>8</sup> I will expand this idea in the following section.

with their children. By being attentive to the child's needs, showing empathy, and offering support and guidance, parents teach the child how to act with kindness and consideration. For example, a moral exemplar parent would model empathy when a child is upset, comforting them in a nurturing manner, and demonstrating how to respond with understanding to the emotions of others.

Secondly, parents must embody and demonstrate ritual propriety (*li*). According to Mengzi, parents do so by upholding and modeling proper behavior, respect for tradition, and appropriate social conduct in their daily lives (e.g., *Mengzi*, 1A7; 2A2; 3A4; 4A1). In Mengzi's moral philosophy, ritual propriety is not merely about following outward rituals but is deeply tied to cultivating virtues and moral relationships. Ritual propriety helps shape individuals' character and fosters harmonious social interactions by teaching respect, responsibility, and humility. When parents, for example, encourage their children to participate in family rituals, like offering food to elders during a celebration, they are not only demonstrating cultural traditions but also instilling values such as gratitude and filial respect.

Thirdly, to be a moral exemplar for their children, parents must practice righteousness (*yi*). Righteousness refers to the concept of acting in a morally right and just manner. In *Mengzi* 6A10, righteousness involves doing what is morally right and acting with integrity, even in difficult situations. Mengzi often emphasized that true righteousness is not merely about following rules but about acting in accordance with the inherent moral sense that all humans possess. A parent can model righteousness by consistently doing the right thing, even when it is challenging. This includes being honest, upholding promises, and making decisions based on moral principles rather than self-interest. For example, a parent who adheres to moral principles even when facing temptations or hardships demonstrates to the child how to be steadfast in righteousness.

Lastly, parents must embody and demonstrate wisdom (*zhi*). Wisdom refers to a ruler's ability to understand people well enough to assign them to the appropriate roles (as seen in *Analects* 12.22) or to an individual's understanding of their own well-being (as in *Mengzi* 5A9). In other words, wisdom refers to the ability to make sound judgments and understand the deeper moral truths about life. A moral exemplar parent must demonstrate wisdom by making thoughtful decisions, teaching the child the importance of reflection, learning, and the consequences of their actions. For instance, a wise parent might guide the child in making ethical decisions, like helping a friend in need or standing up for justice, showing the child how to navigate complex moral situations.

**(ii) Guide them to virtue**

Like Confucius, Mengzi believes that the family is the most central unit of society, with moral development closely tied to strong family bonds. Filial piety serves as the cornerstone for building a morally sound individual and a harmonious society (*Analects* 1.2). In *Mengzi* 7A15, Mengzi states:

“Among babes in arms there are none that do not know to love their parents. When they grow older, there are none that do not know to revere their elder brothers. Treating one’s parents as parents is benevolence. Revering one’s elders is righteousness. There is nothing else to do but extend these to the world.” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 174).

The passage above suggests that cultivating good character within the family is fundamental to overall moral development. In contrast to Confucius, however, Mengzi explicitly asserts that all human beings are born with an inherent potential for virtue. But how do we know that we are born with this inherent potential for virtue?

To answer this, Mengzi uses a renowned thought experiment called “A child about to fall into a well” to demonstrate that “human nature is innately good.” In *Mengzi* 2A6, he states:

“The reason why I say that all humans have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: anyone 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 one’s 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 feeling of compassion, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of disdain, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of deference, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of approval and disapproval, one is not human. The feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom.” (*Mengzi*, 2008, pp. 46-47).

Mengzi believes that humans are naturally inclined to act selflessly and help others without expecting any personal gain because they are born with “the four sprouts” (*siduan*, 四段), which include benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*). These four sprouts form the foundation of the four moral senses: compassion, disdain, deference, and disapproval-approval. In the scenario of “a child about to fall into a well,” Mengzi argues that these sprouts are innate because, in such an urgent situation, no one would have the time to evaluate any personal benefit before acting to save the child. Thus, the genuine concern for the child’s well-being must be innate.

Chong (2002, p. 28) explains that the compassion shown in this situation is not merely a cognitive process, but is shaped by how the situation is perceived. He suggests that compassion is not purely intellectual but is an emotional response to a perceived need. From my understanding, Chong’s comments show that, while compassion is innate, it can prompt different actions depending on how one perceives the situation. This may explain why Mengzi does not assert that all humans are innately good, but rather that human nature itself is inherently good. He also does not suggest that everyone will rush to save the child in every case, but rather that anyone, when confronted with the situation, would feel alarmed and experience a sense of compassion. Whether or not one acts on this feeling depends on how well one cultivates these moral senses.

All humans have the potential to cultivate their innate moral sprouts, and Mengzi emphasizes that these sprouts can be discovered through self-reflection. In *Mengzi* 6A6, he states, “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 fathom their potentials” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 149). In this passage, Mengzi suggests that people vary in moral cultivation because some fail to fully recognize or develop their potential. In *Mengzi* 6A15, additionally, he elaborates, “It is not the function of the ears and eyes to reflect, and they are misled by things... But the function of the heart is to reflect. If it reflects, then it will get it. If it does not reflect, then it will not get it. This is what Heaven has given us” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 156). Here, Mengzi asserts that reflection is an essential function of the heart (*xin*, 心)<sup>9</sup>, through which one can access their moral capabilities. Without reflection, this means people may be led astray by external influences and lose touch with their moral sense. Thus, while humans are born with innate moral senses, without self-reflection, these capacities can remain undeveloped or even be lost.

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<sup>9</sup> The term “heart” (*xin*) literally refers to the physical heart. However, in the *Mengzi*, it encompasses emotions, desires, or attitudes associated with the “heart” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 200).

In this context, good parenting plays a crucial role in fostering a child's moral growth by encouraging the self-reflection needed to cultivate these inherent virtues within the family environment. My view is supported by *Mengzi* 4B12, where Mengzi says, "Great people do not lose the hearts of their 'children'" (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 106). To clarify, "the hearts of their children" refer to the heart (*xin*) where the four sprouts of virtue—benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*)—flourish. These sprouts give rise to the feelings of compassion, deference, disdain, and approval/disapproval, respectively (*Mengzi*, 2A6). This highlights the significance of early moral development, which should begin before bad habits take root. However, at what age, then, should one begin cultivating or reflecting on these innate moral senses?

In *Analects* 2.4, Confucius says, "At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning" (*Confucius*, 2003, p. 9), suggesting that age 15 is the youngest age for conscious moral cultivation. Would starting at this age be too late to cultivate the innate moral senses? Does this mean that the Confucian concept of moral development starts in adolescence and overlooks earlier stages of childhood? I think Confucian moral cultivation does not exclude the early stages of childhood, such as infancy, toddlerhood, and pre-school years. The process of self-cultivation is essential and should begin as early as possible. Since young children, including infants, are unable to reflect on their innate moral endowments on their own, good parenting becomes essential in guiding this process. Paulin C. Lee supports this view. She points out that self-cultivation is central to at least one Confucian perspective on children and childhood (Lee, 2014, p. 532). In her analysis of *Mengzi* 4B12, she observes that different interpretations of this passage suggest that a newborn's heart or spirit is raw material that must be nurtured and developed to reach its full potential. While methods of self-cultivation may vary, childhood is a critical period for shaping a person, and adults should safeguard this stage of life (Lee, 2014, p. 543). This means Confucian moral cultivation emphasizes the pivotal role of parents in shaping a child's moral growth from an early age. Thus, good parents guide their children in reflecting and cultivating their malleable nature through social norms and family relationships.

To illustrate this, Mengzi's mother serves as an exemplary model of how a parent can guide a child toward virtue. According to the *Lienu Zhuan* 列女傳<sup>10</sup>, Mengzi's

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<sup>10</sup> The *Lienu Zhuan* or *Categorized Biographies of Women*, compiled by Liu Xiang (79BCE-8 CE), a historian during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-9CE).

mother is celebrated as one of the most virtuous maternal figures in early China as follows:

Once, when Mencius was young, he returned home after finishing his lessons and found his mother spinning. She asked him, "How far did you get in your studies today?" Mencius replied, "I'm in about the same place as I was before." Mother Meng thereupon took up a knife and cut her weaving. Mencius was alarmed and asked her to explain. Mother Meng said, "Your abandoning your study is like my cutting this weaving. A man of discernment studies in order to establish a name and inquires to become broadly knowledgeable. By this means, when he is at rest, he can maintain tranquility and when he is active, he can keep trouble at a distance. If now you abandon your studies, you will not escape a life of menial servitude and will lack the means to keep yourself from misfortune. How is this different from weaving and spinning to eat? If one abandons these tasks midway, how can one clothe one's husband and child and avoid being perpetually short of food? If a woman abandons that with which she nourishes others and a man is careless about cultivating his virtue, if they don't become brigands or thieves, then they will end up as slaves or servants." (Liu, 2014, p. 18).

Here, Mengzi's mother exemplifies the significance of good parenting, demonstrating how essential it is in guiding children toward virtue. Good parenting goes beyond merely meeting a child's physical needs; it plays a crucial role in shaping their moral character and supporting their overall development. By instilling strong moral values, parents help children realize their full potential as virtuous human beings.

### **(iii) Provide good environments**

For Mengzi, the environment plays a crucial role in a child's moral development, shaping them into a virtuous human being. He believes that familial and social surroundings significantly influence whether a child's innate moral potential is nurtured or distorted. Mengzi emphasizes the importance of these environmental factors in shaping a child's character, evidenced in *Mengzi* 6A8, which underscores how the wrong environment can hinder moral growth.

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 respite it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, there were sprouts and shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. Seeing it barren, people believed that there had never been any timber there. But could this be the nature of the mountain?” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 151)

This passage suggests that harmful environments lead to moral deterioration. Just like the sprouts on the Ox Mountain, our innate goodness cannot thrive if neglected or corrupted. This may help explain why some people harm others or lack concern for their well-being (e.g., serial killers or scammers). Mengzi would likely argue that such behavior results from a bad environment that has damaged their moral senses. This raises an important question: once corrupted, can these moral sprouts be recovered, or are they permanently lost? Van Norden (1991, p. 359) suggests that some individuals may lose their moral sprouts permanently due to negative environmental influences, while others may only experience a temporary loss, with the potential for recovery if their surroundings improve. In either case, however, according to Van Norden, the metaphor illustrates that a harmful environment negatively impacts a child’s development. This means the failure lies not with the moral sprouts themselves, but with the damaging environment. Thus, it becomes a parent’s responsibility to provide children with a nurturing environment.

Similarly, it is also the responsibility of rulers or the government to establish a supportive environment that enables people to raise their children properly. My interpretation is further supported by *Mengzi* 1A7, where Mengzi engages in a discussion with King Hui about the principles of good governance, as shown in the following passage:

Mengzi said, “Instead, simply return to the root. Suppose Your Majesty were to bestow benevolence in governing. This would cause all those under Heaven who serve to want to take their place in Your Majesty’s court, all those who plow to want to plow in Your Majesty’s uncultivated fields, all traveling merchants and shopkeepers to want to place their goods in Your Majesty’s markets, all those who travel to wish to use Your Majesty’s roads. All those under Heaven who wish to complain of their rulers would all desire to report to Your Majesty. If it were like this, who could stop it?” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 15)

The passage above aligns with *Mengzi* 1A4, where Mengzi uses the analogy of parenthood to illustrate the idea of benevolent governance. Just as parents are responsible for nurturing and caring for their children, rulers have a duty to care for their people. Similarly, the passage suggests that a benevolent ruler should create a positive environment for his people, just as good parents provide a supportive environment for their children. I would like to highlight another story of Mengzi's mother, where she emphasizes the significant impact of the environment on Mengzi's learning in the following passage:

The mother of Meng Ke of Zou was called Mother Meng. She lived near a graveyard. During Mencius' youth, he enjoyed playing among the tombs, romping about pretending to prepare the ground for burials. Mother Meng said, "This is not the place to raise my son." She therefore moved away and settled beside the marketplace. But there he liked to play at displaying and selling wares like a merchant. Again Mother Meng said, "This is not the place to raise my son," and once more left and settled beside a school. There, however, he played at setting out sacrificial vessels, bowing, yielding, entering, and withdrawing. His mother said, "This, indeed, is where I can raise my son!" and settled there. When Mencius grew up, he studied the Six Arts, and finally became known as a great classicist. (Liu, 2014, p. 18).

This story of Mengzi's mother underscores the importance of good governance, social harmony, and familial unity as crucial elements of the broader environment that shape individual morality in the *Mengzi*. When rulers, society, and families act virtuously, they create an atmosphere that promotes moral behavior, which, in turn, fosters the development of children.

In conclusion, this section has demonstrated that, according to Mengzi, parents play a pivotal role in cultivating virtue in their children by modeling benevolence, ritual propriety, righteousness, and wisdom. Through self-cultivation, parents serve as moral exemplars, guiding their children to realize their inherent moral potential. Mengzi emphasizes that a nurturing environment—both familial and societal—is essential for moral development. The stories of Mengzi's own mother highlight the significant impact of a supportive environment on a child's growth. Ultimately, Mengzi's philosophy underscores that the cultivation of virtue begins early, with both parents and society working in tandem to shape morally upright individuals.

## 5. Discussion: According to Mengzi, Is Voluntary Childlessness Acceptable in Contemporary Society?

Building on the conceptual analysis and interpretations of the primary and secondary texts presented earlier, this study concludes that, in certain cases, being voluntarily childless today may be seen as acceptable within Mengzi's ethical framework. The following paragraphs will explore these specific cases in greater detail.

### 5.1 Are medical reasons acceptable or unacceptable?

I believe that being childless—whether by choice or due to medical reasons, can be considered acceptable within Mengzi's ethical framework. Let us first consider involuntary childlessness. In ancient China, many couples likely experienced childlessness due to medical conditions, whether understood or not. Infertility was often explained through non-medical and unscientific beliefs, which shaped the cultural perception of the issue. In ancient times, infertility was often attributed to moral failings or improper observance of rituals. It was believed that if an individual had a moral defect, Heaven (*tian*, 天) or the ancestors would withhold children, as children were considered a gift granted by Heaven's mandate (Waltner, 1990, pp. 3-4).

Moreover, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were times of political and social chaos, marked by frequent wars between states. During these turbulent times, many orphans likely lost their parents due to the prolonged conflicts. For instance, the harsh plight of orphans is depicted in both the *Shijing* 詩經 (the *Book of Poetry*)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 甌之罄矣、維罍之恥。

鮮民之生、不如死之久矣。

無父何怙、無母何恃。

出則銜恤、入則靡至。

When the pitcher is exhausted,

It is the shame of the jar.

Than to live an orphan,

It would be better to have been long dead.

Fatherless, who is there to rely on?

Motherless, who is there to depend on?

When I go abroad, I carry my grief with me;

When I come home, I have no one to go to. (*The Book of Poetry*, 1967)

and the folk song “*Orphan’s Journey (gu er xin, 孤儿行)*”<sup>12</sup> by an anonymous poet from the Han Dynasty. Nevertheless, adoption has been practiced in China since prehistoric times. Waltner (1990) argues that in traditional China, adoption and fostering are not distinct institutions, as they are in Western traditions. In contrast, these practices were often subsumed under a single, overarching category in Confucian-influenced society: the concept of “kinship.” Therefore, this means involuntary childlessness might be considered acceptable within Mengzi’s ethical framework, as an heir could always be obtained through adoption or fostering, particularly if infertility was due to medical reasons.

As discussed in Section 4.2.1, medical conditions significantly influence the decision to remain voluntarily childless. Some individuals may choose not to have children because of medical conditions that either prevent conception or pose significant risks during pregnancy. Others may decide against having children for medical reasons, even if these conditions do not directly affect their ability to conceive, due to concerns about the potential to pass on hereditary diseases to their offspring.

I believe Mengzi would also accept voluntary childlessness for medical reasons, for several key reasons. First, as discussed earlier, one could choose to adopt or foster a child to avoid the risk of passing on fatal or hereditary diseases. Adoption has been practiced in China since ancient times. Through adoption, one could also fulfill filial duties without being unfilial—something Mengzi views as the most egregious form of disobedience, as discussed in Section 4.4.1.

Secondly, Confucianism, including Mengzi’s ethical framework, emphasizes the cultivation of the virtue of benevolence (*ren*), which is one of the highest of all Confucian virtues. Benevolence refers to a specific form of empathy or kindness between individuals, especially the relationship between a ruler and his people (*Analects* 4.3; 4.4; *Mengzi* 1A7). It is also closely connected to the concept of empathetic understanding (*shu*, 恕) (*Confucius*, 2003, p. 238). From this perspective, if someone chooses voluntary childlessness in order to avoid the risk of passing on fatal or hereditary diseases, we should respond with empathy rather than condemnation. According to Confucianism, this is a way to express kindness and understanding. As for the cultivation of filial piety,

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<sup>12</sup> 孤儿行, 孤儿行,  
脱尽衣, 断指肠,  
无人问, 望断肠,  
死别重生难为情。

it does not necessarily require having biological children. As mentioned earlier, one can always adopt or foster a child to fulfill this duty without being unfilial.

### **5.2 Are individualistic reasons acceptable or unacceptable?**

In Section 4.2.2, I explained that individualistic reasons are driven by personal gain, where decisions are made based on what benefits oneself rather than others. Some people choose not to have children because they prioritize their own values, such as the freedom to manage their time independently and focus on personal well-being. However, it is important to note that, in Confucianism, these individualistic reasons for not having children—especially for those who do not prioritize their own family or care for children in other families—are not aligned with core Confucian concepts, such as the “relational self.”

In Confucian thought, the self is understood as being shaped and defined through its relationships with others, which are essential for cultivating the four sprouts of virtues: benevolence (*ren*), ritual propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), and wisdom (*zhi*). While the parent-child relationship is crucial, Confucianism does not assert that only parenthood shapes the moral self. Other relationships—such as those between ruler and subject, teacher and student, and husband and wife—also contribute to the cultivation of virtue. Thus, while parenthood is a key relational tie, Confucianism values all types of relationships in shaping one’s moral identity. Therefore, the moral relational self is not exclusively dependent on parenthood; it is influenced by a web of interconnected relationships, with the parent-child relationship being one of the most central. For example, in *Analects* 1.6, Confucius says:

“A young person should be filial when at home and respectful of his elders when in public. Conscientious and trustworthy, he should display a general care for the masses but feel a particular affection for those who are Good. If he has any strength left over after manifesting these virtues in practice, let him devote it to learning the cultural arts (*wen*).”  
(*Confucius*, 2003, p. 3).

Here, the relational self is presented as an individual whose virtue is cultivated through relationships with others, emphasizing that moral development takes place within the context of one’s duties and interactions within both the family and society. Furthermore,

in *Mengzi* 1A7, Mengzi states: “Treat your elders as elders, and extend it to the elders of others; treat your young ones as young ones, and extend it to the young ones of others, and you can turn the world in the palm of your hand...” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 11). In this passage, the relational self is further developed with the notion of “*dui* 推,” or “extension”—that an individual’s natural feelings of empathy and concern should be extended beyond their immediate family to the broader community, and ultimately to all of humanity. Thus, the Confucian concept of the relational self views the individual as shaped by their relationships and embedded within a specific human community. In this context, one’s actions and moral growth are influenced by the social environment and the relationships that are central to learning and development (Lai, 2017, p. 42).

From this perspective, an individual who chooses not to have children for individualistic reasons—such as desiring the freedom to manage their time independently, prioritize personal well-being, or neglecting their own family and the children of others—may be seen as embodying the opposite of the relational self in Mengzi’s ethical framework. This is because such an individual prioritizes personal gain and makes decisions based solely on self-interest. In doing so, their actions and moral development are not shaped by the social environment or the relationships that are central to moral cultivation in Confucian thought. My interpretation aligns with Qiong Wang’s analysis. Wang (2016, pp. 194-196) explores the concept of the “relational self” within the context of Confucian ethics, particularly in relation to familial relationships. Wang argues that Confucianism presents a distinctive view of the self—one that is not individualistic but inherently relational. Therefore, choosing to be voluntarily childless for individualistic reasons—especially for those who do not prioritize their own family or care for children in other families—would be unacceptable within Mengzi’s ethical framework.

### **5.3 Are parenting-related reasons acceptable or unacceptable?**

As discussed in Section 4.2.3, there are concerns—referred to as “parenting-related reasons”—that stem from the challenges and responsibilities of raising children in an increasingly uncertain world. These concerns include doubts about one’s ability to parent, worries about the well-being of children given the state of the world, and concerns about the impact of population growth. However, this case may not be clearly acceptable or unacceptable within Mengzi’s framework. Instead, as a teacher and philosopher, Mengzi might suggest that these individuals focus on cultivating “*qi* (氣)” to develop moral strength, as he advocates in *Mengzi* 6A8, which states:

“When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? The way that they discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? With the respite it gets during the day or night, and the restorative effects of the morning *qi*, 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 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 an animal. Others see that he is an animal, and think that there was never any capacity there. But is this what a human is like inherently?” (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 152)

For Mengzi, *qi* is a vital force that flows through both the environment and the human body, closely linked to the nature and intensity of one's emotions (*Mengzi*, 2008, p. 205). According to the passage, by cultivating *qi*, an individual can strengthen their resolve and gain greater confidence in their moral development. Bryan Van Norden (2011, p. 98) observes that *qi* grants the moral strength required to overcome challenges and setbacks. For individuals who are highly cultivated, this moral resilience becomes so profound that it is virtually inexhaustible, as Mengzi describes. The development of this *qi* occurs through the gradual cultivation of virtuous traits, which grow and strengthen over time like sprouts. Therefore, individuals who doubt their ability to parent effectively due to concerns about the well-being of their children—given the state of the world and the impact of population growth—might follow Mengzi's teachings and cultivate *qi* to overcome these doubts and build confidence in their ability to parent well.

Yet, as a state advisor, Mengzi would also recommend that contemporary governments be benevolent and take on the responsibility of providing a supportive environment for their citizens to raise their children. In Section 4.4.2, I have shown that good parenting involves both guiding children toward virtue and providing them with a positive environment. It is not only a parent's duty to create a nurturing environment for their children, but also that of the government or ruler. This is because, for Mengzi, both benevolent parenting and governance are essential to fostering children's moral development.

Moreover, Confucianism holds that teachers should serve as role models, and that teaching methods should be adapted to the student's abilities. In the *Mengzi*, we see this principle in action in 1A7, where King Xuan is guided by Mengzi. As a teacher,

Mengzi encourages the king to reflect on his compassion for the ox and extend that same care to his people, demonstrating the teacher's role in shaping the moral character of their students. This illustrates the concept of the teacher as a role model. Such teachers are essential to a good education, which, in turn, is supported by contemporary governance that fosters a social environment conducive to the flourishing of its people.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has shown that, in certain cases, voluntary childlessness can be considered acceptable within Mengzi's ethical framework. The key findings of the study are as follows:

First, choosing to remain childless for medical reasons can be viewed as acceptable within Mengzi's ethical framework. If someone decides not to have children in order to avoid passing on serious or hereditary diseases, this decision should be met with empathy rather than judgment. In Confucian terms, this can be seen as an expression of kindness (benevolence or *ren*) and empathetic understanding (*shu*). Moreover, the practice of filial piety does not necessarily require having biological children. One can fulfill this responsibility through adoption or fostering and still be considered filial.

Secondly, Mengzi would likely reject individualistic reasons for voluntary childlessness, as they contradict a fundamental Confucian concept—the “relational self.” In Confucianism, the self is understood as shaped and defined through relationships, especially within the family, which is seen as essential for flourishing the four sprouts of virtues, such as benevolence (*ren*), ritual propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), and wisdom (*zhi*). Voluntary childlessness for individualistic reasons—especially those who do not prioritize their own family or care for children in other families—would be incompatible with Mengzi's ethical framework, as it neglects the moral obligations we have to others within these fundamental relationships.

Lastly, the reasons related to parenting may not be clearly accepted or rejected by Mengzi. Individuals who question their ability to raise children, perhaps due to concerns about the state of the world or the challenges posed by population growth, might find guidance in Mengzi's teachings. By cultivating *qi* (vital energy), they could overcome these doubts and build the confidence necessary to parent effectively, drawing on the moral strength and self-cultivation that Mengzi emphasizes.

Therefore, although Mengzi lived in ancient times when having children was seen as a social and moral obligation, he emphasized that the compassionate and responsible rearing of children is more important than reproduction itself as a moral duty.

The ethical examination of voluntary childlessness through Mengzi's framework in this study highlights how Chinese philosophy remains relevant to contemporary social issues and phenomena. This demonstrates that Chinese philosophy continues to offer valuable insights for modern ethical dilemmas.

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