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MENCIUS (MENGZI)

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Philosopher, teacher, social thinker and political theorist, venerated as the “Second Sage” of *Rujiao* (Confucianism) after CONFUCIUS (KONGFUZI)*; b. *circa* 372 B.C. in the state of *Zou* (Tsou) in modern-day Shandong province; d. *circa* 289 B.C. Mencius is the Latinized form of the Chinese *Mengzi* (Meng-tzu) or “Master Meng.”

Mencius lived during the turbulent period of the Warring States (475-221 BC). An avid admirer of CONFUCIUS (KONGFUZI),* he studied in the school founded by Confucius’ grandson, *Zisi* (Tzu Ssu). In the treatise that bears his name, he elaborated upon the views of Confucius, defending them against scholars from rival schools. His unique contribution to the scholarly debate in particular, and CHINESE PHILOSOPHY* in general, is his assertion on the goodness of the *benxing* (“original human nature”). This assertion would not only undergird his entire philosophy and vision of life, but would eventually become the classical Confucian formulation on human nature (*renxing*). His proof was simple but elegant: he argued that the spontaneous and instinctive impulse of every person, however morally reprehensible, to save a child about to fall into a well is evidence of the presence of latent goodness inherent in that person, suggesting that the presence of goodness in human nature (Mencius 2A:6).

Correspondingly, Mencius insisted that selfish desires do not constitute the essence of *benxing* (original human nature), explaining his position in the parable of “Ox Mountain” (Mencius 6A:8). In this parable, the Ox mountain is a metaphor for the totally evil person, devoid of any virtue. Just as it is natural for trees to grow on a mountain, so it is natural for incipient moral shoots to develop into moral virtues even in an evil person. Just as the constant felling of trees by axes and eating away of young shoots by cattle reduced the mountain to a hopeless barrenness, so the pre-occupation with selfish thoughts and deeds destroys the incipient moral shoots in a person, precluding them from blossoming into virtues. Just as new shoots spring up if the mountain is left alone by woodcutters and livestock to rejuvenate, so too, new moral shoots spring up and blossom into virtues if given an opportunity to do in the evil person. And just as axes and livestock are not essential to the original nature of the mountain, so too, selfish desires do not constitute the *benxing* (original human nature).

For Mencius, strictly speaking, a human is not a static sort of being, but a dynamic *becoming* striving toward sagehood. In his understanding, an infant is not born as an “individual,” but rather, born into a framework of familial and socio-cultural relations that would shape and nurture that infant’s *benxing* (original human nature). At birth, the *benxing* comprises the four virtuous tendencies of commiseration, shame, deference and preference that are incipient, underdeveloped and fragile. With proper education and self-cultivation, these tendencies could mature and blossom into the four cardinal virtues of “human-ness” (*ren*), appropriateness (*yi*), propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*) in a fully developed human nature (*renxing*) (see Mencius 2A:6). The self-cultivation of these

four defining virtues is a lifelong process of deepening one's familial and social relationships to their fullest potential within the classic *Five Relations* of parent-child, ruler-minister, husband-wife, old-young and friend-friend (Mencius 3A:4). What is meant here is a relational, rather than an essential understanding of personhood that understands the progressive maturing of human nature within an interlocking matrix of *reciprocal relations* that, over a lifetime, defines one's character.

Mencius recognized the possibility that everyone has the potential to become a sage (*shengren*). He reasoned that if everyone has the same innate orientation toward goodness at birth, and the sages represented the perfection of *renxing* (human nature), then with the right education and self-cultivation anybody could become a sage. Later philosophers would build upon this vision of sagehood as a realizable goal, the end point and highest fulfillment of learning and self-cultivation.

In the realm of statecraft, Mencius advocated the way of humane government over and against the way of a despot, arguing that if a ruler is righteous and humane, his subjects too will be righteous and humane (Mencius 4A:18). He asserted that a true king is a humane king (Mencius 2A:3) who looks after the material, emotional and moral-ethical well-being of his subjects (Mencius 1A:5). He advocated fair taxes, reduced punishments, proper use of natural resources, welfare assistance for the old and disadvantaged, and communal sharing of resources (see Mencius 1A:5, 1A:7, 3A:3). He reminded rulers that they do not gain the loyalty of their subjects by threats and force, but by virtuous example and leadership (Mencius 2A:3). To the delight of the commonfolk, but risking the wrath of rulers, he proclaimed that in a state, the people are the most important, the spirits of the land and grain are the next, the ruler is of the least importance" (Mencius 7B:14).

Mencius' vision of the goodness of original human nature (*benxing*) became the foundation upon which later generations of Chinese scholars and philosophers would articulate their philosophical views. His advocacy of humane government and condemnation of despots have endeared him to every generation of commonfolk of China and other East Asian nations.

See also: CHINESE PHILOSOPHY, CONFUCIANISM, CONFUCIUS

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