

GREAT THINKERS
OF THE
EASTERN
WORLD



*The major thinkers and the philosophical and religious classics
of China, India, Japan, Korea, and the world of Islam*

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MENCIUS (MENGZI/MENG TZU)

Born: 371 B.C., now Shandong (Shantung) Province, China

Died: 289 B.C.

Major Work: *Mengzi (Meng Tzu) (The Book of Mencius)*

Major Ideas

Human nature is originally good, and moral virtues are innate.

Among all the virtues, ren (jen) and yi (i) are the most important ones.

In order to have ren and yi fully realized, one must cultivate moral courage from within.

Politically a ruler should practice the Kingly Way accompanied by the economic system called jing tian (ching t'ien).

If Confucius is compared to Socrates in the West, then Mencius should occupy the position of Plato. Without Plato, Socrates would have been unknown to us, and without Mencius, the crowning position of Confucianism in Chinese culture would not have been realized.

Mencius (Mengzi/Meng Tzu) was born in what is now Shandong (Shantung) Province, in a place very close to the birthplace of Confucius. Like Confucius, he was brought up by his widowed mother. But Mencius's mother was considered a model mother in the history of China, because she managed to move three times for the educational environment of her son. Throughout his youth, he developed a very strong sense of mission to "save the world" by "rectifying men's mind, putting an end to perverse ideas, rejecting deviated conducts, and censoring misleading rhetoric." He expressed himself boldly when he asserted that he simply wanted to become a second Confucius.

Probably because of his sense of mission and his professed commitment to Confucianism, he was later honored as the "second sage" in the history of China. His book *Mencius* from the Tang (T'ang) dynasty on has been honored as a model for prose literature and as a landmark in Chinese philosophy.

Theory of Human Nature

Confucius maintains that human beings are "born alike," it is their habits which carry them far apart."

Confucius never made a judgment on human nature as fundamentally good or evil. Mencius is perhaps the first one who developed a theory of human nature from the moral point of view. For him, all the cardinal virtues such as ren (jen) (human-heartedness), yi (i) (righteousness), li (courteousness), and zhi (chih) (wisdom) are innate in our nature. In describing these virtues as "innate," Mencius does not mean that they exist a priori or before any human experience takes place. Rather, the virtues exist as pure potentials. Mencius uses the term *duan (tuan)* or "beginning" to mean this. This means that everyone possesses these virtues "to begin with." If an individual is able to carry these beginnings into full development, the individual can become a sage. Mencius's well-known saying that "Everyone can become a Yao or Shun [ancient sage-king]" is a logical conclusion of his argument.

Mencius's justification for the claim that moral virtues are innate rests on an empirical argument and an analogy. His empirical argument states that when we observe a little child about to fall into a well, we experience a feeling of distress or alarm, and our natural response is to make an effort immediately to rescue the child. From this example we can conclude that our natural feeling does not allow us to tolerate the suffering of others. Such a feeling is universally innate in all of us, and this is the "beginning" of human-heartedness.

Mencius's analogy was developed when he had a

fierce argument with Gaozi (Kao Tzu) (c. 420–c. 350 B.C.), who maintained that human nature is originally morally neutral. Gaozi proposed to use water as an analogy, and Mencius gladly agreed. Gaozi maintained that human nature is like water; if it is directed to the east, it will flow eastward; if directed to the west, it will flow westward. But Mencius argued that since water always flows downward, human nature is naturally and originally good. (This argument has been criticized as a “faulty analogy” by modern Chinese scholars.)

If Mencius maintains that human nature is originally good, how does he explain the problem of evil? Mencius's answer is that either the individual fails to develop his original potential or he simply loses his original nature. But this is by no means the fault of his original endowment. So, the main goal of education is to “get back” the lost *xin* (*hsin*) (mind or heart). This concept, no doubt, has influenced the metaphysical theory of human nature in Neo-Confucianism, particularly in the philosophy of Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi).

A Theory of Moral Virtues

Mencius focuses on the moral virtues of *ren* and *yi*. *Ren* is the central concept in the *Analects* of Confucius, while Confucius mentions *yi* only a few times. But Mencius paired *yi* with *ren*. First, he specifically defined *ren* as “the human heart,” a definition that serves as the foundation for *ren*'s being translated as “human-heartedness” today. He defines *yi* as “the path a man ought to follow.”

In Mencius's moral philosophy, the concept of *yi* plays an even greater role. Etymologically, *yi* means “what is proper.” This is very similar to the Aristotelian concept of rightness as the mean, the proper point between excess and deficiency. It is relative to the individual, to the particular situation, and to the desired or anticipated results.

For Mencius, the essence of *yi* lies in the cognition of the absolute validity of the “oughtness” of a situation that requires moral action. When such a moral principle prevails, an individual must comply with it even though his own life has to be

sacrificed. This sublime “oughtness” is very closely related to the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant and obviously has inspired many martyrs who have sacrificed their own lives because of their uncompromising loyalty to their lord or country. Confucius initiated the theory as a philosophy, but in the hands of Mencius the Master's teaching became inspiration, moving from philosophy to religion, and emphasizing the unity of moral conviction and uncompromising obedient action.

The Metaphysical Journey

As mentioned earlier, Mencius believed that every individual can become a sage. The way to become a sage is to undertake a metaphysical journey, a spiritual path without a god. This spiritual path is the path of “cultivating one's own *qi* [*ch'i*].” The concept of *qi* is a central concept in all corners of Chinese culture. Its original meaning was “steam,” “vapor,” or “air.” But it has been extended to mean spiritual or material force or impetus. Here “cultivating *qi*” in Mencius has its special contextual meaning.

The phrase “cultivation of *qi*” means almost the same as “development of moral or spiritual power.” Such a spiritual power is developed through constant accumulation of righteous deeds and is not to be obtained by occasional moral acts. This is comparable to the Eightfold Path of the Buddha, which integrates right mindfulness and right conduct. Although the Buddha's way aims at freedom from suffering, Mencius emphasizes the categorical moral imperative and regards as irrelevant the practical consequences of the act.

As a result, this metaphysical journey leads to the concept of Mencius's ideal personality, even beyond the idea of the *junzi* (*chün-tzu*) (“gentleman”). Mencius calls the ideal person *da zhangfu* (*ta chang fu*), “a great person.” This kind of personality will not be corrupted by wealth or fame, will not be bent by power or force, and will not be moved by poverty or mean conditions. Such a person stands in the correct position under the heavens, and follows the great path of the world.

Political and Economic Thought

Mencius's political ideas follow closely the steps of Confucius, who cherished the ideal of a government of *ren*. Mencius makes a clear distinction between the Kingly Way (*wang dao/wang tao*) and the Way of Power (*ba dao/pa tao*). He defines the Kingly Way by reference to a government or a ruler performing the politics of *ren*, and the Way of Power as shown when the ruler exercises forces over his subjects. So, when he traveled to meet the lords of his time, he usually attempted to persuade them to practice this kind of politics. Unfortunately none of them listened to him, and the Kingly Way remains a sublime unrealized goal for Confucianism.

Mencius was obviously familiar with the history of political institutions of the Zhou (Chou) dynasty. His ideal institution seems to be a modified system of the Golden Age of Zhou that is based on a strict hierarchy, ranking from the emperor in a declining scale. In spite of Mencius's well-known saying about the value of the people, he insisted on the distinction between the ruling class and the ruled and never seemed to approve a "self-governed" and "general participation" type of democracy. Besides, he did not seem to have very much tolerance for foreign (or unorthodox type) institutions, and he was very apologetic about the culture of the Zhou as handed down by Confucius.

Confucius never developed any economic thought, but Mencius did. He developed an ideal way of distributing land, a method that might have been based on the original system of early Zhou. He called for dividing a square mile into nine squares of land which appear like the Chinese character for "well" (*jing/ching*). The middle square remains the public land while the remaining eight are to be distributed to eight families. The eight families are to help in cultivating the public land and the revenue from the harvest will belong to the ruler. According to historians, this type of economic system has never been practiced in the history of China. It is Mencius's innovative idea, but it may have been too innovative to be accepted and practiced.

Mencius's Criticism of Other Philosophers

Throughout the *Book of Mencius* readers find many interesting passages in which Mencius argues against other philosophers. The most notable ones are the arguments against Yang Zhu (Yang Chu) (440-360? B.C.), Xu Xing (Hsü Hsing), and the Mohists.

Yang Zhu is a pioneer of Daoism. He advocates a philosophy of self-preservation, emphasizing the virtue of selfishness. Mencius rejects this position from the viewpoint of an altruism based on the cardinal virtue of *ren* and the traditional concept of social hierarchy. Xu Xing, who represents some ideas of primitive communism, contends that the ruler and the subject should both till the soil. Mencius seriously objects to this, maintaining that the intellectually superior should be the ruler and those who merely develop their capacity for physical labor should be the ruled. A cooperative division of labor has to be based on individual differences: being physically strong or being intellectually superior.

Mozi (Mo Tzu) (c. 470-c. 391 B.C.), a younger contemporary of Confucius, advocated a philosophy of utilitarianism and exercised a powerful influence. The Mohists all rejected long periods of mourning and elaborate funerals. In response to a Mohist's rejection of elaborate funerals, Mencius gave the following reply:

In ancient times there was no burial of one's parents. When a man's parent died, he simply threw the body into a ditch. When he later passed by, what he saw was that the body was being eaten by the foxes or bitten by the gnats or flies. . . . He could not bear the sight. The feeling of his heart flew out to his face. He then hurried home and came back with baskets and a spade for covering up the body. If the covering up of a human body was the right thing for primitive man, it is quite right today for a filial son or man of *ren* to prepare the funeral for his parents.

This is Mencius's typical defense of Confucianism, an appeal to the primacy of the human

heart, where feeling rules supreme. It is perhaps because of this appeal to the permanent nature of the human being that Confucianism has been able to survive throughout the dynasties and the present period.

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Further Reading

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