

# MENCIUS

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TRANSLATED WITH  
AN INTRODUCTION BY  
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PENGUIN BOOKS

## Chapter XI

## MENCIUS

(*The Book of Mencius*, Book VI, Part I)

IN THE study of the character of Confucian thought, it is important to have some ideas of its chief developments in Mencius, because of the clearer exposition of philosophic values in Mencius and because of their actual influence. Mencius represents the "orthodox" development of the Confucian school. The *Book of Mencius*, in seven books, each divided into two parts, is thicker than the *Analects* by almost one-third, and is incomparably better prose than the *Analects*. Mencius was an eloquent writer and speaker, good at debates, and the passages often consist of long and sustained discourses, and there are so many brilliant passages that it is difficult to make a selection in a volume devoted to Confucius.

Nevertheless, the ideas of Mencius represent such an important development of one side of Confucius' teachings, that it is impossible to get a fair conception of the Confucian ideas without reading something from Mencius. Hantse said, "The teachings of Confucius were

broad and covered a wide scope, and it was impossible for any of his disciples to master the whole field. Therefore the early students of Confucianism developed each that side of his teachings which lay closest to his mental equipment. These disciples later on dispersed and settled in different countries and began to teach their disciples what they themselves had mastered, and the farther they were separated from the original source, the more divergent became their views or lines of study. Only Mencius studied under Tsesze, whose knowledge of Confucius' teachings came from Tsengtse. Since Confucius' death, only Mencius was able to carry on the orthodox tradition. Therefore, in order to study the teachings of the Sage, one must begin with Mencius." Hantse also said, "Mencius was the purest of the pure in the interpretation of Confucius; Hsuntse and Yangtse were on the whole pure, with certain adulterations."

I have selected for translation, a whole part of one of the Books of Mencius, in my opinion the most important and representative one. The most important ideas in Mencius are, the goodness of human nature, consequently the importance of recovering that original good nature, the recognition that culture or education merely consists in preventing the good nature in us from becoming "beclouded" by circumstances, the theory of nourishing what amounts to an equivalent of Bergson's *elan vital* (the *haojan chih ch'i*), and finally the declaration that all men are equal in their inherent goodness, and that since the Emperors Yao and Shun were also human beings, "any man could become a Yao or Shun."

Mencius also developed the distinction between the ruler by virtue (*wang*) and the ruler by force or cunning (*pa*)—roughly, the distinction between “a kingly ruler” and “a dictator.” He further developed Confucius’ idea of government by example into a well-defined system, and for the first time used the phrase “benevolent government” which Confucius never used. (*Jen* definitely means “benevolence” in *Mencius*. He was also probably the best historical scholar of his days and had definite ideas about taxation systems, agricultural systems and the feudal system. We do not get a clear idea of his theory of “benevolent government,” developed from Confucius’ government by moral example, but in this essay we find practically all his ideas about the goodness of human nature and the importance and method of finding one’s “greater self.” This essay is translated in full without omissions.

#### I. THE GOODNESS OF HUMAN NATURE

Kaotse said, “Human nature is like the willow tree, and righteous conduct or character is like a wicker basket (made of the willow branches). To make human nature follow benevolence and righteousness is like making willow branches into wicker baskets.” Mencius said, “Now in making a wicker basket, don’t you try to follow the nature of the willow branches (in bending them), or are you going to violate the nature of the willow branches? If you are going to violate the nature of the willow branches in order to make wicker baskets, then

you are also going to violate human nature in order to make it benevolent and righteous. Your teachings are going to mislead the entire world and ruin the teachings of benevolence and righteousness.”

Kaotse said, “Human nature is like water in the gully. You guide it toward the East and it flows eastwards, and you guide it toward the West, and it flows westwards. There is no distinction between goodness and badness in human nature, as there is no distinction between East and West in water.” “It is true,” said Mencius, “that the water has no preference for the East or the West, but doesn’t it make a distinction between ‘up’ and ‘down’ or a ‘higher’ and a ‘lower’ level? Human nature follows the good as water seeks the lower level. There is no man who is not good, as there is no water which does not flow downwards. Now you can strike the water and it splashes upwards above your forehead, or you can force it up the hills. But is this the original nature of water and not just due to the circumstances? And you can make human nature turn to evil in the same way.”

Kaotse said, “What is born in us is called our nature.” And Mencius replied, “When you say that nature is what is born in us, do you mean that it is like saying that a white substance is called ‘white’?” “Yes,” replied Kaotse. “Then do you consider the whiteness of a white feather the same as the whiteness of white snow, or again, consider the whiteness of white snow the same as the whiteness of a piece of white jade?” “Yes,” said Kaotse. “Then do you consider the nature of dogs the

same as the nature of cows, or again consider the nature of cows the same as the nature of human beings?\*

Kaotse said, "The desires for food and sex are born in us. Benevolence comes from within and is not something external, while righteousness is something external, and does not come from within." Mencius replied, "What do you mean by saying that benevolence comes from within while righteousness (or righteous conduct) is something external?" "When I see a tall man and call him tall," Kaotse replied, "it is not I who am tall (or that tallness is not within me), just as when something is white and I call it white, I observe its external white appearance merely. Therefore, I say righteous conduct is external." "Now," said Mencius, "the whiteness of a white horse in no way differs from the whiteness of a white person. But do you think that the tallness of a tall horse is in no way different from the tallness of a tall person? Now is the tall person or horse *right* (same word as *righteous*) or the man who calls it tall or regards it as tall *right* (*the right conception of 'tallness' is a subjective element belonging to the observer*). "But," said Kaotse, "I love my own brother, but I don't love the brother, say, of a man from the country of Ch'in. That shows that love comes from myself and is therefore regarded as something from within. On the other hand, I equally respect the elders of Ch'u as well as my own elders. That shows that what pleases me is the fact of their being elders, and this re-

\* Mencius always considered the moral distinction or consciousness of good and evil as peculiarly human and often said that when a man lost that distinction, "he was not far different from the beasts."

spect (a virtue of righteous conduct) is therefore something external." Mencius replied, "But we love the roast pork of the Ch'in people as much as we love our own roast pork. That is so even with respect to material things. Then are you going to say that this love of roast pork is also something external?"

Baron Chi Meng asked Kung-tutse, "What does Mencius mean by saying that righteous conduct is internal or comes from within?" The latter replied, "Righteous conduct is merely the showing of my inner respect. That is why it is considered to come from within." "If you have a person in the same village who is one year older than your elder brother, whom are you going to serve with respect?" asked the Baron. "Of course I will serve my elder brother with respect first." "But in offering wine at a feast, whom are you going to offer it to first?" "Of course I will offer wine first to the villager," was the reply. "Then you see you serve with respect one person, while you honor another person, which shows conduct is something external (depending on external circumstances) and not something internal." To this Kung-tutse could not make a reply, and he told Mencius about it. Mencius said, "If you ask him whether he will serve with respect his uncle or his younger brother, he will say that he will serve with respect his uncle. Then you ask him, in case his younger brother is acting at a sacrifice as the representative of the deceased, then to whom is he going to show greater respect? He will then say he will show greater respect to his younger brother. Then you say to him, 'Where then is your re-

spect for your uncle?' He will reply, of course, that in this case his younger brother represents that spirit in an official capacity. Then you can say to him, 'Exactly. In our every day life we serve with respect our own elder brothers, but on special occasions we honor the villager.' When the Baron heard this, he said, "Now in one case you respect the uncle, and in the other case you respect the younger brother. That shows clearly respect is dependent upon external circumstances." Kung-tutse replied, "You take hot soup on a winter day and take cold water on a summer day. Then would you also say that (our desire for) food and drink is also something external (though it differs with varying circumstances)?"

Kung-tutse said, "Kaotse says that the original human nature is neither good nor bad. Some people say that human nature can be either good or bad; therefore when the Emperors Wen and Wu were in power, the people loved virtue, and when the Emperors Yu and Li were in power, the people loved violence. Again other people say that some natures are good, while other natures are bad, and that therefore even under the rule of Emperor Yao, there was a bad man Hsiang, and even with a bad father, Kusou, there was produced a good son, Shun, and there were the good princes Ch'i and Pikan with such a bad man as Chou for their uncle and king. Now if you say that human nature is (always) good, then are all those people wrong?" "If you let them follow their original nature," replied Mencius, "then they are all good. That is why I say human nature is good. If men

become evil, that is not the fault of their original endowment. The sense of mercy is found in all men; the sense of shame is found in all men; the sense of respect is found in all men; the sense of right and wrong is found in all men. The sense of mercy is what we call benevolence or charity. The sense of shame is what we call righteousness. The sense of respect is what we call propriety. The sense of right and wrong is what we call wisdom, or moral consciousness. Charity, righteousness, propriety and moral consciousness are not something that is drilled into us; we have got them originally with us, only we often forget about them (or neglect or ignore them). Therefore it is said, 'Seek and you will find it, neglect and you will lose it.' This moral consciousness is developed in different persons to different degrees, some five times, some ten times and some infinitely more than others, because people have not developed to the full extent what is in them. The *Book of Songs* says, 'Heaven created the common people with laws governing their affairs. When the people keep to the central (or common) principles, they will love a beautiful character.' Confucius commented upon this poem, saying, 'The writer of this poem understood the moral law, and therefore he recognized that there were laws governing human affairs. Because the people keep to the central principles, therefore they have come to love beautiful character.'

Mencius said, "In years of prosperity, most of the young people are well behaved, and in bad years, most of

the young people turn to violence. This is not due to a difference in their natural endowments from Heaven, but because something has happened to lead their hearts astray. Take, for instance, the growing of wheat. You sow the seeds and till the field. The different plants are planted at the same time and grow from the same piece of land, and soon they sprout beautifully from the earth. When the time for harvest comes, they are all ripe, and although there is a difference between the different stalks of wheat, it is due to the difference in the soil, in the obtaining of moisture from the rain and the dew, and to differences in human care. Therefore, all who belong to the same species are essentially alike. Why should you doubt that this holds true also of human beings? The Sages belong to the same species as ourselves. As Lungtse has said, 'A man who proceeds to make a pair of shoes without knowing the feet measurements will at least not end up by making a wicker basket.' Shoes are alike because the people's feet are alike. There is a common taste for flavor in our mouths. Yiya (a famous gourmet) is but one who has discovered our common taste for food. If, for instance, one man's taste for flavors should differ from that of another man, as the taste of dogs and horses, who belong to a different species, differs from the human taste, then why should the whole world follow the judgment of Yiya in regard to flavor? Since in the matter of flavor the whole world regards Yiya as the ultimate standard, we must admit that our tastes for flavors are alike. The same thing is true of our ears. In the matter of sounds, the whole world regards Master

K'uang as the ultimate standard, and we must admit that our ears are alike. The same thing is true of our eyes. In regard to Tsetu, the whole world considers him a handsome man, and whoever cannot see his handsomeness may be said to have no eyes. Therefore I say there is a common love for flavors in our mouths, a common sense for sounds in our ears, and a common sense for beauty in our eyes. Why then do we refuse to admit that there is something common in our souls also? What is that thing that we have in common in our souls? It is reason and a sense of right. The Sage is the man who has first discovered what is common to men's souls. Therefore, reason and the sense of right please our minds as beef and mutton and pork please our palates."

#### II. HOW OUR ORIGINAL NATURE IS DESTROYED

Mencius said, "There was once a time when the forests of the Niu Mountain were beautiful. But can the mountain any longer be regarded as beautiful, since being situated near a big city, the woodsmen have hewed the trees down? The days and nights gave it rest, and the rains and the dew continued to nourish it, and a new life was continually springing up from the soil, but then the cattle and the sheep began to pasture upon it. That is why the Niu Mountain looks so bald, and when people see its baldness, they imagine that there was never any timber on the mountain. Is this the true nature of the mountain? And is there not a heart of love and righteousness in man, too? But how can that nature