



Meng Zi

Meng Zi, or Mencius as he was first known in the West, was one of the great teachers of ancient China, second only to that of Confucius in the Confucian tradition. Mencius developed Confucianism by defending it against the criticisms of the Mohists as well as the proto-Daoists teachings of Yang Zhu. Mencius is best known for developing an optimistic theory of human nature, which holds that human beings are capable of benevolence. The question concerning human nature was not even a concern in the time of Confucius. It was Yang Zhu who introduced the notion of human nature (*xing* 性), but it was primarily the result of Mencius' response to Yang Zhu on the topic of human nature that the question of human nature becomes a central theme of subsequent Chinese philosophy. In a famous passage defending the claim of the innate

性
xing

goodness of human beings, Mencius claims that the human heart contains the sprouts or germs of the four central Confucian virtues of benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 知). These sprouts need to be nourished, however, and this nourishment of the sprouts of the virtues of the *junzi* become the focus of Mencius' development of Confucianism. What follows here are excerpts from the Introduction to the *Mencius* in the translation by D.C. Lau as well as a few selections from Lau's translation (I have edited the translation with Pinyin instead of Wade-Giles romanization system).

Introduction by D.C. Lau

Only two Chinese philosophers have the distinction of being known consistently to the West by a latinized name. The first is Confucius. The second is Mencius, whose name is Meng Zi. That Mencius should share the distinction is by no means an insignificant fact, for he is without doubt second only to Confucius in importance in the Confucian tradition, a fact officially recognized in China for over a thousand years. There are various reasons for this. First, the *Analects of Confucius* which forms almost the only reliable source of our knowledge of the thought of Confucius consists of a collection of sayings of the sage, mostly brief and often with little or no context. Hence many ideas are not elaborated upon, leaving a good deal of room for differences in interpretation. The *Mencius*, too, consists of sayings of Mencius and conversations he had with his contemporaries, but these tend to be of greater length and there is often some kind of a context. The ideas are, therefore, more articulate. Thus the *Mencius*, when read side by side with the *Analects of Confucius*, throws a great deal of light on the latter work. Second, Mencius developed some of the ideas of Confucius and at the same time discussed problems not touched on by Confucius. It is not an exaggeration to say that what is called Confucianism in subsequent times contains as much of the thought of Mencius as of Confucius.

The only other great name in early Confucianism is that of Xun Zi who was half a century or so later than Mencius. He developed Confucianism in a way radically different from that of Mencius, and we shall have occasion to mention him when we come to discuss the philosophical thought of Mencius. It is perhaps futile to try to decide which of the two was the greater thinker, as the difference between them is due mainly to a difference in philosophical temperament. In William James' famous distinction, Mencius is a 'tender-minded', and Xun Zi a 'tough-minded', philosopher. But Xun Zi had considerably less influence on subsequent thought than Mencius, and this for two reasons. First, Mencius was probably the greatest writer amongst ancient philosophers, while Xun Zi was, at best, the possessor of an indifferent literary style. When in Tang times Han Yu raised the banner of the *guwen* movement,¹ he looked to Mencius as much for his superb style as for his sound philosophy. Second, from the Song onwards, the philosophy of Mencius became the orthodoxy while Xun Zi was almost totally eclipsed. The *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Analects of Confucius*, together with the *Mencius*, became known as the *Four Books* which, until the present century, were read and memorized by every schoolboy in his first years at school. Thus the position and influence of Mencius were assured. [...]

It is within the fourth century BC that the whole of Mencius' life falls, and the fourth century BC saw some radical and far-reaching changes in China. The feudal system was gradually replaced by a system of centralized government under which the state was divided into administrative districts. The sale and purchase of land came to be permitted and tax on land was levied in kind. A number of states began to put into practice ideas of Legalist philosophers aimed at strengthening the state. The goal was a highly centralized government with laws applied equally stringently to everyone in the state, and ultimately at a healthy agrarian economy with every peasant able to take up arms in time of war. There is no doubt that the application of these policies brought short-term success, as these states were able, because of their increased military strength, to expand at the expense of their more conservative neighbours. This process culminated in the unification of China in 221 BC by the state of Qin which was most thorough-going in its adoption of Legalist ideas. But this was to come. In Mencius' time it meant more frequent wars on an ever-increasing scale. It also meant a growing cynicism towards morality which is implicit in Legalist doctrines based on a view of man as purely egoistic and motivated solely by the thought of reward and punishment. With the prevalent trends Mencius was totally out of sympathy. In his view man is basically a moral creature. To understand this we must take a brief look at the roots of his thought.

In reading the *Mencius* one cannot but be struck by the admiration shown by Mencius for Confucius, and there is no doubt that Mencius' philosophy is essentially based on the teachings of Confucius, though in some respects it developed beyond their limits, mainly because philosophical problems had arisen since Confucius of which any serious thinker had to take cognizance.

As Mencius admired Confucius, so did Confucius admire the Duke of Zhou. Now when the Zhou replaced the Yin as the ruling house of the Empire, they expounded a philosophy as much to instill resignation in the conquered as to inculcate a self-searching vigilance in themselves. To the

¹The movement was so called because it advocated a return to *guwen*, i.e. the prose style of the ancient period. This came about through a growing dissatisfaction with the parallel prose that had been prevalent since the Six Dynasties.

conquered they had to explain the reason for their loss of the Empire. The Yin believed that they ruled by virtue of the Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming* 天命), and because they had held it for so long they had forgotten that this Mandate could be withdrawn. The Zhou, by wresting the Empire from the Yin, had shown this to be the case, and they reiterated this truth; this is summed up in a line from the Odes,

The Mandate of Heaven is not immutable.²

A ruling house could retain the Mandate only so long as it acted morally, that is, acted solely with the good of the people at heart. It would lose it, as indeed the Yin lost it, if the Emperor strayed from the path of virtue. Now this doctrine was double-edged. If it explained the fall of the Yin, it also laid down the conditions which must constantly be fulfilled if the Zhou were to retain the Mandate. Hence the Zhou Emperors were warned that they had to be constantly vigilant over their own conduct. There is no doubt that the Duke of Zhou was the architect of this philosophy and it is easy to understand the admiration shown by Confucius.

Confucius' most distinctive contribution to Chinese thought is his exposition of the concepts of *ren* (仁) and *yi* (義). *Ren* has been variously rendered in English as benevolence, humanheartedness, goodness, love, altruism and humanity. Of these I think benevolence is the least objectionable, and as far as Mencius is concerned, has the advantage of echoes of Bishop Butler. For Butler, both benevolence and self-interest are principles as distinct from particular passions, and there is something of this distinction in the thought of Mencius. *Yi* is often rendered as righteousness, but this, though close enough as an equivalent, lacks the versatility of the Chinese word. *Yi* can be applied to an act which is right, to the agent who does what is right and to a duty which an agent ought to do. Although both *ren* and *yi* are of the first importance to Confucius' teaching, *ren* is more basic. It is the totality of moral virtues and, looked at from this point of view, we can say that *yi* is rooted in *ren*. As we shall see, both *ren* and *yi* figure prominently in Mencius' teaching and he gave *ren* an important place in his political philosophy.

We have already remarked on the fact that although Mencius thought of himself as a successor to Confucius, nevertheless, because of the changes in the philosophical scene, he had to deal with problems which were either unknown or unimportant in Confucius' day. Mencius' name is, above all, associated with his theory of the goodness of human nature (*xing* 性). Now the only remark made by Confucius on the subject is that 'men are close to one another by nature and they drift apart through behaviour that is constantly repeated' (*Analects of Confucius*, xvii. a). That there is only one somewhat non-committal remark in the whole of the *Analects of Confucius* on human nature shows at least that human nature was not a prominent issue in the days of Confucius. By contrast, it must have been a hotly debated topic in Mencius' day. Let us look at the factors contributing to the complexity of the problem.

² Ode 235. Mencius quotes this ode in Iv. A. 7.

The concept of *ming* (命), which in the early Zhou was essentially the *mandate* given by Heaven to the ruling house, has meantime undergone development in two ways. Although *ming* had always meant the moral commands of Heaven, so long as it was conceived of as affecting only the fortunes of Empires, there was no need to deal with the relationship between human nature and the mandate of Heaven. But in the course of time the concept of *ming* was extended. The individual, too, has his *ming*. He, too, is enjoined by Heaven to be moral. The question then arises, given his nature, can he obey the commands of Heaven? The answer to this question depends, of course, on the view of human nature one holds. The second development is that *ming* gradually took on the meaning of destiny. Already in the *Analects of Confucius* we find examples of this use of the word (e.g. xii.). This is even more inimical to moral teachings. If what will be will be, there is hardly room left for human effort, let alone morality. Now by Mencius' time, there was a theory of human nature which must have been widely accepted. According to this theory, the nature of a man consists of his desires and appetites, a view summed up in Gao Zi's remark, 'Appetite for food and sex is nature' (VI. A.). If this were true, man has no other motive to action than the urge to find gratification for his desires, and no matter how much he may wish to comply with the commands of Heaven, it is impossible for him to do so.



It is against this background that we must approach Mencius' theory of human nature. First of all, let us dispose of certain misunderstandings. It has been said by interpreters that Mencius put forth his theory solely with sages in mind, as the sage is the only type of man who possesses unadulterated goodness. This is to restrict the application of Mencius' theory to a small section of humanity, but as Mencius makes it quite clear that his theory is universally applicable to all men, there must be something wrong with the interpretation.

Mencius nowhere contradicted Gao Zi's statement that 'appetite for food and sex is nature'. He would probably admit that desires and appetites form the greater part of human nature. What he emphatically denied was that human nature consisted solely of desires and appetites. According to him, 'Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman (*junzi* 君子) retains it' (IV. B. 19). To say that the difference between man and the brutes is slight is to imply that they are, for the most part, the same, and if the nature of animals consists solely of desires and appetites, then these must also constitute the greater part of human nature. There is, however, a difference, and this, though slight, sets man apart from the animals. Whether a man is a gentleman or not depends on whether he succeeds in retaining and, we may say, developing this difference. But what is this distinguishing feature that the gentleman retains? The answer is, it is his heart (*xin* 心). In IV. B. 28, Mencius says, 'A gentleman differs from other men in that he retains his heart.' This 'retaining of the heart' is again mentioned in VII, A. 1. It is necessary to emphasize the retention of the heart because it is something very easy to lose. Since the heart is something we possess originally, it is also referred to as the 'original heart'. Mencius describes a man who loses his sense of shame and comes to do things for unworthy motives which he would not, in the first instance, have done even to escape death as a man who has lost his 'original heart' (VI. A. 10). Mencius also calls it the 'true heart'. It is not the case that a man never possessed the benevolent and righteous heart, but that he has 'let go of his true heart' (VI. A. 8). We are said to 'let go' of the heart because we possessed it in the first place. The purpose of learning



is ‘to go after this strayed heart’ (VI. A. 11).

What, we may ask, is the special function of the heart? The answer, according to Mencius, is that it is the function of the heart to think. This marks it off from the other parts of the person, particularly the senses. These, being unable to think, are drawn blindly to the objects of their desires. The eyes are attracted by beautiful sights and the ear to beautiful sounds. This is, in principle, no different from one inanimate object being attracted by another, for instance, iron being attracted by a loadstone. Hence man, if he puts aside his heart, is attracted by outside things as one thing by another. ‘The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things,’ says Mencius. ‘When one thing acts on another, all it does is to attract it. The organ of the heart can think. But it will find the answer only if it does think; otherwise, it will not find the answer. This is what Heaven has given me’ (VI. A. 15). We can see from this passage why Mencius attaches the greatest importance to the heart. Without the ability to think, a living creature is completely determined by its desires and the desires are totally at the mercy of their respective objects. It is the gift from Heaven of a thinking heart that marks human beings off from animals, but, Mencius warns, the mere possession of the heart is not enough, we must in fact think with it. If we fail to make use of the heart, we are still no different from animals.

What was it Mencius had in mind when he talked about thinking? He had in mind moral thinking — thinking about moral duties, about priorities, about the purpose and destiny of man and his position in the universe. For Mencius, intellectual thinking forms an insignificant part of thinking. This was a feature common to all ancient Chinese thought. Let us look a little more closely at the objects of thought.

In a group of sections in Book VI Part A, Mencius deals with the problem of relative value. According to this, the various members of the human person are not of equal value. The heart is a greater member while the sense organs are lesser members. A greater member is higher than a lesser member. The difference between a great man and a small man lies in the priorities they give to these members. The great man gets his priorities right, while the small man gets them wrong. The latter is described as ‘unthinking to the highest degree’ (VI. A. 13).

We can see that the function of the heart being to think, it can make judgements on the relative value of the different members of the human person including itself, and further that it is in fact the heart itself that is of the highest value. This ties up with what Mencius says elsewhere. ‘Reason and rightness please my heart in the same way as meat pleases my palate’ (VI. A. 7). What pleases the heart is of higher value than what pleases the senses.

Now we are in a better position to appreciate Mencius’ objections to the views of human nature current in his day, and also the distinctive feature of his own theory. Though one may admit that man shares with animals the possession of appetites and desires and though one may further admit that these form the greater part of his make-up, nevertheless, one is justified in saying that the desireful nature of man cannot be called human nature, because this fails to distinguish him from animals. What distinguishes him from animals is his heart, for though this forms but a small part of his body it is both unique to man and the highest amongst his bodily organs.

It is worthwhile at this point to mention one feature of the view of man held by Mencius and, indeed, by Chinese thinkers in general. There is no bifurcation of man into soul and body as in the Western tradition, and so the problem of how the two can interact does not arise. Man, for Mencius, is an organic whole, though in the complex structure which is his person we can distinguish the

higher constituents from the lower. It is for this reason that in Mencius' view what is wrong with a man who cares only for his belly is merely that he has got his priorities wrong. If he gets these right, then there is nothing wrong with caring for the belly. He says, 'If a man who cares about food and drink can do so without neglecting any other part of his person, then his mouth and belly are much more than just a foot or an inch of his skin' (VI. A. 14). Again, according to him, a healthy heart in a man 'manifests itself in his face, giving it a sleek appearance. It also shows in his back and extends to his limbs, rendering their message intelligible without words' (VII. A. 21). Finally, he says, 'Our body and complexion are given to us by Heaven. Only a sage can give his body complete fulfilment' (VII. A. 38).

So far we have only seen that the heart is pleased by what is right and reasonable, but the essentially moral nature of the heart is much more deep-seated than that. According to Mencius, there are four incipient tendencies in the heart. These he calls 'the heart of compassion', 'the heart of shame', 'the heart of courtesy and modesty', and 'the heart of right and wrong' (II. A. 6 and VI. A. 6). Mencius further points out that 'the heart of compassion' is the germ of benevolence (*ren* 仁); 'the heart of shame', the germ of dutifulness (*yi* 義); 'the heart of courtesy and modesty', the germ of the observance of the rites (*li* 禮); and 'the heart of right and wrong', the germ of wisdom (*zhi* 知) (H. A. 6). Each of these four tendencies has its own significance. The heart of compassion, the finding of suffering in others unbearable, if naturally found in all human beings, will show, according to Mencius, that benevolence has a basis in human nature, and benevolence is the strongest motive to moral action. On the heart of shame Mencius places the greatest emphasis. 'A man,' says Mencius, 'must not be without shame, for the shame of being without shame is shamelessness indeed' (VII. A. 6). Again, he says, 'Great is the use of shame to man. He who indulges in craftiness has no use for shame. If a man is not ashamed of being inferior to other men, how will being their equal have anything to do with him?' (VII. A. 7). A man's aspirations to become a morally better man are founded on his feeling of shame. Unless a man realizes his own inferiority, he cannot be expected to make any effort, and not to realize one's own moral inferiority is the greatest obstacle to moral progress. 'When one's finger is inferior to other people's, one has sense enough to resent it, but not when what is inferior is the heart. This is what is called ignorance of priorities' (VI. A. 12). The importance of shame is summed up in the words of Mencius: 'Only when there are things a man will not do is he capable of doing great things' (IV. B. 8).

'The heart of courtesy and modesty' describes both a man's modesty which does not allow him to claim credit and the courtesy that prompts him to yield precedence to others. This is the basis of rules of conduct in polite society. In a sense, this is a curb on one's natural self-seeking tendencies, and, as we shall see, the clear distinction between morality and self-interest is the cornerstone of Confucian moral theory.

Finally, 'the heart of right and wrong' has a twofold significance. First, it refers to the ability of the heart to distinguish between right and wrong. Second, it can also refer to the approval of the right and the disapproval of the wrong by the heart. Now this ability of the heart is relevant to the understanding of the reasons for Mencius' holding the view that human nature is good. For even when we fail to do what is right we cannot help seeing that what we have failed to do is right and feeling disapproval towards the course of action we have chosen, with its accompanying sense of shame. In this way the statement that human nature is good is given a sense which is completely independent of the way in which human beings in fact behave. Those who think that Mencius, in

formulating his theory, had only sages in mind have failed utterly to understand him.

Mencius simply states that there are these four tendencies in man. He does not go on to make any attempt to show that this is so, except in the case of 'the heart of compassion'. In a justly famous passage, he says:

Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. (II. A. 6)

This passage contains a number of points crucial to Mencius' theory, and it is worth looking at it in some detail.

The first point is that the feeling of compassion experienced by the man who saw the child creeping towards the well is completely disinterested. For if his feeling had been motivated by self-interest, he would most likely have acted from one of the motives which Mencius expressly excluded, viz, the hope of getting in the good graces of the child's parents or of winning the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, or even the desire to stop the cry of the child which he found unpleasant. As he had none of these things in mind, he was unlikely to have acted from any other selfish motive. Mencius clinches the argument by deliberately putting in the qualification 'all of a sudden'. The reaction was instantaneous, and therefore spontaneous, as there was no time to reflect, and a reaction which is spontaneous is a true manifestation of a man's nature, because he is caught off his guard.

The second point is that Mencius has taken care not to overstate his case. All men have such a tendency to compassion, but this is literally the germ of benevolence and no more, In order to develop this into full-fledged benevolence, a great deal of nurturing is required. We may notice that the man is only said to experience a feeling of pity. Nothing is said about his taking any action. We are not even told how long the feeling lasted. It may be just a momentary twinge. For as soon as the man gets over the 'suddenness' of the situation his usual habits of thought are liable to reassert themselves. Indeed, calculating thoughts of self-interest probably arise in his mind and he may raise the question of whether it is worth his while to do anything about the child at all. But whatever happens afterwards, the fact remains that he had no control over the momentary twinge he felt in the first instance and that is all Mencius needs to show that the man has the germ of morality in him. It is for this reason that Mencius says that human nature is good, for no one is completely devoid of such feeling no matter how faint and momentary the experience proves to be. It is also for this reason that Mencius says that the difference between man and animals is slight. It lies in these incipient moral tendencies which are easily lost and such a loss is tantamount to the loss of one's 'original heart'.

At this point it is convenient to compare Mencius' theory of the goodness of human nature with the theory of Xun Zi that human nature is bad; for the precise way in which the two philosophers differ has often been misunderstood. It is often assumed that the two theories are contradictory in the same way as, for instance, to say of one and the same thing that it is both white and black. This can be seen from the fact that it is often said that whereas Mencius, in putting forth his theory, had only sages in mind, Xun Zi, on the other hand, had in mind only totally wicked men. But to do so is to forget that Mencius and Xun Zi shared one common belief, and that is that

all men are capable of becoming sages. In other words, Mencius did not think that the failure of men to act morally, at least at times, invalidated his theory, while Xun Zi equally did not see any contradiction between his theory together with the fact that few men succeed in becoming sages and his belief that all men are capable of doing so.

What then is Xun Zi's theory that human nature is bad? And on what grounds is it based? Xun Zi believed that human nature, in concrete terms, consists of certain factors which, in response to outside things, manifest themselves as desires. If every man gives full rein to his desires, the result is certain to be conflict. There are two reasons for this. There are some things which are scarce and will fall short of the quantity necessary to satisfy the desire of all men for them. Even where there is no scarcity, there may still be conflict if more than one man desire one and the same object. Given Xun Zi's characterization of human nature, conflict is inevitable, and as conflict is the one thing which, in Xun Zi's view, is unquestionably bad, it follows that human nature inevitably leads to a state of affairs which is bad. Whatever necessarily leads to consequences that are bad is itself bad. Hence, concludes Xun Zi, human nature is bad.

Xun Zi's problem is, then, how to find a way out of this human predicament. His solution is morality, which he conceives of as a system of rules according to which what every man is entitled to is clearly laid down. If one's status does not entitle one to the possession of a thing, even if the thing is in plentiful supply and one has the money, one is still not permitted to possess it.

The solution is purely a theoretical one, and Xun Zi has still to show its practicability. First, in Xun Zi's view, the solution was arrived at by the ancient sages, but once invented it was obvious to anyone with average intelligence. In this respect it is somewhat like the way Columbus stood an egg on its end. Second, the ancient sages also saw the feasibility of the solution. The basis of the feasibility of the solution lies in habituation. A man can be trained to behave invariably in a way which is contrary to his nature: habit can become second nature. But how can a man make a beginning? This is possible, according to Xun Zi, because of the function of the heart. He draws a distinction between the desire for a thing and positive action to go after it. Although Xun Zi admits that the heart can never stop a man from desiring a thing, it can, however, make him desist from going after it. One does not go after an object once it is shown to be impossible to secure, a judgement only the heart can make. Similarly, a man can be made by his heart to make an effort to go after a thing when he has no desire for it, or to make a greater effort than is warranted by the strength of his desire.

Now the ancient sages, in inventing morality, saw not only that their solution, once pointed out, would appear to be obviously reasonable to the hearts of all men, but also that all men could be conditioned to become moral against their nature, because the heart has, as we have seen, certain control over action, though not over desires.

An obvious question arises: why does Xun Zi exclude the heart from human nature and so look upon morality as contrary to what is natural? This is due to his definition of 'nature'. In order for a characteristic to count as part of the nature of a thing, it must be inseparable from that thing, impossible to learn to do or learn to do better through application. An example would be the ability of the eye to see. This can be considered part of the nature of the eye, because it cannot be separated from the eye. An eye that cannot see is not, properly speaking, an eye at all. Further, seeing is not something we can learn and we do not improve on our ability to see through application.

This is not true of the heart, nor of morality which is the invention of the heart. Not every man

but only the ancient sages had the capacity to invent morality, and moral behaviour has to be inculcated into a man. Even then success is by no means assured.

We can see now that Mencius and Xun Zi took a very different line in the matter of the definition of the nature of a thing. Mencius was looking for what is distinctive while Xun Zi was looking for what forms an inseparable part of it. For this reason, desires do not qualify, for Mencius, as a defining characteristic of the nature of man because they are shared with animals. The heart, and in particular the incipient moral tendencies in the human heart, is what distinguishes a man from animals, and as such is a higher organ than his senses. For Xun Zi, on the other hand, only what is instinctive can be counted as nature, and the heart with its varying possibilities disqualifies itself.

So far, we have only given an account of the difference between Mencius and Xun Zi in terms of the difference in their attitude towards the matter of definition. There are, of course, real differences as well. For Xun Zi morality is purely an artificial way of behaviour. True, there must always have existed a possibility, and it is this possibility that prompted the sages to invent morality as a way out of the human predicament. But there is a wide gulf between the possible and the natural. To borrow an illustration from an argument between Mencius and Gao Zi, it is possible to bend a willow into a cup in the sense that it is impossible to bend a stone. Nevertheless, from Mencius' standpoint, it is not natural for a willow to be bent into a cup in the sense that it is natural for trees to grow on a mountain. Morality is natural in this sense. The incipient moral tendencies are there in human nature originally. They may be weak and easily destroyed, but this does not make them any less natural. According to Xun Zi this is not so. Morality is a possible solution to the problem of human conflict but it forms no part of original human nature. This can be shown by the fact that it is separable from man. If we bear in mind that Confucian morality demands of a man his willingness to lay down his life for the sake of morality, we are likely to feel that in the final test the gentleman as conceived by Xun Zi may be found wanting. It is doubtful if habit, no matter how strong, will enable a man to walk to the scaffold for the sake of his duty.

To go back to Mencius: the emphasis on a natural moral motive, as distinct from one based on self-interest in the case of the man who sees a child creeping towards a well, touches on a basic tenet of Confucian thought — the distinction between morality and self-interest. The difference between a gentleman and a small man is that the former pursues morality with single-minded dedication while the latter pursues profit with equally single-minded dedication (VII. A. 25). There is never any doubt in Mencius' mind that when self-interest comes into conflict with morality, it is self-interest that should give way. 'Life is what I want; dutifulness is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would choose dutifulness rather than life' (VI. A. 10). Confucius is also quoted as saying, 'A man whose mind is set on high ideals never forgets that he may end in a ditch; a man of valour never forgets that he may forfeit his head' (III. B. and V. B. 7). This may give the wrong impression that self-interest and morality are necessarily opposed, but it is certainly not the Confucian position, which is rather that the two are totally unconnected. It is only when self-interest becomes an obstacle to morality that the former has to be sacrificed, and it is perhaps true that self-interest is the most likely culprit against morality. But nevertheless when self-interest is not in conflict with morality a man has a duty to be prudent. He should not, for instance, stand under a wall on the verge of collapse (VII. A. 2).

There is a difference between self-interest and morality which is relevant to a problem that we

touched upon earlier. We pointed out that *ming* gradually took on the meaning of ‘Destiny’. There are examples of the word used in this sense even in the *Analects of Confucius* (see, for example, XII. 5). It should, however, be pointed out that the fatalism that was accepted by the Confucianist was of a limited kind. Only life and death, wealth and position are said to depend on Destiny. This is to get men to see that it is futile to pursue such ends, ends that most people devote most of their time and energy to. If these things depend on Destiny, then there is no point in pursuing them. What we ought to pursue is morality which is our proper end. On this matter Mencius has this to say:

Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it. If this is the case, then seeking is of help to getting and what is sought is within yourself. But if there is a proper way to seek it and whether you get it or not depends on Destiny, then seeking is of no help to getting and what is sought lies outside yourself. (VII. A. 3)

When whether we are going to get a thing or not depends on Destiny and our seeking makes no difference to our success or otherwise, then obviously there is no point in seeking it and if we seek it at all, we must do so in accordance with what is right. Mencius seems to maintain that all external possessions should come under this head. The only things that are left which we have a duty to seek because seeking makes a difference to our success are internal things. These are our original heart and, more generally, moral ends. In these cases seeking helps because, in a sense, the seeking *is* the getting. Being moral does not depend on successful results but simply on our making the effort. As Confucius put it, ‘Is benevolence really far away? No sooner do I desire it than it is here’ (*Analects of Confucius*, VII, 30). Thus we can see that fatalism as advocated by the Confucianist does not constitute an obstacle to obeying Heaven’s decree that man should be moral.

Let us return to the subject of incipient moral tendencies. We have seen that, according to Mencius, a man naturally has these tendencies but they are easily smothered and need a great deal of nurture. But how is this done? On this question Mencius has a great deal to say. One great difference between moral philosophers in the Chinese tradition and those in the Western tradition is that the latter do not look upon it as their concern to help people to become sages while the former assume that that is their main concern. Western philosophers deal only with the problem of what morality is. They leave the problem of how to make people better to religious teachers. In China, however, there has never been a strong tradition of religious teaching, and the problem has always fallen within the province of the philosopher.

To understand Mencius’ teaching on the matter, it is necessary first to say something about the cosmology prevalent in the fourth century BC. It was believed that the universe was made up of *qi* but this *qi* varied in consistency. The grosser *qi*, being heavy, settled to become the earth, while the refined *qi*, being light, rose to become the sky. Man, being halfway between the two, is a harmonious mixture of the two kinds of *qi*. His body consists of grosser *qi* while his heart is the seat of the refined *qi*. The blood, being neither as solid as the body nor as refined as the breath, lies somewhere in between, but as it is not static and circulates in the body it is more akin to the refined *qi*. Hence the term *xue qi* (blood and *qi*). It is in virtue of the refined *qi* that a man is alive and his faculties can function properly. As the heart is the seat of this refined *qi*, it is necessary to have a regimen for the heart in order to be healthy

氣
<i>qi</i>

and to live to a ripe old age.

Now there seemed to be two schools of thought on this matter. According to one school, though one is born with a fixed fund of *qi*, it is possible to acquire further supplies of it, and it is through the apertures that the *qi* enters the body. But whether the *qi* will stay once it has entered depends on whether the heart is in a fit state for it to take up abode. In order to be a fit abode the heart must be clean, that is, unclouded by desires. The other school believed that the original fund of *qi* cannot be replenished, and one dies when it is used up. The possibility of prolonging life lies in good husbandry of what one is endowed with. Every mental activity uses up a certain amount of *qi*. Excessive concentration of the heart in thought or the senses on external objects will unnecessarily speed up this expenditure. Hence the slogan of this school is: keep your apertures shut. This is directly opposite to the other school whose object is to let more *qi* in and whose slogan is: keep your apertures open.

In a well-known passage in II. A. 2, Mencius describes what he calls the *hao ran zhi qi* (the flood-like *qi*), and it is obvious that this presupposes the prevalent theory we have outlined. For instance, not only does Mencius say of the *qi* that it ‘fills the body’, but it is also impossible to understand his illustration of how the heart is moved by the *qi*, that is, how stumbling and hurrying affect the *qi*, yet in fact palpitations of the heart are produced’, unless we understand the ‘*qi*’ here as the breath which is supposed to fill the body.

But Mencius did not simply take over the current theory of *qi*, he gave it a twist. In place of the physical *qi* he puts his own *hao ran zhi qi* ‘which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding’. The point of contact between the *hao ran zhi qi* and physical *qi* is courage. Courage is believed to depend on *qi*.³ This no doubt has something to do with the fact that courage is accompanied by a state of heightened tension in the body in which breathing is quickened and the activity of the heart stimulated. But for Mencius genuine courage, instead of being sustained by a state of heightened tension in the body, can only be sustained by the sense of being morally in the right. The *hao ran zhi qi* ‘is a *qi* which unites rightness and the Way. Deprive it of these and it will starve.’ As Zeng Zi put it, ‘If, on looking within, one finds oneself to be in the wrong, then even though one’s adversary be only a common fellow coarsely clad one is bound to tremble with fear. But if one finds oneself in the right, one goes forward even against men in the thousands.’

In order to become a good man, it is this *hao ran zhi qi* that one must cultivate. ‘Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth.’ Elsewhere, Mencius describes the gentleman as being ‘in the same stream as Heaven above and Earth below’ (VII. A. 13). If we remember that it is Heaven which planted the moral heart in man, it is hardly surprising that man is in the same stream as Heaven when his heart is cultivated to its utmost possibility.

On the cultivation of one’s moral character, there is one important and eloquent passage in which Mencius compares the heart to a mountain:

There was a time when the trees were luxuriant on the Ox Mountain, but as it is on the outskirts of a great metropolis, the trees are constantly lopped by axes. Is it any wonder that they are no longer fine? With the respite they get in the day and in the night, and the moistening by the rain and dew, there is certainly no lack of new shoots coming out, but then the cattle and sheep come

³The morale of an army is, for instance, called *zhi qi*, that is, the *qi* of the soldiers.

to graze upon the mountain. That is why it is as bald as it is. People, seeing only its baldness, tend to think that it never had any trees. But can that possibly be the nature of a mountain? Can what is in man be completely lacking in moral inclinations? A man's letting go of his true heart is like the case of the trees and the axes. When the trees are lopped day after day, is it any wonder that they are no longer fine? If, in spite of the respite a man gets in the day and in the night and of the effect of the morning air on him, scarcely any of his likes and dislikes resemble those of other men, it is because what he does in the course of the day once again dissipates what he has gained. If this dissipation happens repeatedly, then the influence of the air in the night will no longer be able to preserve what was originally in him, and when that happens, the man is not far removed from an animal. Others, seeing his resemblance to an animal, will be led to think that he never had any native endowment. But can that be what a man is genuinely like? Hence, given the right nourishment there is nothing that will not grow, while deprived of it there is nothing that will not wither away. Confucius said, 'Hold on to it and it will remain; let go of it and it will disappear. One never knows the time it comes or goes, neither does one know the direction.' It is perhaps to the heart this refers. (VI. A. 8)

The comparison of the heart to a mountain is more than just an analogy. There is something which the two share in common. Just as it is natural for trees to grow on a mountain, so it is natural for moral shoots in the heart to develop into full-fledged moral tendencies. In the case of the mountain, it is the constant lopping of the trees by axes and eating away of young shoots by sheep and cattle that reduce it to a hopeless barrenness. Similarly, it is through preoccupation with selfish thoughts and deeds that a man's natural tendencies are destroyed. Even then there are moral shoots that come up, just as there are new shoots coming up in the case of the mountain, and it is only when these are repeatedly destroyed that the man is reduced hopelessly to the level of animals. Thus it can be seen that morality is natural to man in the sense that moral shoots spring up naturally when a man is left alone, just as new shoots spring up on the soil when the mountain is left alone. The use of axes and the grazing by sheep and cattle are artificial and accidental to the mountain. Similarly, the selfish desires which destroy a man's moral tendencies do not constitute his essential nature. Furthermore, what gives nourishment to the soil on the mountain is the respite it gets in the night and the moistening by the rain and the dew. Similarly, it is the rest in the night and the reviving power of the air in the night and the early morning which give nourishment to the moral shoots that will spring up naturally if only given the chance. Here Mencius is doing more than giving us a metaphorical account of the moral tendencies in a man, He is in fact giving us a practical touchstone for gauging our own moral progress. The freshness and spontaneity a man feels in the morning after a good night's rest constitute the best conditions for preserving and developing his true heart. Perhaps Mencius implies that moral health is inseparable from mental health. Whether this is so or not, a man can see that he is making moral progress in so far as he is able to hold on to this state of mind further and further into the day without its being dissipated by the distraction of selfish thoughts and deeds. It is worth mentioning in this connection that the Confucian tradition believes in the joy of being a good man, Both Confucius and Mencius repeatedly use the phrase 'delighting in the Way'. Once more this emphasizes the naturalness of morality. Delight and joy are usually experienced when a man pursues a natural activity unimpeded. On this point one can see that Xun Zi is not in the true tradition of Confucius, as he looks upon morality as artificial and therefore unnatural. A man, according to him, can only learn to behave

morally through incessant habituation over a lengthy period of time. This may, indeed, change a man to a moral automaton, but one cannot see how he can feel joy in the pursuance of an automatic activity.

Now that we have completed the account of Mencius' theory that human nature is good, let us go back to the question which Mencius must have been faced with at the outset: if human nature is nothing but desires, how can man possibly obey the Decree of Heaven? The answer, as we have seen, is in two stages. First, human nature is defined in terms of what is unique to man, viz., his heart, rather than in terms of desires which he shares with animals. Second, the human heart has built-in moral tendencies which though incipient can be developed, and when fully developed will enable a man to become a sage. In this way acting morally is no longer an obedience to an external command issuing from Heaven. Acting in accordance with Heaven's Decree is something one can do joyfully by looking inwards and finding the roots of morality within one's own spiritual make-up. In this way, Mencius broke down the barrier between Heaven and Man and between the Decree and human nature. There is a secret passage leading from the innermost part of a man's person to Heaven, and what pertains to Heaven, instead of being external to man, turns out to pertain to his truest nature. In a rather obscure passage, Mencius seems to be explaining just this point:

The way the mouth is disposed towards tastes, the eye towards colours, the ear towards sounds, the nose towards smells, and the four limbs towards ease is human nature, yet therein also lies the Decree. That is why the gentleman does not ascribe it to nature. The way benevolence pertains to the relation between father and son, duty to the relation between prince and subject, the rites to the relation between guest and host, wisdom to the good and wise man, the sage to the way of Heaven, is the Decree, but therein also lies human nature. That is why the gentleman does not ascribe it to Decree. (VII. B. 24)

Mencius here begins by agreeing that it is human nature for a man's sense organs and other parts of the body to seek for their respective objects for gratification, but what he emphatically denies is that one can be justified in acting immorally under the pretext that it is natural to pursue these ends. For the sphere of human action is also the sphere of morality, and we possess a heart which tells us whether we are doing right or not in our pursuit of this gratification. In his way of putting it, therein also lies the Decree. We know that in a conflict, human desires should give way to the Decree because we recognize the human heart is occupying a supreme position in the total nature of man. On the other hand, although there are moral duties arising from various human relationships, we must not describe them simply as Decreed. This is aimed at those who say that these duties may be decreed but it is just not possible to fulfil them, Mencius' point is that there are moral tendencies in human nature which in fact make it possible for man to fulfil these duties. Hence he says, 'therein also lies human nature.' There is one part of human nature which is one with Heaven. The other part which is not one with Heaven is merely that which we share with the animals. And this must not be allowed to stand in the way of a man's realizing his true nature. 'If one makes one's stand on what is of greater importance in the first instance, what is of smaller importance cannot usurp its place. In this way, one cannot but be a great man' (VI. A. 15).

In upholding the teachings of the Confucian tradition, Mencius was vigorous in combating what he considered heretical views. In particular, he was untiring in his attacks on the Schools of Yang Zhu and Mo Di (Mo Zi). The latter persisted as a major school of thought well into the third century

BC, and it is not surprising that it formed one of Mencius' major targets. But the former was hardly a school to be reckoned with by the third century, and it is more difficult to understand why Mencius took it so seriously. It is likely that in the fourth century BC the school of Yang Zhu was still of considerable influence, and, further, it may have been the precursor of the Daoist philosophers. Viewed in this light, Mencius was by no means mistaken in considering the teachings of Yang Zhu as a major menace to the moral teachings of Confucius. Mencius chose a catch phrase from the teachings of each of the two figures for attention. In the case of Mo Zi, it is the doctrine of love without discrimination (*jian'ai* 兼愛), while in the case of Yang Zhu it is that of egoism (*wei wo*). Love without discrimination is indeed the backbone of Mo Zi's teaching. According to this, a man should love all men equally without discrimination, and Mencius has not misrepresented it. He quotes a Mohist as saying, 'there should be no gradations in love' (III. A. 5). Egoism is equally the central doctrine of Yang Zhu's teaching. According to Mencius, 'Yang Zhu chooses egoism. Even if he could benefit the Empire by pulling out one hair he would not do it' (VII. A. 26). In this Mencius is certainly guilty of misrepresentation. This is not quite the point of Yang Zhu's egoism. It teaches that the most important possession a man has is his life, and the hedonists are mistaken in concluding that since a man lives only once he should indulge in as much pleasure as possible, for, in so doing, he runs the risk of wearing himself out before his time. Instead, a man should not do anything that can possibly harm his life. Hence in Yang Zhu's view one should not give even one hair on one's body in exchange for the possession of the Empire. One hair, though insignificant, constitutes, nevertheless, part of one's body without which one cannot preserve one's life, and the possession of the Empire will almost certainly lead to overindulgence in one's appetites. It is true that if one refused to give one hair in exchange for the possession of the Empire, *a fortiori* one would refuse to give a hair to benefit the Empire. Mencius' misrepresentation lies in taking what, properly speaking, is only corollary and presenting it as the basic tenet of Yang Zhu's teaching. But this makes no difference to the point of his criticism. His criticism is that 'Yang advocates everyone for himself, which amounts to a denial of one's prince' (III. B. 9). In other words, Yang opted out of his moral obligations to society, obligations that can only be met by taking part in public life. Yang's refusal to do so amounts to a 'denial of his prince'. On the other hand, love without discrimination advocated by Mo is a violation of the basic teaching of the Confucian school. One should treat one's fellow human beings with benevolence, but benevolence is based on the love one feels for one's parents: 'The content of benevolence is the serving of one's parents' (IV, A. 27). It is by extending this love to others that one becomes a benevolent man. 'A benevolent man extends his love from those he loves to those he does not love' (VII. B. 1). 'There is just one thing in which the ancients greatly surpassed others, and that is the way they extended what they did' (I. A. 7). As benevolence is an extension of the natural love for one's parents to humanity at large through various degrees of kinship, it would be, according to Confucianists, unnatural to love all men alike. One should love one's parents more than other members of the family, other members of the family more than members of the same village and so on until one reaches humanity at large. Thus to love all men alike is to deny the claim of one's parents to a greater degree of love. Hence Mencius' description of the doctrine of love without discrimination as 'a denial of one's parents'. [...]

Let us try to sum up the contributions made by Mencius to Confucian thought. With the

passage of time, new developments and new problems arose, and if Confucianism was to hold its own, it had to take cognizance of these new developments and furnish answers to these new problems. First, the problem of human nature which hardly existed in Confucius' day became a hotly debated issue. There were a number of different views. According to some, human nature is neutral: human beings can be made good or bad. According to others, there is neither good nor bad in human nature. According to others again, human nature consists solely of appetites and desires. What Mencius did was to offer his own theory which is not only consistent with, but can furnish a firm basis to, Confucian thought. This is his theory that human nature is good.

Second, the fourth century BC can be looked upon as a watershed in the history of Chinese thought in the ancient period. It marks the discovery of the human heart or mind. In the *Analects of Confucius* and the parts of the *Mo Zi* which are earliest in date, although the heart (*xin* 心) is actually mentioned, there is no reference to its inner complexities. But by the middle of the fourth century BC, at the latest, philosophers discovered the complex phenomenon of the human heart and became fascinated by it. This, as we have seen, was initially connected with the theory that *qi* was the basic ingredient in the universe. Again, Mencius not only took cognizance of what happened but also produced his own distinctive way of looking at the matter. He produced a moral version of the theory of the heart and *qi*.

Finally, in the fourth century BC the question was discussed whether there was something behind the universe without which it would cease to function. We have seen that of the two opposing views, 'nothing does it' and 'something causes it', Mencius definitely ranged himself on the side of the second, and this he identified with the earlier belief in Heaven and so related it to the problem of the Mandate or Decree of Heaven.

Mencius brought all these threads together into a complex system. The unique feature of the make-up of a human being is his heart, and so when we speak of human nature we should have in mind, primarily, the human heart. This heart contains incipient moral tendencies which when nurtured with care can enable a man to become a sage. As it is Heaven which is responsible for making morality the unique distinguishing feature of man, his moral nature is that which links him with Heaven. The flood-like *qi* which is a manifestation of this nature, when developed to the utmost, fills the space between Heaven and Earth, and when that happens Man is in the same stream as Heaven and Earth. Thus the barrier between the Decree of Heaven and the Nature of Man which some saw as insuperable was shown by Mencius to be non-existent, and there was no obstacle in Man's path to a perfect moral character except his own failure to make the effort.

It is a view commonly accepted that the Daoist philosophers Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi represented mysticism in ancient China. In my view, the *Dao de jing*, which is supposed to have been written by Lao Zi, contains ideas that are down-to-earth rather than mystic, as the aim was to help a man pick his way through all the hazards inherent in living in a disorderly age. Zhuang Zi, on the other hand, has a better claim to being a mystic. He had a vision of a universe that transcended values which are, at best, of only limited validity. The purpose of his view of the universe is to foster an attitude of resignation. There was, for Zhuang Zi, no safe recipe for survival. The only thing a man can do is to refuse to recognize the conventional values assigned to life and death. In Zhuang Zi's thought there is a sense of oneness with the universe, and that is what qualifies him as a mystic. But a true mystic, it seems to me, ought to feel that the universe has a purpose, and this is missing in Zhuang Zi. Mencius, on the other hand, is more truly a mystic. Not only does he believe that a

man can attain oneness with the universe by perfecting his own moral nature, but he has absolute faith in the moral purpose of the universe. His great achievement is that he not only successfully defended the teachings of Confucius against the corrosive influence of new ideas but, in the process, added to Confucianism a depth that it did not possess before.

Selections from the *Mencius*

Defending the Claim of Innate Benevolence

Mencius said, ‘No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. Such a sensitive heart was possessed by the Former Kings and this manifested itself in compassionate government. With such a sensitive heart behind compassionate government, it was as easy to rule the Empire as rolling it on your palm.

‘My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human. The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence (*ren*); the heart of shame, of dutifulness (*yi*), the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites (*li*); the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom (*zhi*). Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs. For a man possessing these four germs to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple his prince. If a man is able to develop all these four germs that he possesses, it will be like a fire starting up or a spring coming through. When these are fully developed, he can take under his protection the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if he fails to develop them, he will not be able even to serve his parents.’ (II, A.6)

King Xuan of Qi asked, ‘Can you tell me about the history of Duke Huan of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin?’

‘None of the followers of Confucius,’ answered Mencius, ‘spoke of the history of Duke Huan and Duke Wen. It is for this reason that no one in after ages passed on any accounts, and I have no knowledge of them. If you insist, perhaps I may be permitted to tell you about becoming a true King.’

‘How virtuous must a man be before he can become a true King?’

‘He becomes a true King, by bringing peace to the people. This is something no one can stop.’

‘Can someone like myself bring peace to the people?’

‘Yes.’

‘How do you know that I can?’

‘I heard the following from Hu He:

The King was sitting in the upper part of the hall and someone led an ox through the

lower part. The King noticed this and said, “Where is the ox going?” “The blood of the ox is to be used for consecrating a new bell.” “Spare it. I cannot bear to see it shrinking with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution.” “In that case, should the ceremony be abandoned?” “That is out of the question. Use a lamb instead.”

‘I wonder if this is true?’

‘It is.’

‘The heart behind your action is sufficient to enable you to become a true King. The people all thought that you grudged the expense, but, for my part, I have no doubt that you were moved by pity for the animal.’

‘You are right,’ said the King. ‘How could there be such people? Qi may be a small state, but I am not quite so miserly as to grudge the use of an ox. It was simply because I could not bear to see it shrink with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution, that I used a lamb instead.’

‘You must not be surprised that the people thought you miserly. You used a small animal in place of a big one. How were they to know? If you were pained by the animal going innocently to its death, what was there to choose between an ox and a lamb?’

The King laughed and said, ‘What was really in my mind, I wonder? It is not true that I grudged the expense, but I *did* use a lamb instead of the ox. I suppose it was only natural that the people should have thought me miserly.’

‘There is no harm in this. It is the way of a benevolent man. You saw the ox but not the lamb. The attitude of a gentleman towards animals is this: once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard the cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen.’

The King said, ‘The *Book of Odes* says,

The heart is another man’s,
But it is I who have surmised it.

This describes you perfectly. For though the deed was mine, when I looked into myself I failed to understand my own heart. You described it for me and your words struck a chord in me. What made you think that my heart accorded with the way of a true King?’

‘Should someone say to you, “I am strong enough to lift a hundred *jin* but not a feather; I have eyes that can see the tip of a fine hair but not a cartload of firewood,” would you accept the truth of such a statement?’

‘No.’

‘Why should it be different in your own case? Your bounty is sufficient to reach the animals, yet the benefits of your government fail to reach the people. That a feather is not lifted is because one fails to make the effort; that a cartload of firewood is not seen is because one fails to use one’s eyes. Similarly, that peace is not brought to the people is because you fail to practice kindness. Hence your failure to become a true King is due to a refusal to act, not an inability to act. [. . .]’ (I, A.7)

On human nature

Gao Zi said, 'Human nature is like the *qi* willow. Dutifulness is like cups and bowls. To make morality out of human nature is like making cups and bowls out of the willow.'

'Can you, said Mencius, 'make cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow? Or must you mutilate the willow before you can make it into cups and bowls, must you, then, also mutilate a man to make him moral? Surely it will be these words of yours men in the world will follow in bringing disaster upon morality.' (VI, A.1)

Mencius said, 'For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature he is serving Heaven. Whether he is going to die young or to live to a ripe old age makes no difference to his steadfastness of purpose. It is through awaiting whatever is to befall him with a perfected character that he stands firm on his proper destiny.' (VII, A.1)

Explaining Failures to Behave Benevolently

Mencius said, 'Is the maker of arrows really more unfeeling than the maker of armour? He is afraid lest he should fail to harm people, whereas the maker of armour is afraid lest he should fail to protect them. The case is similar with the sorcerer-doctor and the coffin-maker. For this reason one cannot be too careful in the choice of one's calling.

Confucius said, "The best neighborhood is where benevolence (*ren*) is to be found. Not to live in such a neighborhood when one has the choice cannot by any means be considered wise." Benevolence is the high honour bestowed by Heaven and the peaceful abode of man. Not to be benevolent when nothing stands in the way is to show a lack of wisdom. A man neither benevolent nor wise, devoid of courtesy and dutifulness, is a slave. A slave ashamed of serving is like a maker of bows ashamed of making bows, or a maker of arrows ashamed of making arrows. If one is ashamed, there is no better remedy than to practice benevolence. Benevolence is like archery: an archer makes sure his stance is correct before letting fly the arrow, and if he fails to hit the mark, he does not hold it against his victor. He simply seeks the cause within himself.' (II, A.7)

Mencius said, 'Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it. Shun understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. He followed the path of morality. He did not just put morality into practice.' (IV, B.19)

Mencius said, 'In good years the young men are mostly lazy, while in bad years they are mostly violent. Heaven has not sent down men whose endowment differs so greatly. The difference is due to what ensnares their hearts. Take the barely for example. Sow the seeds and cover them with soil. The place is the same and the time of the sowing is also the same. The plants shoot up and by the summer solstice they all ripen. If there is any unevenness, it is because the soil varies in richness and there is no uniformity in the fall of rain and dew and the amount of human effort devoted to tending it. Now things of the same kind are all alike. Why should we have doubts when it comes to man. [. . .] Should hearts prove to be an exception by possessing nothing in common?

What is common to all hearts? Reason and rightness. The sage is simply the man first to discover this common element in my heart. [. . .] (VI, A.7)

Mencius said, ‘The multitude can be said never to understand what they practice, to notice what they repeatedly do, or to be aware of the path they follow all their lives.’ (VII, A.5)

Extending Benevolence

[. . .] Hence I said Gao Zi never understood rightness because he looked upon it as external. You must work at it and never let it out of your mind, you must not forcibly help it grow either. You must not be like the man from Song. There was a man from Song who pulled at his rice plants because he was worried about their failure to grow. Having done so, he went on his way home, not realizing what he had done. “I am worn out today,” said he to his family. “I have been helping the rice plants to grow.” His son rushed out to take a look and there the plants were, all shriveled up. There are few in the world who can resist the urge to help their rice plants grow. There are some who leave the plants unattended, thinking that nothing they can do will be of any use. They are the people who do not even bother to weed. There are others who help the plants grow. They are the people who pull at them. Not only do they fail to help them but they do the plants positive harm. [. . .]’ (II, A.2)

Mencius said, ‘For every man there are things he cannot bear. To extend this to what he can bear is benevolence. For every man there are things he is not willing to do. To extend this to what he is willing to do is rightness. If a man can extend to the full his natural aversion to harming others, then there will be an overabundance of benevolence. [. . .]’ (VII, B.31)

Refinement

Mencius said, ‘A gentleman differs from other men in that he retains his heart. A gentleman retains his heart by means of benevolence and the rites. The benevolent man loves others, and the courteous man respects others. He who loves others is always loved by them; he who respects others is always respected by them. Suppose a man treats one in an outrageous manner. Faced with this, a gentleman will say to himself, “I must be lacking in benevolence and courtesy, or how could such a thing happen to me.” When looking into himself, he finds that he has been benevolent and courteous, and yet this outrageous treatment continues, then the gentleman will say to himself, “I must have failed to do my best for him.” [. . .] (IV, B.28)

Mencius said, ‘Benevolent words do not have as profound an effect on the people as benevolent music. Good government does not win the people as does good education. He who practices good government is feared by the people; he who gives the people good education is loved by them. Good government wins the wealth of the people; good education wins their hearts.’ (VII, A.14)

Mencius said, ‘If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence; if others fail to respond to your attempts to govern them with order, look into your own wisdom; if others do not return your courtesy, look into your own respect. In other words, look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose. (IV, A.4)

Mencius said, ‘You can never succeed in winning the allegiance of men by trying to dominate them through goodness. You can only succeed by using this goodness for their welfare. You can never gain the Empire without heart-felt admiration of the people in it.’ (IV, B.16)

Mencius said, ‘A man must not be without shame, for the shame of being without shame is shamelessness indeed.’ (VII, A.6)

Mencius said, ‘Great is the use of shame to man. He who indulges in craftiness has no use for shame. If a man is not ashamed of being inferior to other men, how will he ever become their equal?’ (VII, A.7)

Mencius said, ‘A gentleman steeps himself in the Way because he wishes to find it in himself. When he finds it in himself, he will be at ease in it; when he is at ease in it, he can draw deeply upon it; when he can draw deeply upon it, he finds its source wherever he turns. That is why a gentleman wishes to find the Way in himself.’ (IV, B.14)

Fulfillment

[. . .] That which a gentleman follows as his nature, that is to say, benevolence, rightness, the rights and wisdom, is rooted in his heart, and manifests itself in his face, giving it a sleek appearance. It also shows in his back and extends to his limbs, rendering their message intelligible without words. (VII, A.21)

[. . .] ‘If a man is praised for honesty in his village,’ said Wan Zhang, ‘then he is an honest man wherever he goes. Why did Confucius consider such a man an enemy of virtue?’

‘If you want to censure him, you cannot find anything; if you want to find fault with him, you cannot find anything either. He shares with others the practices of the day and is in harmony with the sordid world. He pursues such a policy and appears to be conscientious and faithful, and to show integrity in his conduct. He is liked by the multitude and is self-righteous. It is impossible to embark on the way (*dao*) of Yao and Shun with such a man. Hence the name “enemy of virtue”. Confucius said, “I dislike what is specious. I dislike weeds for fear they might be confused with the rice plant; I dislike flattery for fear it might be confused with what is right; I dislike glibness for fear it might be confused with the truthful; I dislike the music of Zheng for fear it might be confused with proper music; I dislike purple for fear it might be confused with vermilion; I dislike the village honest man for fear he might be confused with the virtuous.” (VII, B.37)

Mencius said, ‘A man who is out to make a name for himself will be able to give away a state of a thousand chariots, but reluctance will be written all over his face if he had to give away a basketful of rice and a bowlful of soup when no such purpose was served.’ (VII, B.11)

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Mencius, Translated by D.C. Lau. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.