

2.6 MENCIUS

Mencius (a Latinization of Mengzi, or Master Meng) was the greatest Confucian of the fourth century B.C. He is one of the three Confucian masters of the Classical age who have left us texts or recorded sayings, the other two being Confucius himself, and Xunzi, whom we will discuss in a separate online reading.

Mencius was a native of the state of Zou, located next to Lu on the Shandong peninsula. His exact dates are unknown, but he lived from about 375 until the end of the fourth century. During his younger years, he was a leading Confucian master, but his fame was only assured by his actions as an old man, when, in the belief that the times were ripe for a dramatic change, Mencius actively sought political positions.

About 315, Mencius was actually appointed to a high advisory post by the king of Qi, the most powerful state in the east. However, as we saw when we discussed this episode in an earlier section, the king exploited Mencius. Through a deception, he lured Mencius into uttering words that the king advertised as a “wise man’s” mandate for Qi to invade the state of Yan, to the north. Mencius’s apparent complicity in the invasion of Yan embarrassed him. He soon resigned his post and went into retirement, muttering about how Heaven had apparently determined to extend the era of chaos beyond what a sage person, such as Mencius, might have expected.

In retirement, Mencius and his followers compiled a series of texts describing his political career and including brief sayings and longer arguments in defense of his ideas. The compilation of these texts, known as the *Mencius*, is one of the most influential books in Chinese history.

Mencius is famous for a set of doctrines that Confucianism found very useful in preserving its position of philosophical authority and political idealism. He taught that states exist for the benefit of the people, and that every ruler’s legitimacy ultimately derives from the will of his people. Heaven’s role in the world was to facilitate the political effectiveness of the people’s will. He urged rulers to adopt policies of humane government in the interests of the people. Any single ruler adopting such policies, he argued, could expect to win the good will of people of all states, who would wish to have him as their own ruler. This being so, Heaven would help engineer such a ruler’s ultimate conquest over the armies of all the patrician lords. Humane government was thus the path to the Mandate of Heaven.

The goodness of human nature

Mencius’s best known doctrine was that all people were born with an inherently good nature – a set of moral impulses that would spontaneously let them distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, what was permitted by *li* from what was not. This doctrine allowed him to support his populist vision of the state, which aligned the will of the people with Heavenly morality, and also spurred him to attempt to convince the increasingly debased warlord rulers of his day that they were, at root, sage kings like the Emperors Yao and Shun.

The single most famous passage in the *Mencius* is a demonstration of the intuitive nature of moral sentiments by means of an imaginative example. The entire passage reads as follows:

Mencius said, All people possess within them a moral sense that cannot bear the suffering of others. The former kings had such a moral sense and thus they devised means of government that would not allow people to suffer. If a ruler were to employ the moral sense that makes human suffering unendurable in order to implement such humane government, he would find bringing the entire empire into order to be simple, as though he were turning the world in his hand.

Why do I say that all people possess within them a moral sense that cannot bear the suffering of others? Well, imagine now a person who *all of a sudden* sees a small child on the verge of falling down into a well. *Any* such person would experience a sudden sense of fright and dismay. This feeling would not be one which they summoned up in order to establish good relations with the child's parents. They would not purposefully feel this way in order to win the praise of their friends and neighbors. Nor would they feel this way because the screams of the child would be unpleasant.

Now by imagining this situation we can see that one who lacked a sense of dismay in such a case could simply not be a person. And I could further show that anyone who lacked the moral sense of shame could not be a person; anyone who lacked a moral sense of deference could not be a person; anyone who lacked a moral sense of right and wrong could not be a person.

Now the sense of dismay on another's behalf is the seed of *ren* planted within us, the sense of shame is the seed of righteousness, the sense of deference is the seed of *li*, and the sense of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom. Everyone possesses these four moral senses just as they possess their four limbs. For a person to possess such moral senses and yet to claim that he cannot call them forth is to rob oneself; and for a person to claim that his ruler is incapable of such moral feelings is to rob his ruler.

As we possess these four senses within us, if only we realize that we need to extend and fulfill them, then the force of these senses will burst through us like a wildfire first catching or a spring first bubbling forth through the ground. If a person can bring these impulses to fulfillment, they will be adequate to bring all the four quarters under his protection. But if a person fails to develop these senses, he will fail to protect even his own parents.

(*Mencius*, 2A.6)

While much of the argumentation in this passage is not strong by modern standards, it was very forceful in Mencius's day. And the specific claim that people would universally feel a rush of panic if they spotted a child about to die retains great force, especially among those who would, like Mencius, interpret that rush of adrenaline as a moral response.

Mencius's arguments allowed him to protect the Confucian devotion to ritual from the attacks which later philosophies had brought against it by building ritual and righteousness – and

the entire character of the *junzi* – right into the consciousness of human beings from birth, a moral structure of mind which Mencius claimed was formed within us by Heaven itself.

Mencius as a response to Mohism

Philosophically, Mencius's doctrine that human beings have certain moral responses hard-wired as part of our species-specific destiny was a potentially effective response to Mohist claims that right actions had to be determined through objective, rational criteria that tied morality to the calculus of maximizing action "benefits" (a term that Mencius always uses with the pejorative, self-regarding sense of "profit"). Mohism called on people to override apparently ethical responses, such as preferential love of family, that might undermine obedience to Mohist utilitarian prescripts, and Mencius went to great lengths to argue that this was a perverse distortion of our natural moral predispositions, endowed in us by Tian.

A Mohist named Yi Zhi wished to visit Mencius, and asked an introduction from Mencius's disciple Xu Bi. Mencius said, "I have long wished to meet him, but I am ill now. When I'm better, I'll go pay him a visit. There's no need for him to come here."

But later, Yi Zhi pressed Xu Bi for an introduction once again. Mencius said, "I can see him now. If one is not straightforward, then the *dao* will not become clear. I'll straighten him out. I hear that Yi Zhi is a Mohist. Mohists make frugality in funerals part of their *dao*. Yi Zhi aspires to change the world in this way, and it must be that he believes frugal funerals to be honorable, yet he himself gave his parents lavish funerals – it would seem that he treated his parents dishonorably."

Xu Bi reported this to Yi Zhi, who said, "The Confucian *dao* holds that the ancients prized acting towards others with as much care as one gives a newborn babe in arms. What would this mean? I believe it means loving all without distinction, beginning with one's parents."

Xu Bi reported this to Mencius, who said, "Does Yi Zhi truly believe that men can love their neighbors' children as much as their brothers'? His argument actually relies on that special example picturing how we'd feel if we saw some innocent baby crawling to the edge of a well. When Tian gives birth to a thing, it gives it only one set of roots. Yi Zhi's arguments seem to work because he gives them two roots.

"Most likely, in past ages men did not bury their parents, but simply consigned their bodies to an open ditch when they died. But some days later, passing by, they would have seen how the foxes had gnawed on the corpses and the flies sucked. Sweat would have stood out on their brows as they averted their eyes. Now that sweat was not conjured up for others to see – it would have been the feelings of their inmost heart pouring forth on their faces. Then they would have returned to their homes to get shovels and baskets to cover the corpses over. If burying them thus was truly the right thing, then when filial sons and men of *ren* bury their parents it is certainly in accord with the *dao*."

Xu Bi reported this answer to Yi Zhi, who stared blankly for a time and then said, "I have taken his point."

(*Mencius*, 3A.5)

Note in particular that the critical argument offered in this passage pictures the origins of burial rituals not in terms of social benefits, rationally calculated, but in terms of what the text suggests is a universal, innate affective response, something all people would spontaneously share.

The reading on Mohism includes an anecdote concerning the Mohist Fu Tun, who with typical Mohist righteousness demands that his son be executed for crimes, rather than spared on account of Fu Tun's feelings. Mohists disciplined themselves to override normal affective or emotional responses in order to respond with full commitment to the demands of basic Mohist ethical imperatives, such as acting for the benefit of all impartially, or uprooting oneself on a moment's notice to pursue an opportunity to stop offensive war. We see an example in the *Mencius*, when the Mohist Song Keng passes through Mencius's district.

Song Keng was on his way to Chu. Mencius encountered him at Shiqiu and asked, "Where are you going, Sir?"

Song Keng said, "I have been told that the armies of Qin and Chu have gone to war, and I shall visit the King of Chu and persuade him to call it off. If the King of Chu does not appreciate my argument, I will visit the King of Qin and persuade him likewise. Between the two I shall surely encounter success."

"I shall not presume to ask in detail, but I would like to hear the main gist of your argument."

Song Keng said, "I will explain that there is no profit in it."

Mencius said, "Your intentions are certainly lofty, but your formula is unacceptable. . . ."

(*Mencius*, 6A.4)

This type of militant ethical "voluntarism," willfully overriding the normally mixed responses of the heart in order to align one's energy and commitment fully towards an ideal goal, was, for Mencius, an abandonment of the heart that humans were destined to follow.

Mencius on self-cultivation

The *Mencius* is a very rich text with an abundance of passages that are of great significance to intellectual history and fun to read (D.C. Lau's complete translation is on Library Reserve, and a partial online translation is linked through the "Supplements" page on the G380 website). Mencius was a master of argument and of the analogical parable, and his book is filled with color.

One of Mencius's concerns was the description of the process of self-cultivation, and the Confucian master is portrayed very much as a hero in the text, a man who has been through a crucible of discipline in search of enlightenment. His descriptions of the man in control of the Dao reveal how deeply he felt himself in touch with this sacred Way of the Ancient Kings, and he speaks of how, at the moment that it is grasped, "the hands dance and the feet prance," and how one thereafter "encounters its source and every turn." For Mencius, this was actually a process of self-discovery, for the joy of mastering the Dao is that once we do, we recognize it as the

expression of our own deepest nature, a nature that is intrinsically social and ethical, and which delights most in joining with others to bring happiness to all. “He who knows his nature knows Heaven,” he said, though he added that it was disappointing for the sage to have to watch others fail to realize their true goodness and be unable to single-handedly alter the darkness of the age.

There is in the *Mencius* one detailed discussion of self-cultivation which strikingly illustrates the relationship between Confucian ritualism and the late Zhou warrior society from which it was born. The passage describes the self-cultivation of the Confucian *junzi*, and models that experience on the trained psychology of the master warrior or martial artist. The remainder of this section will be devoted to that single passage. Its subtle analysis of human motivation, self-realization, and ethical potential is a powerful response to the one-dimensional Mohist commitment to whip up one’s energy to follow Mohist maxims no matter what the cost.

Mencius describes here a subtle process whereby the individual brings the spontaneous forces of his body under absolute control in the service of a behavioral goal or way of life. In his life-like description, Mencius makes use of a traditional Chinese concept of a force or energy that pervades the human body and all of the living universe. That energy is called “*qi*” 氣, and was believed to be the subtlest physical component of the body, circulating within it in unpredictable ways. (If you want to know what *qi* is, you need to picture it when it is out of control. For example, recall the last time that you drank six cups of coffee before going to bed – those heebie-jeebies racing through you as you stare at the ceiling at 3:00 A.M. is your *qi* in a wild state. Under control, that same energy will produce the sparkling finish of a term paper, completed at 3:00 A.M. the morning of the due date. In Mencius, its powers are aimed at even more critical issues.)

What follows here is the first half of Mencius’s long discussion of self-cultivation. The conversation probably took place about ten years before the climax of Mencius’s political life, but it relates to his ambitions to achieve high position and lead the ruler of Qi towards Heaven’s mandate. Gongsun Chou, with whom Mencius is speaking, was a native of Qi and a follower of Mencius. It will be useful to note in advance that the term “heart,” in ancient Chinese, covers the meanings of “heart,” “mind,” and often “sense” as well (as in the “sense of dismay” discussed above). The conversation may represent the earliest analysis of the ideas that lie behind East Asian traditions of martial arts, and should be of great interest to anyone who has engaged in them.

From *Mencius* 2A.2: The discussion of the unmoved mind.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM: ATTAINING AN ‘UNMOVED MIND’

Gongsun Chou asked, “If you, Sir, were to receive a high post among the grandees of Qi and were able to implement your *dao*, it would not be startling if the ruler were to rise to the position of hegemon or even a true King. If this were to occur, would your heart be moved by this?”

“No,” replied Mencius. “By the age of forty I had cultivated a heart that could not be moved.”

“If that is so, then you, Sir, have exceeded the valor of the warrior Meng Ben by far!”

“That is not difficult,” said Mencius. “Actually, the philosopher Gaozi attained an unmoving

heart earlier than I.”

“Is there a *dao* for achieving an unmoving heart?” asked Gongsun Chou.

“Yes,” replied Mencius, “there is.”

It will help to bear in mind throughout this long passage that the primary topic is how Mencius attained the condition of having an “unmoving heart.” The word for “heart” is often rendered “heart-mind” by translators, because it may refer to elements of emotion and affect as well as to cognitive aspects of the person. In these readings, I have selected either “heart” or “mind,” depending on what seems the dominant component. In 2A.6 above, and some other places, I have translated the word as “sense” (as in “sense of shame,” rather than “heart of shame”). Recently, a young scholar named John Behuniak has suggested the reading of “feelings,” and that too will work in many cases.

Mencius, a Confucian, was presumably a ritualist and textual scholar who did not cultivate the arts of war, so it is somewhat surprising that he begins his description of the *dao* of the unmoving heart by speaking of warriors.

THE MARTIAL ARTS EXEMPLARS

Mencius continued. “The formula by which the warrior Bogong You nurtured his valor was this: ‘I shall not allow my skin to recoil in the least or let my stare flinch. I shall consider the slightest touch of another to be as insulting as if he were whipping me publicly in a market or court. What I would not accept from a coarsely clad commoner, I will not accept from the ruler of a state of ten thousand chariots. I shall look upon stabbing a great ruler as though I were stabbing a coarsely clad commoner. I shall have no fear of patrician lords. Any insulting sound that reaches my ear I must return.’”

“The formula by which the warrior Mengshi She nurtured his valor was this: ‘I shall regard defeat as the same as victory. To advance only after having measured the enemy or meet the enemy only after having plotted for victory shows fear of the enemy armies. How could I guarantee victory? All I can be assured of is that I will be fearless.’”

“Mengshi She resembles Confucius’s disciple Zengzi; Bogong You resembles Confucius’s disciple Zixia. I do not know which type of valor is the finer, but Mengshi She was a man who preserved self-control.

“Once, Zengzi addressed a man named Zixiang thus: ‘Do you delight in valor? I once heard from the Master about Great Valor. “If I search inwardly and find that I am not fully upright, though I face a mere coarsely clad commoner, I shall not threaten him. If I search inwardly and find that I am fully upright, though I face ten million men I will attack.’” The manner in which Mengshi She preserved his *qi* is not as fine as Zengzi’s.”

Zixia was a disciple of Confucius who was known for specializing in text study and focusing his own followers on the minor points of ritual as a discipline. Zengzi (or Master Zeng) was a younger disciple who was known for his attention to capturing the ethical spirit of Confucius’s *dao*, without such deep emphasis on textual and ritual study. Zengzi’s influence during the Warring States era was particularly great, and Mencius was trained in his teaching tradition. Zengzi is generally authoritative when quoted in the *Mencius*.

FORMULAS USED BY GAOZI AND MENCIOUS

Gongsun Chou said, “May I inquire about the formulas that you and Gaozi used to attain an unmoving heart?”

Mencius replied, “Gaozi’s rule was, ‘If you cannot find sanction for a course of action in the teachings, do not search for it in your heart. If you cannot find sanction for a course of action in your heart, do not search for it in your *qi*.’ I agree to the formula, ‘If you do not find it in the heart, do not search for it in the *qi*.’ But it is unacceptable to say, ‘If you do not find it in the teachings, do not search for it in your heart.’

“The will is the leader of the *qi*, and *qi* is something that fills the body. Wherever the will leads the *qi* follows. Thus there is a saying, ‘Grasp your will and do not dissipate your *qi*.’”

Gongsun Chou said, “On the one hand you have said, ‘Wherever the will leads the *qi* will follow.’ But you have also said, ‘Grasp your will and do not dissipate your *qi*.’ Is there not an inconsistency?”

Mencius answered, “When the will is unified it moves the *qi*. But when the *qi* is unified, it can move the will. For example, when you see a man stumble or rush about, this is the action of his *qi*. In such cases, it has turned back upon the heart and moved it.”

Gaozi appears in the *Mencius* principally as an adversary, arguing that human nature is neither good nor bad – the debates on this point appear below. Some commentators speculate he was a Mohist, but in the few other Warring States texts that portray him, he seems to be a Confucian, though not of Mencius’s school. Note that there is a core disagreement between Mencius and Gaozi here on whether “the teachings” or “the heart” should have authority over one’s actions. They agree that the heart should have authority over the *qi*, and this is probably an anti-Mohist position, designed to counter the Mohist teaching that one should discipline oneself to follow the rationally derived imperative of universality over the spontaneous tendency to love one’s intimates more than others.

In ancient China, this *qi* was pictured as a type of vaporous substance that penetrated the cosmos – it made the stars shine and water flow, and in people, it was a powerful force (the original graph seems to suggest steam). If properly harnessed, *qi* could help people achieve great things in the world and could also nourish the body and keep it healthy. If dissipated through careless living or unfocused activity, it could sabotage the ability to follow through in action and undermine physical health. *Qi* cultivation was a basic aspect of the training of many schools, including Confucianism and Daoism. There were also schools whose Daos consisted of nothing other than *qi* cultivation. (An important product of such schools was martial arts training, both in the Classical period and later. Many contemporary East Asian martial arts still place *qi* at the center of their training.)

THE FLOOD-LIKE QI

Gongsun Chou said, “May I presume to inquire how you, Sir, excel?”

“I can interpret what speech means,” replied Mencius, “and I nurture well my flood-like *qi*.”

Gongsun Chou asked, “What do you mean by ‘flood-like *qi*?’”

“It is hard to describe,” said Mencius. “This is a *qi* that is as great and hard as can be. If one nurtures it by means of straightforward action and never injures it, then it will fill all between heaven and earth. It is a *qi* that is a companion to righteousness and the Dao. Without these, it will starve away. It is generated through the long accumulation of acts of righteousness. It is not something that can be seized through a single righteous act. If in your actions there is any sense of inadequacy in

your heart, it will starve away.

“This is why I say that Gaozi never really understood righteousness. He looked for it in external standards other than the heart. But your task must always be before you and you must not go making small adjustments. The task of nurturing this *qi* must never be forgotten by the heart, but you must not meddle and try to help it grow. Don’t be like the simpleton from the state of Song.

“There was a man of Song who was concerned that the sprouts in his field were not growing well, so he went and tugged at each one. He went home utterly exhausted and said, ‘Oh, I’ve made myself ill today! I’ve been out helping the sprouts to grow.’ His sons rushed out to look and found the stalks all shriveled up.

“There are few in the world who do not ‘help their sprouts grow.’ There are those who do not ‘weed’ – they have simply given the whole task up as useless. But the ones who tug on the sprouts to help them grow – they are worse than useless, for they do harm!”

The attack on Gaozi’s “externalization” of right is a reformulation of the earlier position ascribed to Gaozi, that one should take direction from “the teachings” rather than from one’s heart. Mencius’s criticism of Gaozi is likely influenced by the fact that the Mohist ethical system focused on a concept of “right” that reduced its meaning to “acts that are universal, rather than partial,” and reduced its practice to unwavering commitment to act in accord with Mohism’s simple set of objective ethical rules. For Mencius, the ultimate rule giver is the heart/mind – the center of our feeling responses – that all members of the human species are born with and share in common. Its complex patterns of spontaneous judgments represent the destiny Tian has “mandated” for each and all of us, and to become fully human is to learn how to attend to its messages with perfect sensitivity, having mastered through practice the art of following our ethical instincts in everyday action.

KEY TERMS

qi The “four seeds” (of the moral senses)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *In passage 2A.6, Mencius tries to show that moral impulses are innate by showing that they are spontaneous. Do you think his argument is successful?*
2. *Can you think of instances where, as Mencius claims, we spontaneously act in ways we might call righteous, ritualistic, or reflecting a distinction between right and wrong? Does this prove that we possess innate moral senses?*
3. *On the basis of the long discussion of the unmoving mind, describe Mencius’s model of the human mind and its relation to the body.*
4. *Do Mencius’s teachings endorse the social trends of the Warring States Period?*

Sources and Further Readings

Mencius is one of the most studied figures in early Chinese history. The book that bears his name is rich in accessible ideas, and his personality emerges with engaging vividness. The most widely used full translation of the text is by D.C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1970). Additional online selections beyond those in this reading are available through the G380 website “[Supplements](#)” link. Analyses of Mencius’s thought abound: one widely admired example is Kwong-loi Shun’s, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: 2000).