

MENCIUS

TRANSLATED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY
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PENGUIN BOOKS

Chapter XI

MENCIUS

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

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

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

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

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

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

I. THE GOODNESS OF HUMAN NATURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. HOW OUR ORIGINAL NATURE IS DESTROYED

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

remain beautiful when it is hacked down every day, as the woodsman chops down the trees with his axe? To be sure, the nights and days do the healing and there is the nourishing air of the early dawn, which tends to keep him sound and normal, but this morning air is thin and is soon destroyed by what he does in the day. With this continuous hacking of the human spirit, the rest and recuperation obtained during the night are not sufficient to maintain its level, and when the nights recuperation does not suffice to maintain its level, then the man degrades himself to a state not far from the beast's. People see that he acts like a beast and imagine that there was never any true character in him. But is this the true nature of man? Therefore with proper nourishment and care, everything grows, and without the proper nourishment and care, everything degenerates or decays. Confucius said, 'Keep it carefully and you will have it, let it go and you will lose it. It appears and disappears from time to time in we do not know what direction.' He was talking about the human soul.*

Mencius said, "Do not think that King (Hsuan of Ch'i) is lacking in wisdom or moral consciousness (as a man). Even in the case of the things that grow most easily in this world, they would never grow up properly if for one day of sunshine they get ten days of cloudy (or chilly) weather. He seldom sees me, and when I leave, the people who are the 'cloudy days' for him arrive. Even if what I say to him is taking root (literally 'sprouting')

* Elsewhere Mencius defines the "great man" as "one who has not lost the heart of a child."

in his mind, what can he do about it? Even in a trivial thing like playing chess, one cannot learn it unless he concentrates his mind on learning it. You let Chess-player Ch'iu, who is the best chess player of the country, teach two persons how to play chess. One man will concentrate his mind and energy on it and listen carefully to Chess-Player Ch'iu's explanations and advice, and another man will hear the same explanations, but his mind will be thinking of how a wild goose is going to pass by and how he is going to take a bow and shoot at it. Now although the second man studies under the same master, he will never be equal to the other man. But if you say that this man is lacking in original talent of intelligence, you know it isn't true."

III. THE HIGHER LIFE AND THE GREATER SELF

Mencius said, "I like fish, but I also like bear's paw, but if I can't have both at the same time, I will forego the fish and eat the bear's paw. I love life, but I also love righteousness, and if I can't have both at the same time, I will sacrifice life to have righteousness. I love life, but there is something that I love more than life, and therefore I would not have life at any price. I also hate death, but there is something that I hate more than death, and therefore I would not avoid danger at any price. If there is nothing that man loves more than life, then does he not permit himself to do anything in order to save it? And if there is nothing that man hates more than death, then why does he not always avoid dangers that could be

avoided? And so there are times when a man would forsake his life, and there are times when a man would not avoid danger. It is not only the good men who have this feeling that there are times when they would forsake life and there are times when they would not avoid danger. All men have this feeling, only the good men have been able to preserve it.* A man's life or death may sometimes depend on a bamboo basket of rice and a bowl of soup but if you say to a starving man passing by, "Hey, Mister!" and off them to him in the most insulting manner, he would refuse to take them, or if you offer them to a beggar with a kick, the beggar would not receive them.

"What is a salary of ten thousand bushels to me, if I come by it against my principles? Shall I take this position because it offers me beautiful mansions and the

* In the Chinese text, Mencius used the word "heart," which I have translated here as "feelings" (elsewhere also as the "soul"), because of the limitations of this word "heart" in the English usage. The whole Mencian philosophy centers around "keeping the heart" and not "losing it." At other places I have found it necessary to render the same word by "mind" or "intelligence." Of course the English word "heart" comes closest to what Mencius calls *hsin*, since it is primarily a matter of feeling and not of thinking. But the same word is used in Chinese to express the "mind" also, and it should be strongly emphasized that the Chinese language does not admit of a clear distinction of, or separation between, the head and the heart. That is not only grammatically, but also historically a true fact. Mencius, however, uses three important words, "the heart" (including the mind or intelligence), "sentiment" (which is interpreted as the heart in action), and "talent" (or innate capacity, which is more or less fully developed in individuals according to the circumstances).

service of a wife and concubines, or because I shall be able to help my friends who knew me when I was poor? If formerly I refused to accept the post in the face of death (or starvation), and now I accept it in order to have a fine residence, if formerly I refused to accept this post in the face of death, and now I accept it in order to have the service of a wife and concubines, if formerly I refused this post in the face of death, and now I accept it in order to be able to help my friends who knew me when I was poor, would that not be something totally unnecessary? This is called 'losing one's original heart.'"

Mencius said, "Charity is in the heart of man, and righteousness is the path for men. Pity the man who has lost his path and does not follow it and who has lost his heart and does not know how to recover it. When people's dogs and chicks are lost, they go out and look for them, and yet the people who have lost their hearts (or original nature) do not go out and look for them. The principle of self-cultivation consists in nothing but trying to look for the lost heart."

Mencius said, "Suppose there is a man who has a crooked ring finger which cannot stretch out straight. It isn't painful and it doesn't cause him any inconvenience. And yet, if there was someone who could straighten out the finger for him, he would not mind going as far as Ch'in or Ch'u because he is ashamed that his finger is not like that of other men (or not normal). Now a man is wise enough to be ashamed of a finger that is not normal, and yet he is not wise enough to be ashamed of

his heart, when his heart is not normal. We say such a man has no sense of the relative importance of things."

Mencius said, "People know that if they want a lintera tree whose circumference is a fathom long to grow and live, they must take proper care of it. But as to their own selves, they do not know how to take proper care of them. Can it be that they love their selves less than they love a lintera tree? It is mere thoughtlessness."

Mencius said, "There is not a part of the body that a man does not love. And because there is not a part that he does not love, there is not a part of it that he does not nourish. Because there is not an inch of his skin that he does not love, there is not an inch of his skin that he does not take care of. The thing that determines whether a thing is good or bad depends only on his regard for it, or the value he places upon it. Now in our constitution there is a higher and a lower nature, and a smaller and a greater self. One should not develop the lower nature at the expense of the higher nature, or develop the smaller self at the expense of the greater self. He who attends to his smaller self becomes a small man, and he who attends to his greater self becomes a great man. A gardener who attends to thorns and bramble to the neglect of his lintera trees will be regarded as a bad gardener. A man who takes good care of his finger and suffers an injury to his shoulder blade is deformed. People look down upon the matter of food and drink because food nourishes our smaller self and does nothing to our greater self. If a man attends to his food, without forgetting about his greater self, then it may be said that the

food taken indeed does not only go to nourish any particular small part of the body (an inch of his skin)."

Kungtutse asked Mencius, "We are all human beings. Why is it that some are great men and some are small men?" Mencius replied, "Those who attend to their greater selves become great men, and those who attend to their smaller selves become small men." "But we are all human beings. Why is it that some people attend to their greater selves and some attend to their smaller selves?" Mencius replied, "When our senses of sight and hearing are distracted by the things outside, without the participation of thought, then the material things act upon the material senses and lead them astray. That is the explanation. The function of the mind is thinking; when you think, you keep your mind, and when you don't think, you lose your mind. This is what heaven has given to us (for the purpose of thinking or knowing what is right and wrong). One who cultivates his higher self will find that his lower self follows in accord. That is how a man becomes a great man."

Mencius said, "There is the heaven-made nobility, and there is the man-made nobility. The people who are kind, righteous, faithful and love virtue without fail belong to the heaven-made nobility (or the nobility of God), and the *kung*, *ch'ing*, and *taifu* (different ranks of officials) belong to the man-made nobility. The ancient people cultivated what belonged to God's noblemen and they obtained without conscious effort the ranks of man-made nobility. People today, on the other hand, cultivate what belongs to this heaven-made nobility in order to

secure man-made honors (or man-made nobility), and after they have secured man-made honors, they forsake the things that make for heaven-made nobility. Thus they are led grievously astray and must soon perish after all."

Mencius said, "All people have the common desire to be elevated in honor, but all people have something still more elevated in themselves without knowing it. What people usually consider as an elevated rank or honor is not true honor, for he whom Chao Meng (a powerful ruling family of Chin) has honored, Chao Meng can also bring into dishonor. The *Book of Songs* says, 'I am drunk with wine, and I am filled with virtue.' This figurative expression means that a man is 'filled' with kindness and righteousness, and when he is so filled, he does not care for the flavors of delicate food. And when a man wears a mantle of fame, he does not care for the embroidered gowns."

Mencius said, "The five kinds of grains are considered good plants, but if the grains are not ripe, they are worse than cockles. It is the same with regard to kindness, which must grow into maturity."

Mencius said, "When Yi (a famous archer) taught people to shoot, he told them to pull the string on the bow its full length. The man who wants to cultivate himself must also develop himself to the full extent. A great carpenter teaches his apprentice to use squares and compasses. The man who wants to cultivate himself, must also have squares and compasses for his conduct."