

## The Philosophy of Benevolence



I am referring with this title to the life and work of a Chinese philosopher called Mengzi, or Mencius, as the latinized version of his name is written. Born in Zou province around 371 BC, he lived in a period known as 'The Warring States', which lasted from 481 to 221 BC. It was probably as a result of seeing much cruelty and much suffering among the people of the time that Mencius promoted his philosophy of benevolence. Mencius was a devoted follower of Confucius, and while the concept of benevolence (ren or jen) is a key part of Confucius's teachings, it takes on particular importance in the philosophy of Mencius. Two of his sayings give us an idea of this: 'The benevolent man has no match.' And, 'All that is expected of a gentleman is benevolence.' Seeing the injustices of the time, he comes to the same conclusion as his master: if the rulers were model examples of what a human being should be, 'the whole world would follow', as Confucius poetically puts it in the Analects.

There are four factors in the make up of the model human being in Confucianism: Benevolence (ren), Rightness (yi), Propriety (li) and Moral Wisdom (zhi). However, in Mencius – the book containing a record of conversations with the philosopher – there is a particular emphasis on the first two: 'All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness.'

Benevolence is also translated as 'human-heartedness' and Mencius often refers to the 'true heart', which could be said to be a combination of benevolence and rightness. Having a true heart, one naturally feels compassion for others. He gives an example of how this is innate in human beings, saying that anyone who found a child who had fallen into a well would naturally try to rescue him. Secondly, having a true heart, one does not stray from oneself, by which he means one's inherent sense of right and wrong. These qualities are instilled in us since birth by 'Heaven' (Tian), which is roughly equivalent to the Western concept of God. Importantly, Mencius, like Confucius, believed that the human being is essentially good. He counteracts the argument of another philosopher, Kao-tzu or Gaozi, who declared: 'Men's nature is like a current of water. If you open a channel for the current to the east, it will flow east.'

If you open a channel to the west, it will flow west. Men's nature makes no distinction between the good and the not good, just as water makes no distinction between east and west.' Master Meng (Mencius) replied, 'Water can be trusted not to make a distinction between east and west; but is this so in relation to up and down? Men's natural tendency towards goodness is like the water's tendency to find the lower level. Now if, for example, you strike the water and make it leap up, it is possible to force it over your head... But this surely is not the nature of water, and it is only if force is applied that it acts in this way. That men can be made to do evil is due to their nature also being like this.'

However, Mencius concedes that most people, if deprived of basic necessities, will forget about rightness and benevolence and try to save themselves. The 'gentleman', however – the Junzi or person of noble and cultivated character – will continue to adhere to the good, even in the most difficult circumstances. In one of the many conversations that make up Mencius, the sage puts it like this: 'Those who make an effort only when there is a King Wen [one of China's most venerated kings, 1100–1050 BC] are ordinary men. Outstanding men make the effort even without a King Wen.'

Mencius was from a noble family and could easily (as was also the case with Plato) have entered politics as a career. However, apart from a brief period serving as an official in the state of Ch'i, he spent most of his time travelling, offering wise advice to various rulers on government by ren (human-heartedness). Although he was championing an unpopular cause, he was fearless in speaking his mind to men of power and was regarded with great respect at many Chinese courts. In one of the conversations recorded in Mencius, for example, he criticizes a ruler for taking pity on an ox being led to sacrifice and yet fails to take pity on people suffering injustice in his kingdom.

Here are some examples of the advice he gave to princes on humane government:

'Practise benevolent government towards the people, reduce punishment and taxation...'

Summing up his teachings on this matter, the Encyclopaedia Britannica states: 'He worked out a definite program to attain economic sufficiency for the common people. He also advocated light taxes, free trade, conservation of natural resources, welfare measures for the old and disadvantaged, and more nearly equal sharing of wealth.'

One ruler asked him:

'Through what can the Empire be united?'

Mencius: 'Through unity.'

'Who can unite it?'

Mencius: 'One who is not fond of killing can unite it.'

And, in another conversation:

'How virtuous must a man be before he can become a true king?'

Mencius: 'He becomes a true king by bringing peace to the people... If you shared your enjoyment [parks, music, etc.] with the people, you would be a true king.'

And finally:

'When good and wise men are in high office and able men are employed, a ruler [should] take advantage of times of peace to explain the laws to the people... [But] a ruler who takes advantage of times of peace to indulge in pleasure and indolence is courting disaster.'

All this comes down to Mencius's view that the function of the ruler is to serve the people, and not the other way round. 'The people are the most important element in a nation; the spirits of the land and grain come next; the sovereign counts for the least.'

If, on the other hand, people think in terms of profit, then everything is doomed from the outset, because in the end, everyone from the ruler downwards will put themselves first and no one will think of the good of the whole.

Unfortunately, however, the advice of Mencius fell on deaf ears, and other more cynical or simplistic philosophies found greater favour with the ruling princes. As a result, following the example of his master, Confucius, he became disappointed with 'preaching in the desert' and devoted his last years to the instruction of his pupils.

Remarkably, his efforts finally gave fruit – more than 1,000 years later ? when his work was given 'canonical' status by the Neo-Confucianists of the Song dynasty (AD 960-1279) and, 'for the last 1,000 years, Mencius has been revered among the Chinese people as the cofounder of Confucianism, second only to Confucius himself.'