NECCT 3 (2014)

Mencius as a Public Philosopher

E Bruce Brooks (ebbrooks@research.umass.edu)

1. The Personal Philosopher

What the present age finds of interest in the Mencian writings is largely the notion that human nature is good, plus the idea of moral self-cultivation (so Kwong-loi Shun's one-paragraph summary in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy). This opinion is widespread. If we look at the Index Locorum of any monograph on Mencius, from Dài Jvn to David Nivison, we will indeed find a preponderance of MC 6 and 7: the human nature debate in one, and individualist sayings in the other. Investigations of Mencius in our own time display the same personal and ethical focus.

2. The Public Philosopher

This however is to focus on rv́n, or good feelings toward others, to the exclusion of jv̀ng, a governmental system **based on** concern for others, and having the well-being of the governed as its defining characteristic. The genuine interviews of Mencius with the rulers of his time have that goal exclusively in mind. It is noteworthy that these interviews show Mencius as engaged in the business of advising government; he comes across as a statecraft specialist and not a personal ethical trainer. I will here briefly isolate the thought of Mencius himself as it is contained in his genuine interviews (for the spurious interviews, see our paper from the 1999 Singapore Mencius conference), to show what he was up to in his own time, and then review the parts of the Mencius that were still thought to be worth reading by the ruling elite of early Táng, as preserved in the 14 passages which were all that the Chyẃn Shū Jì-yàu thought it necessary to include out of the Mencius. I will then note the different tendency in the later schools which led to the Mencius as it is presently viewed, and end by considering how durable its contribution to statecraft might be.

3. Mencius Himself

Mencius' interviews are not usually read as specimens of early rhetoric, but that is what they are. He and the rulers played a sort of game, the ruler giving a theme, or even a conundrum, and Mencius developing that topic – as it were, a theme for improvisation – as best he can, leading in the direction of the point he wants to make about the right way to rule. The right way to rule, as everyone in the 04th century was aware, was somehow to incorporate the people on the land into the governmental scheme of things, in response to the fact that in their old role as farmers, they were the source of state wealth and capacity for military action, and that in their new role as soldiers, they were also the mainstay of the state's armies. Their energetic fulfilment of their food function, and their willing assent to their military function, were both required. How to get that situation in being was the key political theory problem of the time.

It was this problem that Mencius was concerned to solve. I will now follow him as he urges his solution on the rulers of his time.

Lyáng Hwèı-wáng (MC 1A1, 3:1-3, and 5) did not have to be persuaded that concern for the public welfare was desirable. He already had a system of famine relief in place. It was based on a government granary from which grain could be allocated to famine areas. So he was not only concerned but engaged; he merely needed to be shown why the system in place was not working. The reason was that it was based on after-the-fact rescue and not on before-the-fact prevention. The government was taking too much grain from the people, and thus pushing the old rural survival system, in which the farmers had kept back their own reserve, to the point of collapse. Mencius' point with Lyáng Hwèı-wáng was that his benevolence was only specious, since the exactions of his government were producing the very crises which his relief measures were designed to alleviate.

The question of the military adequacy of the rv́n jv̀ng system also came up. Would a state which does not extract the maximum grain from its people have enough to support the large armies which all the big states thought were necessary? Mencius faces this problem straight on. In doing so he relies on the effect of benevolent government not only on the state's own people, but also on people of other states, the soldiers of the enemy armies. The Mencian theory was that a government looking to the survival, and more generally to the interests, of the people would not only conciliate its own population, it would also impress and attract the population of other states. Whether by weakening the resolve of other states' soldiers to attack us, or by depopulating those states to our benefit, the Mencian theory was that a rightly governed state in effect had no enemies, and need not worry about other states' aggression. As for our ambition to rule the world, that will occur through attrition of the strength of rivals, leaving us, by attraction and default, to be the only remaining government. That this theory ignores many well-known constants of mass and elite behavior and aspiration scarcely needs saying. My point is that the Mencian theory consisted of this, and nothing else.

Chí Sywǣn-wáng gets a lot of space in the Mencius, since it was under him that Mencius actually achieved a prime ministership, putting him in charge of events. In which role he proceeded to create a military disaster for Chí, which tried to annex Yē̄n only to be ejected by a coalition of armies. The Mencius text understandably strives to make the problem due to Mencius' advice NOT being taken, and Mencius himself sadly leaving Chí due to the King's neglect. The genuine interviews imply that, unlike Lyáng Hwèı-wáng, who was trying to work the new idea but getting it wrong, Chí Sywǣn-wáng cared much for his pleasures and little for his people, and was not making an effort at rv́n jv̀ng; he did not even have the concept of rv́n jv̀ng. This is a very different situation than the one with Lyáng Hwèı-wáng. Mencius' task then was to convince him to be concerned in the first place. And so Mencius argues in 1B1 that if the King would only extend his love of pleasure to include a concern for other people's happiness, he would be all right.

Tv́ng Wv́n-gūng was Mencius' last ruler. The state was tiny, and the ruler quite rightly worried about threats from his powerful neighbors. Mencius' advice was nothing if not realistic. A state so small really had no options in the world of that time., Its ruler could only choose between different ways of going down honorably. He could leave, he could die defending his walls, and that was it. What this shows us is that Mencius was not only a power philosopher, but a big-power philosopher. His method simply did not work with the smaller states.

This concludes our survey of theories which can reliably be attributed to Mencius. The rest of the text consists of spurious interviews with rulers, composed to express the view of one or another disciple in the years after Mencius' death, or other material generated by the evolving agendas of the two schools into which the disciples of Mencius organized themselves. The frequent anachronisms in this material, such as the implicit claim in MC 3B5 that Mencius lived long enough to have an opinion about the pending attack of Chí on Sùng (which occurred in 0285), mark it as of later origin, coming in fact a generation later than Mencius, who had died in c0303. This later material is of course interesting in its own right, but it is not to be taken as information about Mencius himself. All this is set forth in our 1999 Singapore Mencius paper, which I will not repeat here.

Mencius, then, if detached from the massive writings of his successor schools, is exclusively a public figure, operating on the public stage where great events take place, and trying to argue that a state could be considerate of its hard-pressed people and still not lose the unification sweepstakes.

4. Táng

I now skip down a thousand years, to see how the text was regarded in early Táng. Was it read according to its last two chapters, as is the case in our time? Or is its statecraft nature still perceived? For an answer, I turn to the early Táng work Chyv́n Shū Jì-yáu, a huge summary of the historical and political literature of the time, compiled for the Táng ruling elite. The answer is that the Mencius, though not regarded as a very important text (it gets less space than many other texts, including the Yèndž), is included, in 14 extracts. These are available to you on the handout. The extracts are sometimes abbreviated, but they are not rewritten; the text used, undoubtedly the Palace Library copy, is the same as our Mencius. They are drawn from every chapter of the book save the always puzzling Chapter 5. One might think that at least the Chapters 6 and 7 material, which makes up about a third of the 14 extracts, would give an account of human nature and self-cultivation. Nothing of the sort occurs. Instead, all 14 extracts give a consistent statecraft picture. They amount to a masterful epitome of the Mencian rv́n-jv̀ng theory, along with some of its corollaries, including the need to properly staff the rv́n government, to make it effective in practice as well as nice in theory (4A1). There are also denunciations of the would-be rv́n rulers of that day, whose failure should not be thought to impugn the power of the theory when correctly implemented (6A18-19).

Not only are the individualist element, and the human nature argument, entirely absent from the Chyẃn Shū Jr̀-yàu selection, so also is the strong northern-school emphasis on filial piety as the basic personal virtue, an idea which is applied to rulers as well as individuals. This motif simply does not figure in the Chyẃn Shū Jr̀-yàu epitome. What we have instead is simply the rv́n jv̀ng theory, as articulated in the real and spurious interviews of Mencius, supplemented with some material which is later in date, but still consistent in tendency. It is somewhat interesting that the compiler did not use such polite material as the original MC 1A5, which allows Lyáng Hwèı-wáng some dignity, but instead prefers the hostile, and spurious, 1A4. It would seem that the persona of Mencius is being protected by portraying the rulers of his time as monsters of political negligence, as in 1A4 and 1B2.

A key passage among the 14, and the only one which seems to countenance the personalistic view of Mencius, is 2A6, which it quotes not complete, but at length. In the context of the other selections, and without its resonance in the self-cultivation passages in MC 6 and 7, that passage seems to me to be an attempt to explain the Mencian version of the problem of evil. Of course the argument from innate inclinations to virtue can be the basis for a self-improvement regimen, but it can also be a way of ruling out of the human realm anyone who does not have those promptings. Such a model will account for the depraved rulers who are not named but who hover over the scene, the Jyé and Jòu of standard dynastic theory. How could such monsters exist? The Mencian answer would be that they lack fundamental human qualities. It is this logic that leads, in MC *1B8, a passage not quoted in CSJY, and inadvisable to mention even today, to the justification for killing a bad ruler. This theory legitimizes the Shāng to Jōu and other virtuous dynastic transitions: killing such a person is not really murder, since he is not really human in the first place. It is not unlikely that the recent Swéı-to-Táng dynastic transition, which of course had to be treated as correct and inevitable, was somewhat in the minds of the compilers. With such depraved monsters out of the picture, it can then be asserted that everyone who is left has inborn tendencies to rv́n: the rulers will naturally be concerned, and the people will naturally respond to their concern. It is this concern and response that articulate the Mencian political system. Individual moral cultivation is not here in view.

5. Sùng

Where does the opposite impression, the personalistic impression, of the Mencius come from? Is it a misreading, or a partial reading, of the text? I suggest the latter. Mencius himself was hopeful about his theory, as shown by his arduous travels and persistent advocacy in its support. But it failed when applied by Mencius in Chí, and the defensive posture of the end of Mencius 2, which spends time explaining the Yēn fiasco in terms less unfavorable to Mencius, only shows how damaging this was to the later aspirations of the Mencian school. Later on, there are complaints about the lack of effect the Mencians were having on rulers (MC 6A9), with opposing theorists appearing more often before those same rulers, and blowing cold on the Mencian ideas.

There are consolatory comments explaining the hardships to which Mencian advocates are exposed as ultimately beneficial (MC 6B15), and others which offer the isolated and ineffectual Mencian the comfort of communing with like spirits in the past (5B8), a sort of retreat into antiquity. In other words, in the later part of the text, one is aware of a sense of frustration and disappointment among those who were trying to argue for Mencian statecraft with the rulers of their own time.

As a response to this external frustration, an inward turning is very natural. MC 7A1 begins that chapter by noting the influence of Fate on human affairs, and emphasizing that one who knows his own heart, at the end of a process of inner cultivation, will also know Heaven. In that knowledge he can calmly await whatever Fate has in store for him. 7A3 distinguishes between situations where one's own effort suffices to guarantee an outcome, and those where it does not. The notion of having outcomes under one's control has thus made its appearance, and frustration about the uncontrollable outer effort can easily rechannel effort into more assured outcomes. And 7A4, after a mystical assertion ("All things are complete in me"), continues "There is no greater joy for me than to find on self-examination that I am true to myself." Success has after all been achieved, but at the cost of giving up any attempt to succeed in the external political world. Personal virtue now suffices.

The content of these two chapters is very familiar to us, and I need not describe them further. But these, I submit, are the reasons why those chapters read as they do in the first place. They are not Mencian theory, they are a personal response to the failure of Mencian theory to convince the world.

It is in the perception of this two-way dynamic, the public program being gradually replaced, especially in the northern school, by a program of personal fulfilment, that we can best hope to understand everything, not just the historical Mencian part, that is going on in the text.

6. The Value of the Mencius

In the midst of the 1999 Singapore Mencius conference, like a bomb thrown into a chicken coop, came this question from an outsider, a visitor from the sciences: Was Mencius right? This led to an animated discussion, most of it inclined to defend the value of Mencius despite its manifest failure in its own time. The key question, Right about **what**? did not happen to be asked. But it was in part answered by the thought that Mencius testifies to something of permanent spiritual worth, even if of dubious political practicality. This was the best answer of those assembled at that time and place.

But is Mencian thought entirely impractical? I leave out of account here the late individualist turn, and consider Mencianism as Mencius might have recognized it. For that purpose it will be useful to consider Mencianism as the early Táng people summarized it, adding nothing but focusing on certain elements of the theory as developed, rather than abandoned, in the Mencius itself. One of these is the reliance on law to articulate the system: mere personal goodwill of the ruler is not enough, it does not realize itself directly in the political sphere (MC 4A1).

Effective staffing (also MC 4A1) is another angle; Mencianism is too often regarded as sentiment applied directly to affairs, but at least in its later refined version, the need for honest and perceptive officials and ministers is also part of the system. Implementation requires guidelines, and guidelines include physical standards and the social standards we call laws (MC 4A1) . In other words, as time went on, those who still urged the original Mencian program made it more workable, in part by acknowledging elements of what we may recognize as the Gwǎndž view of political success. Among these are the land surveys to determine productivity, and to make land taxes proportional to productivity, such as the Gwǎndž recommends: a fairer way, and thus a more benevolent way, to distribute the tax burden. The Gwǎndž itself uses the term rýn of the policies it recommends; it claims that virtue for infrastructure projects that improve agricultural efficiency, even if those improvements benefit the state as well as the people (GZ 10). A state in which the old absolute ruler system is simply inverted in favor of the people is not going to work well either. Both sides need to be involved, and to feel themselves and their ethical impulses, their sense of fairness, satisfied, as MC 7A12 claims will be the situation in the true Mencian system, and as the Chyźn Shū Jr̀-yàu editors emphasize by including that passage.

The Mencian version of populism, which includes the possibility of replacement of a misperforming ruler, failed in its time. That feature also caused the text to be expurgated or suppressed in China, Korea, and Japan. Its radical social potential remains radical to this day. Those interested in what is now called human rights, and in the possibility of a state oriented toward its people and not toward whatever else contemporary states have in mind; the possibility of a stable condition of society at once successful and humane, might find in the early, nonindividualistic parts of the Mencius text a source of ideas, and on the merely personal side, a source of inspiration.

Regardless of small spats between the Mencius people and contemporary Micians, the debt of Mencianism to Micianism, with its people-centeredness and its small-state survival mentality, is profound. But it would be no less helpful if the overlap of mature Mencianism with the rather liberal statecraft of the Gwǎndž theorists of Chí were also recognized. Here might be a useful task for some contemporary Mencianist to undertake.

There is no one passage in the Mencius which I can quote to sum up the conclusions of this paper. But in refutation of the sentimental presumptions with which many approach the text, I might mention their refutation in MC 7B23, the Fźng Fù story, and one of the last passages in the Mencius. In the story, a famine has occurred in Chí, and Mencius, who has somehow become the person in charge of these things, is asked if he will again order a distribution from the government granary; it's understood that he has done so on a previous occasion. He agrees that he is not going to do so this time, and instead of a reason, he tells a contemptuous story of a yokel, Fźng Fù, who became an official, but who, on being told of a dangerous tiger loose in the village, stripped off his robe and set out to barehand the tiger.

What is disapproved here is the spontaneous reaction. What is approved is a more reflective approach. What sort of political theory does this lead us to? One which sees food as the central element in economic planning, but which regards grain distribution as only a palliative, acceptable in an emergency, but not valid as regular practice. Instead, the problem should be solved in a more general way. In view of the theory of the historical Mencius, as far as the brief interviews of MC 1 permit us to glimpse it, this will be, in part, an adjustment downward of the tax demands made on the people, which at present are too high to allow routine rural survival from one harvest to the next. Tax policy comes up repeatedly in the late Mencius; another place is MC 6B10, which insists that too little tax (such as suffices for the inhabitants of the northern grasslands) is as bad as too much; the classical 10% is about right. The interplay here between revenue and type of society, which sees tax policy as more than a number, is a useful advance on what we may call primitive Mencianism.

The late Mencius opposes advocates of a simpler society, from the agrarian primitivists wrongly esteemed by Chýn Syàng in MC 3A4, to the revenue minimalists ridiculed in MC 6B10. The text likes the new big society of the late Warring States period. It is not antiwar; on the contrary, it embraces the unification push, as the historical Mencius curtly affirms to the ineffective Ngwèı Syāng-wáng in MC 1A6. Unify it, says Mencius, and he knows what military activity this is likely to involve. The Mencius text as a whole is never tempted to reverse the clock on the new society. In social terms, it moves forward. It just wants to take the people with it into the new age.

How that might be done probably requires more economic and social detail than the text provides. Those in search of a realizable program will need to read it along with such bodies of theory as the Gwǎndž, and against Mician and other backward tendencies. Perhaps the right thing to say of the Mencius, as a statecraft text for our own time, is that it probably needs to be on that final reading list. Not for personal virtue, but in the interest of a fully functional, and fully just, human community.

7. Mencius Retrospect

In the above, I have tried to show that the statecraft teachings of Mencius were continued and further developed by his successor schools, and even at the end, were not entirely eclipsed by the growing northern-school interest in self-cultivation. That development did however take place, and the differences between northern and southern schools, and between early and late emphases in each school, are real and important. Their reality can be confirmed by stylistic examination, as is shown in the test results given and interpreted on the last page of the handout. Briefly, the northern chapters are distinct from the southern ones in their greater chapter-to-chapter consistency. The tests also pick up a probable genre difference between chapters, whether northern or southern (MC 3 and MC 5), which feature longer rather than shorter passages. These purely stylistic results are thus, among other things, consistent with the authorship picture previously proposed.