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The Problem of Mencius 5
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1. The Problem of Mencius 5

Mencius 5 is a problem for readers. It departs from the rest of the text in having little of obvious philosophical interest. I believe it is possible to see what this chapter was doing, in the context of contemporary disagreement about the content and value of ancient traditions, and the way in which conflicts between public and private duty are to be resolved.

Mencius 5 addresses itself to these problems in a systematic way. It digs deeper. It surveys the political world, from the most ancient ruler to the most humble officeholder. It constructs a positive view of history, and establishes guidelines for deciding conflicts of value. With this foundation, the Mencian movement, which had been challenged by recent events, could move forward into the future.

2. Previous Discussions in Mencius 2 and 4

The concerns of the Mencians were also discussed by other schools. The Micians, the Legalists, the Dàuists, and the home Confucian school in Lǚ, all dealt with them. The immediate context for Mencius 5 is the way they had been treated in the Mencian school, not only in the previous northern chapter, Mencius 4, but also in the writings of the southern school, Mencius 2.

In Handout #1, I list some of these earlier passages. It will be seen that they raise the issues, but anecdotally, and not in any systematic way. Among these concerns were the character of ancient worthies in 2A2, 2A9, and 4B20, accepting support from rulers in 2B3 and 4A10; the filiality of Shùn in 4A26 and 4A28, and filiality as a value in 4B13 and 4B30. Conflicts between private and public duty appear in 2A9 and 4B31.

But something is missing. The True King, Wáng-jǚ and rǚn government, are mentioned in 4A, but in 4B, only in 4B21, and there, as having been extinguished before Spring and Autumn. It is as though the goal of making contemporary rulers into True Kings had been abandoned.

This is the gap which Mencius 5 comes forward to fill.

3. The Form of Mencius 5

The systematic approach of Mencius 5 shows in its layout, moving from the top to the bottom of the political world.

It also shows in its form: the sayings in Mencius are paired. The pairing in Mencius 5 is so clear that passages which break it can be taken as interpolated. These are 5A8, a piece on Confucius which interrupts a discussion of ancient ministers, and 5B9 on replacing the ruler, a topic which otherwise occurs only in a later chapter. In the rest of Mencius 5, the pairing may give a lesson which is not so apparent in the separate sayings. See Handout #2.

5A1 and 5A2 are about Shùn: he yearned for his parents' affection at 50, and he married without informing his parents. The pairing focuses not simply on filiality, but more exactly on conflicted filiality. As Legge notes, the real issue in 5A2 is providing posterity for the family. In this pair, then, filiality is a duty even if not returned (5A1) and also where the long-range obligation of procreation outweighs the short-range duty of direct obedience (5A2).

The next pair gives a different set of conflicts. 5A3 shows that the duty to a brother may be made compatible with a ruler's duty to his people, and 5A4, that the duty of a subject toward the ruler did not apply to Shùn's father, since he need only be pleased at the honor he received by being the ruler's father. We may not find this convincing, but the point for understanding the chapter is that the same device of conflict resolution is used in both.

5A5 and 6 ask: is succession properly by merit or by birth? The answer is that it is by neither. All valid succession rests on the approval of Heaven, which as 5A5 points out, is identical to the approval of the people. “Yáu recommended Shùn to Heaven and Heaven accepted him; he presented him to the people and the people accepted him.” This is the theme of Mencian populism.

With 5A7 and 9, the pair which results when we remove the extraneous 5A8, we move from the ruler to the minister. This pair denies that a minister can arise from a menial position. Mencian elitism here tempers the populism expressed in the preceding pair.

The minister topic continues across the chapter break. 5B1 and 2 are both about latitude, though here one must stretch to bring both under that rubric. Differences of personal scruple are acceptable in 5B1, and different ranks and incomes of rulers and officers in 5B2 are appropriate to their duties.

5B3 and 4 are about friendship. Both find that it is not between equals: there is always a moral superior, and that superiority must govern.

The problem of low office is taken up in the next pair, 5B5 and 5B6. The basic principle is that the proper function of the *gywǎndǒ* is to advise the ruler on policy as a minister. Is a lower office then acceptable? Yes, if it is necessary to avoid poverty, but in that case one fulfils the duties of that office, and does not advise on policy. The ruler is entitled to that advice only if he acknowledges the *gywǎndǒ*'s as a superior, and employs him as a minister. This theme reappears in 5B6, on the protocol of gifts: support given as charity must be distinguished from a ministerial salary.

Last of all, in logical sequence, is the situation of NOT holding office. In 5B7, continuing the rule in the previous pair, the ruler may not summon a man of talent and virtue, but must approach him respectfully, acknowledging his superiority. Otherwise, the *gywǎndǒ* may refuse office. The associated problem is whether being out of office is an acceptable situation. 5B9 tells us that it is: a man of talent and virtue still has a function. That function is to embody and hand on the tradition itself.

With that provision, the option of not serving is protected as valid.

4. Reflections on Mencius 5

1. Mencius 5 harmonizes conflicting views, clears the ground by rejecting some wrong ideas then in circulation, and produces a correct view of Shùn and of antiquity in general.
2. Mencius 5 deals with the world as it is, to make the Mencian ideal workable.
3. Mencius 5 adjudicates cases of seeming conflicts of values, as a guide to service. Its focus is on noncontradiction.
4. The man of virtue must be respected. His options of service or nonservice are all valid. The system does not require untenable conduct. It gives the *gywǎndǒ* a place in the system, whether in or out of office.

5. Conclusion

The creation of a Mencian antiquity and the development of a practical guide to serving and surviving in office was not itself philosophy. But it gave support for individuals, and strengthened the conceptual basis on which to build their philosophy, a task which was then taken up in detail in the rest of the school chapters, Mencius 6 and 7.

Herein lies the importance of chapter 5 of the Mencius.