

SELECTIONS FROM THE MENCIUS: ON HUMAN NATURE

Introduction

Mencius (Mengzi, or Meng Ke) was a particularly powerful advocate for the thought of Confucius. Living in the fourth century BCE, about one hundred years after Confucius, Mencius, too, was concerned about the contradiction between the ideal of a peaceful, unified, hierarchical feudal kingdom and the reality of nearly constant warfare between de facto independent feudal states in which the large and powerful preyed upon and absorbed the smaller and weaker states. Like Confucius, Mencius offered his services to feudal lords. Also like Confucius, Mencius had a more successful career as a teacher than as an official.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Selections from the Mencius: **On Human Nature**

2A:6 All human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. The ancient kings had a commiserating mind and, accordingly, a commiserating government. Having a commiserating mind, a commiserating government, governing the world was like turning something around on the palm of the hand.

... Now, if anyone were to suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would always be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion. That he would react accordingly is not because he would use the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the child's parents, nor because he would seek commendation from neighbors and friends, nor because he would hate the adverse reputation. From this it may be seen that one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels aversion and shame would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human.

Questions:

1. What assumptions does Mencius make about human nature?
2. How does Mencius' thinking in regard to human nature fit with your conceptions of human nature?
3. How does Mencius' thinking on human nature compare to that of Xunzi?

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
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4. What implications does Mencius' thinking on human nature have for his advice on how to govern a state?

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Here is why I say that all human beings have a mind that commiserates with others. Now,¹ if anyone were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would always be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion. That he would react accordingly is not because he would use the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the child's parents, nor because he would seek commendation from neighbors and friends, nor because he would hate the adverse reputation. From this it may be seen that one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human.

The mind's feeling of pity and compassion is the beginning of humaneness (*ren*); the mind's feelings of shame and aversion is the beginning of rightness (*yi*); the mind's feeling of modesty and compliance is the beginning of propriety; and the mind's sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom.

Human beings have these four beginnings just as they have four limbs. For one to have these four beginnings and yet to say of oneself that one is unable to fulfill them is to injure one's ruler. When we know how to enlarge and bring to fulfillment these four beginnings that are within us, it will be like a fire beginning to burn or a spring finding an outlet. If one is able to bring them to fulfillment, they will be sufficient to enable him to protect 'all within the four seas'; if one is not, they will be insufficient even to enable him to serve his parents."

¹ At the beginning of the passage Mencius recalls that the ancient kings had this "mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others." Here he affirms that people of the present also have it.