

A Comparison Between the *Mencius* and Contemporary Philosophies

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Introduction

Mencius, also known as Mengzi, was born Meng Ke circa 405 BCE during the Warring States period and died circa 311 BCE.¹ Not much is known about Mencius's early life: we know that he studied the philosophy of Confucius extensively,² that he had become a statesman when he was about 65 years old, and that he had travelled extensively to give advice to rulers of the various Warring States of the period.

Mencius's own philosophy borrows much from the early work of Confucius, reiterating the importance of family, tradition, Ritual, and Duty. Yet, Mencius also places importance on the idea that all are born with good intentions and are molded instead by circumstance, as well as the idea that a ruler should be able to share his privileges with the people, thereby becoming "the people's father and mother"³ by giving back to the people.

One of the main reasons as for Mencius's importance to Confucian thought is the revival of Confucian teachings by Neo-Confucianists in the Song Dynasty, who felt the need to add a spiritual element to the philosophy to make it more appealing to a population that is primarily Buddhist. According to David Hinton, this attempt at redefining Confucianism from governing ideology to a spiritual ideology is why the

¹ Robert H. Gassmann, *Menzius : Eine Kritische Rekonstruktion Mit Kommentierter Neuübersetzung* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2016), 205.

² Gassmann, 207.

³ David Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics : Tao Te Ching, Analects, Chuang Tzu, Mencius* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013), 399.

Mencius, alongside *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* are associated with more contemporary Confucianism.⁴

As the ideas of the *Mencius* has now been ingrained into modern East Asian culture, it perhaps may be better for us to develop some level of understanding of the translated text, even though there may exist cultural cues or expressions that may be lost upon translation. The purpose of this report is to primarily analyze the *Mencius* in its translated form and, secondary to that, compare *Mencius* with the works of Confucius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi in order to provide reasons for why it has taken this new cultural importance developed by Neo-Confucian thinkers.

Analysis of the Mencius

The modern depiction of the *Mencius* is divided into 14 chapters, and every pair of chapters, or “books” as it is translated in the David Hinton translation of the *Mencius*, is about a certain set of events or pieces of wisdom and named after another person who appears most often or is the cause of Mencius’s giving of wisdom, excluding the final two chapters, which are titled “To Fathom the Mind”. Of the other books, whose titles are, in the order they are written in: “Emperor Hui of Liang” (which may also be read as “King Hui of Liang”), “Gongsun Chou”, “Duke Wen of Teng”, “Li Lou”, “Wan Chang”, and “Master Gao” (or “Gaozi”), where each of the chapters excluding the final pair focus on the conversations Mencius has with the people mentioned in the title of each book. These conversations mainly discuss the Confucian ideals of Ritual and Duty, Tradition, the Inner Heart and People, Humanity, and Governance, as well as self-discipline and

⁴ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 394.

self-criticism. The final pair of chapters, “To Fathom the Mind”, discusses the concepts of Destiny, the Way, and Humanity alongside the earlier set of concepts, as well as that of how to self-realize and self-cultivate, and is the closest in format to the early chapters of *The Analects*. Thus, there exists two distinct sections in the *Mencius*: the practical, generally made up of the first 12 chapters, and the introspective, generally made up of the last two chapters. As there exist introspective anecdotes within the practical books and practical anecdotes within the introspective books, for the purpose of this paper, we will be analyzing the *Mencius* in this practical-introspective format rather than a strictly chapter-chapter format.

With regards to the “practical chapters”, Mencius discusses the power the people hold over the rulers. Mencius begins by stating that the joys of the emperor should be shared with the people. This way, the emperor acts as the people’s father and mother⁵, where the emperor provides for the people such that the loyalty one has towards one’s own family would be shared with the country. Such a humane emperor, that is, an emperor that adhered to Ritual and Duty, Mencius says, would be able to bring all peoples together.⁶

A humane emperor, Mencius says, should bring stability to the nation, lest the people become restless and begin to break the law. If a humane people are punished, then the emperor has trapped himself with his own actions. According to Mencius, even the strongest states cannot stand without the will of the people⁷. Thus, Mencius says to listen

⁵ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 399.

⁶ Ibid, 400.

⁷ Ibid, 434.

to the people above all else, especially with regards to justice, to bring stability to society.⁸

With regards to humanity, alongside the importance placed on cultivating humanity as is the case with Mencius being a follower of Confucius, there is another importance placed on the goodness of the human heart. In conversation with Gaozi, another Confucian scholar, about human nature as compared to water, Mencius says,

“...Human nature is inherently good, just like water flows inherently downhill. There’s no such thing as a person who isn’t good, just as there’s no water that doesn’t flow downhill.”⁹

Human nature, in the *Mencius*, is inherently constant, only bending in the way of overwhelming force. However, Mencius says to not force others into roles, and instead let them do what they do best: do not teach a master of his craft his own craft, and do not forcibly bend those in service to the regent’s will, saying that,

“...in governance – if you say, “Put aside what you’ve learned and obey me”, how is that any different from trying to teach the jade-carver how to cut jade?”¹⁰

Among other things, Mencius says to turn weakness into strength: use a want for valor for the good of the community, use a love of wealth to be the love of the people’s wealth, etc. In the case of valor, Mencius states that, if one has a flaw that causes them to seek valor at every opportunity,

⁸ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 415.

⁹ Ibid, 518.

¹⁰ Ibid, 415

“Then let it not be small valor that you love... Let it be great valor that you love.”¹¹

Mencius also discusses how traditional society was much better than the current status of society regarding societal relations and that being more humane than current societal relations.

However, despite his radical ideas, for the time, he still promoted strict societal bounds according to Confucian tradition, such as the strict relationship between classes, within families, and within the imperial court.

With regards to family, familial hierarchies were still male-preferential in Mencius’s teaching. Mencius directly implies that who slaughter animals for food are not noble-minded. He goes one step further by saying,

“That’s why the noble- minded stay clear of their kitchens.”¹²

In a society where women were the ones who primarily cooked for a family, this not only directly implies that those who slaughter animals are not noble-minded, but also indirectly saying that women aren’t either. Besides this, Mencius also states that, in the communal well-field land-distribution system used by the ancients, named so for the shape of the character ‘井’ which can be seen as a square divided evenly into 9 blocks, with the center block being the communal farmland,

“[A]mong the peasants, each extra man in a family should be given an additional twenty-five acres”¹³,

¹¹ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 409

¹² Ibid, 402.

¹³ Ibid, 449.

meaning that, although the system was fair for each of the families, it was not fair for individual family members, and it would have been preferable to have male children for more land. Mencius also states, in adherence to tradition,

“To make deference the norm – that is the Way of married women.”¹⁴

Mencius supports this traditional societal inequality not just within families but within society at large by stating that

“[I]nequality is the very nature of things... If you tried to make everything equal in value, confusion would reign in all beneath Heaven. If elegant shoes and workaday shoes brought the same price, who would bother to make elegant shoes?”¹⁵

So, not only is inequality a fact of life, but, according to Mencius, essential to the inner workings of a proper Confucian society.

With regards to the introspective portion of *Mencius*, mainly consisting of the two books of “To Fathom the Mind”, Mencius comes closest to Confucius. In the first book of “To Fathom the Mind”, Mencius brings up the importance of destiny and self-cultivation. Mencius, again, points towards the importance of looking at one’s self to serve Heaven, stating,

“To fathom the mind is to understand your nature. And when you understand your nature, you understand Heaven. Foster your mind, nurture your nature – then you are serving Heaven.”¹⁶

Not only is Mencius empowering the individual, but he is also adding in a natural and spiritual element to Ritual, Duty, and Humanity.

¹⁴ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 458.

¹⁵ Ibid, 454.

¹⁶ Ibid, 541.

Especially important is the concept of destiny in these early sayings. Mencius says,

“Cultivate yourself well – and patient in that perfection, let it come. Then you will stand firm in your fate.”¹⁷

as well as,

“To fathom the Way in life, and then die – that is our true fate.”¹⁸

Not only is Mencius, throughout the final books, looking into how noble-minded person’s mind should operate, but he also injects some spirituality into it.

Comparison with Predecessors and Contemporaries

The *Mencius* shares much with its philosophical predecessor, *The Analects*, where both discuss in depth the importance of tradition, Ritual, and Duty. Mencius himself not only references the *Book of Songs* during conversation, but he also references *The Analects* in order to provide greater context for his own reasoning.

Between Confucius and Mencius, both speak much about traditions and the mechanisms and writings of the ancients. Both, for example, refer to the *Book of Songs* to interpret the people’s wisdom when they cannot dispense their own. Mencius also refers to and respects the teachings of Confucius in *The Analects*, citing him on multiple occasions in his own book.

With regards to more traditional society, Mencius refers to the communal system older dynasties used as superior to a private system, where the distribution of land is more rigid. Mencius explains by stating,

¹⁷ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 541.

¹⁸ Ibid.

“Communal means everyone together, and mutual means mutual assistance.”¹⁹

As Mencius emphasizes tradition, there is little doubt as to which system Mencius prefers.

When a student who had chosen to leave his old teacher and go to another teacher came to Mencius, Mencius condemns him for discarding Ritual and for giving up on his old teacher in order to follow someone who claimed to follow the Way of an ancient emperor, Shen Nung.²⁰

Additionally, Confucius and Mencius speak about being flexible in the inflexible, always cultivating yourself to find your place in society, like water in a cup. Perhaps this is the reason for the line in *The Analects* where Confucius says, somewhat out of nowhere,

"A cornered vessel without corners - a strange cornered vessel! A strange cornered vessel!"²¹

Laozi and Zhuangzi, on the other hand, talk about the pure flexibility of human nature, and how one should strive to go back towards a natural or original state, like that of water.²²

One of the key differences between the ideas of Mencius and Confucius is that Mencius places much more emphasis on the will of the people. Confucius, on the other hand, primarily discusses how people should act within society.

¹⁹ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 447.

²⁰ Ibid, 449-454.

²¹ Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Chinese Text Project.

²² Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, trans. Bruce R. Linnell (Project Gutenberg, 2015), 16.

With regards to other philosophies, Mencius expresses distinct disdain for the works of Yang Zhu and Mozi, the former's teachings are specifically about the individual, "denying the sovereign", and the latter's teachings are specifically about the community, "denying the father".^{23,24} Mencius specifically remarks,

"Unless the Way of Yang and Mo withers and the Way of Confucius flourishes, twisty words will keep deluding the people and blocking the path of Humanity and Duty."²⁵

However, Mencius still expresses the belief that those who follow Yang and Mo should come to their own conclusions, rather than being hounded for their beliefs.²⁶ Besides the ideas of Yang and Mo, Mencius's ideas of constant self-cultivation run contrary to the ideas of Laozi, who states that

"When the task is successful, the self should let go of it.
This is the Way of heaven."²⁷

Mencius's proposition that those with good hearts know their place in society also contradicts the Zhuangzi's idea of how the small cannot comprehend the great and how the short-lived cannot understand the long-lived. The Burton Watson translation of the *Zhuangzi* states,

"Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived."²⁸

²³ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 465-466.

²⁴ Ibid, 547.

²⁵ Ibid, 466.

²⁶ Ibid, 561.

²⁷ Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, trans. Bruce R. Linnell (Project Gutenberg, 2015), 17.

²⁸ Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 24.

Whereas Mencius brings up the words of Confucius, where people, whether in high or low positions, know their place in society.²⁹

Mencius's position on governance is also very similar to that of Laozi, where the government should operate in such a way that serves the people. However, Mencius argues for a clear hierarchy where the emperor should serve in a way such that he would be able to, perhaps openly, call himself the people's father and mother. Laozi, on the other hand, states that

“The existence of the best ruler is barely known to the people.
Next is one who they love and praise.
Next is one who they fear.
Next is one who they ridicule.”³⁰

Despite these different preferences, Mencius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi still place a lot of importance on the individual. Mencius himself discusses the importance of looking inward in order to understand any issue with others in society, as can be seen in the introspective chapters of the *Mencius*, whereas Laozi and Zhuangzi both instead discuss the importance of, again, returning to an original state of mind through nature.

Conclusion

Not only was Mencius a radical thinker for his time, but he also provides us insight as for why Confucianism shifts from pure philosophy to a spiritual and scholarly philosophy by the Song Dynasty and the Chinese Culture shift from an emphasis on strict social hierarchies to more flexible social hierarchies and a shift in beliefs towards an

²⁹ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 514.

³⁰ Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, 25.

ideally accountable government. However, in each dynastic cycle, later the rulers of the dynasty would often use the hierarchy to control the people rather than helping the people.

However, due to the limitations of this report, certain details have been left out for the sake of readability. Other ideas in *Mencius* one should note include the concept of *qi*, where Mencius speaks about how the human “will” is something to be forcefully held, whereas *qi* (written as 氣 in Traditional Chinese) is something to be left to culture on its own, rather than be cultivated by oneself.³¹

Another set of concepts important to the *Mencius* are the definitions of generosity, loyalty, and humanity, where Mencius describes them with the following:

To share your wealth is called generosity. To teach people about living nobly is called loyalty. To be worthy of all beneath Heaven is called Humanity – and so it’s easy to give all beneath Heaven away, but to be worthy of it is difficult indeed.³²

Today, this concept is important because people are more self-serving than ever, choosing to attack each other and attempt to tear each other’s image down rather than choosing to build respect between individuals. If Mencius were to see our society at large, he would certainly say that there is much to improve on.

Besides these concepts, with the spirituality invoked within the final portion of the *Mencius*, there is little doubt as for why Neo-Confucian scholars took to making the book part of Confucian canon. By discussing fate and destiny, Mencius brings certainty to Confucian philosophy, and by interpreting *The Analects* and the *Book of Songs*, he

³¹ Hinton, *The Four Chinese Classics*, 425.

³² Ibid, 452.

brings traditional legitimacy, for lack of a better term, to his more radical ideas, including the power people hold over the government and the importance of self-cultivation.

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