

*A 'salt-of-the-earth' sage-king: Convergence and divergence in early Confucian thought about government – instruction, consultation, and legitimacy.*

This essay was a response to the following question: -

Compare how the ideal ruler is pictured in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. Was Mencius a true follower of Confucius in this regard? Did he build on Confucius' ideas, change them, distort them, improve them ... ?<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

While Mencius has generally been considered the defender of Confucian thought, the following discussion will show that coursing through the broad similarities between the two doctrines are delicate fissures. Similarities and differences exist on the subject of how a ruler should rule, the permissibility of holding a ruler accountable, and the standing of a ruler with regards his people. The author acknowledges that inconsistencies in these ancient texts are to be expected; however we must judge them in the form that antiquity has provided.

### Humane Government

Before proceeding to discuss Mencius' ideal government, a brief outline of his picture of human nature is warranted. In simple terms, Mencius believed human nature to be inherently good. Specifically, all human beings possessed four incipient virtues – commiseration, shame and dislike, respect and reverence, as well as right and wrong (6A:6) - simply by virtue of being human, in that it was these qualities that gave humans the character of being human. The reason for our failing to follow this inherent goodness is because of the destructive effect of external influences (for instance, the Niu mountain analogy at 6A:8) which act on our senses so as to lead us astray (6A:15), and because the virtues are akin to buds that needed to be cultivated in order to assert themselves over destructive external elements.<sup>2</sup>

This is relevant to Mencius' ideas about the ideal ruler, as it is arguable that Mencius founds his argument on the ideal ruler on his conception of human nature. Because all men have inherently good minds, says Mencius, and cannot bear to witness the suffering of others, the sage kings established government “that could not bear to see the suffering

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<sup>1</sup> Editions of texts used were: Confucius, *The Analects (Lun yu)*, translated by D.C. Lau, Penguin Books, 1979; Chan, Wing Tsit, “Idealistic Confucianism: Mencius” *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 1963, 49-83

<sup>2</sup> Van Norden, Bryan W. (1998) “Mencius” In E Craig (Ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London: Routledge. Retrieved September 9, 2004, from <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G047> in response to Neo-Confucian interpretations that the virtues were fully realised

of the people.”(2A:6) Therefore, Mencius’ prescription is that a ruler must govern humanely; the practice of humane government is the secret formula for winning the empire (1A:5, 2A:3). So, not only does the fact that humanity is naturally good mean that government should also be good, but that it is largely a matter of pragmatics – humane government will automatically attract support from the common people, who will submit willingly, rather than needing force to enforce obedience (2A:3, 2A:5). Implicit even at this stage is an acknowledgement by Mengzi of the importance of the common people. This shall be returned to later, but it will suffice to say that the magnetism of humane government is so strong that Mencius sees it extending to the people in neighbouring states (2A:5)

The content of this ‘humanity’ has many dimensions. It appears that it is best understood in the ordinary sense of ‘humanity’, demonstrated in 4A:2: after asserting that Confucius had said, “There are two ways to follow, that of humanity, and that of inhumanity”, Mencius adds that a ruler “who oppresses his people to the extreme will himself be slain and his kingdom will perish.” Therefore, with harsh oppression the opposite of humanity, the absence of such helps constitute humanity. The idea of a government geared to prevent the suffering of the people (2A:6) is further evidence for this interpretation.

There are other ideas which Mencius associates with humane government to substantiate the concept. In 3A:3, for instance, Mencius explains how it is the duty of the ruler to provide a secure livelihood for the people, and that should he fail to do so, then the criminal activity which the people turn to in desperation cannot be justifiably punished because the moral responsibility lies with him, and not the people. Chapter 2A:5 counsels that the political magnetism which ‘humane government’ is said to provide in 2A:3 and 4A:9 is generated from the employment of such strategies as the use of public labour in lieu of taxes on private goods; no punishment or fine for families that cannot provide the required quota of cloth; employing the wisest men in government; and the reduction or elimination of taxes to encourage trade and travel. However, an important aspect is that the ruler was envisaged as having a role in the cultivation of the people (2A:6) – for a person to say that ‘a ruler cannot develop them, they are destroying the ruler’. Therefore, ‘humane government’, while capable of being expressed simply as ‘good’ or ‘benevolent’, is a layered concept, applying practical economic measures designed to achieve ‘the good life’ for the people, and broadly characterisable as being in the interests of the people.

Confucius’ *Analects* does not contain as thoroughly articulated and unambiguous a discourse on whether human nature is good or otherwise as appears in *the Mencius*. Nonetheless, there appears to be a *prima facie* accord with the Mencian doctrine, as for Confucius, government is correction (12:17) – that is, correction of the populace. The process by which this takes place, however, is interesting in how it subtly differs from Mencius’ approach – similar to Mencius, Confucius claims that a ruler’s own straightness will have an attractive effect to bring recalcitrant subjects into line (16:1) and produce obedience to the governing authority (13:6; 13:13; 12:17). Additionally, he counsels for the ruler to “[j]ust desire the good yourself and the common people will be good.” (12:19) So, conformity with goodness means both obedience to the ruler, and that the

proper approach for the ruler to engage in the process of ruling/cultivation is by example. Confucius even evinced a belief that if the ruler acted properly, no extra effort on his part was needed (15:5, 2:1).<sup>3</sup> Mencius agrees that the ruler will cultivate the people by example (4A:20), but he also advocated the establishment of educational institutions to actively instil the virtues he espoused (3A:3). Confucius then may be said to place much more emphasis on this principle of *instructive government* by example, while Mencius would appear to incorporate with a more institutionalised, pragmatic, and perhaps *realistic* approach.

Secondly, Confucius appears to advocate a governmental approach that approximates Mencius' ideas of 'humane government'. Specific similarities include: Mencius advocated employment of the best men in positions of government; similarly, Confucius counselled to raise the good and straight above the crooked which will again fulfil the twin functions of teaching 'straightness' (12:22) and achieving obedience (2:19, 2:20); tolerance from those in high positions (3:26), "benign" rule (4:11), and the according of dignity and kindness to the people (2:20) are valued; 'sage' is the deserved title of someone who can bring "help to the multitude" and "give extensively to the common people" (6:30). Additionally, the gentleman cultivates himself so as to bring 'peace and security' to the people (14:42). Broadly speaking, therefore, Confucius is arguing for benevolent rulership that has varying degrees of similarity with Mencius (for instance, the principle of raising the good) but has general accord with it on ideals of compassionate treatment of the community. However, it is here that the strongest similarities exist. As shall be demonstrated, Mencius takes his Confucian foundations beyond that which was favoured by Confucius.

#### Mencius' Extremism

The most significant divergence between the two thinkers involves the extrapolation made by Mencius from his belief that the ruler is obliged to ruler with humanity that where a ruler fails to do so the populace beneath him have a right to rise in resistance of his despotism and overthrow. In Chapter 1B:8, Mencius declares that 'he who injures humanity is a bandit' – once a ruler so injures humanity, his kingly status is lost, so that the act of deposing him is not to be named 'regicide', but is simply tyrannicide.

Mencius' reasoning appears to be influenced by the principle of the Mandate of Heaven<sup>4</sup>, but is also an example of an application of the 'rectification of names'.<sup>5</sup> In this particular

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<sup>3</sup> this is referable to a philosophical concept used by Confucius known as *de*; typically translated as "virtue" it is more accurately described as "potency" or "power"; therefore, the meaning here is that a ruler who is correct is of such potency that an orderly state just 'happens'; additionally, what attracts the many to a ruler's correctness is his *de* – see Graham, A.C., *Disputers of the Tao : philosophical argument in Ancient China*, Open Court, 1989, 13-15

<sup>4</sup> the idea that once a ruler no longer was ruling well his family dynasty lost the favour of Heaven; on whom the favour now rested were to overthrow the incumbent dynasty – for a more detailed and articulate treatment, see Chapter 1, "The Chinese Tradition in Antiquity", De Bary, William Theodore, et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Columbia

incarnation of this idea, the standard of conduct implied by a name had to match the conduct of the person to whom the name was attached.<sup>6</sup> A ruler only deserves the name 'king' if they govern in a kingly fashion, which in Mencius' view equates with humane government. Therefore, whatever moral prohibition there is for killing a bad Emperor is by definition not applicable. This is an intellectual inheritance from Confucius<sup>7</sup>, demonstrated in passages such as 12:11 – "Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Mencius and Confucius appear to agree on this philosophical principle.

However, Confucius clearly does not endorse the radical conclusion reached by Mencius from the latter's adoption of this approach. Confucius favoured the Zhou dynasty, holding its kings as models to be emulated (e.g. 3:14). Despite this, in a metaphorical passage where the music of Shun is compared with the music of King Wu of the Zhou dynasty (3:25), Confucius indicates a preference for the former, it being 'perfectly beautiful and perfectly good', with the latter being 'perfectly beautiful, but not perfectly good'. This has been interpreted<sup>9</sup> as a recognisance by Confucius of the fact that, while Shun acceded to the empire on the abdication of Yao, a consensual and peaceful transition, King Wu established the Zhou dynasty through the violent overthrow of the previous ruler of the Shang dynasty. This fact taints the legitimacy of the Zhou line to a certain degree for Confucius, which contrasts sharply with the unwavering resolve with which Mencius declares that tyrannicide is perfectly permissible, and thereby demonstrates how Mencius extends on the principles expressed in the *Analects* to reach conclusions quite removed from Confucius' beliefs.

#### Regard for the Common People, and a Ruler's Status

Chapter 1B:8 of *The Mencius* appears to conform with an apparent trend of Mencius' to reduce the status distinction between ruler and ruled. This impression seems thoroughly demonstrated in 7B:14, where Mencius declares that the people are the most important element in a state, while the ruler is the least important. This standpoint seems referable again to Mencius' belief in the intrinsic human propensity towards goodness, for example when he proclaims the revered sage-kings Yao and Shun to be 'the same as any man' (3A:1). To say that government comes last also recalls the point made earlier about government being for the people, and stated in this way, Confucius agrees (12:9).

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University Press, 1960, 6-7; Mencius explained his understanding of the workings of the Mandate of Heaven in 5A:5, where Heaven's will is explained as being evinced by the fact that the Empire simply 'followed' whomever Heaven had deemed worthy; this illuminates why Mencius thought that the people would naturally follow a ruler who ruled with humanity, as he says 'Heaven see as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear.'

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 3 "Mencius", in Liu Shu-Hsien, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998, at 52

<sup>6</sup> Fung Yu Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Free Press, 1966, at 41,

<sup>7</sup> Liu Shu-Hsien, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> this translation is from Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> by the translator of this edition of *the Analects*, D.C. Lau, at 71

However, in 8:9 he says “The common people can be made to follow a path but not to understand it”. He would therefore not seem to share the ‘levelling’ inclinations shown suggested by 7B:14 of *Mencius*.

However, this may be overstating the egalitarianism of Mencius’ philosophy. The great analogy Mencius uses when describing the ideal relationship between ruler and subject is that of a parent and child (1B:7, 2A:5). This suggests a superior-subordinate relationship, thus undermining the apparent egalitarianism referred to above. 1B:7 says that the judgement of the people is to be preferred over that of officials – however, Mencius makes very clear that this judgement is only to be used as a *guide*, and that final decisions always rest with the ruler, the ruler’s personal judgement having ultimate priority. Therefore, while Mencius appears to have reduced the distance between ruler and subject, he maintains Confucius’ approach that government should be for the people, but in no way were the common people to be regarded as able to have a decisive influence, thereby diminishing the significance of his reputedly ‘democratic’ ideas.

However, in further elaborating on the task of the ruler as compared with those of his subjects, Mencius makes a clear departure from Confucius. In 3A:4, Mencius states that while great men labour with their minds, little men labour with their strength, with the former governing the latter. This statement seems to confirm the suspicion with which his ‘egalitarianism’ was treated in the above paragraph<sup>10</sup>; however the point to be made is probably a practical one<sup>11</sup>, as it appears directed towards the instituting of an efficient and cooperative structure – “If one must make the things himself before he uses them, this would make the whole empire run about on the road.” However, this shows Mencius is also characterising the job of the sage as so taxing as to preclude his participation in menial labour: “When sages are concerned so much with their people, had they the time for farming?”

Confucius seems opposed to such a characterisation. Confucius praises the example of the sage king Yu, who lived a poor and humble existence, engaging in manual tasks while helping the people by hand (8:21), in contrast to heroes known for their physical strength, who typically met violent deaths (14:5). Indeed, Confucius suggests that the government should not occupy a ruler’s full attention: Yao and Shun were lofty because they “held aloof” from the Empire while in power (8:18). Therefore we see a profound disagreement between Mencius and Confucius, Mencius still endorsing a ruler who, notwithstanding Mencius’ efforts to the contrary, is rightfully above and removed from the people, his life entirely consumed with the running of the empire, and Confucius preferring a ruler who works shoulder-to-shoulder with his subjects.

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<sup>10</sup> Chan, Wing Tsit, *op. cit.*, at 69; although Chan says that because Mencius does not suggest that anyone is bound to their class by birth, it is a distinction based simply on function and so is not as out-of-keeping with the earlier tendencies towards equality.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* (see n 9), although I have still maintained that the earlier leanings towards equality on Mencius’ part were more apparent than real

Conclusion

This discussion has showed that broad similarities between Confucius' and Mencius' respective positions on correct government exist alongside subtle but significant differences. While possessing the same broad vision of an ethical government geared to serving the people, Mencius' incorporated a more pragmatic approach to the instruction of the backward, whereas Confucius was convinced that *de* is all the ruler needs. Similarly, while Mencius gave the people an unqualified power to revolt, Confucius believed that a new dynasty rising on the ashes of an old one could not equal the standard of one achieved by peaceful means. And finally, and perhaps ironically, Confucius seems to have favoured a ruler more in touch with the common people despite Mencius' own efforts to encourage rulers to consult their subjects.