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MENCIUS

c. 371 B.C.-

c. 289 B.C.

The Chinese philosopher Mencius was the most important successor to Confucius. His teachings, as set forth in the *Book of Mencius*, were highly esteemed in China for many centuries. He was often referred to as “the Second Sage,” that is, second in wisdom only to Confucius himself, whom he followed by about two hundred years.

Mencius was born about 371 B.C., in the small state of Tsou, in what is now the Shantung province of China. The era in which he was born, the last stage of the Chou dynasty, is referred to by the Chinese as “the Period of the Warring States,” since China was politically disunited at that time. Mencius, though he had been reared in the Confucian tradition and was always a strong supporter of Confucian theories and ideals, eventually became respected as a scholar and philosopher in his own right.

Mencius spent much of his adult life travelling about China and offering his advice to various rulers. Several rulers listened respectfully to him, and for a while he was an official in the state of Ch'i; but by and large, he held no permanent, policy-making government position. In 312 B.C., when he was about fifty-nine years old, he returned to his home state of Tsou, where he remained until his death. The year of his death is uncertain, but was probably 289 B.C.

Mencius made disciples during his own lifetime, but his influence upon China derives mainly from the *Book of Mencius*, in which his principal teachings are set forth. Although the book may have been subjected to some editing by his disciples, there seems little doubt that it basically represents Mencius's own ideas.

The tone of the *Book of Mencius* is idealistic and optimistic, reflecting Mencius's firm conviction that human nature is basically good. In many ways, his political ideas are very much like those of Confucius; in particular, Mencius firmly believed that a king should rule primarily by moral example rather than by force. Mencius, however, was much more of a "people's man" than Confucius was. "Heaven sees as the people see; heaven hears as the people hear," is one of his best-known statements.

Mencius stressed that the most important component of any state is the people, rather than their ruler. It is a ruler's duty to promote the welfare of his people; in particular, he should provide them with moral guidance and with suitable conditions for their livelihood. Among the governmental policies he advocated were: free trade; light taxes; conservation of natural resources; a more equal sharing of the wealth than generally prevailed; and government provision for the welfare of aged and disadvantaged persons. Mencius believed that a king's authority derives from Heaven; but a king who ignores the welfare of the people will lose the "mandate of Heaven," and will, rightly, be overthrown. Since the last part of that sentence effectively overrules the first part, Mencius was in fact asserting (long before John Locke,) that the people have a right to revolt against unjust rulers. It was an idea that became generally accepted in China.

Now generally speaking, through most of history, the sort of policies that Mencius advocated have been more popular with subjects than with their rulers. It is therefore hardly surprising that Mencius's proposals were not adopted by the Chinese rulers of his own day. In the course of time, however, his views became increasingly popular with Confucian scholars and with the Chinese people. Mencius's reputation, which was already high,

became even greater in China following the rise of neo-Confucianism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

In the West, of course, Mencius has had virtually no influence whatsoever. This is only partly due to the fact that he wrote in Chinese. The *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, which was written in China at roughly the same time as the *Book of Mencius*, has been translated into European languages many times simply because so many people find the ideas expressed in that book intriguing. But relatively few Westerners have found the *Book of Mencius* particularly original or incisive.

It may sound attractive for the government to concern itself with the welfare of the aged and the disadvantaged; it also sounds attractive to be in favor of low taxes. However, an American politician who announced that he was in favor of those two policies, without being a lot more specific, would be likely to be mistrusted by liberals and conservatives alike. Similarly, Mencius indicates on the one hand that he favors a more equitable sharing of the wealth, and on the other hand indicates his approval of free trade and low taxes, without ever really coming to grips with the possible conflicts between those policies. This may sound a bit unfair to Mencius, who after all was not running for Congress. There is something to be said for a philosopher who presents a set of worthy (though partly inconsistent) general principles, even if he does not specifically indicate how the conflicts between those principles are to be resolved. Nevertheless, in the long run, a philosopher such as Machiavelli, who expressed his priorities more clearly than Mencius did, has had more influence upon human thought.

But Mencius's writings have certainly influenced the Chinese. Though his importance to Confucianism is not nearly as great as St. Paul's importance to Christianity (for one thing, Mencius lacked Paul's unusual proselytizing ability), he was unquestionably an immensely influential writer. For roughly twenty-two centuries, his ideas were studied throughout a region that included over 20 percent of the world's population. Only a few philosophers anywhere have had so great an influence.