Journal 5: Mengzi (Mencius)

Mengzi continues the tradition of Confucianism and elaborates upon it by stating that all humans are born with the intrinsic capacity for virtuous living. Mengzi states that all humans “have the heart” for benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (Mengzi; 6A6, 147). Although this may sound counterintuitive to some people, considering the evil found in the world, Mengzi believes that this is not due to a lack of these virtues being part of human nature. Instead, Mengzi believes that it is a failing in the cultivation of potential that is naturally found in all human beings. He compares these four virtues to sprouts, which need to be nurtured into their full potential (Mengzi; 2A6, 129). Like Kongzi, Mengzi saw that restoring order to the world was only obtainable through the development of virtuous living and not through harsh governmental structures and punishments. Benevolence, being one of the most important virtues to both Kongzi and Mengzi, should be practiced by people as well as by government to rule the people. Mengzi, when speaking with King Xuan of Qi, recounts a story of the king sparing an ox (on its way to sacrifice) because he couldn’t “bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution grounds” (Mengzi; 1A7, 118). The people of Qi thought the king was being stingy, but instead he choose to spare the ox from a place of benevolence; because the king did not do so for profit, or for the opinion of others, but because he was moved by his nature to do so, this was an act of true benevolence. Mengzi uses this story to teach the king that he has the capacity to be a great king inside him, he must just train his virtues to be available to all his people and not just in specific cases.

Although we aren’t born with developed virtues, Mengzi’s theory that we have an innate predisposition toward virtuous action has far reaching implications. He grounds and sustains this theory with metaphors that can be applied to our current day and real-life situations. Mengzi uses a story of a child and a well as an example to show that virtuous behavior is intrinsic to human nature. He lays out this thought experiment; “Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion” (Mengzi; 2A6, 129-130). Because the feelings anyone in that situation would have would be instinctual, this shows that the feeling isn’t a response of profit (personal benefit, being commended, etc.) and that this feeling of compassion (which translates to benevolence) is ingrained into our being. In fact, Mengzi believes that because of this attribute found in human nature, anyone can reach this fulfilled potential of virtuous living.

Although this theory is seemingly optimistic, as I mentioned in my introductory comments: the world is filled with evil people, Mengzi states that it is the interference of the external world that damages the true nature of a human being. He compares human nature to a stream of water, stating how “there is no water that does not tend downward” there is “no human who does not tend toward goodness” (Mengzi; 6A2, 145). Although human nature tends toward goodness, like water tends downward, this can be disrupted by external forces. When a person lives in a hostile environment, their benevolence can become lost. I believe this is important to understand even for today’s issues with systemic racism and socio-economic oppression. People attempt to defend their racist notions by attributing the fault to a group of people’s lack of moral character, but this is wrong. If groups of people have been economically crippled throughout history, their needs haven’t been met, and their voices have been suppressed, the problem would be the unfair pressures imposed upon these groups by society and not their nature. I would like to relate the story of “Ox Mountain” to the racist policies enacted by the American government on African Americans for hundreds of years. Ox mountain was once beautiful and full of nature, but through constant pillaging of its resources it was left barren (Mengzi; 6A8, 149). Mengzi compares this to seeing people in their present moment, just because they are lacking in benevolence and righteousness doesn’t mean that it’s in their nature to lack these virtues. Comparatively, when groups of people have been marginalized and stigmatized, it’s not in their nature to be impoverished, instead it is through systematic abuse of those groups that has created that structure.

To further elaborate this point, I’d examine Mengzi’s idea that without the proper nourishment, the “sprouts” of virtue wouldn’t be able to grow. He states, “If one can prevent the injury of hunger and thirst from being an injury to one’s heart, then there will be no concern about not being as good as other people” (Mengzi; 7A27, 153). This is a powerful section, it underlines that like hunger and thirst, which cripple a person’s body, there are things that can cripple a person’s heart. Like food and water are essential for physical growth, dignity, respect, and equality are necessary for spiritual growth. When there is a lack of nourishment for groups of people alienated by their own government, the fault of their actions can’t wholly be on them. Certain mistakes can’t be attributed to their nature or lack of virtue, instead it must be attributed to the system that refused to nourish their virtues.

Citation:

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