

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AS SEEN BY MENCIUS

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Of the three founding fathers of a philosophy known as Confucianism, Confucius, Mencius and Hsun Tzu, I have chosen to write on Mencius's philosophy of history for two reasons: Firstly, of the three, Mencius's teachings are the most lucid and readable, though more elaborate and extended than the master Confucius's. Secondly, Mencius stands in between Confucius and Hsun Tzu, living between 371 B.C. and 289 B.C., a century after the death of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and living to see the birth of Hsun Tzu (340-245 B.C.). Whereas Confucius in the *Analects* considered the preceding dynasties of Hsia and Shang as dark areas, and spoke frequently only of the Chou Dynasty and its founders and expanders as the culmination and climax of the glories of the Classical Age,¹ Mencius's vision, on the other hand, extends farther to the supposedly legendary kings Yao and Shun, and already much knowledge has been gathered in his time to enable him to speak elaborately of the fiscal systems and laws of antiquity. It took two hundred years after Mencius for historical studies to be truly developed in Szu-ma Ch'ien, the father of Chinese history, but already in Mencius we have an elaborate philosophy of history.

Nevertheless, to extract a philosophy of history from the works of Mencius is not an easy task. Chinese philosophy, like any philosophy of the Orient for that matter, does not make any clear demarcation between the different branches of philosophy (logic, metaphysics, ethics, cosmology, etc.) as does Western philosophy. The spirit of Chinese philosophy is synthetic and predominantly moral. Moreover, the form of writing is allegorical, aphoristic and dialogical.

So, this paper is a modest attempt to outline several highlights in Mencius's philosophy of history or to be exact, of Chinese history. However, since Mencius knew of no other civilization than his own, it is safe to speak of his philosophy of history.

At the outset, it is worthwhile to mention the historical documents which form the basis of Mencius's philosophy of history. Mencius is familiar with the Confucian classics, the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of Documents*.² Mencius also quotes frequently from the works of Confucius since he is traditionally said to be a pupil of Tzu-szu, Confucius's grandson.

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Although the works mentioned above serve as the sources of his philosophy of history, Mencius is not uncritical of them.

Mencius said, "Rather than believe all that we read in the *Book of Documents*, it were better that there were no *Book of Documents*. From the chapter 'Wu Ch'eng,' for example, I have obtained two or three exemplary passages, but no more. Though the man Humanity is never opposed, the 'Wu Ch'eng' describes the most Humane (King Wu) attacking the most Inhumane (Chieh the Tyrant) and says that 'the blood flowed till the pestles are afloat in the mortars.' How could that be? ³

What does Mencius see in Chinese history? How does it unfold before him? Several points seem to be predominant in his works.

1. History is the progress of the world in cycles from primordial sageliness to the present confusion and degradation.

There is a tendency in Mencius (as well as in Confucius) to look back to the past age as more perfect than the present. The farther one goes to the past, the more exemplary. For Confucius, the Duke of Chou is the hero. For Mencius, it is farther back, to the kings Yao and Shun. History is a kind of descent from the divine sages to the model kings and finally to Confucius whom Mencius considers to have been king or "Son of Heaven." ⁴

The world ⁵ began for Mencius with a big flood which was controlled and made habitable by the efforts of the three legendary heroes, Yao, Shun and Yu. But when Yao and Shun died, tyrants arose and destroyed houses and re-flooded the plains to make fishing grounds. This descent, however, was then stopped by exemplary figures but re-continued by evil ones. After Yao, Shun and Yu, the world was governed by dynasties, Hsia, Shang and Chou. The three emperors of the three dynasties each had their ministers who were usually the worthies and their venal relatives by whom the dynasty would be threatened or lost. Thus, history for Mencius is a series of deterioration and recoveries, a kind of cycle but always the model of perfection is the past, specifically Yao and Shun.

Mencius said, "The perfect square and the perfect circle come only from the set square and compasses. The perfect exemplars of man's relation to man come from the sages. Both he who, as a prince, wishes to follow fully the way of princes, and he, who, as subject wishes to follow fully the way of subjects, should take Yao and Shun as his model." ⁶

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Mencius is not deterministic and pessimistic in his view of history. Heaven always steps in, usually about every five hundred years,⁷ with a sage king or a Confucius. The Mandate of Heaven, however, is placed in the mandate of the people. There is no conflict between divine providence and human freedom. When an evil king arises, Heaven gives sanction to the people to revolt and replace him.⁸ And usually, this revolt is led by a sage who has the blessings of Heaven.

Thus it is that, when Heaven is about to confer high office on a man, it first exercises his mind with suffering and flexes his muscles with toil. It inures his body to hunger and his person to poverty. It frustrates him in his undertakings so that his mind is stimulated, his nature toughened to endure, and he develops capabilities he lacked.⁹

2. The exemplars in history led the people by virtue, not by force.

Mencius, like the rest of Confucian philosophers, believes that historical movements are initiated by leaders who are sages. This has been the ideal of Chinese philosophy in general: "sageliness within and kingliness without." Mencius sees in Yao and Shun the models of sage-rulers, and in Po Yi, Yi Yin and Liu-hsia Hui the exemplary ministers. These sages may be separated by time and distance, but "the Sages from first to last observed identical principles."¹⁰

A sage is the teacher of a hundred generations--such men, for example, as Po Yi and Liu-hsia Hui. And so, when the story of Po Yi is told, the dull man becomes reasonable, and the weak man strengthens his resolve. When the story of Liu-hsia Hui is told, the mean man becomes open-hearted, and the boorish man becomes generous.

Inspiring they were a hundred generations ago; a hundred generations later, no man hearing of them but is similarly aroused.¹¹

What are these principles? They are filial piety,¹² truthfulness,¹³ sympathy¹⁴ and commiseration,¹⁵ purity, steadfastness and reconciliatoriness¹⁶--in short, all that is meant by virtue. There are four cardinal virtues in Confucianism: *Jen* (仁) Humanity, *I* (義) Justice or Righteousness, *Chih* (智) Wisdom, and *Li* (禮) Propriety. The true being of the sage lies in these four virtues.¹⁷ And for Mencius, as well as for Confucius, the virtue that binds and unites all virtues is *Jen* (仁), often translated as Humanity, Virtue, Benevolence, Love. The sage is the man of Humanity.

It is these men of Humanity who lead history. It is a leadership by the Golden Rule. Mencius said,

When Chieh and Chou lost the Empire, they lost the people. And by 'losing the people' I mean 'losing their sympathy.' There is a way to gain the Empire. It is to gain the people, and having gained them one gains the Empire. There is a way to gain the people. Gain their sympathy, and then you gain them. There is a way to gain their sympathy. Share with them the accumulation of the things you wish for, and do not impose upon them the things you yourself dislike.¹⁸

Again, Mencius said,

Can he be said to be truly wise, who to attain the best in government, does not start with the Way of the Former Kings?

It is for this reason that only men of Humanity ought properly to occupy high position. To lack Humanity and to be highly placed is to spread abroad evil in the populace. When the prince has no principles by which to measure, his subordinates have no standards to maintain. If the Court does not remain true to principles, the workmen will not keep true to standards. If the ruler contravenes Justice, lesser men will contravene the penal code. It will then be a matter of sheer luck that the State survives. Truly it is said, "It is not the imperfection of defensive walls, or the paucity of arms, that constitutes disaster for the State. It is neither a failure to increase the acreage of arable land, nor an inadequate accumulation of goods and wealth that constitutes the losses of a state. It is a *ruler who lacks propriety*, and subordinates who lack learning, and, when plunderers of the people prosper, it is these things that bring about the overthrow, in short order, of the State."¹⁹

Yet, for Mencius, it is Confucius alone among the sages who had the sense of appropriateness of the occasion.

In Confucius we have what we would call the quintessence of harmony. The quintessence of harmony is when the bronze and the jade instruments are in perfect accord. The bronze instruments begin the theme, and the jade instruments complete it. And so it is the duty of wisdom to begin the theme, and the duty of sageliness to complete it. Wisdom is like the virtuosity of a musician, and sageliness the strength he reveals in performance. It is like an archer, aiming at targets beyond the hundred paces. The arrow finding its mark is a matter of his strength, but its striking the bull's-eye is not so much a matter of his strength, but of his skill.²⁰

The sense of "*kairos*," of destiny, then, is important for a leader.

In contrast to the exemplar is the tyrant (also called Paramount Prince) who brings destruction to the empire. He is "one, who, pretending to Humanity, resorted to force" and "allegiance which is gained by the use of force is not allegiance of the heart--it is the allegiance which comes from imposing upon weakness."²¹

3. A philosophy of history is an ethical reflection on history.

No one single quotation from the works of Mencius can be cited here to support this view since most of the sayings of Mencius at the court with the kings regarding history are replete with moral lessons and judgments. In contrast to many Western historians and philosophers of history, Chinese philosophy and history are predominantly ethical. It is a must to derive a lesson from history, and an amoral history or philosophy of history is irrelevant. Knowledge is not for knowledge's sake but for virtuous action.

4. The root and ideal of history is the person as a social being.

Mencius said, "People commonly speak of 'the Empire, the State, and the family.' The Empire lies rooted in the State, and the State lies rooted in the family, and the family lies rooted in the individual."²² The root of history for Mencius is the person, the person as he interacts with fellow human beings, in the family, the community, the state and the world at large. History is the unfolding of this interaction of the person with others. This interaction, however, can be proper or improper, humane or inhumane, depending on the direction of the movement towards the ideal, and this ideal is the fullness of Humanity, which is the *Tao* (道), the Way. And the continuity of history is the continuity of the pursuance of or departure from the Way.

Mencius said, "If a man does not pursue the Way, it will not be pursued by his wife and children. If he leads others from the Way, the Way cannot be pursued by his wife and children."²³

And what is the Way in concrete? It is none other than the Way of Humanity, of *Jen*. And *Jen* comprises all that is best in the person.

Humanity (*Jen*) is man (*jen*). Put together, the words spell out "the Way."²⁴

What does history teach? None other than the Way of the ancient sages.²⁵ And the Way of the ancient sages is the way of

becoming truly a person, a person for others, a person in harmony with other human persons.

What a gentleman (Man of Humanity) cherishes is the cultivation of his person, and, in doing so, the world is given peace.²⁶

To sum up, Mencius sees history as the progress of the world in cycles from primordial sageliness to confusion and degradation, and the restoration is brought about by the exemplars in history who lead the people by virtue rather than by force. A philosophy of history then is an ethical reflection on history, the root and ideal of which is the person as a social being.

NOTES

1. Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964), 13.

2. Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs* (London, 1937). Bernard Karlgren, *The Book of Odes* (Stockholm, 1950) and his *The Book of Documents* (Stockholm, 1950). James Legge, "Book of Odes," Vol. 4 and "Book of Documents," Vol. 3 of *The Chinese Classics* (Oxford, 1893).

3. *Mencius*, 7B:3. Translation by W.A.C.H. Dobson, *Mencius* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966).

4. *Mencius*, 3B:9, 5A:6.

5. The Chinese character for China literally means "middle kingdom" (中國). The ancient Chinese considered their land as the world.

6. *Mencius*, 4A:2.

7. *Ibid.*, 7B:38.

8. *Ibid.*, 1B:7, 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 6B:15.

10. *Ibid.*, 4B:1.

11. *Ibid.*, 7B:15.

12. *Ibid.*, 4A:28.

13. *Ibid.*, 7B:33.

14. *Ibid.*, 4A:10.

15. *Ibid.*, 4B:20.

16. *Ibid.*, 5B:1.

17. *Ibid.*, 7A:21.

18. *Ibid.*, 4A:10.

19. *Ibid.*, 4A:1. Italics mine.

20. *Ibid.*, 5B:1.

21. *Ibid.*, 2A:3.

22. *Ibid.*, 4A:5.

23. *Ibid.*, 7B:9.

24. *Ibid.*, 7B:16. It is interesting to note that *Jen* is made up of two characters: 人 also pronounced *jen*, meaning human being, and 二 *erh*, meaning two. So *Jen* (仁) refers to the harmonious relationships between the person and fellowman.

25. *Ibid.*, 7A:8.

26. *Ibid.*, 7B:32.