

in the clarity of morning's healing *ch'i*—but the values that make you human keep thinning away. All day long, you're tangled in your life. If these tangles keep up day after day, even the clarity of night's healing *ch'i* isn't enough to preserve you. And if the clarity of night's healing *ch'i* isn't enough to preserve you, you aren't much different from an animal. When people see you're like an animal, they think that's all the potential you have. But does that mean this is the human constitution?

"With proper sustenance, anything will grow; and without proper sustenance, anything will fade away. Confucius said: *Embrace it and it endures. Forsake it and it dies. It comes and goes without warning, and no one knows its route.* He was speaking of the heart."

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. What is the rhetorical purpose of the character Kao at the beginning of this selection? How does he set up Mencius's argument? What kinds of objections to his own theory does this device allow Mencius to anticipate?
2. How does Mencius present the difference between "benevolence" and "righteousness"? Why does Kao Tzu see the first as internal to human nature and the second as external to human nature?
3. What role does human nature, for Mencius, play in the love we show to our family members? What role does it play in the respect that we show to strangers?
4. A great deal of the debate between Mencius and Kao Tzu concerns the origin of propriety, or proper social behavior, which is synonymous in the text with "righteousness." For Kao Tzu, propriety is a matter of social convention that has nothing to do with human nature. For Mencius, the standards of propriety are based on qualities that are inherently part of human nature. Which of these views do you find more convincing? Why?
5. How might Mencius perceive the nature of evil? If human beings are naturally good, where might evil originate? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
6. Do you agree with Mencius's statement, "Men's mouths agree in having the same relishes; their ears agree in enjoying the same sounds; their eyes agree in recognising the same beauty"? How does this idea of conformity, and with it Mencius's argument, conflict with modern ideas of the individual?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Mencius and Hsün Tzu (p. 100) disagree completely about human nature, yet both are dedicated Confucians. What elements of their respective philosophies justify their inclusion as members of the same school of thought?

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That's why the people loved goodness when Wen and Wu ruled, and they loved cruelty when Yu and Li ruled.² And there are still others who say: Human nature is inborn: some people are good and some evil. That's why a Hsiang could have Yao as his ruler, a Shun could have Blind Pureblind as his father, a Lord Ch'i of Wei and Prince Pi Kan could have the tyrant Chou as their nephew and sovereign.³

"But you say: Human nature is good. Does that mean all the others are wrong?"

"We are, by constitution, capable of being good," replied Mencius. "That's what I mean by good. If someone's evil, it can't be blamed on inborn capacities. We all have a heart of compassion and a heart of conscience, a heart of reverence and a heart of right and wrong. In a heart of reverence is Ritual, and in a heart of right and conscience is Duty. In a heart of reverence is Ritual, and in a heart of right and wrong is wisdom. Humanity, Duty, Ritual, wisdom—these are not external things we meld into us. They're part of us from the beginning, though we may not realize it. Hence the saying: *What you seek you will find, and what you ignore you will lose.* Some make more of themselves than others, maybe two or five or countless times more. But that's only because some people fail to realize their inborn capacities.

"The Songs say:

*Heaven gave birth to humankind,
and whatever is has its own laws:
cleaving to what makes us human,
people delight in stately Integrity.*

Of this, Confucius said: *Whoever wrote this song knew the Way well.* So whatever is must have its own laws, and whenever they cleave to what makes us human, the people must delight in stately Integrity."

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Mencius said: "In good years, young men are mostly fine. In bad years, they're mostly cruel and violent. It isn't that Heaven endows them with such different capacities, only that their hearts are mired in such different situations. Think about barley: if you plant

2. Yu and Li: kings singled out in the Confucian tradition for their arrogance and recklessness. Wen and Wu: ancient kings who were singled out by Confucius as eminent examples of virtuous rulers. In Mencius's time, philosophers commonly appealed to well-known ancient kings, good and bad, to support their arguments about statecraft.

3. Yao was an ancient emperor frequently cited by Confucius as the model of a righteous king, and Shun was Yao's handpicked, equally right-

eous successor. Blind Pureblind, also called Ku-Sau, was Shun's wicked father. Lord Ch'i of Wei was a wise man who refused to serve the wicked tyrant Chou, who killed his own uncle Prince Pi Kan. The point of all these examples is to refute Mencius's major claim—that human nature is essentially good and made bad by environment—by showing that the same environments that produced some of the most righteous people in history also produced some of the worst.

Mencius's rhetorical style is somewhat confusing at first because, like Plato in the "Gorgias," he advances his own arguments in a dialogue with others. Mencius adds an additional layer of complexity to this dialogue form by filtering Kao's arguments through a student, Kung-tu, who listens to both Kao and Mencius and tries to determine which of them speaks the truth.

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MASTER KAO SAID: "The nature of things is like willow wood, and Duty is like cups and bowls. Shaping human nature into Humanity and Duty is like shaping willow wood into cups and bowls."

"Do you follow the nature of willow wood to shape cups and bowls," replied Mencius, "or do you maul it? If you maul willow wood to make cups and bowls, then I guess you maul human nature to make Humanity and Duty. It's talk like yours that will lead people to ravage Humanity and Duty throughout all beneath Heaven."

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Master Kao said: "The nature of things is like swirling water: channel it east and it flows east, channel it west and it flows west. And human nature too is like water: it doesn't choose between good and evil any more than water chooses between east and west."

"It's true that water doesn't choose between east and west," replied Mencius, "but doesn't it choose between high and low? 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."

"Think about water: if you slap it, you can make it jump over your head; and if you push and shove, you can make it stay on a mountain. But what does this have to do with the nature of water? It's only responding to the forces around it. It's like that for people too: you can make them evil, but that says nothing about human nature." . . .

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Adept Kung-tu¹ said: "Master Kao said: *Human nature isn't good, and it isn't evil.* There are others who say: *Human nature can be made good, and it can be made evil.*

1. Kung-tu: Mencius's disciple.

Mencius
Man's Nature is Good
(circa 300 BCE)

OF THE HUNDREDS OF GREAT Chinese philosophers, poets, novelists, and statesmen whose works have been read in the West, only two have been given Latin names: K'ung Fu Tzu (551–479 BCE), who is known in the West as Confucius, and Meng Tzu (circa 371–circa 289 BCE), who is known as Mencius. After Confucius himself, Mencius is the most important figure in the development of Confucianism, a system of rites, rituals, and social observances that was the official state religion of China for nearly two thousand years.

Mencius lived and wrote during one of the most spectacular eras of social upheaval that the world has ever known: the Period of Warring States (475–221 BCE). During this period, the area now known as China consisted of numerous smaller states—all remnants of the great Chou Empire—who were constantly at war against each other. Confucianism, Legalism, Moism, and Taoism all emerged during this time as different ways to answer the most important question of the day: What is the best way to ensure political stability? The general Confucian answer to this question is that good government requires good leaders, and good leaders must be good people—people who honor their ancestors, observe the ancient rites, and act toward others with a spirit of rectitude and benevolence.

During Mencius's lifetime, Confucians were split on the question of human nature. Confucius had been puzzlingly vague on this matter, insisting only that all people had a duty to observe the rites and rituals handed down by their ancestors. Some, such as Mencius, took this to mean that humans were inherently good and, with the proper training, could become perfect. Others, such as Hsün Tzu, believed that the Confucian rites were necessary because humans were inherently evil and required rites to keep them in check. Mencius's arguments ultimately prevailed and influenced future generations of Confucians.

The excerpt here is drawn from chapter 21 of Mencius's major work, called the *Mencius*, and consists of a series of conversations between Mencius and the philosopher Kao Tzu and his disciples. Kao Tzu believed that human nature was neither inherently good nor inherently evil but a "blank slate" that could be conditioned in both directions. In Kao's philosophy, the love that people feel toward their relatives stems from internal human nature, but the respect that people show for strangers—and for the rites and traditions that were so important to Confucianism—must be conditioned by external forces. Mencius and his disciple Kung-tu refuse to make this distinction and insist that both love and respect proceed from internal feelings that form part of human beings' nature.

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the seeds carefully at the same time and in the same place, they'll all sprout and grow ripe by summer solstice. If they don't grow the same—it's because of inequities in richness of soil, amounts of rainfall, or the care given them by farmers. And so, all members belonging to a given species of thing are the same. Why should humans be the lone exception? The sage and I—surely we belong to the same species of thing.

"That's why Master Lung said: *Even if a cobbler makes a pair of sandals for feet he's never seen, he certainly won't make a pair of baskets.* Sandals are all alike because feet are the same throughout all beneath Heaven. And all tongues savor the same flavors. Yi Ya⁴ was just the first to discover what our tongues savor. If taste differed by nature from person to person, the way horses and dogs differ by species from me, then how is it people throughout all beneath Heaven savor the tastes Yi Ya savored? People throughout all beneath Heaven share Yi Ya's tastes, therefore people's tongues are alike throughout all beneath Heaven.

"It's true for the ear too: people throughout all beneath Heaven share Maestro Kuang's⁵ sense of music, therefore people's ears are alike throughout all beneath Heaven. And it's no less true for the eye: no one throughout all beneath Heaven could fail to see the beauty of Lord Tu. If you can't see his beauty, you simply haven't eyes.

"Hence it is said: *All tongues savor the same flavors, all ears hear the same music, and all eyes see the same beauty.* Why should the heart alone not be alike in us all? But what is it about our hearts that is alike? Isn't it what we call reason and Duty? The sage is just the first to discover what is common to our hearts. Hence, reason and Duty please our hearts just like meat pleases our tongues."

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Mencius said: "The forests were once lovely on Ox Mountain.⁶ But as they were near a great city, axes cleared them little by little. Now there's nothing left of their beauty. They rest day and night, rain and dew falling in plenty, and there's no lack of fresh sprouts. But people graze oxen and sheep there, so the mountain's stripped bare. When people see how bare it is, they think that's all the potential it has. But does that mean this is the nature of Ox Mountain?

"Without the heart of Humanity and Duty alive in us, how can we be human? When we abandon this noble heart, it's like cutting those forests: a few axe blows each day, and pretty soon there's nothing left. Then you can rest day and night, take

4 Yi Ya: an ancient chef who was revered for his culinary talents; according to legend, he once cooked his own son for his master's table.

5 Maestro Kuang: the most revered musician in Chinese history. Mencius makes the point that if everyone likes the cooking of Yi Ya and everyone likes the music of Kuang, then certain preferences in human nature are not subject to individual taste.

6 Ox Mountain: a mountain on the Pearl River Delta, near present-day Hong Kong. Mencius argues that, though it was in the nature of the mountain to have trees and lush vegetation, the human and animal population of the large state made it appear barren. The larger point is that even people's failure to act benevolently does not mean that they lack a natural disposition toward benevolence.