

Activity 4. The Book of Mencius

Source: <http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~cp28/confuc.htm> (Accessed April 11, 2010).

Instructions: Mencius or Meng Tzu (371-289 B.C.) was a disciple of Confucius and student of his grandson. He developed a philosophy based on the idea that humanity was essentially good and that a ruler could not govern without the tacit consent of people. In the *Book of Mencius*, he presented ideas similar to those advanced by John Locke in England and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in France during the European Enlightenment two thousand years later. Examine excerpts A – C from the *Book of Mencius* and answer questions 1 – 3.

A. Can the mountain be regarded any longer as beautiful since the trees have been hewed down with axes and hatchets? . . . When people see that it is so bald, they think that there was never any timber on the mountain. Is this the true nature of the mountain?

B. When there is repeated disturbance, man becomes not much different from the beast. People see that he acts like an animal, and think that he never had the original endowment (for goodness). But is that his true character? Therefore with proper nourishment and care, everything grows, whereas without proper nourishment and care, everything decays. Confucius said, “Hold it fast and you preserve it. Let it go and you lose it. It comes in and goes out at no definite time and without anyone’s knowing its direction.” He was talking about the human mind.

C. The great man is one who does not lose his [originally good] child’s heart . . . Humanity is man’s mind and righteousness is man’s path. Pity the man who abandons the path and does not follow it, and who has lost his heart and does not know how to recover it.

Questions

1. Why does Mencius compare the human mind with a deforested mountain?
2. According to Mencius, why do people often behave badly?
3. In your opinion, is Mencius correct that the nature of people is initially good? Explain.