Introduction

Just as Socrates led to Aristotle; in a similar way, Confucius led to Mencius. Confucius (~400 B.C.E.) wrote simplistic phrases that could easily be memorized, but may not have had the subtlety and depth to handle real life situations. It was left to Mencius (~310 B.C.E.) to build on and clarify those ideas initially presented by Confucius.

The historical significance of Confucius was twofold: first, during his life the land we call China was in turmoil. There were almost constant wars, and very little was admirable. Confucius admired one leader (Duke of Chou), whose leadership of the people was given by heaven (ming). To maintain this role, to earn the right to rule, the rulers of a nation had to earn the trust of, and to benefit, the people. Only a just leader had the right to lead. This lead to a consolidation of the various lands of China, and to grounding the government, and in fact the entire culture, on the system put forth in Confucius' Analytics. The second historical significance of Confucius, then, was the establishment of this entire cultural and governmental structure, which made moral responsibility connected from the highest leader, to the lowest field worker. This basic approach has lasted, now, for over two thousand years.

The present selection concerns the nature of humans. In particular, the issue is whether people are inherently good or inherently bad; does moral decency come naturally or must it work against nature. For example, it could be argued that people are inherently selfish and that to make them moral one must work against their natural selfishness. Mencius argued for the contrary. Before we begin, we must note that when Mencius talks about the "heart," he is referring more closely to what we would call the mind.
Mencius talks about four "hearts:" the heart of compassion, the heart of shame, the heart of courtesy and the heart of right and wrong. For the present purpose, the heart of compassion is the most important. Mencius argues that each is born with an "original heart." This original heart is naturally compassionate. To prove this, Mencius gives the example of someone who witnesses a boy about to fall into a well. Without thought the viewer is moved into action. He lists three alternatives, which he claims, are not the person's motivation. The person is not moved to actions by 1) the desire for approval of the child's parents, 2) nor for the approval of locals, and finally, 3) the person is not moved to act by mere dislike for the sound of a child crying. The first two are with reference to the social benefits; the last is for personal benefit. Mencius denies these. The reason, he suggests, for the action is simply compassion for the child.

Each of the four "hearts" Mencius associates with other moral benefits. Further, the lack of any one of these "hearts" makes one "not human." But, the point is that these four are innate, they are already in the person. What is needed is merely to nurture these four to full growth. In this way, Mencius is arguing that people are by nature, good. Raising moral people is not contrary to nature but is rather within their general nature. This is important since both Mencius and Confucius emphasize the importance of moral rules as symbols and examples of being moral. A compassionate leader helps make compassionate citizens.

Reading

Chapter V

V. 1. Mencius said, "If [a ruler] give honour to men of talents and virtue and employ the able, so that offices shall all be filled by individuals of the highest distinction, then all the scholars of the kingdom will be pleased and wish to stand in his court.

2. "If in the market-places he levy a ground-rent on the shops but do not tax the goods, or enforce the [proper] regulations without levying a ground-rent, then all traders of the kingdom will be pleased, and wish to store their goods in market-places.

3. "If at the frontier-gates there be an inspection of the persons, but no charges levied, then all the travellers of the kingdom will be pleased, and wish to be found on his roads.

4. "If the husbandmen be required to give their material aid [in cultivating the public field], and no levies be made [of the produce of their own], then all the farmers in the kingdom will be pleased, and wish to plough in his fields.
5. "If from the [occupiers of the] people's dwellings he do not exact the cloth required from the individual [idler] or the quota for residences, then all the people in the kingdom will be pleased, and wish to be his people.

6. "If [a ruler] can truly practise these five things, then the people of neighbouring States will look up to him as a parent. From the first birth of mankind until now never has any one led children to attack their parents, and succeeded in his enterprise. Such [a ruler] will not have an enemy under the sky, and he who has no enemy under the sky is the minister of Heaven. Never has there been such a case where [the ruler] did not attain to the royal dignity."

Chapter VI
VI. 1. Mencius said, "All men have a mind which cannot bear [to see the sufferings of] others.

2. "The ancient kings had this commiserating mind, and they had likewise, as a matter of course, a commiserating government. When with, a commiserating mind there was practised a commiserating government, to bring all under heaven to order was [as easy] as to make [a small thing] go round in the palm.

3. "The ground on which I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear [to see the suffering of] others is this: Even now-a-days, when men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will all experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so not that they may thereon gain the favour of the child's parents; nor that they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends; nor from a dislike to the reputation of [being unmoved by] such a thing.

4. "Looking at the matter from this case, [we may see that] to be without this feeling of distress is not human, and that it is not human to be without the feeling of shame and dislike, or to be without the feeling of modesty and complaisance, or to be without the feeling of approving and disapproving.

5. "That feeling of distress is the principle of benevolence; the feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness; the feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety; and the feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge.

6. "Men have these four principles just as they have their four limbs. When men, having these four principles, yet say of themselves that they cannot [manifest them], they play the thief with themselves; and he who says of his ruler that lie cannot [manifest them], plays the thief with his ruler."
7. "Since we all have the four principles in ourselves, let us know to give them all their development and completion, and the issue will be like that of a fire which has begun to burn, or of a spring which has begun to find vent. Let them have their full development, and they will suffice to love and protect all [within] the four seas; let them be denied that development, and they will not suffice for a man to serve his parents with."

Chapter VII

VII. 1. Mencius said, "Is the arrow-maker [naturally] more wanting in benevolence than the maker of mail? [And yet], the arrow-maker's only fear is lest [his arrows] should not wound men, and the fear of the maker of mail is lest men should be wounded. So it is as between the priest and the coffin-maker. [The choice of] a profession therefore is a thing in which it is very necessary to be careful.

2. "Confucius said, 'The excellence of a neighbourhood consists in its virtuous manners. If a man, in selecting a residence, do not fix on one where such prevail, how can he be wise?' Now benevolence belongs to the most honourable nobility of Heaven, and is the quiet home where man should dwell. Since no one can hinder us from being so, if we are not benevolent, this shows our want of wisdom.

3. "He who is [thus] neither benevolent nor wise will be without propriety and righteousness, and must be the servant of [other] men. To be the servant of men and yet ashamed of such servitude is like a bow-maker's being ashamed to make bows, or an arrow-maker's being ashamed to make arrows.

4. "If [a man] be ashamed of being in such a case, his best course is to practise benevolence.

5. "He who [would be] benevolent is like the archer. The archer adjusts himself, and then shoots. If he shoot and do not hit, he does not murmur against those who surpass himself: he simply turns round, and seeks the [cause of failure] in himself."