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## Mencius as a Public Philosopher

E Bruce Brooks (ebbrooks@research.umass.edu)

### Abstract

What the present age finds of interest, in the Mencian writings, is largely the notion that human nature is good, plus the idea of moral self-cultivation (so Kwong-loi Shun's one-paragraph summary in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy). The Index Locorum of any recent monograph on Mencius relies heavily on the personal self-cultivation material in MC 6 and 7. But in his own time, and as late as early Táng, Mencius was received and read as a political philosopher. I here isolate the statecraft thought of the historical Mencius, as preserved in the genuine interview transcripts in Mencius 1, which argue for the practical superiority of a society based on rǎn 仁 and yì 義 – a concern for others and an awareness of what is socially right – and briefly note two of its sources in earlier (04th century) thought: the people-centered program of the Mwòdž school, and the somewhat different populism of the non-Analects Confucians who wrote the Dzwǒ Jwàn.

I then consider how Mencius appears in the 13 passages which represent the text in the early Táng compendium Chyǎn-shū Jǐ-yào 群書治要.

The Mencian version of populism failed in its time. It caused the text to be later expurgated or suppressed in China, Korea, and Japan. Its radical social potential remains radical to this day. Those interested in what is now called human rights, and in the possibility of a state oriented toward its people and not toward whatever else contemporary states have in mind; the possibility of a stable condition of society at once successful and humane, might find in the early, nonindividualistic parts of the Mencius text a source of ideas important in the classical period, and perhaps still relevant.