Mencius

1, Social and Personal Background
Mencius (371-289 B.C.?) [孟(mèng)子(zǐ)] was and still is considered to be second only to Confucius in terms of his influence on Chinese culture. He was amazingly similar to Confucius in personal life. He was a student to the students of Zisi, the grandson of Confucius. He was a professional teacher, idolized the legendary sage-emperors, lived in political instability and moral chaos, travelled for forty years to offer advice to rulers for reform, and was eventually disappointed and retired. More surprisingly, he lost his father when he was three years old, just like Confucius. He owed his childhood education to his mother who moved three times for a good neighbourhood.

Historically he lived in the state of Qi in the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) when social order was not stable. Intellectually he sought to defend the teachings of Confucius. His major writing is the Mengzi, collections of his teachings and advices by himself and his students. He is best known for the view that “human nature is good.”
2. Human nature is good

Confucius didn’t say that human nature is good, but the idea was implied in his teachings. He said “By nature men are alike”, humanity means “to love men”, and “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you”.

Mencius made a big step forward in the good-nature theory. He said: “Man’s nature is naturally good just as water naturally flows downward. There is no man without this good nature; neither is there water that does not flow downward. Now you can strike water and cause it to splash upward over your forehead, and by damming and leading it, you can force it uphill. Is this the nature of water? It is the forced circumstance that makes it do so. Man can be made to do evil, for his nature can be treated in the same way.”
人性之善也，犹水之就下也。人无有不善，水无有不下。今夫水，搏而跃之，可使过颡（sǎng）；激而行之，可使在山。是岂水之性哉？其势则然也。人之可使为不善，其性亦犹是也。

Mencius said: If you let people follow their feelings (original nature), they will be able to do good. This is what is meant by saying that human nature is good. If man does evil, it is not the fault of his natural endowment. The feeling of commiseration is found in all men; the feeling shame and dislike is found in all men; the feeling of respect and reverence is found in all men; and the feeling of right and wrong is found in all men. The feeling of commiseration is what we call humanity; the feeling of shame and dislike is what we call righteousness; the feeling of respect and reverence is what we call propriety; and the feeling of right and wrong is what we call wisdom. Humanity, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are not drilled into us from outside. We originally have them with us. Only we do not think to find them.
• These four virtues are born with us. They are the specific contents of our good nature. Being good means to be humane, righteous, proper and wise. Without education or reflections, probably we cannot find them, not to mention to do them.

• 3, Heaven and man make up a unity

• The four virtues are philosophers’ generalization on the basis of observations of and reflections on human behaviour. Deeper than these is the unity between heaven and man.
Mencius said, “He who exerts his mind to the utmost knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows Heaven. To preserve one’s mind and to nourish one’s nature is the way to serve Heaven. Not to allow any double-mindedness regardless of longevity or brevity of life, but to cultivate one’s person and wait for the Mandate of Heaven to take its own course is the way to fulfill one’s destiny.”

孟子曰： “尽其心者，知其性也。知其性，则知天矣。存其心，养其性，所以事天也。殀(yao)寿不贰，修身以俟之，所以立命也。”

This is to say that Heaven is within my intellectual reach if and only I look for it, a view that is surprisingly similar to Jesus Christ’s teaching which suggests succinctly that “Look and you will see;
seek and you will find.” Heaven means the nature of mind, and things like that. Chinese do not break things into parts but look at them as a whole, a striking contrast to that of John Locke. So Heaven and man make up a unity. They are one not two. They are always together. This is the most distinctive feature of Chinese culture in general and Chinese philosophy in particular.

In the perspective of Heaven-man unity, Mencius said that “All things are already complete in oneself. There is no greater joy than to examine oneself and be sincere. When in one’s conduct one vigorously exercises altruism, humanity is not far to seek, but right by him.”

孟子曰：“万物皆备于我矣。反身而诚，乐莫大焉。强恕而行，求仁莫近焉。”
To serve Heaven, one must cultivate his mind; to cultivate his mind, he must get ready to stand certain test. The following words of Mencius have encouraged countless Chinese when they came across troubles and hardships in their life. Mencius said, “When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incomplete.”
4, The social order and people’s life in a humane government

The purpose of Confucian philosophy is a humane government where the state is ruled by moral example of the ruler. Mencius argued to use virtue to overcome people. He said, “A ruler who uses force to make a pretence at humanity is a despot. Such a despot requires a large kingdom. A ruler who practices humanity with virtue is a true king. To become a true king does not depend on a large kingdom...When force is used to overcome people, they do not submit willingly but only because they have not sufficient strength to resist. But when virtue is used to overcome people, they are pleased in their hearts and sincerely submit, as the seventy disciples submitted to Confucius.”
• The way to govern should be like this. “If a ruler honors the worthy and employs the competent so that offices are occupied by the wisest, then scholars throughout the world will be delighted to stand in his court.”

• Moral education is a necessary component of the humane society. Mencius listed Five Relations among people and they have become the general pattern of Chinese society. He said, “According to the way of man, if they are well fed, warmly clothed and comfortably lodged but without education, they will become almost like animals.
The sage (emperor Shun) worried about it and he appointed Qi to be minister of education and teach people human relations, that between father and son, there should be affection; between ruler and minister, there should be righteousness; between husband and wife, there should be attention to their separate functions; between old and young, there should be a proper order; and between friends, there should be faithfulness.”

人之有道也，饱食、暖衣、逸居而无教，则近于禽兽。圣人有忧之，使契为司徒，教以人伦：父子有亲，君臣有义，夫妇有别，长幼有序，朋友有信。
• Mencius talked about man’s nature in two perspectives: individual and social. The Five Relations is the social nature of man. Individually, man must cultivate Four Virtues, as mentioned above. He further argues that “The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of humanity; the feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness; the feeling of deference and compliance is the beginning of propriety; and the feeling of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom...When they are fully developed, they will be sufficient to protect all people within the four seas (the world). If they are not developed, they will not be sufficient even to serve one’s parents.”

• 恻隐之心，仁之端也；羞恶之心，义之端也；辞让之心，礼之端也；是非之心，智之端也......苟能充之，足以保四海；苟能不充之，不足以事父母。
I will borrow Feng Youlan (or Fung Yu-Lan, 冯友兰 1895–1990) to conclude this lecture. Feng was a pioneer in Chinese philosophy. Regarding religion and philosophy, he said, in the beginning of his well-known *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, that Chinese people have Confucianism. It has very much concern with the transcendent aspect of reality called Heaven or Mandate of Heaven, so it takes the place of a transcendent God. In other words, the Chinese have philosophy in the name of Confucianism just as the Western world has religions in their daily life.