

Confucianism



The two most significant Confucianists were Confucius—surprised?—(551-479 BC), and Mencius (372-289 BC).

When one of his disciples asked him if there was a moral principle that one could act on all day, every day, he said, “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.”

He taught of the five key relationships: ruler to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, older brother to younger brother, friend to friend, and held that if both parties fulfilled their own roles in the relationship, harmony would result.

Confucius placed a strong emphasis on the value of education, which could raise capable ministers from lower-income students, and which could inculcate moral judgment.

As part of the emphasis on education, Confucius placed a major emphasis on the example set by rulers. If they wanted their subjects to be ethical, they had to be ethical as well.

Confucius and his disciples (especially Mencius) tended to see human nature as essentially good, requiring only education and examples, in order to get people to behave morally. They tended to be skeptical about the utility of harsh laws, and critical of harsh rulers.

Mencius followed in his teacher’s footsteps, teaching that human nature was good (as opposed as being bad, or merely neutral), the fairness of executing unjust rulers, and rulers to be lenient towards their subjects by lowering taxes and avoiding severe penalties.

His teachings represent the mentality of the lowerclasses, and criticized the aristocracy of his age.

- Confucianism is more a social philosophy than a religion. He avoided explicitly religious teachings. Asked by a pupil about serving spirits, he stated, “You are not yet able to serve men; how can you serve spirits?”
- Confucianism, because of its rejection of strict laws, emphasis on a good moral example, and acceptance of assassinating tyrants, became associated with those who opposed a tyrannical government. This is one reason why some 460 Confucian scholars were killed in the days of the First Chinese Emperor.