Abstract

This project examines and compares the political philosophies supporting the centralized authority of monarchs elaborated by two major figures of antiquity, Mèngzǐ (孟子 Mencius, 372-289 BC) of the Warring States period in China, and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Μαρκος Αυρηλιος Αντωνινος, 121-180 AD) of the later Roman Empire. The texts that have transmitted the ideas of these two men—the Méngzǐ and the Meditations—have shaped the political actions of rulers, as well as the ideas and ideals of political theorists, from their formation down to the present day. Each thinker made substantial claims concerning the role of a philosophically-oriented monarch in actualizing governance that is both benevolent and beneficent under a form of absolute authority. The present study will compare basic principles of Mèngzǐ’s and Marcus’s political philosophies as they relate to monarchical rule expressed in those two classic works, and draw from these principles to create a new criterion in political philosophy that can be used to critique contemporary political arrangements characterized by strong centralization of power. This project will not be a polemic for monarchy or strongly centralized political governments; it is an exploration into political philosophical principles advocated by Marcus and Mèngzǐ, demonstrating how rulers in strongly centralized political institutions can exercise their power in ways that result in good for the people, and how principles advocated by Marcus and Mèngzǐ can be transformed into a criterion for practical application in contemporary political settings, without having to resort to political philosophical principles popular in most Anglo-European contexts.
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