

# Chapter 25

## Epistemology in the *Mencius*



Waldemar Brys

### 1 Introduction

The vast majority of Mencius scholarship, both ancient and modern, is devoted to Mencius's ethical and political thought. Very little research is being done on Mencian epistemology. This is both understandable and regrettable. It is understandable, given that the *Mencius* is not an epistemological treatise, nor does Mencius provide us with anything resembling a theory of knowledge. Unlike the Mohist Canons, the *Xunzi*, or even the *Zhuangzi*, we find in the *Mencius* no sustained discussions on epistemic matters. For example, Mencius lists “wisdom” (*zhi* 智) as one of the four virtues (2A6, 6A6), but he is particularly terse when it comes to telling us what wisdom *is*, what it means to be wise, or how we come to acquire it. It is therefore hardly surprising that scholars of early Chinese philosophy have been more interested in reconstructing early *Chinese* epistemology (Hansen 1992; Allen 2015) or early *Confucian* epistemology (Raphals 1992: Ch.2; Yao 2006), rather than specifically query the *Mencius* for epistemological insights. If we, for example, take the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, *Zhongyong*, and *Daxue* together and assume that they largely share the same epistemological views, then we gain a plethora of textual resources in our quest to learn something about early Confucian epistemology. But the assumption that these texts *do* hold epistemological views in common is, of course, methodologically suspect. Mencius and Xunzi do not see eye to eye on many issues, even if the exact lines of disagreement are subject to much scholarly debate, and it is not obvious whether the figure of Confucius from the

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W. Brys (✉)

School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales,  
Sydney, NSW, Australia

e-mail: [w.brys@unsw.edu.au](mailto:w.brys@unsw.edu.au)

*Analects* holds ethical views that are closer to Xunzi's or Mencius's. Why, then, should this be any different for their respective views on knowledge?<sup>1</sup>

Hence, my aim in this chapter is to draw on the *Mencius* to better understand Mencius's views on knowledge and how they might contribute to contemporary debates in epistemology. Part of my aim is therefore to show how a close study of ancient Chinese texts can conceptually enrich current work in epistemology, and how current work in epistemology can offer us new perspectives on the ancient texts.

I divide this chapter into three parts, each of which briefly introduces one feature of what might be broadly construed as Mencian epistemology. I do not intend to suggest that this is all there is to Mencian epistemology – there might be other features. But what I do believe is that each one of these features has the potential to be of interest both to scholars of the *Mencius* and to contemporary epistemologists alike. These features are: Mencius's views on knowing *things* (Sect. 2); the role that wisdom plays in acquiring knowledge (Sect. 3); and, finally, Mencius's views on "knowing-to", a kind of knowledge distinct from knowing-that and knowing-how (Sect. 4). I conclude the chapter by giving a brief outline of how these features relate to one another.

## 2 Mencius on Knowing *Things*

The term "knowledge" (*zhi* 知) is frequently used in the *Mencius* in expressions of the form "knowing X", where X stands for a noun or a noun phrase, rather than a proposition, a proper name, a verb, or a verb phrase. Such expressions are ubiquitous in Classical Chinese and the *Mencius* is no exception. For example, one is said to "know sages" (2A2), "know *dao*" (5A7), "know categories" (6A12), "know Heaven" (7A1), "know words" (2A2), "know importance" (7A46), "know beauty" (5A1) etc.<sup>2</sup> Cases such as these plausibly fall under what contemporary epistemologists call *objectual knowledge* – that is, knowledge of things.

To clarify, epistemologists routinely distinguish at least three kinds of knowledge. When you know that Sparta won the Peloponnesian War, then you have knowledge of the true proposition that Sparta won the Peloponnesian War. You have knowledge that *p* (i.e., propositional knowledge). When you know how to read Classical Chinese, then you have an ability or disposition to perform certain kinds

<sup>1</sup> There might, of course, be good reasons to draw on texts from the *Xunzi* or the *Analects* when it comes to understanding what Mencius has to say on epistemological matters, but such a reliance on textual material from outside the *Mencius* has to be carefully argued for.

<sup>2</sup> Almost a third of all occurrences of the term *zhi* 知 in the *Mencius* are conjoined with a noun or a noun phrase that I believe cannot be adequately translated into English with a *that*-clause. More exactly, there are 26 such occurrences from a total of 113 instances of *zhi* 知. Here I merely list the passage numbers for reference: 1A6, 2x 1A7, 5x 2A2, 2A4, 2x 2B4, 3A2, 4A27, 5A1, 6A6, 6A7, 2B7, 2x 6A7, 6A12, 3x 7A1, 7A2, 7A46, and 7B7.

of actions. You have knowledge how to  $\varphi$  (i.e., practical knowledge).<sup>3</sup> And when you know the Way, or your best friend, then you know some X – that is, you have knowledge of a thing or a person (i.e., objectual knowledge).

The logical relations among these three kinds of knowledge are subject to much debate. The best known of these debates concerns the nature of knowledge-how. Some argue that knowledge-how is a kind of knowledge-that, while others argue that the two are philosophically distinct.<sup>4</sup> Less well known debates concern the nature of knowledge-that, with some philosophers recently arguing that all knowledge-that is better understood as a kind of knowledge-how.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to objectual knowledge, some argue that knowing X is distinct from knowing-that (Sosa 2003; cf. Benton 2017) and many such accounts rely on the notion of “acquaintance” popularized by Bertrand Russell: if you are *acquainted* with some X, then you know X in an objectual sense (see Conee 1994: 136; Tye 2009: 96; cf. Zagzebski 1999; Martens 2010).<sup>6</sup> Others argue that mere acquaintance with X is not enough to know X and that all knowing by acquaintance is a kind of knowing-that – namely, knowing-that as it is grounded (or caused by) one’s acquaintance (Farkas 2019). Nobody to my knowledge has explored the possibility that objectual knowledge could be a kind of knowing-how – and this is where Mencius enters.

The view that objectual knowledge (i.e., knowledge of *things*, or “knowing X”) is a kind of knowledge-how seems to be Mencius’s view. Contemporary scholars have noticed that expressions of the kind “S knows X” frequently refer to an agent’s capacity for X-ing: if someone “knows ritual”, then she is able to perform rituals.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>On some views, having an ability to  $\varphi$  is not entailed by knowing how to  $\varphi$  (e.g., Snowdon 2004). This detail will not matter for the purposes of this chapter, but for recent responses, see for example (Glick 2012; Hickman 2019; Bayne 2021). For the sake of convenience, I will henceforth ignore the distinction between *knowing how to  $\varphi$*  and *being able to intelligently  $\varphi$* .

<sup>4</sup>Roughly, intellectualists take all knowledge-how to essentially involve having propositional attitudes towards  $\varphi$ -ing, while anti-intellectualists take all knowledge-how to essentially involve an ability (or capacity) to  $\varphi$  rather than propositional attitudes. For a good overview, see (Carter and Poston 2018).

<sup>5</sup>The view that all knowledge-that might be a kind of knowledge-how is not new, although it was not pursued with much philosophical rigour until fairly recently. Stephen Hetherington discusses some of these historical antecedents (Hetherington 2011a: Ch.2). He also provides a thorough defense of the view (Hetherington 2011a, b, 2017, 2021a), as does John Hyman elsewhere (Hyman 2015, 2017). Hetherington calls such a view a *practicalism* about knowledge-that.

<sup>6</sup>Bertrand Russell distinguishes “knowledge of things” from “knowledge of truths”, and he divides the former into “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge by description” (Russell 2001[1912]: 25). According to Russell, we know some X by acquaintance if we are “directly aware [of X], without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths” (Russell 2001[1912]: 26) and such direct awareness involves apprehending sense data. On the other hand, we know some X by description if we know that X is “the object that causes such-and-such sense-data.” (*ibid.*)

<sup>7</sup>Classical Chinese is flexible enough that nouns, even proper names, can be used as verbs (cf. Harbsmeier 1998: 139–142). But a sentence of the form “she knows how to ritual” is not as readily understandable as “she knows how to dance.” If we replace “ritual” with other nouns, the problem gets worse. “She knows how to heaven”, “she knows how to Way” are barely intelligible sentences. Adequate translations of ‘verb + noun (phrase)’ structures therefore have to rely on additions: e.g., “she knows how to *serve* heaven”, “she knows how to *traverse* the Way.” Hence, whenever I write, “S has a capacity for X-ing” or “S knows how to X”, where X is a noun or a noun phrase, I take this to be interchangeable with sentences of the kind “S knows how to  $\varphi$  X” or “S knows how to act in X-related ways.”

For example, Harbsmeier writes: “Knowing ritual in ancient China is usually taken not as a purely cerebral awareness of the truth of propositions. One might plausibly argue that it is an acquired skill.” (Harbsmeier 1998: 247)<sup>8</sup> Chad Hansen holds an even stronger view, claiming that for the early Chinese “the closest Chinese counterpart of *zhi*<sup>know</sup> is know-how.” (Hansen 1992: 85) In line with that, he calls knowledge “a type of mastery” (Hansen 1992: 104) and explicitly ascribes such a view to the Mohists (*ibid.*: 252–4), Xunzi (*ibid.*: 321), Mencius (*ibid.*: 177), and to the Daoists (*ibid.*: 211, 219, 275). Undoubtedly, then, if Hansen believes that Mencian objectual knowledge is a kind of knowledge, and if he believes that the early Chinese took knowledge to be a kind of mastery, then he would agree with Harbsmeier that Mencian objectual knowledge is a kind of mastery as well.<sup>9</sup> Call such a view *Practicalist Objectual Knowledge*:

**Practicalist Objectual Knowledge** All objectual knowledge of X is knowledge-how to act in X-related ways, and all expressions of objectual knowledge of X are intelligent X-related actions.

There is, therefore, some agreement among contemporary scholars that in the early Chinese texts, when a person is said to have objectual knowledge, then they have such objectual knowledge by virtue of having corresponding knowledge-how. But is this view correct? It is not obvious to me that it is, and Harbsmeier himself is careful to qualify his stance on the matter. He says that “theoretical knowledge of ritual by itself would not in ancient China have qualified one as *zhi li* [knowing ritual] in every sense of the word.” (Harbsmeier 1998: 247) But this suggests the possibility that, for the early Chinese, a person might count as having objectual knowledge by virtue of having *knowledge that p* (i.e., what Harbsmeier calls “theoretical knowledge”), rather than *knowledge how to φ*. This raises an important

<sup>8</sup>Such a view on “knowing X” is also articulated, albeit much less carefully, by Barry Allen: “Knowing Heaven is knowing the pattern, and knowing the pattern is knowing how to translate it into wise, timely, effective interactions.” (Allen 2015: 49) On the other hand, Hetherington and Lai provide thorough arguments for the claim that we find such a view on “knowing X” in the *Analecets* (Hetherington and Lai 2012; cf. Lai 2012), and Chris Fraser argues that we find it in the *Mozi* (Fraser 2011: 131–134).

<sup>9</sup>Hansen’s own claims seem to me vastly under supported. Harbsmeier convincingly argues, *pace* Hansen, that early Chinese thinkers had a notion of propositional knowledge and the linguistic resources necessary to distinguish between knowing-that *p* and knowing-how to *φ* (Harbsmeier 1998: 245–254). However, although I agree with Harbsmeier on this point, the fact that the early Chinese had a notion of propositional knowledge does not answer the question of whether what they took to be propositional knowledge *just is* a kind of knowledge-how. For example, it might be that all knowing-that is knowing-how and the syntactic distinction between the two marks a distinction between different kinds of abilities constitutive of one’s knowing-how. I return to this point below. More recently, Chris Fraser has drawn on the *Xunzi* and the *Mozi* to argue that knowledge in early Chinese thought is primarily “a reliable ability to discriminate things and respond to them appropriately [...]. To know is thus to be able to perform certain tasks competently.” (Fraser 2011: 128–129) Although I think Fraser’s move from the *Xunzi* and the *Mozi* to all early Chinese thinkers is too quick, his analysis of the epistemic views we find in these texts is well supported.

question: in *what* sense of the word would such mere possession of knowledge-that have qualified one as knowing ritual? Harbsmeier does not say.

## 2.1 *Knowing X and Knowing That X Is F*

Let me make the issue more precise. Are we justified in interpreting Mencius as suggesting the view that all objectual knowledge of X is knowledge-how to X? That is, does Mencius believe that “knowing Heaven” (7A1), “knowing words” (2A2), or “knowing the Way” (5A7) entails knowing how to serve Heaven, knowing how to discriminate words, or knowing how to traverse the Way? Many scholars believe that, yes, Mencius has such a practicalist notion of objectual knowledge, but Harbsmeier hints at a problem: we can be said to know X without knowing how to X, simply by virtue of knowing that X is F.

As far as the *Mencius* is concerned, there seems to be textual evidence in support of Harbsmeier’s suggestion. There are passages that *prima facie* suggest that “knowing X” expressions are sometimes used to attribute propositional knowledge to a person – namely, knowledge that X is F. Take for example Mencius’s claim at 2A2 that Gaozi does not “know righteousness” (*zhī yì* 知義). Mencius is clear why he thinks so: “I say that Gaozi does not know righteousness because he takes it to be ‘external’ (*yǐ qí wài zhī yě* 以其外之也).” Gaozi fails in “knowing X”, where X is “righteousness”, and Mencius describes this as a failure of knowing *that* righteousness is not external. Presumably, all other things being equal, if Gaozi had different beliefs about righteousness, for example, if he had believed that righteousness was internal rather than external, then he would not be open to Mencius’s criticism.

We find a similar use of “knowing X” at 1A6. Mencius has an audience with King Xiang of Liang and has this to say:

Does Your Majesty not know sprouts? During the dry period of the summer months, the sprouts shrivel. But when Heaven abundantly makes clouds, and copiously sends down rain, then the sprouts vigorously rise up. If it is like this, who can forbid it? (1A6)<sup>10</sup>

At 1A6 “knowing X”, in this case “knowing sprouts” (知苗 *zhī miáo*),<sup>11</sup> entails knowing *that* the sprouts rise after rain during the summer. Hence, it is understandable that both Van Norden and D.C. Lau respectively translate the expression as “know *about* sprouts” (Van Norden 2008: 7; my own emphasis) and “know *about* the young seedlings” (Lau 2013: 13). If I know about the heavy rains in Sichuan, I at least know *that* there are heavy rains. In other words, knowing about X entails knowledge of a true proposition. Hence, just like at 2A2, there is a clear textual link between objectual

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations of the *Mencius* are from Van Norden’s edition with minor changes (Van Norden 2008). I point out more substantial changes.

<sup>11</sup> The original reads: “*Wáng zhī fū miáo hū* 王知夫苗乎?” I follow Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 in omitting *fū* 夫 and taking Mencius to ask the straightforward question of whether the King knows sprouts (Yang 2013: 12).

knowledge (“knowing X”) and propositional knowledge (“knowing that X is such-and-such”).

In this light, consider a different section from 2A2:

Gongsun Chou asked, “May I ask wherein you excel, Master?”

Mencius replied, “I know words. I am good at cultivating my floodlike *qi*.”

[...]

Gongsun Chou asked, “What do you mean by ‘knowing words’?”

Mencius replied, “If someone’s expressions are one-sided, I know why they are obscured. If someone’s expressions are excessive, I know what they have sunk into. If someone’s expressions are heretical, I know why they are separated from the Way. If someone’s expressions are evasive, I know why they are overwhelmed. [...]” (2A2)

Although it is not entirely clear what each of Mencius’s points amount to, the overall message seems to be this: “knowing words” entails knowing answers to questions such as why a person is ‘obscured’, given his utterances in a specific situation, or what he has ‘sunk into’, why he is ‘separated from the Way’, etc. But knowledge of answers to such questions is propositional (Stanley and Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011; Farkas 2017). When Mencius knows why someone is separated from the Way, then he knows a proposition *p*, the content of which states the reason why someone is separated from the Way. Hence, when Mencius suggests that “knowing words” amounts to knowing answers to such questions, then he is in effect saying that “knowing words” amounts to having propositional knowledge.

It therefore seems to me at least *prima facie* plausible that in the *Mencius* expressions like “knowing X” can sometimes be used to attribute to a person knowledge *that* X is such-and-such – or, put differently, they can be used to attribute propositional knowledge. This contrasts with “knowing X” expressions that are more naturally read as attributing knowing-how – as in, when Mencius says that Yi Yin knows how to reform the ruler by virtue of his knowledge of the Way (5B7). But if so, does this mean that there are two philosophically distinct kinds of objectual knowledge in the *Mencius* – namely, knowing X *qua* knowing that X is F and knowing X *qua* knowing how to act in X-related ways?

## 2.2 Knowing Things: One or Two Kinds in the Mencius?

One might propose the following answer. Yes, there are two kinds of objectual knowledge in the *Mencius*. This is a view hinted at by Harbsmeier, although not developed any further (Harbsmeier 1998: 247). My own proposal is to say that there is only one kind of objectual knowledge, namely *Practicalist Objectual Knowledge* – that is, all “knowing X” expressions refer to an agent’s knowing-how. The suggestion is, however, that Mencius’s practicalism is more nuanced than has been hitherto assumed.

What I mean is this. All the passages that I have cited thus far are only counter-examples against the following view: if I know ritual, then I know how to perform

rituals, and if I know the Way, then I know how to put the Way into practice. The textual evidence suggests that, at least sometimes, if I know ritual, then I know *about* ritual (i.e., I know that ritual is such-and-such). This contradicts the view mentioned above, because knowing *about* ritual and knowing *how to perform* rituals is evidently not the same.<sup>12</sup>

However, a more nuanced practicalism can avoid this problem. Roughly, if “knowing X” just *is* knowing how to act in X-related ways, then in those cases where an agent’s knowing X seems to be a kind of knowing that X is F, I suggest that the agent has a corresponding set of *belief*-related capacities that she can manifest in belief-related intelligent actions. What do I mean by belief-related capacities? They are capacities we would normally associate with the agent’s state of belief – be it a capacity to *use* her beliefs in drawing inferences, making decisions, etc., or a capacity to *form* beliefs given the available evidence, or to *question* already existing beliefs.<sup>13</sup> For example, when Gongduzi confidently asserts that righteousness is internal (6A5), epistemologists would standardly take Gongduzi to be capable of making such assertions by virtue of his belief that righteousness is internal – a belief that he expresses by asserting that righteousness is internal. If we were to say that Gongduzi “knows righteousness” just in case he is capable of intelligently making true assertions about righteousness, then we would thereby ascribe to him a *belief*-related capacity to act in righteousness-related ways. Hence, Gongduzi might have a bundle of capacities, some belief-related and some not, that jointly constitute his overall capacity to act in righteousness-related ways – that is, they jointly constitute his “knowing righteousness.”<sup>14</sup>

These are just outlines of one account of Mencian objectual knowledge – a specifically *practicalist* one. Although I cannot provide a complete defense of it here, I hope to have shown that it can explain why there is almost unanimous agreement among scholars that at least some “knowing X” in the *Mencius* is to be read as knowing-how to act in X-related ways. The view that “knowing X” might be knowledge-how deserves to be explored further, and, given that it is not a view that has received much attention by contemporary epistemologists, it has potential to contribute to current debates on objectual knowledge.

<sup>12</sup>This is true regardless of whether we are intellectualists about knowledge-how or not. Intellectualists would agree that the propositional knowledge needed for an agent to know how to perform rituals cannot be gained by, for example, reading a manual, and yet I can evidently come to know *about* rituals by merely reading about them.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore, having a particular belief-related capacity does not *necessarily* mean that one has the corresponding belief. A capacity to *form* beliefs on the basis of favourable evidence might be constitutive of Mencian “knowing words” (2A2).

<sup>14</sup>Hetherington argues that an epistemic agent’s knowing that p is to be explicated as a bundle of capacities to act in p-related ways (Hetherington 2017). If I am right that all Mencian “knowing X” is knowing how to act in X-related ways, and if S’s knowing that p is sometimes constitutive of her knowing X, then it follows that at least some knowing that p is knowing-how to act in p-related ways. This evidence, although not conclusive, hints at a practicalist conception of knowledge in the *Mencius*.



### 3 Mencius, Intellectual Virtue, and Virtue Epistemology

In this section I move away from the question concerning what objectual knowledge *is* to how we come to *acquire* it – more specifically, I consider the role of Mencian intellectual virtue in knowledge acquisition. The closest term in the *Mencius* that corresponds to the notion of an intellectual virtue is the term *zhi* 智, which is variously translated as “wisdom” or “intelligence” (cf. Van Norden 2008: 153). Whereas other epistemic terms such as “reflecting” (*si* 思), “taking into account” (*lü* 慮), or “weighing” (*quan* 權) play important epistemic roles, it is *zhi* 智 that is singled out as one of the four virtues (2A6, 6A6) and a characteristic of sagely figures (5A9, 2B9, 5B1, 2A2).

There is some agreement among scholars that Mencian wisdom, whatever else it might be, is at least an epistemic capacity or competence – it is something the possession of which makes the agent capable of achieving certain epistemic ends.<sup>15</sup> Scholars disagree on what these ends are supposed to be. For example, Kwong-Loi Shun argues that Mencian wisdom is a capacity to form proper aims (Shun 1997: 68), one that partly entails capacities for weighing reasons in favour or against undertaking a course of action (*ibid.*: 69–70). Other scholars take Mencian wisdom to be a capacity for making distinctions that are “action-guiding” (Hansen 1992: 166), a capacity for making “correct moral judgments” (Kim 2018: 66; cf. Kim 2014; Schwartz 1985: 293), or a capacity to “distinguish right and wrong” (Raphals 1992: 36). Yet other scholars note that wisdom is at least a capacity for coming to know something or other (Yao 2006: 12), e.g., coming to know the character of the people one has encountered or the best means towards certain ends (Van Norden 2008: 273–278).

Perhaps these disagreements are best understood as concerning the *objects* or *domain* of wisdom – that is, if wisdom is a capacity to come to know something, then what does that “something” encompass? Does it entail knowing “proper aims”, as Shun suggests, or knowing what is right or wrong, as Raphals suggests? Regardless of what the proper domain of wisdom might be, that Mencian wisdom *is* (at least partly) a capacity for knowing seems largely agreed upon. It is also supported by textual evidence, for example, when Mencius says that knowing benevolence and righteousness is “a manifestation of wisdom” (*zhi zhi shi* 智之實) (4A27) or when he claims that Zai Wo, Zigong, and You Ruo have enough wisdom to know sages (2A2). I return to some of this textual evidence below. However, if it is right that one epistemic function of Mencian wisdom is to render its possessor capable of acquiring knowledge, then I suggest that one line of research looks especially promising. The *Mencius* can be put into constructive debate with a recent view among

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<sup>15</sup> There might of course be non-cognitive or non-epistemic aspects to Mencian wisdom (cf. Perkins 2002: 219), but whether or not there are, both Shun and Kim convincingly show that wisdom is at least in part an epistemic capacity (Shun 1997; Kim 2014). In this section I focus my attention entirely on the epistemic function of wisdom.



contemporary epistemologists that likewise takes the exercise of intellectual virtues to be central for acquiring knowledge – and that view is *virtue epistemology*.

### 3.1 *Is Mencius a Virtue Epistemologist?*

Virtue epistemological accounts of knowledge take the believer and her intellectual qualities to occupy a special role in explaining whether an epistemic agent has knowledge. The general idea is this. Believing is an action or assessable in the same way that actions are.<sup>16</sup> We assess actions on the basis of success conditions. A shot is more or less successful depending on whether (a) it hits its target, (b) it manifests the agent's competence, and (c) it hits its target *because* it manifests the agent's competence (Sosa 2011: 1–13). Applied to beliefs, we get the view that believing is fully successful if (a) S's belief is true, (b) S's believing manifests intellectual virtue, and (c) S believes truly *because* S manifests intellectual virtue (Greco 2003, 2010, 2012; Sosa 2007, 2011, 2015; Turri 2011; Zagzebski 1996: 298, 1999, 2009).<sup>17</sup> Given that knowing is a kind of believing, and given that knowing is assumed to be a cognitive achievement, i.e., a kind of success, a person therefore has knowledge just in case their believing is fully successful. As Greco puts it, knowledge is success from competence (Greco 2010: 71).

Contemporary virtue epistemologists disagree on how we should understand intellectual virtue,<sup>18</sup> but they agree that the exercise of intellectual virtue is sufficient to explain why the presence of a true belief is knowledge, why knowledge is more valuable than true belief (Greco 2010: 99; Sosa 2011: 63–5), and why Gettiered beliefs are not knowledge (Zagzebski 1996; Turri 2011).<sup>19</sup> The reason why an appeal

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<sup>16</sup> Here I am not committed to the view that forming a belief is an action (although some virtue epistemologists would consider belief formation to be a kind of performance, e.g., Sosa 2011: 24), nor do I believe that such a commitment is essential to virtue epistemology. All that is required is for believing, forming beliefs, and knowing to be *assessable* in the same way we assess actions. One might propose that believing, etc., are assessable in this way because they are *relevantly similar* to actions without themselves being actions. For example, according to Sellars, “[a]n action is the sort of thing one can decide to do” (Sellars 1968: 74) and it is not obvious that we can decide to form beliefs. I will set this complication aside and, for the sake of convenience, I will continue using the expression “cognitive act” or “cognitive action” to describe knowing, believing, reasoning, etc.

<sup>17</sup> I henceforth ignore the distinction between *forming* true beliefs and *believing* truly.

<sup>18</sup> Roughly, according to *reliabilist* virtue epistemologists, an intellectual virtue is a capacity to reliably form true beliefs and only those true belief that are reliably formed amount to knowledge (for an alternative, on which intellectual virtues are capacities to know rather than to believe truly, see (Miracchi 2015)). *Responsibilist* virtue epistemologists hold that an intellectual virtue is a character trait the possession of which makes the agent capable of reliably forming true beliefs *and* to be aptly motivated, and only those true beliefs that are formed both reliably and from the right motives amount to knowledge (cf. Code 1987; Zagzebski 1996).

<sup>19</sup> However, there might be good reasons to doubt whether virtue epistemological approaches *in general* are as successful as they are sometimes taken to be (see Hetherington 2016: Ch.5).

to intellectual virtues can do all this explanatory work is mostly because of an underlying thesis about virtue:

**Contemporary Virtue Thesis (CV)** A cognitive act A has normative property N just in case A issues from the exercise of a capacity C that is an intellectual virtue V.<sup>20</sup>

To illustrate, according to (CV), what makes a true belief knowledge is that the true belief is formed intellectually virtuously, so it is the agent's intellectual virtue that (definitionally) explains why her true belief is knowledge. If S's knowledge is an achievement and mere true belief is not, then it is S's successful exercise of intellectual virtue that (definitionally) explains why knowledge is an achievement, and therefore why it is more valuable than true belief. If a Gettiered belief is a belief that is true, justified, but not knowledge, then it is the fact that S fails to exercise intellectual virtue in believing truly that supposedly (definitionally) explains why Gettiered beliefs are not knowledge (cf. Sosa 2007, 2011: 43–6).

What underlies (CV) is the claim that intellectual virtue is importantly *prior* to cognitive acts with relevant normative properties. This priority relation is one of definition: knowledge just *is*, by definition, believing truly from intellectual virtue (Sosa 2007: 41, 2011: 4), or true belief formed intellectually virtuously (Greco 2010: 12), or a state arising from an act of intellectual virtue (Zagzebski 1996: 270), or an exercise of a competence to know (Miracchi 2015: 41). Hence, contemporary virtue epistemologists take knowing to be defined in terms of intellectual virtue.

But is this Mencius's view? As I have mentioned previously, it is plausible that Mencian wisdom is at least partly a capacity for acquiring knowledge. Does that mean, however, that Mencius also accepts the view that knowing is partly defined in terms of the exercise of wisdom (CV)?<sup>21</sup> That is not obvious. At the core of the issue lies the following question: what exactly *is* the relation between knowledge and wisdom in the *Mencius*?<sup>22</sup> In other words, is a cognitive state an instance of

<sup>20</sup> I follow (Bronstein 2020) here. But unlike Bronstein, I believe this formulation is broad enough to capture both reliabilist (e.g., Greco 2010: 12; Sosa 2011: 79) and responsibilist (e.g., Zagzebski 1996: 270–1) forms of virtue epistemology.

<sup>21</sup> Accepting both views might make it seem as if we end up with a circular definition of knowledge: knowledge is partly defined by an exercise of a capacity to know, and capacities to know are partly defined in terms of knowledge. For an argument that such circularity is not vicious, see (Miracchi 2015). However, there is an easy way to avoid this problem. One could argue that Mencian wisdom is a capacity to know by virtue of being a capacity to believe truly, and that a person's true beliefs amount to knowledge only if they issue from her wisdom.

<sup>22</sup> A view that is surprisingly widespread is that the early Chinese “did not distinguish knowledge and wisdom: rather, they identified knowledge and wisdom by using the same word for both.” (Yao 2006: 57) Lisa Raphals claims that the two graphs *zhi* 知 (“knowledge”) and *zhi* 智 (“wisdom”) are “often used interchangeably in pre-Qin texts” (Raphals 1992: 16) and various contemporary scholars follow suit (e.g., Allen 2015: 5; Ryan and Lai 2021: 668). Some even go so far as to translate *zhi* 智 (“wisdom”) in the *Mencius* as “knowledge.” For example, Benjamin Schwartz writes: “‘Knowledge’ is, of course, also one of Mencius’ ‘four virtues’ and also has roots in the spontane-

knowledge because of the epistemic agent's wisdom it issues from, or is a capacity an instance of wisdom because it produces knowledge? We can make the question more precise in one of two ways:

- (A) Is the exercise of wisdom what *causally explains* how an agent comes to know or is an agent's acquisition of knowledge what *causally explains* how she ends up with wisdom?
- (B) Is the exercise of wisdom what (partly) *defines* knowledge or is the disposition to acquire knowledge what (partly) *defines* wisdom?

Depending on how we answer questions (A) and (B), we end up with one of the following four views:

- (A1) The exercise of wisdom causally explains an agent's knowledge.
- (A2) The agent's acquisition of knowledge causally explains her wisdom.
- (B1) The exercise of wisdom (partly) defines an agent's knowledge.
- (B2) The agent's disposition to acquire knowledge (partly) defines her wisdom.

The *Contemporary Virtue Thesis* (CV) entails view (B1), but it is not obvious whether that is true of the *Mencius*. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Suppose you assign Yi Qiu to teach two people (the boardgame) Go.<sup>23</sup> One of them focuses his heart and applies his intention and only listens to Yi Qiu. The other of them, although he listens, with his entire heart he thinks a swan is approaching, and he reflects only on drawing his bow and shooting it. Although he learns along with the other person, he will not be as good as he. Is this because his wisdom is not equal? I say that this is not so. (6A9)

In this passage, wisdom seems to play the epistemic role of a capacity for acquiring know-how or abilities. Mencius's claim is straightforward: for S to be capable of knowing how to play Go, it is necessary that S has wisdom, but for S to *in fact* come to know how to play Go, more is required. After all, two students can have the same capacity for acquiring know-how, but if one of them fails to concentrate on his lessons, then he will fall behind. Although in such a case, the student has a capacity for learning how to play Go, he does not use it, because he fails to concentrate on his lessons and thereby fails to enact a way for him to learn how to play Go. Therefore, I suggest that, according to 6A9, for S to come to know how to play Go, what is needed is for S to exercise her capacity for acquiring knowledge, i.e., her wisdom.

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ous tendencies of the heart.” (Schwartz 1985: 289) Even otherwise careful scholars like Chris Fraser have done so: “A famous passage in the *Mencius* states that knowledge is ‘the heart of *shi-fei*’ [...]” (Fraser 2013: 5) But this is a mistake, and, as far as the *Mencius* is concerned, the view that the early Chinese did not distinguish between wisdom and knowledge has been demonstrably refuted by (Shun 1997) and (Kim 2014). Following Harbsmeier, one might think that, perhaps, the most charitable way of understanding the otherwise perplexing claim that *zhi* 知 and *zhi* 智 are not distinguished is by saying that *zhi* 知 in its nominalised form can stand for ‘knowledgeableness’ (Harbsmeier 1998: 255–6) – or, in my words, it can stand for “capacity for knowledge.” Given that *zhi* 智 is commonly taken to be a capacity for knowledge, then *zhi* 智 and the nominalised form of *zhi* 知 might indeed be very similar.

<sup>23</sup> Go, also known as *weiqi* 圍棋, is here referred to as *yi* 弈 – the same character that makes up Yi Qiu's 弈秋 name.

Concentrating on the task at hand is a way for the student to learn how to play Go, and enacting such a way is nothing other than using one's capacity for acquiring know-how.

However, *contra* (CV), it is not that knowing how to play Go is an instance of knowing-how only if it is acquired through the exercise of wisdom. In fact, Mencius at 7A15 says that there can be abilities (*neng* 能) that are not acquired by learning (*bu xue* 不學), which has traditionally been read to mean that one can possess unacquired abilities.<sup>24</sup> If wisdom is a capacity for acquiring knowing-how, but one can have unacquired know-how, then one can have know-how that is not the result of an exercise of wisdom. Therefore, it cannot be that knowing-how is *defined* in terms of the exercise of wisdom. And that is evidence that Mencius rejects (CV).

Consider, in that light, the following excerpt from 2A2:

Zai Wo, Zigong and You Ruo had wisdom sufficient to know sages. They would not stoop so low as to favour someone just because they liked him. [...] You Ruo said, "This is not only so with people: the unicorn in relation to animals, the phoenix in relation to birds, Mount Tai in relation to hills, the Yellow River and ocean in relation to running waters, they are all of the same kind. The sage in relation to the people is also of the same kind. But they all stand out from their kind; they emerge from the thicket. Since the beginning of mankind, there has never been one greater than Confucius." (2A2)

Mencius seems to be saying that knowing who is sagely requires a certain degree of wisdom. Once an epistemic agent has attained *sufficient* (*zuyi* 足以) wisdom, they are capable of knowing sages. In this case, Zai Wo, Zigong, and You Ruo know that Confucius is a sage and they do so as a result of their wisdom. Therefore, Mencius seems in effect to be saying that wisdom is a capacity the exercise of which yields knowledge.

What 2A2 does not say, however, is that what it means to know sages *just is* (at least in part) to exercise wisdom. According to You Rou, what it means to know that Confucius is sagely is to grasp that Confucius is a particularly excellent member of the kind (*lei* 類) that he belongs to. Knowing those who are sagely is not *defined* in terms of the exercise of intellectual virtue. If anything, it involves grasping something about the sagely.<sup>25</sup> Wisdom is what brings it about that one knows sages, but what makes it the case that a cognitive act is an instance of knowing is that the act is *such-and-such* – namely, that it involves grasping something about the sagely, perhaps being able to explain why Confucius is a sage, or perhaps acting reverently towards him. For Mencius, how knowledge is acquired seems of no importance to the question of whether it is an instance of *knowledge*.

<sup>24</sup>For example, Han Dynasty scholar ZHAO Qi 趙岐 (d. 201) comments: "If one is able without (having acquired it through) learning, then one is able by nature." (Jiao 1987: 897) All translations of commentaries are my own. CHENG Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) is quoted by ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) as saying that these unlearned abilities, which Mencius also calls "original abilities" (*liang neng* 良能) (7A15), are such that they "all stem from nothing (*jie wu suo you* 皆無所由); they come from Heaven and are not welded onto human beings (from outside)." (Zhu 1983: 353)

<sup>25</sup>To be more specific: it involves grasping the fact that S has a certain normative status (being sagely) as a result of having a set of normative properties (being an excellent member of a kind).

Hence, there is textual support for the view that exercising Mencian wisdom is necessary for acquiring both knowledge how to  $\varphi$  and knowledge that  $p$ . This corresponds to view (A1) above: the exercise of wisdom *causally explains* how an agent comes to know. But it does not correspond to view (B1), and so, by implication, it does not correspond to the *Contemporary Virtue Thesis*.

If my argument so far has been successful, and if it turns out that Mencius does not hold (CV), then perhaps Mencius's view is that an epistemic agent's intellectual virtue only *causally* explains how she comes to know without *defining* knowledge in terms of the exercise of her intellectual virtue. This is a nuanced view that, as far as I know, has not been considered by either contemporary virtue epistemologists or scholars researching early Chinese texts. In what follows I argue that the view has at least one important advantage over more traditional virtue epistemological views – and that is, it can better account for the value of knowledge.

### 3.2 *Mencian Wisdom and the Value of Knowledge*

One core motivation behind adopting a kind of virtue epistemology is that we can thereby supposedly give an account of knowledge that excludes Gettiered beliefs from being knowledge. It is a common assumption among epistemologists that Gettiered beliefs fail to be knowledge because they are beliefs that are veritically lucky,<sup>26</sup> and no veritically lucky belief can be knowledge. A belief is veritically lucky just in case the belief is true in the actual world but false in almost all close possible worlds in which the agent forms the belief in the same way that they do in the actual world (see e.g., Prichard 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012).<sup>27</sup> Virtue epistemology is therefore post-Gettier epistemology: it is an attempt to understand knowledge in partly modal terms, i.e., knowledge is true belief formed virtuously, and a true belief is formed virtuously just in case it is formed in a way that is not lucky (cf. Greco 2010: 73–4; Zagzebski 1996: 135; Sosa 1991: 277; Turri 2011; see also Beddor and Pavese 2020).

But one might ask, for example, if all that Boli Xi wants to do is to reform the state of Qin (5A9), why should he care whether his belief that Duke Mu of Qin will cooperate with him is formed in a way that makes it true in all close possible worlds? If all he wants is for it to be true in the *actual* world, because that is all that matters to him when it comes to reforming the state of Qin, then what difference does it

<sup>26</sup> The term 'veritic luck' is a neologism popularized by Duncan Prichard. For a sustained argument against the assumption that veritically lucky beliefs are not knowledge, see (Hetherington 2016).

<sup>27</sup> To clarify, one way of making sense of counterfactual sentences is in terms of 'possible worlds.' The sentence "if you had not taken the train, you would have missed the show" can be analysed as saying something about a possible world where you did not take the train. In that world, you have missed the show. Such a world could be very similar to the actual one, and the more similar it is, the 'closer' it is to the actual world. Hence, "you nearly missed the show" means that the possible world where you missed the show is very close to the actual one.

make that the belief is also true in *close possible* worlds? According to Kvanvig, an adequate account of knowledge should be free of counterexamples and consistent with an explanation as to why knowledge is valuable (Kvanvig 2003: 6), but it is difficult to see how a virtue epistemologist might satisfy the latter condition without begging the question.<sup>28</sup>

Consider for example how a reliabilist virtue epistemologist might respond. They might say that forming a true belief non-luckily (i.e., virtuously) is an achievement, so *knowing* whether Duke Mu of Qin will cooperate is also an achievement, whereas mere true belief about whether Duke Mu will cooperate is not. Given that achievements are by definition more valuable in a domain of success than non-achievements are, it follows that knowing is more valuable than mere true belief (e.g., Greco 2010: 99; Sosa 2007: 46; Prichard 2010: 67). But surely such a response begs the question. If my aim is to reform the state of Qin and I reform it on the basis of my luckily produced belief that, if I come to Qin, the Duke will cooperate with me, why is my achievement in reforming the state any less of an achievement than if I had produced my belief in a non-lucky way? In other words, why should non-lucky success be better than mere success? The state of Qin is reformed either way.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, consider how a responsibilist virtue epistemologist might respond. They might say that the reason why I should care whether my belief that Duke Mu is amicable towards reform is a virtuously produced belief is because producing a belief virtuously is not only a *mark* of the belief's truth in all close possible worlds, it also exemplifies intellectual virtue. It therefore follows that knowing is more valuable than believing truly, because knowing exemplifies a virtuous character trait. But surely this once again begs the question. What is it about *this* character trait that makes it a virtue rather than *that* one, if not the fact that acting from *this* one will result in excellent cognitive acts while acting from *that* one will not?

Responses are surely available to either kind of virtue epistemologist, but rather than trace them out, I suggest we consider the following Mencian alternative. Mencius concedes that, whenever S comes to know that p, S's knowing can be a result of using intellectual virtue, but the value of S's knowing lies elsewhere: my knowledge of Duke Mu of Qin's intentions is valuable not because I have formed it in such a way that in all close possible worlds I come to know about them as well. Such an explication leads down the thorny route that much post-Gettier epistemology is set to traverse. Rather, according to Mencius, my knowledge is valuable because I can *do* something with it. For example, my knowing that Duke Mu of Qin

<sup>28</sup>At one point, Zagzebski seems to assume an even stronger principle than Kvanvig's for the adequacy of accounts of knowledge, namely the principle that, if one appeals to property P in one's explanation of the value of knowledge, then P should be part of one's definition of knowledge (Zagzebski 1996: 302).

<sup>29</sup>This argument is a variation on the *swamping problem*, which says that there is no added epistemic value to a *reliably* (hence, *competently*) formed true belief beyond whatever epistemic value the true belief already has by virtue of being true. Therefore, the epistemic value of knowledge, if knowledge is true belief competently produced, is 'swamped' by the epistemic value of the truth of the belief (cf. Zagzebski 1996: 301–302; Prichard 2011: 248; Hetherington 2018: 4687–4688).



is someone I can work with is valuable because it can help me decide what to do. And having intellectual virtue is valuable because it produces that knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Hence, a Mencian conception of the relation between intellectual virtue and knowledge has at least this advantage over more traditional approaches: it does not have to rely on a modal explication of knowledge and therefore has no difficulty accounting for the distinct value of knowledge.

## 4 Knowing-to: A Different Kind of Knowledge?

In the previous two sections I have drawn attention to what I believe are two aspects of Mencian epistemology: Mencius's account of objectual knowledge ("knowledge of things") and the relation between knowledge and intellectual virtue ("wisdom"). Both of them concern notions of knowledge that are familiar to contemporary epistemologists. This section presents some recent work that suggests we might find in the *Mencius* reference to a kind of knowledge that is different from those that are familiar to contemporary epistemologists. The notion of *knowing-to* might be one such candidate.

Harbsmeier is certainly right when he says that, in Classical Chinese, we normally use the pattern 'know + verb phrase' to express knowing-how and we use 'know + nominalised sentence' to express knowing-that (Harbsmeier 1998: 249). But, as Hetherington and Lai have recently argued, the picture can be complicated in the following way. They argue that there might be instances of the pattern 'know + verb phrase' that do not correspond to either knowledge-how or knowledge-that (Hetherington and Lai 2015). Although their work mostly draws on the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, which is roughly contemporaneous with the *Mencius*, it will be helpful to give a rough outline of what Hetherington and Lai's textual evidence is and what knowing-to is supposed to be. Here is how they describe knowing-to instances in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*:

In the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, the view of knowledge implicit in the passages with the construction "X *ke wei zhi* Y *yi*," is a particular *type* of knowing, whereby a single occasion in which a person appropriately deals with or responds to the situation at hand is deemed to have *sufficiently* demonstrated knowledge. Additionally, in these passages, the focus is on the person's manifest knowledge in particular circumstances. It is not about whether a person *knows how to X* because to say that suggests that, up to a point, a person knows how to X, but on some occasion *may fail to manifest X*. To say that a person *knows to X* is to say that such knowledge is or has been manifest in a particular situation. These manifestations of knowing — knowing-to — are partly constitutive of knowing-how's being exemplified and therefore not reducible to knowledge-how. (Hetherington and Lai 2015: 288)

<sup>30</sup> One might object: whether I *know* that this is the way to Larissa or merely have a *true belief* that it is, in both cases I am equally capable of finding my way to Larissa. How, then, do we distinguish the value of knowledge over the value of true belief? My response, in brief: what is usually taken to distinguish knowledge from true belief is justification, and it seems to me that a justified true belief (that is not Gettiered) is more useful than an unjustified one. For example, such a belief is easier to defend, to maintain in the face of doubts, to have confidence in, etc. Hence, a person who knows that p and a person who believes truly that p differ in terms of what they are epistemically capable of doing. For a more detailed discussion, see (Hetherington 2017, 2021a, b; Hyman 2015: Ch.8).



Roughly, the kind of knowing that Hetherington and Lai claim to have found in some expressions of the form “*X ke wei zhi Y yi* (X 可謂知 Y 矣)” can be thought of as having the following three characteristics. First, it is particular: for example, in *this* circumstance, at *this* particular time, *right there and then*, the Lord of Jingguo knew to stand by Ji Maobian, thereby manifesting his general ability to accurately know people (Hetherington and Lai 2015: 286; cf. Hetherington 2022: 34–35). Second, knowing-to is necessary, perhaps even sufficient, for putting an agent’s know-how into practice: for Duke Huan to appropriately reward Bao Shu, it is not enough that Duke Huan wants to reward Bao Shu and knows how to do so. He also needs to know to perform *this* particular action for Bao Shu to be appropriately rewarded (Hetherington and Lai 2015: 287; cf. Hetherington 2022: 18–20). Third, knowing-to is a success term: if on a particular occasion you knew-to utter W so as to calm a crowd, then you cannot also be said to have failed to calm the crowd (Hetherington and Lai 2015: 283; cf. Hetherington 2022: 36).<sup>31</sup>

Given these characteristics, knowing-to is conceptually distinct from both knowing-how and knowing-that. It is distinct from knowing-how because it is “the extra epistemic element *whereby* the knowledge-how is exemplified in the specific action” (Hetherington and Lai 2015: 282). And it is distinct from knowing-that because knowing-to does not require the agent to possess knowledge of a proposition – that is, it is non-propositional knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

## 4.1 Knowing-to in the Mencius

Whatever the case might be for the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, do we find instances of knowing-to, as I have characterised it above, in the *Mencius*? Perhaps we do. Consider the following passage:

Mencius said, “Suppose someone has a ring finger that is bent and will not straighten. It is not the case that it hurts or that it interferes with one’s activities. But if there is something

<sup>31</sup> There might be other characteristics of knowing-to, including, for example, its normative force: if you know-to  $\varphi$  in circumstance C, then your  $\varphi$ -ing is to a sufficient degree appropriate given the details of the situation. However, it is unclear what determines the relevant standards of appropriateness. For a discussion, see (Brys 2022a: 50).

<sup>32</sup> For an alternative conception of knowing-to, one that largely draws on the work of Wang Yangming and, I believe, is a *propositional* kind of knowing-to, see (Huang 2017). Elsewhere, Huang argues that his notion of knowing-to  $\varphi$  entails but does not reduce to knowing that I ought to  $\varphi$ , because knowing-to motivates its possessor to  $\varphi$ , whereas I can know that I ought to  $\varphi$  without being motivated to  $\varphi$  (Huang 2022: 212). But that is compatible with saying that Huang’s notion of knowing-to is propositional, given that, as Huang puts it, it is “normative knowledge such as my knowledge that I ought to love my parents” (Huang 2022: 211; my own emphasis). Hence, we might think of it as a motivationally efficacious kind of knowing that I ought to  $\varphi$  – and therefore propositional. Of course, Huang’s distinction between motivationally efficacious and motivationally inert knowledge that I ought to  $\varphi$  is only plausible on externalist views about moral motivation, given that internalists would reject it (e.g., Smith 1994: 61).

that can straighten it, one will not consider the road from one end of the world to the other too far, because one's finger is not as good as other people's. If one's finger is not as good as other people's, one knows to dislike it. But if one's heart is not as good as other people's, one does not know to dislike it. This is what is called not knowing categories." (6A12)

This passage has various features in common with those passages that Hetherington and Lai take to be indicative of knowing-to in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*. For example, the passage describes a particular occasion on which a person fails to appropriately respond to the situation. That is, in a situation where the agent's finger and heart are flawed, she fails to appropriately prioritize improving her heart over improving her finger.<sup>33</sup> Second, the passage attributes to the agent a failure of knowledge in an almost identical way to the *Lüshi Chunqiu*: the last sentence of 6A12 has the form "X *zhi wei bu zhi* Y *ye* (X 之謂不知 Y 也)", while the expressions in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* that supposedly hint at knowing-to have the form "X *ke wei zhi* Y *yi* (X 可謂知 Y 矣)". The former is a negation of the latter. Hence, if the latter suggests knowing-to, the former ought to suggest a failure of knowing-to.

In addition to that, and unlike all the textual evidence drawn on by Hetherington and Lai, the *Mencius* at 6A12 explicitly mentions a 'know + verb phrase' construction that is more naturally rendered as "knowing-to  $\varphi$ ": the person *knows-to* dislike (*zhi wu zhi* 知惡之) the fact her finger is not as good as that of other people's, and she does not *know-to* dislike (*bu zhi wu* 不知惡) the fact that her heart is not as good as that of other people's.<sup>34</sup> Hence, in this particular instance, one fails to express one's "knowing categories", because one fails to know-to dislike the flaws of one's heart (and, one might suppose, one fails to know-to enact a way to remedy these flaws). If a person consistently fails to express her knowing how to  $\varphi$  in circumstances that are apt for  $\varphi$ -ing, then Mencius would presumably suggest that we have reason to doubt whether she knows how to  $\varphi$  at all. Compare this with what Mencius says at 6A11:

Mencius said, "Benevolence is the human heart and righteousness is the human path. To leave one's path and not follow it, or to lose one's heart and not know to seek for it (*zhi qiu* 知求) — these are tragedies! If people lose their chickens or dogs, they know to seek for them (*zhi qiu zhi* 知求之). But if they lose their hearts, they do not know to seek for them (*zhi qiu* 知求). The Way of learning and inquiry consists in nothing other than to seek for one's lost heart." (6A11)

Just like those at 6A12 who do not know-to dislike the fact that their hearts are flawed are said to fail to express their "knowing categories", at 6A11 those who do

<sup>33</sup> Objection: 6A12 does not describe a particular *moment* that is apt for knowing-to improve one's heart. Hence, it does not fit my characterization of knowing-to in terms of knowing to do *this* at a specific moment in time. My response: there is no reason why the "right time" for performing  $\varphi$  has to be a particular moment rather than an extended period of time. The right time to discard excess cargo off a ship to save its crew is, presumably, any time between the sinking of the ship and the arrival of the storm. A captain can be said to have known to throw cargo overboard to save her crew if she had done so (intelligently) at any time between those two events. I thank Huang Yong for allowing me to clarify.

<sup>34</sup> Translators almost unanimously render the expression in terms of some cognates of "to know" and "to dislike": for example, "one knows to dislike it" (Van Norden 2008: 155); "he knows to feel dissatisfied" (Legge 1895: 415); "they know to detest it" (Perkins 2022: 37); "one knows enough to hate it" (Bloom 2009: 129); "one has sense enough to resent it" (Lau 2013: 257).

not know-to seek their lost heart presumably fail to enact “the Way of learning and inquiry” (*xuwen zhi dao* 學問之道). Once again, the relevant ‘know + verb phrase’ construction (i.e., *zhi qiu* 知求) is more naturally rendered as “knowing-to”, with most translators following suit.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, given that one characteristic of knowing-to is that it is necessary, perhaps even sufficient, for putting one’s know-how into practice, it should come as no surprise that Mencius connects a failure of knowing-to seek one’s lost heart with a failure of enacting “the Way of learning and inquiry”. At 4A1 Mencius explicitly compares “the Way of Yao and Shun” to a craftsman’s skill, and at 5B7 we are told that Yi Yin intends to “use this Way (of Yao and Shun)” (*yi si dao* 以斯道) to reform the ruler and his people. Yi Yin is presumably capable of doing so by virtue of his knowledge of the Way of Yao and Shun, given the parallel that Mencius draws between knowing the Way and having skill. Hence, knowing the Way of X seems to at least entail knowing how to act in X-related ways, and according to 6A11, failing to know-to act in X-related ways in a situation apt for doing so is a failure of enacting the Way of X.

Mencius issues a similar criticism at 1A3, but this time specifically against King Hui of Liang. The context is this. The people of Liang are suffering from famine, and although King Hui knows about the situation and even tries to provide some measure of relief, Mencius is clear that the King’s efforts fail:

Dogs and sows consume the food of the people and you do not know to set a limit to this (*zhi jian* 知檢). There are bodies in the streets dead of starvation and you do not know to open the granaries (*zhi fa* 知發). When someone dies, you say, ‘It wasn’t me. It was due to the harvest.’ How is this different from killing someone by stabbing him and saying, ‘It wasn’t me. It was due to the weapon’? (1A3)

What is important is that King Hui knows that he *should* protect the people from famine, because he acknowledges that this is a way for him to strengthen his kingdom – that is, he expects his people to become more numerous by virtue of him exerting his “heart to the utmost for the state.” (1A3) Hence, King Hui knows that he ought to protect his people and he wants to protect them, but he nonetheless fails to do so. Why? Because in that particular circumstance, where opening the granaries is a way for him to protect his people, he does not *know-to* open the granaries (*zhi fa* 知發).<sup>36</sup> One might suspect that, just like at 6A12 and 6A11, a lack of knowing-to might indicate a lack of corresponding know-how: what explains King Hui’s

<sup>35</sup> E.g.: “do not know to seek for them” (Van Norden 2008: 155); “do not know to seek for it” (Legge 1895: 414); “do not know to seek it” (Perkins 2022: 117); “not know enough to seek it” (Bloom 2009: 128); “not know enough to seek after it” (Gardner 2007: 92); “without enough sense to go after it” (Lau 2013: 255).

<sup>36</sup> D.C. Lau provides a different translation of 1A3: “[...] when men drop dead from starvation by the wayside, you fail to realize that it is time for distribution.” (Lau 2013: 9) On this translation, Mencius accuses King Hui of failing to know that his situation is apt for distributing food. Perhaps that is the reason why the King fails to put his knowledge-how into practice – namely, because he fails to know that he is in an apt situation for doing so. However, even if the King had been aware of the aptness of his situation, it is still plausible that he could have failed to save his people, because, as I have argued, he could have failed to *know-to* do *this* to save them. I thank Kim-chong Chong for alerting me to D.C. Lau’s translation.

failure to know-to open the granaries might be that, in the end, he does not really know how to protect the people (or provide adequate famine relief). The point is, however, that 1A3, 6A12, and 6A11 seem to suggest that the *Mencius* contains attributions of a kind of knowledge, namely knowing-to, that is conceptually distinct from both knowing-that and knowing-how.

Such a notion of knowing-to should not only be of philosophical interest due to the fact that it complicates a picture of knowledge that has largely become philosophical orthodoxy. It should also be of interest because it can contribute to a long-standing debate on what is required for an action to count as intelligent. In what follows, I give a brief outline of how it can do that.

## 4.2 The Philosophical Significance of Mencian Knowing-to

Contemporary philosophy of action is largely influenced by a view of agency suggested by Wittgenstein's famous question: "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" (Wittgenstein 1958[1953]: §621) There is a difference between the mere physical motion of my arm going up and the act of my raising my arm, such that, if the motion of my arm is intelligent at all, then it derives this intelligence from some purely "inner" mental states.<sup>37</sup> The problem is, however, that merely *having* these mental states is not enough to specify that exactly *this* particular action should occur. For example, suppose the relevant mental states are an agent's intentions, as some contemporary philosophers take them to be (e.g., Enç 2003). If I intend to catch a ball, then I do not thereby intend to move my arm in exactly *this* way, spread out my fingers to *this* extent, close my hand at *this* point in time, etc. In short, my intention to catch the ball does not contain a maximally fine-grained description of my arm's motions but is more or less general (Valaris 2020b: 3401–3). However, if that is so, then how do we get from a mental state with *general* content to the *particular* action of catching this ball, at this time, under these conditions? In a similar vein, how do we get from my general knowledge how to catch balls to the particular expression of it in *this* action of catching a ball? There is a gap here between the agent's mental states that are supposed to specify which action occurs and the action that occurs, and it is not obvious how we can bridge the gap.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This is best illustrated by an argument given by Donald Davidson: the same motion of my hand can on one occasion be a mere muscle-spasm and on another occasion be an instance of signaling an accomplice. The motion is the same on both occasions, and so, according to Davidson, what best explains the difference between the two are the inner mental states that relevantly cause the motion (Davidson 1980).

<sup>38</sup> There is a host of philosophical issues involved here. For example, if we say that in any specific circumstance my general know-how to catch balls has to be *implemented* for it to yield an intelligent action of catching *this* particular ball in *this* circumstance, then it seems that my act of implementing can itself be performed more or less intelligently. But if that is so, then for my act of implementing to be done intelligently, I have to know-how to perform it and I have to exercise such

One way to approach this problem – dare I say, a *Mencian* way – is to deny that the intelligence of actions is derived from causally antecedent mental states.<sup>39</sup> If I am right that there are instances of knowing-to in the *Mencius*, then what this suggests is that an action is intelligent because it manifests the agent’s knowing *in* the action. The agent knows that performing *these* movements is a way for her to  $\varphi$ , and she knows it *as* she is  $\varphi$ -ing – not *before* she is  $\varphi$ -ing. The intelligence of her action is explained by the fact that she *knows* what she is doing *as* she is doing it, whereas a novice can merely hope that what she is doing is a way for her to  $\varphi$ . This point can be further developed in various ways, for example, in terms of the expert performer having demonstrative knowledge of what she is doing (Valaris 2020a, b)<sup>40</sup> or in terms of a special kind of knowledge of answers to embedded questions (Farkas 2017), but either way, there is a lot of potential for a Mencian notion of knowledge to contribute to contemporary philosophical debates.

## 5 Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter is to draw attention to the fact that the *Mencius*, despite not being an epistemological treatise, contains much that can be of interest to contemporary epistemologists. To do this, I have focused on three points in particular.

First, I have proposed that Mencius’s view on *knowing things* amounts to knowing how to act in related ways, and I have given a preliminary defense of it against the objection that, sometimes, knowing things seems to amount to having propositional knowledge of the relevant things being such-and-such. This suggests a novel approach to objectual knowledge – what I have called a *practicalist* account of objectual knowledge.

Second, I have argued that Mencian wisdom stands in a relation to knowledge in a way that is illuminatingly different to the way in which contemporary virtue epistemologists would conceive of it. More specifically, Mencius would agree with many virtue epistemologists that exercising intellectual virtue is necessary for

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second-order know-how in my act of implementing my knowledge-how to catch balls. This leads to a regress similar to the one that Ryle proposed against his intellectualists opponents (see Valaris 2020b).

<sup>39</sup>This does not mean that Mencius rejects the view that there are any such “purely inner” mental states causally antecedent to actions. Indeed, Slingerland provides strong evidence for the claim that the early Chinese had a notion of psychological interiority and that they believed in the causal efficacy of mental states (Slingerland 2019), even if they did not always state it in terms of what is “internal” (*nei* 内) and what is “external” (*wai* 外). For an argument that, as far as the *Mencius* is concerned, the distinction between “internal” and “external” at 6A4–5 does not correspond to what is “within” and “outside” of the mind, see (Brys 2022b). I take this argument to be compatible with Slingerland’s evidence.

<sup>40</sup>To illustrate: I have demonstrative knowledge, for example, if I know that *this* movement of my hands is a way for me to reach my intended target. Furthermore, I can have such knowledge without being able to describe the movement of my hands (Valaris 2020a: 101).

acquiring knowledge, but he would disagree that knowledge is partly defined by the exercise of intellectual virtue. This suggests an account of what makes a capacity an intellectual virtue that is functionally distinct from many contemporary views on intellectual virtue.

Third, I have proposed that we find in the *Mencius* attributions of a kind of knowledge that differs conceptually from those familiar to contemporary epistemologists. That is, there is textual evidence that Mencius sometimes uses the notion of *knowing-to*. This has potential to offer a novel approach to the question of what makes an action intelligent and what it takes to put one's knowledge into practice.

I conclude this chapter by briefly considering the relation between these three aspects of Mencian epistemology. It is by exercising intellectual virtue that we come to know that *p*, know how to *φ*, and know things. Moreover, the epistemic relation we stand in to the actions we perform *as* we perform them determines whether our actions are intelligent. In other words, by knowing-to do *this*, where "this" is a way for me to *φ*, I put my *φ*-related knowledge into practice. By knowing-to move my hands in *these* ways in *this* particular situation, I intelligently perform a ritual, thereby (e.g.) expressing my objectual knowledge of ritual in action.

But the Mencian notion of knowing-to can also help explain how it is that an exercise of intellectual virtue produces knowledge. Suppose I come to know that King Wu defeated Zhou, the last king of the Shang Dynasty, at the Battle of Muye, and I have done so by having studied the *Book of Documents*. What is written in the *Book of Documents* provides me with evidence for the truth that King Wu defeated Zhou. But to be able to learn from the *Book of Documents*, I have to come equipped with a basic set of capacities, the least of which is my ability to read. And yet, as Mencius plausibly illustrates at 6A9, merely being capable of coming to learn how to play the boardgame Go does not guarantee that one will learn how to play it, even if one has access to teachers. Likewise, merely being capable of reading the *Book of Documents* does not guarantee that I will read it, even if I have access to it. More is required. And here is where the notion of knowing-to comes in.

The student who intends to learn how to play Go must *know-to* focus on her lessons for her to make progress (6A9), because focusing on her lessons is presumably a way for her to learn how to play Go. She must, in other words, *know-to* do *this* to put her capacity for learning skills into practice. Analogously, one might think that she must know-to *read* the *Book of Documents* for her to learn that King Wu defeated Zhou, because doing so is a way for her to use her *p*-favouring evidence in coming to know that *p*. Therefore, if Mencian wisdom is partly a capacity for producing knowledge that *p*, then perhaps it is so by virtue of being a capacity for using one's *p*-favouring evidence.

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, my intent is not to claim that this is all there is to Mencian epistemology, nor do I believe myself to have provided anything more than an exploratory outline of various aspects of Mencius's epistemological views. Much more needs to be done. However, I hope to have shown that much more *can* be done, and that the question of what the early Chinese have to offer to contemporary epistemology deserves serious consideration.



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