
EXTENDING KINDNESS: A CONFUCIAN ACCOUNT

BY

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Abstract: The Confucian philosopher Mengzi believes that ‘extending’ one’s kindness facilitates one’s moral development and that it is intimately tied to performing morally good actions. Most interpreters have taken Mengzian kindness to be an emotional state, with the extension of kindness to centrally involve feeling kindness towards more people or in a greater number of situations. I argue that kindness cannot do all the theoretical work that Mengzi wants it to do if it is interpreted as an emotion. I submit that Mengzi’s notion of extending kindness is best understood as the exercise of a capacity for intelligently performing kind actions.

1. Introduction

A central thesis for the early Confucian philosopher Mengzi (c. 372 BCE – c. 289 BCE; latinized as Mencius) is that ‘extending’ (*tuī* 推) one’s kindness significantly contributes to one’s moral development, that such extending involves performing moral actions, and that a person with kindness is thereby capable of extending it.¹ But there are interpretative puzzles about what it means for an agent to be extending her kindness, and these puzzles call into question key assumptions about our understanding of core Mengzian terms such as ‘kindness’, ‘the heart of compassion’ (*cèyǐn zhī xīn* 惻隱之心), ‘benevolence’, and related candidates for extension.

¹The term I translate as kindness, namely, *ēn* 恩, can also be rendered as ‘compassion’ or ‘sympathy.’ The latter make it more obvious that *ēn* 恩 can be an emotion – that is, that one can *feel* kindness. In this paper, I take it for granted that it is plausible that one can feel *ēn* 恩, regardless of how the term is translated. I also assume, following Van Norden (2007, p. 235), that Mengzi refers to the same process of extension by various terms, including ‘broadening’ (*kuò* 擴; 2A6), ‘filling out’ (*chōng* 充; 2A6), ‘attaining’ (*dá* 達; 7B31), and ‘reaching’ (*jì* 及; 7B1, 1A7).

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Many scholars of Mengzi interpret the things-to-be-extended as emotions. On this view, to extend an emotion centrally involves feeling it towards a greater number of people or in novel situations.² Some scholars take such extending to involve reasoning, be it analogical or otherwise, while others disagree.³ But in both cases, a person who extends an emotion such as kindness in some situation C thereby *feels* kindness towards some person A in C. I henceforth call this the *emotionalist reading of extension*.

Perhaps the clearest example of the emotionalist reading is the following interpretative remark from Myeong-Seok Kim on passage 1A7 from the *Mengzi*⁴ – a passage where King Xuan of Qi is said to have saved an ox from slaughter out of compassion:

In a well-known passage where Mèngzǐ advises a king to cultivate compassion toward his people, he uses the phrase “take this feeling and apply it to other cases” (*jū sī xīn jiā zhū bī* 舉斯心加諸彼; Mèngzǐ 1A7). “This feeling” (*sī xīn* 斯心) here mainly refers to the feeling of compassion, and the term “apply” (*jiā* 加) is conceptually equivalent to *tūi* 推 (“to extend”), and thus the whole phrase means “take up the feeling of compassion [from where you naturally feel it] and extend it to other cases [where you have difficulty in feeling it naturally]. (Kim, 2022, pp. 369–70; square brackets in the original)

Kim goes on to elaborate Mengzi’s notion of extension in the following way:

Mèngzǐ’s recommendation to “take up” this feeling of compassion and “apply” it to the case of the king’s people can be understood as an urge to *take up* the king’s sympathetic construal of the ox to be anticipating undeserved death and *apply* it to the case of his people – in other words, to construe the people to be suffering undeserved hardship and in dire need of help from a sympathetic concern as well. (Kim, 2022, p. 280)

Although scholars might disagree with Kim on the details of what it means to *feel* an emotion, it is a commonly held view that, according to Mengzi, extending X means extending the emotion of X, and extending the emotion of X centrally involves having X in more cases than before. Here is, for example, how David Wong expresses the emotionalist reading in a comment on 1A7:

²Although the details of how Mengzi conceives of emotions are disputed, it is generally agreed that Mengzian emotions stand in a constitutive or explanatory relation to an agent’s motives: what it means to feel kindness for an ox that is led to slaughter is to have certain motives for acting, and what it means in such a case to act on one’s emotion of kindness is to perform an action for the sake of rescuing the ox (e.g., Jiang 2021, pp. 157–158; Sung, 2019, pp. 1107–1108). Scholars have also emphasized that Mengzian emotions have cognitive aspects, e.g., that having compassion for a child that is about to fall into a well involves ‘one’s construal of the situation as one in which an innocent sentient being is endangered’ (Kim, 2010, p. 418) or that such compassion comes with ‘the ability to notice salient features of the situation – in this case, noticing that danger is about to befall a child’ (Hu, 2019, p. 4).

³The former include Nivison (1980), Shun (1989, 1997), Wong (2002, 2015); for the latter, see Ihara (1991), Perkins (2002), Im (1999, 2002), Ivanhoe (2002).

⁴A brief note on the scholarly citation convention: the eponymous text *Mengzi* that serves as our primary source for Mengzi’s views is divided into seven books, each of which consists of a ‘former’ (A) and a ‘latter’ (B) part. Hence, ‘1A7’ refers to part A of book 1, section 7.

Mencius is trying to get the king to consciously reinstate his emotion of compassion through reflection on the analogies from the suffering of the innocent man to the suffering of the ox to the suffering of the people. He is reflecting on and reliving what he felt for the innocent man and the ox, and Mencius is hoping to get that feeling, the bodily readiness to respond and the motivational inclination, to flow to the king's people. (Wong, 2015, p. 42)

Although such a view on Mengzian extension is widespread, I argue that it renders Mengzi's views puzzling. My argument, in outline, is this. Mengzi holds that an agent performs a kind action just in case she extends her kindness. But how could this be true if kindness is an emotion? Even if a person's emotional state motivates her to perform kind actions, there is a clear difference between wanting to do something kind and doing it. In Section 2, I give a detailed account of this issue, which I call the 'feeling-outcome gap'. I then consider, in Section 3, possible ways for emotionalists to respond to the gap problem, and I argue that a significant obstacle for bridging the gap is what I call the 'problem of incapacity'. Roughly, I argue that Mengzi is committed to the view that a person is capable of performing kind actions just in case she has kindness – that is, in a situation where protecting the people is a kind action, a ruler is capable of protecting the people just in case she has kindness. But if kindness is an emotion, how could it be that merely feeling an emotion is enough to make an agent *capable* of performing a kind action?

In Section 4, I offer my solution to both problems. I argue that Mengzian extension is best understood as the enactment of a capacity, and the things-to-be-extended are best understood as capacities for intelligently performing corresponding kinds of actions – that is, what it means to extend kindness is to intelligently perform a kind action. Therefore, contrary to the emotionalist view on extension, the things-to-be-extended (such as kindness) are not emotions but capacities for intelligent action.

2. *The feeling-outcome gap problem*

The two *loci classici* for the thesis that Mengzian extension is to be understood in terms of the extension of emotions are 1A7 and 2A6. Mengzi claims at 1A7 that King Xuan's 'kindness is sufficient to extend to animals' and he supports this by saying that the king previously had mandated the release of an ox that was about to be slaughtered:

Mengzi said, 'I heard your attendant Hu He say, "While the King was sitting up in his hall, an ox was led past below. The King saw it and said, "Where is the ox going?"' Hu He replied, "We are about to ritually anoint a bell with its blood." The King said, "Spare it. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground." [...]' (1A7)⁵

⁵For 1A7, I rely on the translation of Van Norden (2008) with minor emendations. All other translations of the *Mengzi* are my own, unless otherwise specified.

The king's act of freeing the ox is an instance of the king's kindness 'extending to animals'. Mengzi continues in the following way (and I enumerate the passages for ease of reference):

(I) Mengzi said, 'Suppose there were someone who reported to Your Majesty, "My strength is sufficient to lift a hundred *jūn* 鈞,⁶ but not sufficient to lift one feather. My eyesight is sufficient to examine the tip of an autumn hair, but I cannot see a wagon of firewood." Would Your Majesty accept that?'

The King said, 'No'.

Mengzi said, 'In the present case your kindness is sufficient to extend to animals, but the effects do not reach the commoners. How is this different from the examples I just gave?'

(II) Hence, one fails to lift a feather only because one does not use one's strength. One fails to see a wagon of firewood only because one does not use one's eyesight. You fail to protect the people only because you do not use your kindness. Hence, Your Majesty fails to act kingly because you do not act, not because you are unable to act.

[...]

(III) Hence, if one extends one's kindness, it will be sufficient to protect all within the Four Seas. If one does not extend one's kindness, one will lack the wherewithal to protect one's wife and children. That in which the ancients greatly exceeded others was no other than this. They were simply good at extending what they did'. (1A7)

From the aforementioned exchange, I infer that Mengzi uses the claim that the king's kindness is sufficient to extend to animals to make three further points.

- (Ia): If King Xuan is capable of being kind towards animals, then he is capable of being kind towards the people.
- (IIa): If the king is capable of being kind towards the people, then the reason why he is not protecting the people is because he is not putting his kindness into practice.
- (IIIa): If the king 'extends' his kindness, then this is sufficient for him to be protecting the people.⁷

Mengzi establishes (IIa) by means of a comparison. It is absurd to say that someone has sufficient strength to raise a hundred *jūn* 鈞 but not a single feather. If in such a case the person fails to lift the feather, it means that they

⁶A *jūn* 鈞 is an ancient unit of weight denoting roughly 18 kilograms.

⁷Two complications deserve mention here, to which I return further below. First, I assume that Mengzi's term 'to use' (*yòng* 用) can be translated as 'to exercise' or 'to put into practice.' This is not obvious, and I return to this point in Section 3. Second, there is an important distinction between sentences of the kind 'S is ending the famine' and 'S has ended the famine', such that both cannot be true of the same famine at the same time. This is because the latter entails success: 'S has succeeded in ending the famine' means that the famine was ended because of S's efforts. (On issues with the 'because of' relation, see Bishop, 1989, ch. 4; Mayr, 2011, ch. 5.) But 'S is ending the famine' is true just in case S is enacting a way for her to end the famine. I therefore suggest that we understand Mengzi's claim that 'extending X is sufficient for protecting the people' as saying that exercising X is a sufficient condition for enacting a way for the agent to protect the people.

are not exercising their strength. Likewise, if only the king were to exercise his kindness, he would be protecting the people. The point is repeated at (IIIa) in terms of extension: if only the king were to *extend* his kindness, he would thereby be protecting the people.

The point of the analogy is to show that, if an agent has a capacity that enables her to perform a difficult task, then what explains why she fails to perform a correspondingly easier task of the same type is because she is not exercising her capacity for performing tasks of that type. Just as an agent can be said to not have exercised a capacity (i.e., ‘strength’) to raise a feather, so the king can be said to not have exercised a capacity (i.e., ‘kindness’) to protect the people. But if this is right, then the close textual parallel between ‘using kindness’ (*yòng ēn* 用恩) and ‘extending kindness’ (*tuī ēn* 推恩) should give us pause. If what is meant by ‘using kindness’ is for the king to ‘exercise a capacity’, then I suggest that the same is true for ‘extending kindness’ as well: what it means to extend one’s kindness is to exercise a capacity for performing a corresponding action.⁸

In fact, it seems to me that the analogy and the textual parallels are reasons for rejecting the view that extending kindness is to be understood in terms of extending an emotion. Here is why. Mengzi is saying that the king is protecting the people just in case (IIa) he ‘uses’ his kindness or (IIIa) he ‘extends’ it. Presumably, the king’s act of protecting the people is in this situation an instance of acting kindly. Hence, if a person puts kindness into practice – if she *enacts* kindness – then she acts kindly. Mengzi therefore seems committed to the following principle: *enacting kindness means acting kindly*. But if we take kindness to be an emotion, then it is simply not true that a person is acting kindly just in case she is motivated by it. To use an example given by Hursthouse, if hiding a hurtful truth from a student is not an instance of acting kindly, then even if I hide the hurtful truth motivated by a desire to do something kind, I will not be thereby performing a kind action (Hursthouse, 1999, pp. 52, 101).⁹

In a similar way, King Xuan’s failure to act kindly might be due to him misunderstanding what it means to perform a kind action given the details of his situation. He might falsely believe, as King Hui of Liang does at 1A3, that merely relocating people and food resources during a famine is

⁸From this, it does not follow that ‘using’ kindness and ‘extending’ kindness are coextensive, although I believe that they are, and so I believe that, perhaps, the term ‘to use’ (*yòng* 用) should be added to the list of Mengzian terms that refer to the same process of extension. But one might object: perhaps ‘to use kindness’ refers to exercising one’s kindness for ϕ -ing, while ‘to extend kindness’ refers to improving one’s kindness in such a way that one can exercise it in more circumstances than before. My response is that this seems difficult to reconcile with Mengzi’s claim (IIIa) that, if the king extends his kindness, then this is sufficient for him to be protecting the people. If ‘extending kindness’ means improving one’s kindness rather than exercising it, then how does extending kindness end up protecting the people? I return to this issue in Section 3.

⁹Proponents of Slote’s agent-based virtue ethics might disagree, arguing (roughly) that an agent performs a virtuous action just in case she acts from a virtuous motive (Slote, 2001, 2010). For reasons against thinking that Mengzi was an agent-based virtue ethicist, see Brys (2023).

enough for his action to be kind. The king might in such a case feel kindness towards his people and act on it, and yet he might still fail to perform a kind action.

The problem for the emotionalist view is that there is a gap between an agent's emotions and her kind actions – between, on the one hand, S feeling kindness or being motivated by kindness, and, on the other hand, S performing a kind action. The existence of such a gap is the reason why it is false to say that a person is acting kindly just in case she is extending her kindness. But Mengzi is saying exactly that at (IIIa): if King Xuan were to extend his kindness, he would be protecting the people. Hence, the emotionalist reading commits Mengzi to a view that is false. This is an instance of what I call the feeling-outcome gap problem.

In Section 4, I argue that there is no corresponding gap problem if we understand Mengzian extension solely in terms of the exercise of capacities for intelligent action. For now, I wish to point out that the feeling-outcome gap problem not only applies to what Mengzi says at 1A7, but also to 2A6:

The reason why I say that all humans have hearts that cannot endure the suffering of others is this. Suppose someone suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a heart of compassion-and-alarm – not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among one's neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries. From this we can see that if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not human.

[...]

The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The heart of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The heart of deference is the sprout of ritual propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom. People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts, yet to claim that one is incapable is to steal from oneself. To say that one's ruler is incapable is to steal from one's ruler. In general, having these four sprouts within oneself, if one knows to fill them out, it will be like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through! If one can fill them out, it will be sufficient for protecting all within the Four Seas. If one fails to fill them out, it will be insufficient to serve one's parents. (2A6)

The term 'heart that cannot endure the suffering of others' (*bùrěn rén zhī xīn* 不忍人之心) is usually taken by friends of the emotionalist reading to be an emotion and this is supported by the claim that 'the heart of compassion-and-alarm' (*chùtì cèyǐn zhī xīn* 怵惕惻隱之心) supposedly refers to the emotion of alarm that either brings about or is constitutive of one's motives for acting. One *feels* alarm when one sees that a child is about to fall into a well. Likewise, given that Mengzi takes the 'heart of compassion' to be the so-called 'sprout' (*duān* 端) of the virtue of benevolence, it should be easy to see why friends of the emotionalist reading would want to take 'filling out' the sprouts (i.e., extending them) to centrally involve coming to feel emotions towards more people or in a greater number of situations.

But there are reasons to doubt whether this overwhelmingly popular view of 2A6 is as correct as it is standardly taken to be, and the feeling-outcome gap is one of them. After all, Mengzi says that, if one ‘fills out’ one’s sprouts, then this is sufficient to protect the people. But no matter how much sympathy a ruler might feel for the plight of his people and no matter how much the ruler might be motivated to act on this sympathy, it does not follow that he will be protecting the people.

In what follows, I discuss how emotionalists might propose to bridge the feeling-outcome gap and I argue that any such attempts face a significant challenge – namely, the problem of incapacity.

3. *Bridging the gap and the problem of incapacity*

One might propose to bridge the feeling-outcome gap in the following way. Suppose we say that for King Xuan to extend his kindness he not only has to *have* the emotion of kindness, but he also needs to *use* it (*yòng ēn* 用恩). What does it mean to use one’s kindness, where kindness is taken to be an emotion? Friends of the emotionalist reading might respond: it means *to enact a way for the agent to perform a kind action*. In King Xuan’s situation, this amounts to alleviating the plight of his people, because doing so counts as performing a kind action. Hence, proponents of emotionalism might object that I have treated the following expressions as relevantly synonymous: ‘performing an action motivated by kindness’ and ‘using one’s kindness/putting one’s kindness into practice’. But they are not synonymous. If a person acts motivated by kindness, she might still fail to perform a kind action, because she might fail to enact a way for her to alleviate the plight of her people in a situation where doing so would be a kind action. Hence, it is plausible to say that I can be motivated by kindness but fail to ‘put my kindness into practice’. Emotionalists might therefore propose to avoid the feeling-outcome gap by suggesting that extending kindness means putting the emotion of kindness into practice and putting the emotion of kindness into practice means performing a kind action. This amounts to the following:

- E1: Extending kindness means extending one’s emotion of kindness.
 E2: A person extends her emotion of kindness just in case she puts her emotion of kindness into practice.¹⁰

¹⁰Van Norden hints at such a view when he distinguishes the ‘cognitive aspect’ from the ‘affective aspect’ of extension: ‘Cognitive extension is coming to see the ethically relevant similarities (or differences) between two actions, individuals, or situations. Affective extension is coming to have the motivations and emotions that are appropriate in response to two actions, individuals, or situations. [...] Now, when extension is *complete*, one’s affective and cognitive reactions will be in perfect alignment.’ (Van Norden, 2007, pp. 236–237) Hence, one might suggest that, beside the cognitive and affective aspects, there is also an *agential* aspect to extension: a person *agentially* extends kindness just in case she puts it into practice. I have tried to capture this by (E2).

I argue that such a proposal is unsuccessful, because (E2) renders (E1) implausible. My argument is this. If kindness is an emotion, then we have reason to believe (E1), and if kindness is not an emotion, then we have reason to deny (E1). Mengzi claims that, if a person has kindness, then she is capable of extending it. But if kindness is an emotion, and if (E2) is the right account of what it means to extend kindness, then Mengzi's claim is false. Hence, either (E2) is wrong or kindness is not an emotion. This is the problem of incapacity.

Let me make the argument more precise and support it with textual evidence. It is plausible that a person can be in a particular emotional state without being capable of putting it relevantly into practice. That is, she can have the emotion of kindness without knowing how to act kindly in a situation where doing so amounts to protecting the people. Hence, having the emotion of kindness is not sufficient for being capable of protecting the people in a situation where putting one's kindness into practice means protecting the people. But Mengzi says that it *is* sufficient. He tells King Xuan that, 'this heart (of yours) is sufficient for acting kingly (是心足以王矣)' and that, 'if you protect the people, you act kingly (保民而王)'. (1A7) Hence, King Xuan's heart has some quality that renders the king capable of protecting the people.¹¹ We learn that the relevant quality of King Xuan's heart is kindness: 'You fail to protect the people only because you do not use your kindness. Hence, Your Majesty fails to act kingly because you do not act, not because you are unable to act (百姓之不見保, 為不用恩焉. 故王之不王, 不為也, 非不能也)'. (1A7) Therefore, in King Xuan's situation, having kindness is sufficient for being capable of protecting the people.

Mengzi suggests that this is not only so for kindness, but also for the four sprouts mentioned at 2A6. He says that a person who has the four sprouts cannot say of herself that she is 'incapable' (*bù néng* 不能) and that if a ruler puts her sprouts into practice, then she protects the people.¹² This suggests that, if a ruler has the sprouts, then she is capable of protecting the people – a view that parallels the more explicit claim about kindness from 1A7 that, if King Xuan has kindness, then he is capable of protecting the people. I take this to be evidence that Mengzi holds a view on which a person cannot have kindness without having some corresponding capacity. Put in slogan form, Mengzi seems to hold: *no kindness without capacity*. I return to the question of what counts as a *corresponding* capacity in Section 4. But suffice to say that, if kindness (or the four sprouts) are emotions, as the emotionalist

¹¹Compare this with saying: 'this strength of yours is enough for crushing stones.' If the sentence is true, then what makes it true is the fact that you have some quality that makes you capable of crushing stones.

¹²The two relevant sentences from 2A6 are: 'To have these four sprouts, yet to claim that one is incapable is to steal from oneself (有是四端而自謂不能者, 自賊者也). [...] If one can fill them out, it will be sufficient for protecting all within the Four Seas (苟能充之, 足以保四海).'

reading conceives of them, then it is simply false that a ruler is capable of protecting the people just in case she feels specific emotions.

At best, we should conceive of a ruler's emotional states as something that could either motivate or hinder her protecting the people. If King Xuan is apathetic towards the fact that his people suffer, then his apathy might hinder the exercise of his capacity to help the people. But his apathy does not *deprive* him of such a capacity. Likewise, if he feels moved by the suffering of his people, his emotion can motivate him to exercise his capacity to ease their suffering. But it is implausible to take his emotions to *constitute* his capacity to help them. And yet, if we read the *Mengzi* carefully, it turns out that Mengzi takes a ruler to be capable of helping the people just in case she has kindness (or the four sprouts). Recall passage (II) from 1A7: 'One fails to see a wagon of firewood only because one does not use one's eyesight. You fail to protect the people only because you do not use your kindness'. If King Xuan were to lack kindness, he would be deprived of his capacity to protect the people just as much as a person lacking eyesight would be deprived of his capacity to see a wagon of firewood. Given that this is false if kindness is an emotion, the emotionalist reading commits Mengzi to a view that is false. This is an instance of the problem of incapacity.

Perhaps there are ways for emotionalists to respond to the problem of incapacity. Here I consider two promising ways of doing so, while in Section 4 I offer my preferred solution. The first response takes issue with some of the textual evidence I cite. Part of my argument in this section has been that we should interpret Mengzi as saying that a ruler (in apt circumstances) is capable of protecting the people just in case she has kindness. But we can dispute that this is in the text. My argument partly draws on support from Mengzi's sentence at 1A7 that, 'this heart (of King Xuan) is sufficient for acting kingly (是心足以王矣)' (1A7), which I take to mean that King Xuan has a capacity that is sufficient for ϕ -ing, but friends of the emotionalist reading might object that the sentence is to be read in an entirely different way. They might propose that Mengzi is stating the *cause* of kingly action: what brings about a kingly action in King Xuan's situation is his kindness, and his kindness can do that because kindness is an emotion and emotions motivate actions. That is, one might suggest that Mengzi's sentence is to be read as the analogous equivalent of saying that, if you are motivated to crush stones, then crushing stones will happen, given that you *already* have the relevant capacities and you are in an apt situation for doing so.

Hence, so the objection continues, when Mengzi tells King Xuan that the king has all that he needs (*zú yǐ* 足以) to protect the people, then we are warranted to assume that the king is already capable of protecting the people. In such a case, what best explains the fact that King Xuan does not protect the people is that he does not want to. We should therefore read the sentence

‘this heart (of yours) is sufficient for acting kingly’ as saying that, if the king were to feel kindness towards his people, this would be sufficient for bringing about the action of protecting the people, because it would be sufficient to motivate the king to protect them. On such a reading, Mengzi’s goal throughout 1A7 is to motivate the king to protect the people by making him feel kindness towards them.

My answer is that this objection fails, because it is open to the feeling-outcome gap. In Section 2, I have argued that a person can be in an apt situation for φ -ing, know how to φ , want to φ , and still fail to φ . Hence, it is false that wanting to φ (by feeling kindness) is sufficient for bringing about φ -ing in relevant circumstances. And so, the emotionalist proposal outlined in the objection commits Mengzi to saying something false. On the other hand, if emotionalists interpret the sentence ‘this heart (of yours) is sufficient for acting kingly’ as saying that your heart makes you capable of performing a kingly action, then they open themselves to the problem of incapacity – that is, if we construe kindness as an emotion, then it is false that a ruler is capable of acting kingly just in case she feels specific emotions.

Let me consider a second way for proponents of emotionalism to respond to the problem of incapacity. Emotionalists might say that, if King Xuan feels kindness towards his people, then he is in a sense capable of protecting them, because he has the potential to morally cultivate himself into a person who can protect the people. Likewise, we are supposed to read 2A6 as saying that, if you have the four sprouts, then you are in a sense capable of putting them into practice, because you are capable of doing so after you have undergone the required training. Suppose, for example, that you are right in telling a beginner violinist who shows a lot of potential that, ‘you are capable of playing violin concertos, but you will need to practice a lot before you can’. If the beginner can be said to be capable of playing violin concertos because she is capable of developing the skills required to do so, then we can likewise say that King Xuan is capable of protecting the people because he can be cultivated into a person who protects them.¹³

The problem with this response is that it merely shifts the issue further back. Is it really true that I am capable of becoming a concert violinist just in case I feel specific emotions? I do not think so. Specific emotions can motivate me to work hard on my technique, but they do not constitute my capacity for becoming a concert violinist. If anything, Mengzi would say that it is something about my *nature* that renders me capable of becoming a

¹³Aristotle in *De Anima* II.5 (417a21-b6) distinguishes a person’s first potentiality to φ (a capacity X to acquire a further capacity Y) from the person’s second potentiality to φ (a capacity Y the exercise of which consists in φ -ing). To illustrate, Aristotelians would say that an infant is a speaking animal in potentiality, because she possesses the first potentiality to speak, which is a capacity to acquire (the capacity for) speech. Once she has acquired that capacity to speak (i.e., once she possesses the second potentiality to speak), she can then choose to exercise it or not. The emotionalist response can be interpreted along these Aristotelian lines. I thank an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

virtuous person (6A6), just as one might say that a person is capable of becoming a concert violinist because she has *inborn talent* for playing the violin. But surely the fact that you have some inborn talent is not a matter of being in a specific emotional state. You can love playing the violin without having any inborn talent, and you can have inborn talent without loving to play the violin.

Emotionalists might point out that we are justified in believing that a beginner is capable of becoming a concert violinist only if she shows a lot of potential. This is because showing a lot of potential is a way for the beginner to *indicate* that she is relevantly capable. One might therefore suggest that King Xuan's emotion of kindness likewise indicates the possession of a capacity. That is, having kindness shows that I am capable, although it does not *make* me capable. Hence, whenever King Xuan feels kindness, he shows that he has a lot of potential for becoming a person who protects the people in apt situations.

My response is this. The matter under dispute is whether I have a capacity for becoming a person who ϕ -s just in case I have a particular emotion. The emotionalist proposal under consideration is that having a particular emotion indicates the possession of such a capacity. But this seems to me false. Feeling kindness does not indicate that I am capable of becoming a person who saves drowning people, and wanting to help others does not indicate that I am capable of becoming helpful. Why should this be any different for King Xuan and his capacity for becoming virtuous? Even if we stipulate that being a virtuous person is partly defined in terms of having virtuous motives (e.g., in terms of wanting to help others for its own sake), it is not clear why having a virtuous motive should indicate that I am capable of becoming virtuous. If a beginner violinist shows a lot of potential, then we can agree that she is thereby indicating the possession of a corresponding capacity, but we cannot assume, at least not without begging the question, that a person shows a lot of potential just in case she feels a particular emotion.

Let me summarize the arguments against the emotionalist reading thus far. The issue can be put in the form of a dilemma. If emotionalists say that King Xuan extends his kindness just in case he performs an action motivated by the emotion of kindness, then Mengzi is wrong that extending kindness in relevant circumstances means protecting the people. This is because, if a person feels kindness, then it does not follow that she will thereby enact a way for her to help the people, even if she is in apt circumstances for doing so. But if emotionalists want to say that King Xuan, in his particular situation, extends his kindness just in case he enacts a way for him to help the people, then Mengzi is wrong that King Xuan is capable of protecting the people just in case he has the emotion of kindness. Hence, the emotionalist position is stuck between the feeling-outcome gap and the problem of incapacity.

4. *A solution: Extending capacities for action*

In the previous two sections, I have introduced two problems for the popular emotionalist view that Mengzian extension centrally involves having emotions towards more people or in more situations than before. In this section, I propose my solution to both of these problems.

Recall that what generates the gap problem at 1A7 and 2A6 is that Mengzi holds the following: *enacting kindness means acting kindly*. And what generates the problem of incapacity is a related principle: *no kindness without capacity*. I have argued that at least one of them turns out to be false if we take extending kindness to mean extending the emotion of kindness. The reason why they turn out to be false is simple: emotions do not entail capacities, let alone capacities for intelligent action. One can be capable of intelligently using one's emotions, but one is not capable of doing so merely by virtue of having emotions, just as being strong does not necessarily make one capable of intelligently using one's strength. At best, strength allows me to intelligently perform actions whose performance requires me to be physically strong, but what makes me capable of intelligently performing actions is my knowledge how to do so.

Here, then, is my proposal. Mengzian kindness is a capacity for intelligently performing kind actions, and the four sprouts are respectively capacities for intelligently performing benevolent, righteous, ritually proper, and wise actions. If we generalize, then we can say that Mengzian virtues are capacities for intelligently performing virtuous actions. What counts as a virtuous action partly depends on the details of the situation. In a situation where a person has fallen into a river and is shouting for help and the agent standing on the riverbank knows how to swim, what counts as a compassionate action will be different than in a situation where the agent does not know how to swim. Moreover, if a person fails to recognize that a situation is apt for performing a kind action, or falsely believes that ignoring the drowning person is a kind way for him to act, then this is a failure of his capacity for intelligently performing kind actions. An especially kind person is, on this interpretation of Mengzi, someone who is *inter alia* reliable at discovering ways for an agent to perform kind actions given the details of the situation. This is why they make good advisors, and, presumably, why the Confucians take virtuous people to make good ministers and rulers. If we present a hypothetical situation to a person who is especially kind, e.g., we ask her what a person with King Xuan's skills and resources ought to do to perform a kind action, then we can expect her to give us a good account of what a kind action would be in King Xuan's situation.

I believe that such a proposal has many advantages. For example, it helps to explain why Mengzi, at the end of 1A7, advises King Xuan to 'weigh' (*quán* 權) and 'measure' (*dù* 度) his heart. If the king were to reflect on the

capacities he has, it would answer the question he poses at the outset of 1A7 – namely, whether the king is capable of protecting the people. By ‘measuring’ his heart, he finds out that there is a way for him to use his resources to perform a kind action and that doing so involves protecting the people. Hence, all that King Xuan needs to do to protect the people is to use what is available to him to act kindly.

But the clearest advantage of such a proposal is that it can avoid the two problems mentioned at the outset of this paper. Consider the problem of incapacity first. If we take kindness to be an emotion, then it is false that having the emotion of kindness entails having a capacity for putting it into practice. But if kindness *just is* a capacity for intelligently performing kind actions, then we can avoid the problem. If you have a capacity for intelligently ϕ -ing, then you do not need *an additional* capacity for putting your first capacity into practice for you to ϕ . Moreover, if a person is capable of intelligently ϕ -ing in a situation C, and ϕ -ing in C is coextensive with ψ -ing, then the person is capable of ψ -ing. Hence, if a ruler is capable of intelligently performing a kind action in a situation where acting kindly just means protecting the people, then it is true that a ruler is capable of protecting the people.¹⁴ Hence, it is neither false nor trivial for Mengzi to tell King Xuan: ‘this capacity of yours to intelligently do something kind is enough to protect the people’. This is true, because in King Xuan’s situation, using his available skills and resources to intelligently perform a kind action entails protecting the people.

Consider, in that light, the feeling-outcome gap problem. If we take kindness to be a capacity for intelligently performing a kind action, then Mengzi’s claim (IIIa) turns out to be true: if the king extends his kindness, then he will be protecting the people. The reason why it turns out to be true is because the exercise of a capacity to intelligently perform a kind action is nothing other than a kind action, and protecting the people in King Xuan’s situation is a way for him to perform a kind action.

Friends of the emotionalist reading might object to my proposal in various ways. Here I consider two objections that strike me as particularly strong. First, emotionalists might object that my proposal is uncharitable, because it implausibly takes Mengzi to say that we are born with capacities for intelligently performing benevolent, righteous, ritually proper, and wise actions. Second, friends of the emotionalist reading might argue that my proposal fails to bridge a relevantly adjusted feeling-outcome gap and hence it fares no better than the emotionalist alternative. After all, it is false that, if King Xuan were to exercise his capacity for intelligently performing a kind action

¹⁴Note that I am *not* committed to the stronger and less plausible view that, if a person is capable of intelligently ϕ -ing, and ϕ -ing is coextensive with ψ -ing, then the person is capable of intelligently ψ -ing. Such a view is likely to be false (see Kearns, 2021, p. 428), but also not necessary for my purposes. The point is that, if King Xuan is capable of *intelligently* protecting the people, then this is because he knows how to protect them, rather than because he is capable of intelligently performing kind actions.

in a situation where doing so means ending a famine, then he would thereby successfully bring about the end of the famine.

In the remainder of this paper, I answer each objection in turn. The first objection focuses on how plausible it is to think that, for example, very young children possess capacities for intelligently performing virtuous actions. That Mengzi holds such a view seems to me independently supported by 7A15: ‘There are no young children who do not know how to love their parents, and there are none who, having grown up, do not know how to respect their older brothers. Treating one’s parents as parents is benevolent. Treating one’s elders respectfully is righteous’. Given that benevolent actions are arguably virtuous actions, Mengzi seems to be saying that young children know how to love their parents, and hence they are capable of intelligently performing benevolent actions towards them.

Here is one way to make such a claim plausible. When a child offers her favourite plush toy to a grieving parent, it is not far-fetched to think that the child knows what she is doing. It is plausible to conceive of her consoling action as intelligent – that is, the child’s action expresses her knowledge that offering the plush toy is a way for the child to console (and hence to act lovingly towards) her parent. We would of course not expect young children to know how to act benevolently, kindly, or lovingly in more complex situations, say, when they are faced with ruling a kingdom, but that is because knowledge-how comes in degrees. Recall that King Xuan’s kindness is *sufficient* (zú yǐ 足以) for being capable of protecting the people, although the kindness of a young child might not be. I therefore believe that the first objection can be avoided, because it is not implausible to believe that young children are capable of using what is available to them to intelligently perform virtuous actions, although their capacities for doing so are basic and in need of development.

What about the second objection? It rests on the following (correct) insight: exercising a capacity does not guarantee that one will succeed in bringing about the end constitutive of the capacity. To illustrate, suppose King Xuan possesses a capacity to intelligently end the famine that is ravaging his kingdom, and suppose he exercises that capacity in mandating that the state granaries be opened. Although he is exercising his capacity in issuing mandates, the people’s hunger does not thereby immediately cease. Indeed, King Xuan might ultimately fail to end the famine despite acting intelligently. But, so the objection goes, this is nothing other than the gap problem all over again: you can act intelligently, but fail to achieve the right outcomes.

My response is this. The objection rightly points out that intelligently enacting a way for me to ϕ is not enough for my ϕ -ing to be successful. That is, I can intelligently enact a way for me to shoot arrows at a target and still miss. This might be due to unforeseeable gusts of wind that move the arrow away from the target, thereby rendering my action a failure, albeit an

intelligent one.¹⁵ Nonetheless, my knowledge is expressed in my *action*, even if my action fails to achieve its end. Put differently, an action cannot be an instance of intelligent ϕ -ing if it is not an instance of ϕ -ing at all. And so, an agent's ϕ -ing cannot be an intelligent failure at ϕ -ing without being an instance of ϕ -ing.¹⁶

When King Xuan exercises his capacity in intelligently mandating policies that help to end the famine, he is thereby enacting a way for him to end the famine, even if doing so does not guarantee that he will succeed in producing a state of affairs of the famine having been ended. If an asteroid unexpectedly wipes out his kingdom before he can end the famine, it is still true that King Xuan was ending the famine when he was enacting the right kind of policies, and it is still true that the famine eventually came to an end, but it is false that King Xuan ended the famine – it was the asteroid that did. Therefore, King Xuan was intelligently ending the famine, but he failed. His action was an intelligent failure.

In intelligently enacting a way to end the famine, King Xuan is benefitting his people, protecting them, and he is performing a kind action. Hence, for the king to be ending the famine, protecting the people, and acting kindly, what is sufficient is that he is intelligently enacting a way for him to end the famine – what is *not necessary* is that he succeeds in producing a state of affairs of the famine having been ended.¹⁷

Is such a response open to friends of emotionalism as well? It is not, and the reason is this. In acting on any of his emotions, King Xuan is not necessarily enacting a way to end the famine. If King Xuan misguidedly believes that punishing his ministers will end the famine, then no matter what emotion he acts on when he is ordering the punishments, he will not be enacting a way to end the famine. In short, although exercising a capacity for intelligently ϕ -ing involves enacting a way for the agent to ϕ , putting an emotion

¹⁵Sosa (2011, 2016) makes a similar point in terms of competences. He characterizes an action ϕ as competently performed if the agent enacts a way for her to ϕ such that, under normal circumstances, her ϕ -ing would be successful. If you shoot the arrow in such a way that 'its speed and orientation would in normal conditions take it to the bull's-eye' (Sosa, 2016, p. 6), then your shooting is competent, regardless of whether you end up hitting the target. On the need to account for competent failures, see Miracchi (2015).

¹⁶To clarify, the distinction is between (i.) intending to exercise one's capacity for intelligently ϕ -ing but failing to do so (and, hence, failing to ϕ) and (ii.) exercising one's capacity in ϕ -ing but failing at ϕ -ing. One might object that (i.) implies a gap as well: intending to exercise a capacity does not necessarily lead one to exercise it. This is right, but irrelevant. Recall that the feeling-outcome gap is a gap between enacting kindness and acting kindly - a gap whose existence Mengzi denies. But this is unrelated to the claim that there might be a gap between intending to enact kindness and enacting kindness. For a discussion of this latter gap, see Valaris (2020); Hetherington (2022).

¹⁷Presumably, an act of protecting the people brings about a state of affairs of the people being protected, and that might be true even if, in King Xuan's situation, protecting the people *just means* relieving a famine. Therefore, the people can be protected *while* and *because* the king is enacting a way for him to end the famine.

into practice does not necessarily mean enacting a way for the agent to φ .¹⁸ My proposed solution is therefore not open to friends of emotionalism, and the second objection can be avoided as well.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that any adequate interpretation of the Mengzian extension of kindness (and its related terms) must be able to accommodate the following two principles: *no kindness without capacity* and *enacting kindness means acting kindly*. Failure to do so generates the feeling-outcome gap and the problem of incapacity.

I have then argued that the best way to accommodate what Mengzi has to say on extension is this: the things-to-be-extended are capacities for intelligently performing corresponding actions, and Mengzian extension consists of the enactment of such capacities. Hence, to extend kindness means to enact a capacity for intelligently performing kind actions, and to extend the four sprouts means to enact capacities for intelligently performing compassionate, righteous, ritually proper, and wise actions. From this, it follows that, as far as Mengzi's notion of extension is concerned, we have no reason to think that what is to be extended are emotions, even though what is to be extended are kindness, compassion, love, the four sprouts, and their related terms.

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¹⁸*Objection*: surely this is not true if we *stipulate* that putting an emotion into practice just means enacting a way for you to φ . I agree, but as I argue in Section 3, such a proposal encounters the problem of incapacity.

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