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Mengzian knowledge practicalism

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ABSTRACT

I argue that, for Mengzi, the kind of knowledge that features in expressions of the form ‘knowing *N*’, where *N* is a noun or a noun phrase, is not a kind of belief but is instead a capacity for intelligently performing relevant actions. My argument proceeds by showing that, first, Mengzi is committed to the view that a person knows *N* iff she is relevantly capable and, second, that the best explanation for this is that the kind of knowledge involved in knowing *N* is a capacity. Finally, I motivate such a *practicalist* interpretation by arguing that it offers us a general but informative explanation of what it is that knowing *N* makes the knower capable of doing.

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1. Introduction: Mengzi on knowing *N*

The closest that the early Confucian philosopher Mengzi 孟子 (c. 372–289 BCE) comes to giving us an account of knowledge is in passages that discuss what it means for a person to know *N*, where *N* stands for a noun or noun phrase, rather than a proposition, a proper name, a verb, or a verb phrase. Mengzi’s examples of knowing *N* include knowing sages (*zhī shèng rén* 知聖人) (2A2), knowing categories (*zhī lèi* 知類) (6A12), knowing words (*zhī yán* 知言) (2A2), and knowing Heaven (*zhī tiān* 知天) (7A1). My aim in this paper is to explain the kind of knowledge that a person has when she knows *N*. For the sake of convenience, I henceforth call *N*-knowledge the kind of knowledge that is involved in knowing *N*. My argument is that *N*-knowledge is not a species of belief but is instead a capacity for intelligently

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acting in related ways. Hence, Mengzi holds a form of knowledge *practicalism*.¹

Before I set out to introduce my argument, let me clarify how I use the terms ‘belief’ and ‘capacity’ in this paper. When I use the term ‘belief’, I adhere to the widely accepted notion among contemporary epistemologists that beliefs are, roughly speaking, generic attitudes of taking something to be the case. Many contemporary epistemologists take these generic attitudes to be so-called propositional attitudes. A propositional attitude is a mental state that relates its bearer to a proposition, and, for the purposes of this paper, we can think of a proposition as the referent of a *that*-clause. For example, for Farmer Zhang to believe that his crops are flourishing is for him to be in a particular mental state (a propositional attitude) with content typically expressible in the form of ‘*that p*’ (on propositional attitudes in the early Chinese context, see Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 249–54).

Capacities are not propositional attitudes. Hydrochloric acid is capable of dissolving zinc but is incapable of having propositional attitudes. There might be capacities for forming propositional attitudes (e.g. capacities for forming beliefs), and some capacities might require the agent to have propositional attitudes (e.g. a capacity to explain why *q* is *p* might require you to have corresponding beliefs), but the two are not identical. Hence, if *N*-knowledge is a capacity, but capacities are not propositional attitudes, then *N*-knowledge is not a species of belief.² On such a practicalist view, beliefs might play an important role in some instances of having *N*-knowledge (a point to which I return further below), but *N*-knowledge is not essentially a kind of belief.

The thesis that we can find practicalist thought expressed in some early Chinese texts is not new. For example, Hetherington and Lai (“Practicing to Know”) have argued that the *Analects* of Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE) is more practicalist than not. Most recently, Chris Fraser has argued that the

¹I adopt the term ‘practicalism’ from Hetherington, *How to Know*, with one caveat. Hetherington takes knowledge practicalism to be an account of knowledge-that – roughly, that all knowledge-that is knowledge-how. I use the term ‘practicalism’ in a slightly broader but related way. That is, I take an account of knowledge, for any kind of knowledge *K*, to be a practicalist account of *K* just in case it says that *K* is a capacity. Hence, Mengzi is a practicalist about the kind of knowledge involved in knowing *N*, because he takes that kind of knowledge to be a capacity – or so I argue. Additionally, I note that ‘knowing *N*’ can be used to mean either ‘having *N*-knowledge’ or ‘expressing *N*-knowledge in action’ and that both ways of using ‘knowing *N*’ entail the presence of *N*-knowledge. For the sake of convenience, I henceforth use ‘knowing *N*’ and ‘having *N*-knowledge’ interchangeably.

²Such a distinction between propositional attitudes and capacities (or abilities) is standard in contemporary debates on the nature of knowledge-how (see Bengson and Moffett, “Two Conceptions of Mind and Action”; Carter and Poston, *A Critical Introduction to Knowledge How*, 12–26). More specifically, so-called intellectualists argue that knowing how to φ essentially involves having relevant propositional attitudes, while anti-intellectualists argue that it essentially involves having relevant abilities, rather than propositional attitudes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate whether such a distinction between propositional attitudes and abilities is an apt one, and I henceforth assume for the sake of argument that it is. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify. Finally, for the purposes of this paper, it will not be necessary for me to distinguish abilities from capacities, and I henceforth use the two terms interchangeably.

early Confucian philosopher Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310–220 BCE) takes knowledge to be a competence (Fraser, *Late Classical Chinese Thought*, 180; see also Fraser, “Epistemic Competence and Agency in Sosa and Xúnzǐ”), and that we find a similar view expressed in texts attributable to followers of Mozi 墨子 (fl. ca. 430 BCE) (Fraser, *Late Classical Chinese Thought*, 172–75). My paper aims to contribute to these debates on the characteristics of early Chinese epistemology by providing a sustained analysis of Mengzi’s views on knowing *N*, and by arguing that Mengzi takes the kind of knowledge involved in knowing *N* to be a capacity.³ If the argument of my paper is successful, then we find practicalist thought not only in the *Analecets*, the *Xunzi*, and various Mohist writings, we also find it in the eponymous text *Mengzi*.

I arrive at a practicalist reading of Mengzi in the following two steps. The first step consists of a close reading of passages where Mengzi discusses what is involved in knowing *N*.⁴ In Section 2, I argue that a person knows *N* if and only if she is correspondingly capable of acting intelligently in related ways.

In Section 3, I offer an abductive argument (in the sense of an inference to the best explanation) for the thesis that, for Mengzi, *N*-knowledge is a capacity. What best explains that *N*-knowledge comes with relevant capacities is that *N*-knowledge just is a capacity for intelligently acting in *N*-related ways.

In Section 4, I situate the resulting view in the contemporary philosophical landscape, and I defend it against objections. Some have suggested that Mengzi’s notion of knowing *N* is more akin to knowing-how than knowing-that. I argue that reading Mengzi as a practicalist can accommodate much that is right about such proposals without succumbing to some of the more powerful objections that can be raised against them.

2. The relation between *N*-knowledge and capacity

My aim in this section is to argue that Mengzi endorses the following view on the relation between having *N*-knowledge and being capable:

(Know-iff-Capable): A person has *N*-knowledge if and only if she is capable of intelligently acting in *N*-related ways.

My argument has the following two steps. In Section 2.1, I argue that Mengzi endorses the view that, if a person is capable of intelligently acting in

³In doing so, I significantly expand on my previous analysis of knowledge attributions in the *Mengzi* (see Brys, “Epistemology in the *Mencius*”, 495–97). I thank an anonymous referee for insisting that I clarify.

⁴Although my argument primarily draws on passages that feature ‘*zhi* 知 + noun (phrase)’ constructions, I note that the term *zhi* 知 is one of several terms that can (but need not) be used to refer to a person’s knowledge. Sometimes, the term ‘*shi* 識’ can be used in this way too, for example, in King Xuan’s question at 1B7: “How could I have known his lack of ability (*shi qí búcài* 識其不才) and so have avoided employing him?” (My own translation). I bracket the question of what the exact relation is between *zhi* 知, *shi* 識, and similar terms (for a view, see Gassmann, *Mencius*, Vol. 1, 193–6). Finally, I also bracket the question of how knowing *N* might be related to other forms of knowledge (if there are any) in the *Mengzi*.

N -related ways, then she has N -knowledge. That is, knowing N is necessary for being relevantly capable. Call this the *Necessity Claim*. I argue that Mengzi endorses the *Necessity Claim* at 6A12 and 7A46.

The second step of my argument consists in showing that, for Mengzi, if a person has N -knowledge, then she is capable of intelligently acting in N -related ways. That is, knowing N is sufficient for being relevantly capable. Call this the *Sufficiency Claim*. In Section 2.2, I draw on 7A46, 2A2, 5A7/5B1, and 4A1 as evidence for my thesis that Mengzi endorses the *Sufficiency Claim*.

Taken together, the *Necessity Claim* and the *Sufficiency Claim* yield *Know-iff-Capable*. Therefore, if Mengzi endorses both claims, then he endorses *Know-iff-Capable*.

2.1. Evidence for the Necessity Claim

I have two pieces of textual evidence for the *Necessity Claim*: Mengzi's description of what is involved in "knowing categories" (*zhī lèi* 知類) (6A12) and what is involved in "knowing importance" (*zhī wù* 知務) (7A46). Mengzi describes a person who fails to "know categories" (*zhī lèi* 知類) in the following way:

Mengzi said, "Suppose someone has a fourth 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 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)⁵

I take this passage to be making two points relevant to my argument. First, an agent who does not know categories is prone to a specific kind of failure to act. In a situation where the agent has two flaws, one more serious than the other, she will fail to know to prioritize improving her more serious flaw, because she will not know to dislike the more serious flaw over the less serious one.⁶ This suggests that knowing categories has an impact on your agency. A person who knows categories is capable of intelligently doing more than a person who does not know categories.

Second, Mengzi suggests that what explains a person's failure of intelligently prioritizing her more serious flaw is her ignorance of categories. The

⁵Henceforth, my translations of the *Mengzi* are taken from Van Norden's edition, with minor adjustments. I point out more substantial changes. Translations of commentaries are my own.

⁶Alternatively, one might suggest that an agent who does not know categories is an agent who cannot act for the reason that one of her flaws is more serious than the other (e.g. she cannot dislike a flaw qua more serious flaw). I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion. On such a reading of 6A12, what is relevant to my argument is that knowing categories comes with a capacity to act for specific reasons – namely, reasons that are unavailable to a person who does not know categories.

Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) helpfully points out that knowing categories amounts to knowing the distinction between significant and insignificant matters: “Not knowing categories means not knowing the hierarchies of significant and insignificant (*qīngzhòng zhī dèng* 輕重之等)” (*Sishū jízhù*, 6A12). It is plausible that, if a person does not know the distinction between significant and insignificant matters, then she is incapable of intelligently distinguishing instances of the two. Hence, adopting Zhu Xi’s suggestion, we can read 6A12 as making the following point: without being capable of distinguishing significant and insignificant matters, I cannot intelligently point out that one of my flaws is more significant than the other, and so I am in no position to intelligently set out to fix the more significant one of my flaws.⁷

I therefore take 6A12 to be saying that a person’s ignorance of categories makes her *incapable* of intelligently acting in related ways – in this case, it makes her incapable of intelligently fixing the more serious one of her flaws. Hence, knowing categories is necessary for being capable of acting in corresponding ways.

Mengzi characterizes a person’s failure to “know importance” (*zhī wù* 知務) (7A46) in a way that echoes his discussion of “knowing categories” from 6A12:

To be incapable of upholding the three years mourning period but (to be capable of) meticulously observing the three or five months mourning period, to carelessly swill one’s broth but ask about the right style of chewing one’s food — this is what is meant by not knowing importance.

(7A46)

In this passage, I take one of Mengzi’s points to be that, if a person does not know importance, then she is prone to pursue unimportant matters over important ones. Just like at 6A12, the presence or absence of *N*-knowledge is said to have an impact on your agency, and it is the person’s ignorance that explains her misguided actions. Zhu Xi helpfully comments on this passage, saying: “if you know what should come first and what should come last, then your actions will have an order (*zhī suǒ xiānhòu, zé shì yǒu xù* 知所先後, 則事有序)” (*Sishū jízhù*, 7A46). I take Zhu Xi to be implying that your actions can have an order *by accident*, for example, when you just happen to pursue important matters over unimportant ones. However, if

⁷This does not mean, of course, that a person who knows categories is thereby guaranteed to pursue what is more significant over what is less significant. I return to this further below. Additionally, an anonymous referee points out that, on my proposed reading of 6A12, knowing categories can be plausibly interpreted as involving knowledge-that: a person knows that one of her flaws is more serious than the other, and this in turn causes her to be capable of intelligently prioritising one flaw over the other. I agree that knowing categories might plausibly involve having propositional knowledge with categories-related content and that such content is typically expressible by a that-clause. However, I disagree that this commits us to accepting a causal story between an agent’s knowledge-that and her capacity for acting intelligently. I offer an argument for this in Section 3.

you know importance, then your actions can have an order that is not merely accidental but is instead expressing your relevant knowledge. Drawing on Zhu Xi's comment, I therefore take 7A46 to be making the point that what explains a person's failure to intelligently order her actions on the basis of how important they are is her lack of relevant *N*-knowledge.

The point I draw from both 6A12 and 7A46 is that having relevant *N*-knowledge, where *N* stands for categories or importance, is at least *necessary* for being capable of intelligently acting in corresponding ways. This means that, if a person is capable of intelligently ϕ -ing, then she has corresponding *N*-knowledge. Therefore, 6A12 and 7A46 are textual evidence in support of the view that Mengzi endorses the *Necessity Claim*.

2.2. Evidence for the Sufficiency Claim

Passage 7A46 is not only textual evidence for the *Necessity Claim*, it is also textual evidence for the *Sufficiency Claim* – that is, the claim that having *N*-knowledge is sufficient for being relevantly capable. This is because Mengzi at 7A46 says that, if you are incapable (*bù néng* 不能) of upholding the three years mourning period, then you lack corresponding knowledge (*bù zhī* 不知). The logical contrapositive of ‘if not-*q*, then not-*p*’ is ‘if *p*, then *q*’. Therefore, 7A46 logically implies that, if you have corresponding knowledge, then you are relevantly capable. Given that the antecedent of a conditional sentence states a sufficient condition for the truth of the consequent, it follows from 7A46 that having corresponding knowledge is sufficient for being relevantly capable. And that is an instance of the *Sufficiency Claim*.

There are four additional pieces of textual evidence that support the *Sufficiency Claim*. These are passages where Mengzi discusses “knowing words” (*zhī yán* 知言) (2A2) and “knowing the Way” (*zhī dào* 知道) (5A7/5B1, 4A1). Let me discuss each of them in turn. First, the *Sufficiency Claim* is supported by what Mengzi has to say about knowing words:

Gongsun Chou asked, “What do you mean by ‘knowing words’?” Mengzi replied, “If someone's words are one-sided, I know what it is that obscures the speaker. If someone's words are excessive, I know what it is that ensnares him. If someone's words are deviant, I know what it is that separates him from the Way. If someone's words are evasive, I know what it is that overwhelms him.”

(2A2)

This passage suggests that knowing words involves being capable of knowing something morally relevant about a speaker on the basis of her utterances. When Mengzi encounters a speaker whose utterances are one-sided, he knows that the speaker is obscured and what it is that obscures him. Knowing words is what enables Mengzi to do this. Various pre-modern commentaries agree on such a reading of ‘knowing words’ at 2A2. For example, the Han Dynasty scholar Zhao Qi 趙岐 (d. 201) glosses

knowing words as “*being capable of knowing what (the speaker’s) feelings urge (him to do) (néng zhī qí qíng suǒ qū 能知其情所趨)*” (Jiao, *Mèngzǐ Zhèngyì*, 199; my own emphasis). Therefore, according to Zhao Qi, knowing words is (or entails having) a capacity (*néng 能*), and so, a person who knows words is relevantly capable. The Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi cites the following explanation given by Chengzi 程子:⁸ “Mengzi knowing words: this is like being a person who sits at the top of the hall and is capable of distinguishing (*néng biàn 能辨*) whether the people at the base of the hall are crooked or upright” (*Sishū jízhù*, 2A2). Here, too, knowing words is taken to involve a relevant capacity. Therefore, 2A2 is expressing the view that, if a person knows words, then she is relevantly capable. And that is direct textual evidence in support of the *Sufficiency Claim*.⁹

Mengzi’s case of knowing words (2A2) differs from that of knowing categories (6A12) in an illustrative way. Recall that 6A12 is suggesting that a person’s lack of *N*-knowledge entails a corresponding lack of capacity. In the case of knowing words (2A2), the presence of *N*-knowledge entails the presence of a corresponding capacity. The former implies that having *N*-knowledge is necessary for being relevantly capable, and the latter implies that having it is sufficient for being relevantly capable.

There are three additional passages that support the *Sufficiency Claim*. They are passages in which Mengzi describes what is involved in “knowing the Way” (*zhī dào 知道*):

After Tang had sent people to invite him three times, [Yi Yin’s] expression changed and he said, “Rather than dwell amidst these ploughed fields and from here delight in the Way of Yao and Shun, would I not rather make this ruler into a ruler like Yao and Shun? Would I not rather make these people into people like those of Yao and Shun? [...] Heaven, in giving birth to the people, directs those who first know to awaken those who will know later. It directs those who have insight first to awaken those who will have insight

⁸Chengzi 程子, transl. “Master(s) Cheng”, refers to either the Neo-Confucian scholar Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032–1085), Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), or both.

⁹An anonymous referee asks whether the existence of *akrasia* (or weakness of will) would be problematic for the *Sufficiency Claim* (Franklin Perkins raises a similar question via correspondence). My answer is that it would not. To clarify, a typical case of *akrasia* involves a person acting against her considered judgement about what is best for her to do. The *Sufficiency Claim* implies that, if you know the Way, then you are capable of intelligently acting in some Way-related ways. However, being *capable* of doing something does not entail that you *will* do it. Hence, the *Sufficiency Claim* does *not* entail the view that having relevant knowledge is sufficient for intelligently acting in apt circumstances, and so it does not commit me to any view on the existence of *akrasia*. That is, even if a person is capable of φ -ing, is in apt circumstances for φ -ing, and judges that he ought to φ , he might nonetheless end up not φ -ing, regardless of whether he is akratic. Still, one might wonder: if the person is not akratic, what else is required in such a case for him to intelligently φ ? I believe that the answer is “*knowing-to*”. That is, what is needed for e.g. Farmer Zhang to intelligently play the flute is for him to know to do *this*, where “*this*” refers to a way for him to play the flute. On this view, see Hetherington, “Knowing-To”; for knowing-to in Chinese philosophy, see Hetherington and Lai, “Knowing-How and Knowing-To”; Lai, “Knowing to Act in the Moment”; Brys, “The Epistemology of Mengzian Extension”; “Epistemology in the *Mencius*”, 505–10; “Knowing-to in Wang Yangming”.

later. Among the people given birth to by Heaven, I am one of those who has insight first. I shall use this Way to awaken these people. If I do not awaken them, then who will?"

(5A7; see also 5B1)

In this passage, Yi Yin says that he is going to “use this Way” (*yǐ sī dào* 以斯道) to turn the ruler Tang into a person comparable to the sage kings Yao and Shun. Yi Yin is capable of doing so because he is one among the first who know (*xiān zhī* 先知).¹⁰ This straightforwardly suggests that Yi Yin is capable by virtue of some relevant knowledge of his. Just like at 7A46 and 2A2, having relevant knowledge makes the knower capable of intelligently acting in corresponding ways. Such a view is also suggested by the following passage:

Even (a person with) the clear vision of Li Lou and the skilfulness of artisan Gongshuzi will not be able to draw a perfect square or circle if they are not used along with a compass and carpenter’s square. Even (a person with) the hearing of Music Master Kuang will not be able to set the five notes if it is not used along with the six pitch pipes. Even (a person with) the Way of Yao and Shun will not be able to pacify and rule the world if it is not used along with benevolent government.

(4A1)

What is important to my argument is that Mengzi in this passage groups the Way of Yao and Shun together with sensory capacities and crafting skills. This is evident from the parallel structure observed of the first three sentences of 4A1: “if X is not used along with Y, then one will be unable to Z (X *bù yǐ* 不以 Y *bù néng* 不能 Z)”. ‘X’ respectively stands for excellent eyesight, skill, excellent hearing, and the Way of Yao and Shun, and ‘Y’ respectively stands for the compass and square, the six pitch pipes, and benevolent government. Hence, Mengzi is saying that, for a person to succeed at certain difficult tasks (such as drawing a perfect circle, setting the five notes, or pacifying the world), it is not enough for her to have the relevant capacities, she must also have the right instruments (compass and square, the six pitch pipes, and political power). I therefore take 4A1 to suggest that knowing the Way of Yao and Shun makes the agent capable in the same way that e.g. possessing an artisan’s skill does.¹¹

¹⁰What is it that Yi Yin knows? Both Zhao Qi and Chengzi suggest that he knows the Way. Zhao Qi claims that Yi Yin knows the Way of benevolence and righteousness (*rén yì zhī dào* 仁義之道) (Jiao, *Mèngzǐ Zhèngyì*, 654), and Chengzi claims that Yi Yin has “exhaustively attained the Way of the people (*jìn dé mǐn dào* 盡得民道)” (*Sìshū jǐzhù*, 5A7). What is important for my argument is that the knowledge that underlies Yi Yin’s knowing the Way makes him relevantly capable.

¹¹An anonymous referee objects that the point of 4A1 is to show that, in some cases, a person needs the right instruments to succeed at a difficult task, and that Mengzi can make such a point without simultaneously suggesting that knowing the Way of Yao and Shun makes the agent relevantly capable. My response is this. A natural way of reading 4A1 takes it to be saying that, in a particular situation, a person needs to be relevantly capable *and* have the right instruments for her to be able to ϕ . This is because Mengzi emphasizes that a person *with Gongshuzi’s skill* cannot draw a perfect circle unless she also uses a compass and square. But if that is so, then Mengzi is suggesting that a

Therefore, from 2A2, 5A7/5B1, and 4A1 we get the view that knowing *N* is sufficient for being capable of intelligently acting in corresponding ways. From 6A12 and 7A46 we learn that knowing *N* is at least necessary (and in the case of 7A46, it is also sufficient) for having corresponding capacities. Taken together, we get *Know-iff-Capable*: a person has *N*-knowledge if and only if she is capable of intelligently acting in *N*-related ways.

At this point, one might object against my proposal in the following way. Even if we grant that Mengzi endorses *Know-iff-Capable*, this does not mean that *N*-knowledge is a capacity. This is because biconditionals are not definitions. For example, we can plausibly accept the biconditional that a person knows that *p* if and only if her reason for doing something can be that *p*, but without being committed to a particular definition of what it means for a person to know that *p*. That is, we can hold the biconditional that a person knows that *p* iff she is capable, even if we define knowledge-that in terms of justified true belief.

Therefore, so the objection continues, possessing relevant knowledge-that might be all that there is to knowing categories, knowing importance, or knowing the Way in the sense that Mengzi is using these expressions. This is also what an intellectualist reading of Zhu Xi's comments might suggest: knowing categories involves knowing that *X* is more significant than *Y*, and knowing that *X* is more significant than *Y* means having propositional knowledge – it means knowing-that. One might suggest that a similarly intellectualist interpretation can also be given of 5A7/5B1. Knowing the Way of Yao and Shun might amount to knowing *that* rulers should be benevolent towards their subjects (1A7, 2A6), *that* they should take care of the elderly within their realm (4A13, 7A22), *that* one ought to reduce taxes and appoint worthy ministers (2A5), etc. Hence, the objection is that, even if we grant the argument of this section, it establishes that knowing *N* comes with a capacity for intelligently acting in corresponding ways, but this is compatible with saying that the kind of knowledge involved in knowing *N* is a species of

person is relevantly capable by virtue of having Gongshuzi's skill, Li Lou's eyesight, Master Kuang's hearing, or the Way of Yao and Shun. Hence, 4A1 suggests that knowing the Way makes the knower relevantly capable (see also Gassmann, *Menzius*, Vol. 2, 76–7). At this point, a second anonymous referee raises a follow-up objection. According to the *Sufficiency Claim*, knowing the Way of Yao and Shun is enough to be capable of acting in relevant ways, but according to 4A1, having Gongshuzi's skill (or knowledge) is *not* enough for a person to be capable of drawing a perfect circle. Hence, the objection is that 4A1 contradicts the *Sufficiency Claim*. I disagree. If a person with Gongshuzi's skill does not have the compass and square, then it is true that he 'cannot' draw circles, meaning that he is in circumstances that prevent him from drawing, but it is false that he 'cannot' draw in the sense of having lost his capacity for drawing. A person does not lose her capacity to draw when she forgets her tools at home any more than a person becomes blind when she enters a dark room. Many standard accounts of capacities take them to be relevantly circumstance-dependent (see e.g. Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, 110–5; Clarke, "Abilities to Act", 1–2), and they are right. Therefore, if we read 4A1 charitably, the passage says that Gongshuzi is capable of drawing a perfect circle but needs the compass and square to do so, and this is compatible with the *Sufficiency Claim*.

belief. Therefore, the argument of this section falls short of showing that, for Mengzi, *N*-knowledge is a capacity for intelligently acting in related ways.

In what follows, I develop this objection further, and I offer an argument for my claim that Mengzian *N*-knowledge is a capacity, rather than being accompanied by a capacity.

3. From *Know-iff-Capable* to knowledge practicalism

The aim of the previous section was to offer textual evidence for the claim that Mengzi endorses *Know-iff-Capable*, that is, the view that a person has *N*-knowledge if and only if she is capable of intelligently acting in *N*-related ways. On a practicalist reading of Mengzi, *N*-knowledge is a capacity. Such a practicalist interpretation neatly explains why *N*-knowledge is present only in those instances where a corresponding capacity is present. A person with *N*-knowledge is a person with a corresponding capacity because *N*-knowledge just is a capacity. Hence, a practicalist reading offers us a straightforward account of why Mengzi endorses *Know-iff-Capable*.

Might there be an alternative explanation for why Mengzi endorses *Know-iff-Capable* that does not take *N*-knowledge to be a capacity? The most plausible alternative that I can think of is this. *N*-knowledge is not itself a capacity, but having *N*-knowledge causes you to be relevantly capable, and being relevantly capable is only ever caused by having *N*-knowledge. On such a view, being relevantly capable is a causal consequence of having *N*-knowledge, rather than being constitutive of it.¹² One might therefore suggest that such a causal account is a good candidate explanation for why Mengzi holds *Know-iff-Capable*. It is a good candidate explanation, because, so the suggestion goes, *N*-knowledge is *capacity-causing*, and the corresponding capacity is necessarily *knowledge-caused*. For example, if a person knows categories (*zhī lèi* 知類) (6A12), then it may be that her categories-knowledge causes her to be capable of intelligently prioritizing *X* over *Y*, something that she would be incapable of doing if she were to lack categories-knowledge, and such categories-knowledge guides her in the performance of categories-related actions.

Such a causal account is compatible with the view that *N*-knowledge might be propositional knowledge, that is, knowledge of *N*-related propositions. It is therefore compatible with the view that *N*-knowledge might be a species of belief. One might therefore suggest that adopting such a causal account is a genuine alternative to my practicalist proposal and that

¹²The distinction between a capacity being the causal consequence of having knowledge and being constitutive of having knowledge is most prominently drawn by Hetherington, "Knowledge and Knowing", 85–8; "Knowledge as Skill"; *Defining Knowledge*, 48–50; and "Knowledge-Practicalism".

it offers us a plausible explanation for why Mengzi endorses *Know-iff-Capable*.¹³

The question is, of course, whether we should endorse the view that a person's relevant capacities are a causal consequence of her *N*-knowledge as a plausible explanation of what we find in the *Mengzi*. I believe that the answer is 'no', and I offer two arguments for this. Both of my arguments take for granted that such a causal account might be a workable, internally coherent alternative. Those who reject the causal account as a viable position can formulate a third argument against ascribing it to Mengzi: we should not ascribe to Mengzi a bad view on pain of being uncharitable to him. I mention such an approach here, in comparison, to bring out a sharper articulation of the two arguments that I offer below.

My first argument is this. Any interpretation of the *Mengzi* on which a person's capacities are a causal consequence of *N*-knowledge is both explanatorily redundant and textually unsupported. It is textually unsupported, because there is no evidence that Mengzi believes that there is a causal connection between a person's *N*-knowledge and her relevant capacity.¹⁴ Moreover, the interpretation is explanatorily redundant, because we do not have to rely on a causal story to explain why Mengzi says that a person is relevantly capable *iff* she has corresponding *N*-knowledge. A more elegant and simpler explanation is readily available: a person is capable of intelligently φ -ing *iff* she has corresponding *N*-knowledge because her *N*-knowledge just is her capacity for intelligently φ -ing. Given that simplicity is an aspect of rational theory choice, we therefore have reason to favour the practicalist explanation over the causal one. Hence, reading Mengzi as a practicalist about *N*-knowledge can help explain everything about the *Mengzi* that would otherwise be explained by a causal story about the relation between knowing *N* and being capable, and so we can do away with the causal story.

¹³Other possible explanations for why Mengzi endorses *Know-iff-Capable* might include, for example, a view on which *N*-knowledge and its corresponding capacity have a common cause. This is unlikely to be Mengzi's view, because it seems to me difficult to identify such a common cause in the *Mengzi*. In any case, many views on which *N*-knowledge is something other than a capacity are vulnerable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the argument that I offer further below, because they posit more than is needed to explain our textual evidence.

¹⁴An anonymous referee asks whether 3B8 could be used as evidence in support of the view that a person's *N*-knowledge causes her corresponding capacities. At 3B8, Mengzi scolds Dai Yingzhi, a high official from the state of Song, because Dai knows that taxing the peasantry is wrong and yet he continues to do it. The referee's suggestion is to interpret this exchange as implicitly assuming that, if Dai knows that *p*, then Dai's knowledge-that can cause him to act in *p*-related ways, and hence Dai's knowledge-that can cause him to be capable of intelligently acting in *p*-related ways. But I believe that this is too quick. I agree that we can read 3B8 as saying that some of your knowledge-that can motivate you to act. However, from this it does not follow that some of your knowledge-that can cause you to be *capable* of intelligently acting in relevant ways, nor does 3B8 suggest otherwise. On a practicalist reading of 3B8, the knowledge involved in Dai's knowing the wrongness of taxing the peasantry just is his capacity, e.g. to act for the reason that taxing the peasantry is wrong, and he fails to express it in his actions for unstated reasons.

Second, if N -knowledge is not a capacity, then a person's N -related action is intelligent by virtue of being guided by her N -knowledge.¹⁵ Such a view commits Mengzi to a conception of N -knowledge on which N -knowledge guides actions – a notion that is clearly intellectualist and for which, once again, there is no evidence in the text. On a practicalist interpretation, all intelligent actions are actions that express corresponding knowledge, rather than actions that are guided by it. Hence, practicalists do not have to rely on a notion of being guided by one's N -knowledge to make sense of the *Mengzi*, because we can give an account of what it means for a person's N -knowledge to be expressed in her acting that draws on philosophical and textual resources internal to our text. In other words, a practicalist reading of the *Mengzi* can do without the textually unsupported idea of N -knowledge having a guiding function.

Let me take stock. I have argued that taking Mengzi to hold that the kind of knowledge involved in knowing N is not a capacity is problematic. It is a simpler, more elegant, and equally as explanatorily powerful interpretation to take Mengzi as holding the view that N -knowledge is a capacity. It is simpler and more elegant, because we do not have to commit Mengzi to a causal story about the relation between a person's N -knowledge and her relevant capacities, and we do not have to read the notion of guidance into the text. It is equally as explanatorily powerful, because taking Mengzi to hold that N -knowledge is a capacity explains everything that would otherwise be explained by taking him to hold that N -knowledge is capacity-causing.

4. Defending Mengzian practicalism

In Section 2, I argued that Mengzi endorses *Know-iff-Capable*: a person knows N iff she is capable of intelligently acting in N -related ways. I have then argued that the best explanation for this is that Mengzi takes such knowledge to be a capacity. The aim of this section is to motivate my proposal. I do so by showing how it offers us a general but informative account of what it is that knowing N makes the knower capable of doing, by defending my proposal against objections, and, finally, by highlighting some attractive implications of reading Mengzi as a practicalist.

Consider Harbsmeier's take on what it means for a person to be knowing ritual:

¹⁵Intellectualists hold that, if my action of opening a door is guided (i.e. produced in the right way) by my propositional knowledge about ways for me to open doors, then my knowledge is expressed in the action I perform, and my action is an intelligent one. That is, whenever I intelligently open a door, I am guided by my knowledge about doors in the performance of my action. Even non-propositional intellectualists rely on the claim that the agent's relevant knowledge (in this case, an objectual grasp of a way for the agent to ϕ) plays a *guiding* role in ϕ -ing (see, e.g. Bengson and Moffett "Non-propositional Intellectualism").

‘Academic’ or theoretical knowledge of ritual by itself would not in ancient China have qualified one as *chih li* [*zhī lǐ* 知禮, knowing ritual] in every sense of the word. 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, *Language and Logic*, 247)

Presumably, being skilled at φ -ing entails being capable of intelligently φ -ing, in which case Harbsmeier’s suggestion is that knowing ritual entails being correspondingly capable. But Harbsmeier does not tell us what knowing ritual makes the agent capable of doing. Elsewhere, he claims that “knowing the Way in ancient China is knowing how to go about things” (Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 248). Here, too, it is far from clear what it means to know how to go about things.¹⁶ What is it that a person is specifically capable of doing when she knows the Way?

The problem is this. If we take knowing ritual to be a capacity for acting in any specific way, then the resulting view will be vulnerable to simple counterexamples. To illustrate, if ritual-knowledge is a capacity for intelligently performing rituals, then much that we would normally conceive of as expressions of knowing ritual would be implausibly excluded. A person with ritual-knowledge might be able to express it by writing a manual, by explaining the deeper meaning of specific rituals, or by discriminating between good and bad ritual performances.¹⁷ But if having ritual-knowledge just is being capable of intelligently performing rituals, then, given that explaining rituals is not itself a ritual performance, it absurdly follows that intelligent acts of explaining rituals do not count as expressions of ritual-knowledge. This is an instance of what I call the *Specificity Problem*: if *N*-knowledge is a capacity, then it seems difficult to give an account of what it is that knowing *N* makes you capable of doing.

Can we avoid the *Specificity Problem* if we adopt Chris Fraser’s suggestion – largely inspired by his reading of the *Mozi* and *Xunzi* – that knowledge is a competence for discriminating things and responding to them appropriately? Fraser puts it this way:

Knowledge is understood primarily as a reliable ability to discriminate things and respond to them appropriately — minimally, by predicating appropriate general terms of them. To know is thus to be able to perform certain tasks

¹⁶Chad Hansen is vague on this matter as well: “To *zhī*^{know} *dao* is to know (how) to perform it properly” (Hansen, *A Daoist Theory*, 86). He is a bit more precise when he discusses the Mohists (see, e.g. Hansen, *A Daoist Theory*, 252–7) and I return to Mohist-inspired attempts to give an account of Mengzian *N*-knowledge further below.

¹⁷An anonymous referee objects that, if a person is capable of intelligently explaining a ritual, then she must have true beliefs, and so, on my account, some cases of knowing ritual require the knower to have true beliefs. I agree. A practicalist proposal can accommodate the fact that beliefs can sometimes ground capacities. However, what is distinctive of knowledge practicalism is the view that believing truly is not *necessarily always* a part of the capacities that constitute relevant knowledge. I return to this issue further below.

competently. Cognitive error is a form of incompetence or ineptitude in discriminating and responding to things.

(Fraser, “Knowledge and Error in Early Chinese Thought”, 128f.)

I take Fraser’s thesis to be that, for the early Chinese, to know is to be able to competently discriminate things and respond to them appropriately. Fraser does not specify whether he takes the early Chinese to hold that *all* or only *some* forms of knowledge are such abilities. I speculate, however, that he might agree that at least the kind of knowledge that is involved in knowing *N* is such an ability. Does this help us avoid the *Specificity Problem*?

Hardly so, and the reason is this. Suppose that I know *N*, for example, I know the outcome of the Peloponnesian War. Perhaps I am thereby able to discriminate accurate from inaccurate textbooks on ancient history, but it is less clear to me whether acts such as contemplating the outcome of the Peloponnesian War or recalling it from memory are acts of discriminating or responding to things appropriately.

What Fraser certainly gets right is that, if I know the outcome of the Peloponnesian War, then I can intelligently *do* things that a person who is ignorant of ancient history cannot. He is also correct that, being capable of intelligently performing some corresponding actions (such as, presumably, intelligently discriminating true from false claims about the war) is sufficient for possessing relevant knowledge. Where I believe Fraser’s account might be problematic is in the claim that a capacity for intelligently acting in a specific way, e.g. a capacity for competently discriminating things, is necessary for having relevant knowledge.¹⁸

Plausibly, what is necessary for having *N*-knowledge is having some capacity for intelligently acting in *N*-related ways, and that might include (but does not have to) a capacity for intelligently discriminating instances of *N* from instances of not-*N*. To illustrate, knowing the Battle of Muye (c. 1046 BCE) might plausibly involve being capable of, e.g. intelligently answering some questions about the outcome of the battle, explaining to others

¹⁸Is Fraser committed to the view that, for the early Chinese, being capable of competently discriminating things is necessary for having relevant knowledge? Fraser defends a version of such a view as an interpretation specifically of the *Xunzi* (see Fraser, “Epistemic Competence”; “Truth and the way in Xúnzǐ”). Elsewhere, he emphasises that, for Xunzi, “knowledge is a competence in discriminating and naming things, specifically for the purpose of guiding action so that we carry out the *dào*” (Fraser, *Late Classical Chinese Thought*, 179). This suggests that, if a person lacks a relevant competence to discriminate and name things, then she lacks relevant knowledge. Hence, on Fraser’s reading of the *Xunzi*, having a competence to discriminate and name things is *necessary* for having relevant knowledge. It is unclear whether Fraser takes Mengzi to share Xunzi’s view on this. Elsewhere, Fraser claims that “the ability to sort things correctly” is a “criterion of knowledge” for both Xunzi and the Mohists (“Knowledge and Error in Early Chinese Thought”, 139), and he takes this overlap to suggest that there is “a largely shared underlying theoretical framework” among early Chinese epistemologists (“Knowledge and Error in Early Chinese Thought”, 129). This presumably includes Mengzi. But perhaps Fraser would grant that Mengzi’s views could substantially differ from those of Xunzi and the Mohists, even if the latter two agree that an ability to discriminate things is necessary for knowing. I thank Franklin Perkins for pressing this point.

how King Wu of Zhou (d. 1043 BCE) defeated the last ruler of the Shang Dynasty, or using the claim that King Wu was victorious at Muye as a premise in an argument. Different people can be capable of acting in different *N*-related ways at different times. Hence, different people can know the Battle of Muye in different ways at different times. For a practicalist, every case of knowing the Battle of Muye is a case of being relevantly capable, and the actions that express your capacity need not be the same types of actions on each occasion. If I am incapable of acting in *any N*-related ways, say, if I am incapable of even recollecting *N*, putting *N* into practice, or finding out whether *N* is *F*, then it seems highly doubtful that Mengzi would say that I know *N*. A Mengzian practicalist can therefore suggest that knowing *N* involves being capable of intelligently acting in some but no specific *N*-related way, because no *N*-related way of acting is definitive of what it means to be knowing *N*.

Against this suggestion one might object that it threatens to trivialize knowledge practicalism as a philosophical thesis.¹⁹ The worry is that, if we have reason to doubt whether a person knows ritual just in case she is incapable of recollecting anything about rituals, making intelligent ritual-related assertions, or intelligently acting in any ritual-related way, then a practicalist account of knowledge seems to yield the same results as a belief-based account. This is because, if *N*-knowledge is a species of belief, then it is true that, if a person is incapable of intelligently acting in *N*-related ways, then we have reason to doubt that she knows *N*.

Mengzi does not address this issue, but if the argument of this paper is on the right track, then he has the theoretical means to provide an effective response. If I am right that Mengzian practicalism entails that a person who, e.g. knows ritual does not have to be capable of intelligently acting in any specific ritual-related way, then this can be used to avoid the worry that practicalism might be trivial. Here is how. On a belief-based account of knowing ritual, a person knows ritual only if she is capable of intelligently acting in some specific ritual-related ways – namely, those ritual-related ways that we would usually associate with her having a belief with ritual-related content. This might include acts such as intelligently making assertions about rituals or explaining the purpose of specific ritual performances. An implication of Mengzian practicalism is that, if the agent does not have any ritual-related beliefs, then she might still know ritual, so long as she is capable of intelligently acting in some ritual-related ways. Therefore, Mengzian practicalism is compatible with the view that a person can know *N* without having any *N*-related beliefs, whereas a belief-based account of knowing *N* is incompatible with the view that a person can know *N* without having any *N*-related beliefs. This is what sets the practicalist thesis

¹⁹I thank Peter Adamson for raising this issue.

apart from a belief-based one, and so, it is what makes Mengzian practicalism a non-trivial philosophical thesis.

One attractive feature of interpreting Mengzi as a practicalist about *N*-knowledge is that it accommodates what is right about Fraser's and Harbsmeier's suggestions while offering us a simple answer to the *Specificity Problem*. On a practicalist reading, if a person knows ritual, then she is capable of intelligently acting in some ritual-related ways. Intelligently performing a ritual is a ritual-related action, but, so too, is intelligently answering questions about rituals, making true assertions about rituals, or explaining the deeper meaning of a given ritual, neither of which are definitive of knowing ritual.²⁰

A second attractive feature is that, on a practicalist reading, knowing *N* comes in degrees. A person's knowing sages can be better or worse – that is, her knowing sages can be more advanced or less advanced than that of others – and the degree of her knowledge is reflected in the variety of the actions that she is capable of intelligently performing and in the quality of her performance. The more types of ritual-related actions a person is capable of intelligently performing (e.g. if she is capable of enacting specific rituals *and* explaining them to others), and the better her performance of these types of action is, the superior her ritual-knowledge will be. So, if *N*-knowledge is a capacity, then *N*-knowledge comes in degrees, because the capacity that constitutes a person's *N*-knowledge can itself be more or less developed.

Third, and finally, a practicalist reading of knowing *N* implies that some *N*-knowledge can be acquired and improved through practice. If intelligently performing rituals is something that I can learn by doing, then I can acquire some ritual-knowledge through practice – that is, by deliberately practicing the performance of ritual-related actions. It might even be that some *N*-knowledge is impossible to acquire through book-learning alone, and other *N*-knowledge will remain shallow unless it is accompanied by deliberate practice. In either case, acquiring and improving some *N*-knowledge is intimately tied to the knower's deliberate practice.

5. Conclusion

My goal in this paper is to propose and defend the view that, for Mengzi, the kind of knowledge that is involved in knowing *N* (i.e. *N*-knowledge) is a

²⁰Hence, some (but not all) ways of intelligently performing ritual-related actions might plausibly require the agent to have a grasp of the rules that govern a particular ritual performance. For example, intelligently explaining the rules that govern ritual performances is a ritual-related action, and a person cannot intelligently explain to you the rules without having a grasp of them. In a similar vein, some (but not all) ritual-related actions might require the agent to be appropriately motivated or for her to know that she ought to perform a particular ritual. Moreover, it seems to me plausible that a person can be intelligently but unsuccessfully performing a ritual – that is, there can be intelligent failures. Hence, some failures at performing rituals can be expressions of the agent's knowing ritual. I thank an anonymous referee for pushing me to clarify.

capacity. For this purpose, I have argued that our textual evidence suggests a view on which a person has *N*-knowledge if and only if she is relevantly capable. I have then argued that the best explanation for this is that Mengzian *N*-knowledge is a capacity, because any view on which *N*-knowledge is not itself a capacity but is capacity-causing encounters problems. Finally, I have shown how such a practicalist interpretation can accommodate much that is right about previous attempts to make sense of what Mengzi says about *N*-knowledge, and it can help us avoid the *Specificity Problem*. What results is a unified and explanatorily powerful way of understanding a central epistemic notion in the *Mengzi*.

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