



The Difference Between *Ren* and *Yi*: Mengzi's Anti-Guodianism at 6A4-5

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Abstract

Passages from the recently excavated Guodian manuscripts bear a surprising resemblance to a position ascribed to Gaozi and his followers in the *Mengzi* at 6A4-5, namely that righteousness is “external.” Although such a resemblance has been noted, the philosophical implications of it for the debate between Gaozi and Mengzi and, by extension, for Mengzian ethics have been largely unexplored. I argue that a Guodian-inspired reading of 6A4-5 is one that takes the debate to be about whether standing in certain family relations makes a difference to whether one’s actions are righteous. Gaozi denies that it does, holding the view that one’s family relations, i.e., relations *internal* to the household, are irrelevant when it comes to matters of righteousness, while Mengzi disagrees, arguing that all relational properties, including family relations, are just as much reason-giving properties for performing righteous actions as they are in the case of performing benevolent actions. I argue that such a Guodian-based reading provides us a simple, yet explanatorily powerful reading of 6A4-5 that has broader implications for Mengzian ethics and our understanding of the early Chinese intellectual milieu in general.

Keywords Mengzi (Mencius) · Benevolence · Emotion · Moral motivation · Confucianism · Compassion · Gaozi · Guodian · Action

The Emotionalist Reading of 6A4-5

Among the most influential and widely studied Confucian texts is the *Mengzi*, composed in the fourth century BCE and eponymously named after the Chinese philosopher Mengzi 孟子 (391–308 BCE). One of the main arguments of the *Mengzi* is that proper government rests in the character and ability of the rulers and their ministers. This offers both a diagnosis and a solution to the most pressing issue of Mengzi’s time — namely, the political and social chaos of what has become known to us as the Warring States period (403–221 BCE). Among the desirable character

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traits that Mengzi identifies are benevolence (*rén* 仁), righteousness (*yì* 義), ritual propriety (*lǐ* 禮), and wisdom (*zhì* 智) (2A6).¹ However, Mengzi is clear that merely having these character traits is not enough for the establishment of proper government (4A1); one also needs to put them into practice (1A7, 2A5, 2A6, 4A13, 7A22). But what does it take to put one's benevolence into practice — that is, what does it take to act benevolently (*rén* 仁)? And do the conditions under which one acts benevolently differ in *kind* from those under which one acts righteously (*yì* 義)? According to Gaozi at 6A4-5,² they do differ in kind, while Mengzi disagrees that they do.

The Gaozian position at 6A4-5 amounts to saying that, given the different kinds of conditions that have to be met, righteousness is “external” (*wài* 外) while benevolence is “internal” (*nèi* 内). But what exactly *are* those conditions? A common approach to this issue is to say that the Mengzian side claims, and the Gaozian side denies, that righteousness “arises from within” (*yóu nèi* 由内), i.e., that whenever I act righteously, “I put into practice my (feeling of) respect (*xíng wú jìng* 行吾敬).”³ (6A5) This is, in Van Norden’s words, “a clear, unambiguous statement: righteousness is internal because it requires acting out of a particular feeling” (2007, 147).⁴ In contrast to that, the Gaozians are said to take righteousness to be external because they supposedly hold that acting righteously can be done without feeling respect. That is, according to the Gaozian position, even if my action is not accompanied or caused by an emotion of respect, it can still be a genuinely righteous action. Therefore, a popular interpretation of 6A4-5 takes the main point of the debate between Mengzi and Gaozi as focusing on what emotions are necessary for performing a righteous or benevolent action. I henceforth call this the *emotionalist reading* of 6A4-5.

I argue that an emotionalist reading of 6A4-5 is not as plausible as it might initially appear, and that the disagreement between Gaozi and Mengzi is not about whether a condition for performing righteous actions is that one has to perform them from certain emotions. Even if we grant the assumption that early Chinese thinkers share our preconceptions about the internality of emotions,⁵ I argue that reading 6A4-5 along emotionalist lines is implausible. I suggest we can make progress

¹ Our extant manuscript of the *Mengzi* has seven parts, each of which is further divided into former (*shàng* 上) and latter (*xia* 下) — that is, into sections A and B. Citations of the primary text follow this convention. “2A6” refers to the *Mengzi*’s second part, section A, passage 6.

² Little is known about Gaozi himself, whose debates with Mengzi are recorded at 6A1-4 (6A5 does not directly involve Gaozi, but someone affiliated with Gaozi’s position). The Han Dynasty scholar Zhao Qi 趙岐 (?–201) claims that Gaozi studied under Mengzi (cf. Jiao, 1987, 731), although there is not much evidence to corroborate his claim. Some believe that Gaozi might be a fellow Confucian (e.g., Schwartz, 1985, 263; Chen, 1973, 195–204; Eno, 1990, 55, 114) while others disagree (Nivison, 1996, 124; Shun, 1997, 126). For a helpful discussion on the available evidence, see Shun (1997, 119–126).

³ All translations of the *Mengzi*, unless otherwise specified, are taken with minor changes from Van Norden (2008). More significant changes are pointed out.

⁴ Such a reading of 6A4-5 is very common. To name a few examples: Graham (1967, 248); Nivison (1996, 153); Lau (2003, 379–380); Chong (2002, 109). For an alternative, see Shun (1997, 87–127), although discussing Shun’s view is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ This assumption has been questioned by, for example, Nylan (2016, 99) and in a more speculative manner by Fingarette (1972, 45). For critical discussion, see Slingerland (2019).

in our understanding of 6A4-5 by taking recent scholarship on the internal-external distinction from the excavated Guodian manuscripts into account.⁶ More specifically, scholars have noticed that the Guodian chapter *Liu De* 六德 expresses views similar to that of the Gaozians.⁷ I argue that such a Guodian-inspired reading of 6A4-5 not only provides us with a better understanding of the issues at stake, it can also explain some otherwise puzzling features of Mengzian ethics. Finally, although 6A4-5 on its own does not provide us with an account of the conditions that have to be met for an action to be benevolent or righteous, it substantially contributes to such an account.

In the following section, I discuss some problems that common emotionalist readings of Gaozi's position run into. In "[Gaozi and the Guodian](#)" I argue that there is an affinity between Gaozi's position and parts of the excavated Guodian manuscripts. "[Gaozi's Guodianism Applied to 6A4](#)" and "[Mengzi's Anti-Guodianism](#)" develop a Guodian-based reading of 6A4, arguing that Mengzi's response to Gaozi is better understood as a response to a Guodian-Gaozian view on righteousness and that Mengzi's position is better characterized as anti-Guodian rather than emotionalist. In "[The Guodian Reading and 6A5](#)" I show how an appeal to the Guodian manuscripts can make sense of otherwise difficult sections at 6A5. Finally, in "[Lessons From 6A4-5 for the Mengzi and Beyond](#)" I discuss the philosophical lessons we may draw from a Guodian-based reading of 6A4-5, including its significance for Mengzi's distinction between righteousness and benevolence and for Mengzian ethics in general.

Gaozi's Argument from Analogy

Do Gaozi and Mengzi really disagree about whether one must act from appropriate emotions to act righteously? Emotionalists about 6A4-5 would have us believe so. To test whether an emotionalist reading is adequate, we should examine it against the received text of the *Mengzi*. But when is a reading of a text adequate? I propose the following three methodological principles.⁸ For any reading of 6A4-5 to be an adequate reading of the text,

⁶ In 1993, a large cache of bamboo slips was discovered in a fourth-century BCE tomb in the village of Guodian 郭店 in Hubei 湖北 province. The tomb contained a plethora of diverse manuscripts from various traditions, including what is now our earliest manuscript of the *Laozi* 老子 and a chapter from the *Liji* 禮記, the former belonging to the Daoist tradition and the latter (arguably) to the Confucian one, but the vast majority of the excavated texts bear no obvious relation to the transmitted tradition and the question of whether they belong to any particular school of thought is subject to much scholarly debate. For a good overview, see Chan (2019a).

⁷ This has prompted various scholars to see parallels between sections of the Guodian and Gaozi's position, cf. Goldin (2000, 139); Cook (2012, 761); Chan (2019b, 213n3).

⁸ They are inspired by Normore (2016).

- (A) It should be charitable. That is, it should not ascribe to any party a view that is clearly wrong, does not make sense or is internally inconsistent. If it does, it should provide good reasons for why the views of one party are flawed.
- (B) It should be able to explain the text without seeking a hidden meaning behind the text. If there is a reading of the text that can make sense of it without assuming a hidden meaning behind the text, then *ceteris paribus* we should prefer that one.
- (C) It should be able to explain the entirety of the text. If a reading does not fit parts of the text, then it should be rejected as a reading of the text.

My argument in this section is that the emotionalist reading fails on all three fronts, and for the sake of brevity, I will illustrate this on 6A4 alone.⁹ First, I cite the entirety of 6A4:

Gaozi said, “The desire for food and sex is our nature. Benevolence is internal, it is not external. Righteousness is external, it is not internal.”

Mengzi asked, “Why do you say that benevolence is internal and righteousness is external?”

Gaozi said, “They are elderly, and we treat them as elderly. It is not that they are elderly because of us. Similarly, that is white, and we treat it as white, according to its being white externally to us. Hence, I say it is external.”

Mengzi replied, “Elderliness is different from whiteness. The whiteness of a white horse is no different from the whiteness of a gray-haired person. But surely we do not regard the elderliness of an old horse as being no different from the elderliness of an old person? Furthermore, do you say that the one who is elderly is righteous, or that the one who treats another as elderly is righteous?”

Gaozi said, “My younger brother I love; the younger brother of a person from Qin I do not love. I take the explanation for this to lie in me. Hence, I say that it is internal. I treat as elderly an elderly person from Chu, but I also treat as elderly my own elderly. I take the explanation for this to lie in the elderly person. Hence, I say that it is external.”

Mengzi replied, “Savoring the roast of a person from Qin is no different from savoring my roast. So what you describe is also the case with objects. Is savoring a roast, then, also external?” (6A4)

Recall that, on an emotionalist reading, Mengzi supposedly holds this:

Emotionalist Internalism (EI) Righteousness is internal, because a righteous action is at least an action performed out of the emotion of respect.

⁹ I provide arguments against the emotionalist reading on the basis of 6A5 in “[Lessons From 6A4-5 for the Mengzi and Beyond](#)”.

From (EI), it follows that for my action to count as righteous, it is not enough that I treat the elderly as befits the elderly — I have to do so *from* the emotion of respect.¹⁰ In contrast to (EI), Gaozi supposedly holds this:

Emotionalist Externalism (EE) Righteousness is external, because a righteous action is an action that is not necessarily performed out of the emotion of respect.

From (EE), it follows that, if I treat the elderly as befits the elderly, then this is sufficient for my action to count as righteous. I do not have to feel anything in particular to do so. What, then, would be an effective argument for either side?

For Mengzi to provide an effective argument, he must show that merely treating the elderly as befits them is *insufficient* for the action to count as righteous. We must, at the very least, also *feel* respect towards the elderly. While, for Gaozi to provide an effective argument, he must argue that treating the elderly as befits them from certain emotions is *not necessary* for the action to count as righteous. How can Gaozi do that? He must either provide a conceptual analysis of righteousness, which he obviously does not, or he must give an example of at least one action that is both righteous and not performed from respect. In other words, he must at the very least exclude the possibility that, whenever an action is righteous, it is performed out of respect. One way of doing that is to show that we sometimes act righteously without acting out of respect.

Does Gaozi at 6A4 say that we sometimes act righteously without acting out of respect? He does not. At best, he explains that we treat the elderly as befits them because of an “external” property of theirs, namely their elderliness: “they are elderly and we treat them as elderly. [...] I treat as elderly an elderly person from Chu, but I also treat as elderly my own elderly. I take the explanation for this to lie in the elderly person.” (6A4) But that does not tell us anything about the motivational state of the agent, nor does it tell us anything about the relation between treating the elderly as befits them and acting righteously. For one, it does not exclude the possibility that, in response to the fact that the person in front of me is elderly, I am *always* moved to feel respect for them and act on the basis of that; nor does it exclude the possibility that treating the elderly as befits them is only righteous *if* it is done from the emotion of respect, *regardless* whether or not we always act from respect when we treat the elderly as befits them. Therefore, what Gaozi says is compatible with Mengzi’s (EI), namely the view that, whenever I act righteously, I act from my emotion of respect. This means that Gaozi at no point gives us a reason against (EI). But if that is so, none of what Gaozi argues for could be effective against Mengzi’s position. In fact, Gaozi seems to miss the entire point of the debate *if* the debate is read along emotionalist lines.

I take this to be a reason against the emotionalist reading, because it violates methodological principles (A) and (C): it cannot make sense of Gaozi’s arguments,

¹⁰ I am not committed to any particular view about the exact relation between one’s emotion and the resulting action. For the sake of convenience, I will henceforth continue using expressions like “actions performed from emotions”.

because it construes them in a way that misses the point of the debate. In response to this problem, Van Norden proposes that we should interpret Gaozi as implicitly assuming that, “if a property is independent of us, we cannot be expected to have a particular emotion in response to that property.” (2007, 292)¹¹ Armed with such an assumption, Gaozi’s explanation that we treat the elderly as befits them because of their elderliness *does* exclude the possibility that, whenever we treat the elderly as befits them, we do so out of an emotion of respect. This is because, if it cannot be expected of us to always feel respect when encountering the elderly, then this means that it is hard, perhaps even impossible, for us to always feel respect when treating the elderly as befits them. But is this enough to be effective against Mengzi?

Hardly so. In fact, it still misses the point. What Gaozi has to show is that we can act *righteously* without necessarily doing so from an emotion of respect. But even on Van Norden’s proposal, Gaozi only shows that we can *treat the elderly as befits them* without necessarily feeling respect. The only way for Gaozi to get from the statement, “we can treat the elderly as befits them without necessarily feeling respect” to the statement “we can act righteously without necessarily feeling respect” is on the further (implicit) assumption that treating the elderly as befits them is sufficient for an action to count as righteous. But that is what Gaozi is supposed to *argue* for rather than *assume* as part of the argument. Therefore, Gaozi still misses the point, and if he implicitly assumes that all acts of treating the elderly as befits them are righteous acts, then he simply begs the question against Mengzi. Neither possibility is an adequate reading of 6A4.

Here is an alternative. Recall that the overall point of 6A4 is first and foremost a distinction between benevolence and righteousness. Mengzi and Gaozi supposedly agree that it is benevolent to treat those who are part of one’s own family differently from those who are not part of one’s own family, so the question can be raised whether the same is true of righteousness. Both philosophers have reasons to deny that there is such a similarity between benevolence and righteousness; i.e., both have reasons to argue that righteousness, unlike benevolence, is *impartial*. What counts as a righteous action does not change, *ceteris paribus*, with the family relations between agent and patient. If this is so, then perhaps that is all that Gaozi means when he says that righteousness is external; i.e., it is external because it concerns matters *outside* of the household.¹² This is nothing other than the position we find in some of the Guodian manuscripts, and I will henceforth call it the *Guodian reading* of 6A4-5.

Gaozi and the Guodian

A hint that, perhaps, Gaozi’s view that righteousness is “external” is to be understood as saying that righteousness concerns matters outside of the household can be found in the recently uncovered Guodian manuscripts. The chapter *Liu De* contains

¹¹ In a similar vein, see also Nivison (1996, 154–155).

¹² For a sustained argument that such a conception of righteousness permeated the early Chinese intellectual milieu, see Jiang (2021).

a passage that makes an explicit connection between benevolence and righteousness on the one hand and what is internal-external *qua* what is within-outside the household on the other hand. Strips 25-31 say:

Benevolence is internal; righteousness is external. Ritual and music are common. The internal positions are: father, son, and husband; the external positions are: ruler, minister, and wife. [...] When governing what is internal, kindness overrides righteousness; in governing what is external, righteousness is cut off by kindness. (*Liu De* 25-31)¹³

What this suggests is that righteousness is external because it concerns matters outside the household, namely the relations that rulers, ministers, and wives stand in, while benevolence concerns matters within the household, namely the relations that fathers, sons, and husbands stand in. Furthermore, while strip 22 identifies benevolence as the virtue of the son, strips 12-14 identify righteousness as the virtue of the ruler, the latter of which exercises it in the context of employing others:

The ones who are of great capabilities he employs to great offices, and those of lesser capabilities he employs to lesser offices, and on the basis of this he pays out salaries [...] - such a person we call a ruler. He employs others by means of righteousness. Righteousness is the virtue of the ruler. (*Liu De* 12-14)

Such a view is not foreign to the *Mengzi*. At 2B2 the royal envoy Jingzi confronts Mengzi about his behavior towards the king:

Jingzi said, “Within the family (*nèi* 内), there is the relation between father and son; outside the family (*wài* 外), there is the relation between ruler and minister. These are the greatest human relations. The relation between father and son is governed by kindness; the one between ruler and minister is governed by respect. I have seen the king respect you, but I have not yet seen how you respect the king.” (2B2)

It is uncontroversial that Mengzi associates kindness (*ēn* 恩) with benevolence (cf. 1A7, 2A6) and respect (*jìng* 敬) with righteousness (cf. 4A1, 5B3, 6A5, 7A15). Therefore, Jingzi seems to echo the view expressed in the Guodian strips that righteousness concerns matters outside of the household, while benevolence concerns matters within the household. It is not clear from these passages whether the view is that righteousness *only* governs relations outside of the household or whether it does so for the most part. However, Gaozi's own views seem to align with the former, because Gaozi's argument is that he treats his elderly as befits them not because they are *his* elderly, but because they are *elderly*: “I treat as elderly an elderly person from Chu, but I also treat as elderly my own elderly. I take the explanation for this to lie in the elderly person.” (6A4) In other words, one can perform righteous actions towards family members *qua* elderly, but presumably not towards family members *qua* family members.

¹³ All translations of the *Liu De* are my own, although they are inspired by the translations of Cook (2012).

Besides the Guodian strips and the *Mengzi*, none of our extant texts claim that benevolence is internal and righteousness is external,¹⁴ although the connection between what is internal-external and what is within-outside of the household is copiously attested for. For example, there are passages in the *Liji* that express it:

The Confucians recommend members of their own family (*nèi* 內), without avoiding them because of their kinship; they suggest people outside of it (*wài* 外), without avoiding (the resulting) enmity.¹⁵ (*Liji*, *Ru Xing* 13)

It is also found in the *Xunzi*:

Anyone on the streets can come to know that the righteousness of father and son holds within the household (*nèi* 內), and the correctness of the ruler and minister relations holds outside of the household (*wài* 外).¹⁶ (*Xunzi*, *Xing E*)

I therefore believe that Gaozi at 6A4-5 is taking up terminology that was prevalent at that time, namely the distinction between *nèi* 內 and *wài* 外 as a distinction between what is internal-external to the household, and he might be echoing the view that benevolence is internal *qua* concerning matters within the household, while righteousness is external *qua* concerning matters outside of it. This leads me to believe that the debate between Gaozi and Mengzi at 6A4-5 is perhaps better understood as exploring why benevolence and righteousness differ in the sense that standing in certain family relations is relevant for whether one's action is benevolent but not for whether one's action is righteous, rather than being a debate on whether acting from emotions is necessary for performing righteous actions.

Gaozi's Guodianism Applied to 6A4

So far I have argued that there is a close affinity between views expressed in the Guodian and Gaozi's position that righteousness is external. My thesis is that, when Gaozi argues that righteousness is external, he is echoing the Guodian view that righteousness is only applicable to matters outside of the household. To be more exact, the view is that for an action to be righteous, it does not matter whether the recipient of the action is a person from the agent's own family or not. An elderly person does not have to be related to me for my act of treating them as befits the elderly to be righteous. Similarly, when Mengzi argues that righteousness is internal, he is arguing at least in part *against* the Guodian view. I will return to Mengzi's views further down below. For now, let us test whether Gaozi can provide an effective argument for his position on a Guodian reading of 6A4.

¹⁴ Some scholars have drawn upon the roughly contemporaneous text *Guanzi* 管子 as a third possibility; see, e.g., Graham (1967, 22); Goldin (2000, 139). In the *jie* 戒 chapter of the *Guanzi* we find: "Benevolence emerges from within, righteousness is made from the outside." My own translation. Given that the term used for "within" is *zhōng* 中 rather than *nèi* 內, it is unclear whether the *Guanzi* expresses the same view as that defended by Gaozi at 6A4. Finally, besides the Liu De, the Guodian text *Yucong* 語叢 1, strips 22-23, says that benevolence arises (*shēng* 生) from what is internal and righteousness arises (*shēng* 生) from what is external, although it is unlikely that this corresponds to the distinction that we find in the *Liu De* between what is within and what is outside the household (cf. Goldin 2000, 120).

¹⁵ Translations of the *Liji* are adapted with minor changes from Legge (1885).

¹⁶ My own translation.

Gaozi must give an explanation why it is the case that (a) for my action to be righteous, it does not matter whether the recipient belongs to my own family and (b) for my action to be benevolent, it *does* matter whether they are from my own family. Gaozi's argument for (a) is that the reason-giving property for treating the elderly as befits them is their elderliness. Given that elderliness is similar (*yóu* 猶) to whiteness, and whiteness is an intrinsic property (rather than a relation) of the things that are white, it is plausible to think that elderliness is an intrinsic property of the people that are elderly.¹⁷ It is not a relation, let alone a family relation. Therefore, if we vary the family relations that an elderly person stands in relation to an agent, what is righteous remains the same, because it is the intrinsic property of elderliness that morally justifies the agent's action. And so what matters for my action to be righteous is whether the person I treat as befits the elderly is an elderly person. What does not matter is whether they are from my own family.¹⁸

Gaozi's argument for (b) parallels his argument for (a). The reason-giving property for treating one's younger brother as befits them is the fact that he is one's *younger brother*. But unlike "elderliness," being a younger brother is not a property that can be equally true of *my* younger brother and the younger brother of a person from Qin. The reason for this is that being a younger brother is a relational property. It is therefore unlike whiteness and elderliness. In short, "elderliness" is shared among *my* elderly and the elderly of *others*, while "being a younger brother" cannot be shared *between* me and my younger brother, and me and the younger brothers of *others*.

There are several advantages of such a Guodian reading of Gaozi's arguments at 6A4. First, it takes Gaozi to make an effective argument for his position and therefore avoids the issues that an emotionalist reading encounters; i.e., it avoids construing Gaozi as begging the question or missing the point. Secondly, it accommodates Gaozi's claim that there is an important similarity between elderliness and whiteness, and an important difference between being elderly and being a younger brother. Third, it explains why Gaozi says that the reason why I ought to treat my younger brother aptly "lies in me" — it is because he is *my* younger brother. I suggest, however, that the main advantage of the proposed reading lies in the fact that it can better accommodate what little evidence we have for the intellectual background in light of which the debate seems to have taken place (cf. Jiang, 2021, 35–39).

Mengzi's Anti-Guodianism

In the previous section I considered how we might construe Gaozi's argument for his view that righteousness is external in light of a Guodian reading of 6A4. But

¹⁷ The view that Gaozi takes "elderliness" to be an intrinsic property, given that "elderliness" is said to be similar to "whiteness", is accepted by both Nivison (1996, 156) and Van Norden (2007, 292). For the opposite view, namely that Gaozi held elderliness to be a non-family relation, see Lai (2019, 137, 148f.) However, Lai does not discuss the parallel between elderliness and whiteness.

¹⁸ Assuming, of course, that we take cases of treating the elderly as befits them to be paradigm cases of righteous actions, so that all other righteous actions are similar in kind to such paradigm cases.

how could we make sense of Mengzi's arguments? It is widely taken for granted that Mengzi is arguing for an emotionalist position: we must act from respect for our action to be righteous. But if the point of the debate is not about emotionalism, what is Mengzi arguing for?

For one, Mengzi at 6A4 sets out to refute Gaozi. He argues that elderliness is not relevantly similar to whiteness, from which follows that elderliness is not an intrinsic property. The upshot of this is, I claim, that according to Mengzi what provides us a (moral) reason for performing certain actions *can be* a relational property. In other words, what morally justifies my action of treating the elderly as befits them is the *relation* in which I stand with the elderly. If a person is of a certain age, then this fact alone is not reason enough for me to treat him in a specific way, because his age does not determine whether he stands in a certain relation to me, say, that of being elderly or being a younger brother. If a person is young, but I am younger, he cannot be my younger brother, and so *ceteris paribus* I have no reason to treat him as a younger brother. Finally, the fact that a roast is enjoyable *for me*, i.e., stands in the relation of "being enjoyable" to me, is a reason-giving property in favor of eating the roast, but a roast can be a roast without being enjoyable for me, in which case I would *ceteris paribus* not have a reason to eat the roast.

From this, it follows that Mengzi would accept, *contra* Gaozi, that "elderliness" *does* "depend on me" (*yǒu cháng yú wǒ* 有長於我), which is the converse of Gaozi's claim that elderliness *does not* depend on me. If "elderliness" is a relation between me and another person, then, given the fact that relations cannot be instantiated without their relata, the existence of the relation depends on me. My brother cannot be a younger brother if he has no siblings. Likewise, if being an elderly person is a dyadic relation, then in a way it is true that a person of advanced age is elderly because of me. But the same is not true, however, of either person's age. Therefore, Mengzi's argument at 6A4 is that "elderliness" in the sense of "having a certain age" is a non-relational property that can be true of horses and people alike, while "elderliness" in the sense of "being my elderly" is a relational property that can only be true of a certain group of people. Only if a person is elderly in the latter sense does that provide me with a reason for treating them righteously. Therefore, Gaozi fails to establish that righteousness is external, because he fails to establish that what provides me with a reason for acting righteously are facts about people having intrinsic properties like elderliness or whiteness, rather than facts about them standing in a relation to me. If we cannot exclude the possibility that relations can be reason-giving properties for acting righteously, then we cannot exclude the possibility that *family* relations can be reason-giving properties for acting righteously.

It is at 6A5 that Mengzi argues that family relations *can* be reason-giving properties for acting righteously, because we sometimes have a superior social status *vis-a-vis* a family member by virtue of being *related* to them in a particular way. This, in turn, is significant for Mengzi's anti-Guodian position on the relation between benevolence and righteousness.

The Guodian Reading and 6A5

So far I have argued that we have reasons to prefer a Guodian-based reading of 6A4 over the commonly assumed emotionalist one. Such a Guodian-based reading construes the dialogue between Mengzi and Gaozi as one on which both sides make good points in favor of their respective positions and, most importantly, do not talk past each other. In this section I briefly point out the advantages of such a Guodian approach to reading 6A5, while in the next section I argue that understanding Mengzi's position as anti-Guodian has important philosophical implications, not only for the argument at 6A4-5, but also for Mengzian ethics in general. First, I cite 6A5 in its entirety:

Meng Jizi asked Gongduzi, "Why do you say that righteousness is internal?"

Gongduzi replied, "I act out of my respect, hence I say that it is internal."

Meng Jizi asked, "If a fellow villager is older than your eldest brother by a year, then whom do you respect?"

Gongduzi replied, "I respect my brother."

Meng Jizi asked, "When you are pouring wine, then whom do you serve first?"

Gongduzi replied, "I first pour wine for the fellow villager."

Meng Jizi concluded, "The one whom you respect is the former, but the one whom you treat as elder is the latter. Hence, it really is external. It does not come from how you feel internally."

Gongduzi was not able to answer. He told Mengzi about it.

Mengzi said, "Next time, ask him, 'Do you respect your uncle? Or do you respect your younger brother?' He will say, 'I respect my uncle.' Then you say, 'When your younger brother is playing the part of the deceased in the sacrifice, then whom do you respect?' He will say, 'I respect my younger brother.' Then you say, 'What happened to the respect for your uncle?' He will say, 'My respect changes because of the role my younger brother occupies.' Then you also say, '(In the case you asked about in our previous discussion,) the reason why my respect changes has to do with the role the fellow villager occupies. Ordinary respect is directed toward my brother, but temporary respect is directed toward the fellow villager.'"

Meng Jizi, upon hearing all this, said, "Regardless of whether it is your uncle or your younger brother, it is the same respect, so it really is external. It does not come from how you feel internally."

Gongduzi replied, "On a winter day, one drinks hot broth. On a summer day, one drinks cool water. So are drinking and eating external too?" (6A5)

Presumably, both interlocutors assume that it is righteous to first serve wine to the eldest person in the room. On a Guodian reading of 6A5, Meng Jizi points out that it is the *age* of the eldest person in the room that provides us with a reason to serve them wine first — it is not the fact that they are related (or not related) to us, or whether there are other people present who are related to us. This is to be expected if the Gaozians take elderliness to be an intrinsic property that is relevantly similar to whiteness.

Mengzi's argumentative strategy is similar to that in 6A4: deny that the eldest person's age is a reason-giving property. Mengzi at 6A5 argues that in a situation where one's younger brother and one's uncle are present, it is righteous to treat one's uncle with respect. If we keep the age of the younger brother constant and only change his social position (i.e., we make him take up the role of Impersonator of the Dead), how we ought to act towards the younger brother changes as well. Previously, to act righteously, we ought to have treated the uncle with respect, but now, to act righteously, we ought to treat the younger brother with respect. But the reason is not the *age* of either person — that has not changed. The reason is their social status *vis-a-vis* the agent. This is likewise to be expected if the Mengzians take one's social status to be a relational property that is relevantly similar to younger-brotherliness.

What is central to Mengzi's argument is to have Meng Jizi concede that a change in social status (*zài wèi gù yě* 在位故也) morally justifies a change in the way one treats one's younger brother. But if Mengzi accepts, *pace* Meng Jizi, that it is neither the younger brother's nor the uncle's age that provides us with a reason to treat them respectfully, then why is it the case that, in a situation where one's younger brother and uncle are present, the agent has a (moral) reason to treat their uncle but not their younger brother respectfully? As this cannot be the fact that the uncle is older than the younger brother, I suggest that the text implies that what makes it righteous to treat one's uncle respectfully is the fact that they are *one's uncle*. By being *my* uncle, a person occupies a certain position of social superiority *vis-a-vis* myself, and it seems that righteous actions are at least those actions that we owe towards social superiors.¹⁹ This is supported by what Mengzi says at 4A27: "Obeying one's elder brother is a manifestation of righteousness." The reason why it is righteous to obey one's elder brother, I suggest, is because he is *one's brother*, and by virtue of standing in such a familial relation I have (moral) reasons to act in certain ways. What is implied by Mengzi's argument at 6A4-5 and what is found at 4A27 is that certain family relations are relations of status, so that the relation of "having a lower social status than..." can be true of family members in relation to one another.

Meng Jizi offers a final objection. You might have *prima facie* reasons to treat your social superiors respectfully, but this is because your social superiors are only so because they are *respectable*, i.e., because they have the external property of respectability: "Regardless whether you respectfully treat your uncle or your younger brother, they are respectable, so it really is external." (6A5) Perhaps, then, being respectable is similar to being strong. If I am strong enough to lift weights of this many kilograms, then that is true of me regardless of whether or not I am able to lift more than other people. In fact, standing in the relation of "being able to lift more than..." is only true of me *because* I have the non-relational property of "being able to lift X kilograms." Likewise, Gaozi's argument from 6A4 implies that

¹⁹ This is where I disagree with D.C. Lau (2003), who believes that "there need be no special relationship" (385) that agents stand in for their actions to be righteous.

standing in the relation of “being an elderly from this family” is perhaps only true of me *because* I am elderly, i.e., because I am of a certain age.²⁰

On the Guodian reading of 6A4-5 that I have proposed, Gongduzi's response is a fitting parallel to Mengzi's final response at 6A4. Recall that at 6A4, Gaozi argues that if we change whether an elderly belongs to my own family or not, but keep the age of the patient constant, then *ceteris paribus* what the agent has reason to do remains the same. Mengzi points out that, if we change whether a roast belongs to my own family, but keep the roast otherwise constant, then *ceteris paribus* what the agent has reason to do remains the same, but in this case, the reason-giving property is the relation of “being enjoyable for.” Therefore, from the fact that, if we change certain relational properties and an agent's reasons for acting in a certain way remain the same, it does not follow that the reason-giving property is an intrinsic property.

In a similar vein, Meng Jizi at the end of 6A5 argues for the contrapositive of Gaozi's claim: if you keep the family relations between agent and patient the same (the uncle is still an uncle, the younger brother still a younger brother), but change the social status of the two (the younger brother is an Impersonator of the Dead), then *ceteris paribus* what the agent has reason to do changes as well (one ought to treat respectfully one's younger brother). According to Meng Jizi, the best explanation for this is that one of the patient's external properties (respectability) is a reason-giving property.

Gongduzi points out that the argument is not successful. The fact that what is righteous differs with the circumstances does not warrant us to infer anything about which properties make one's actions righteous. In fact, it could be the case that what better explains why different actions are righteous in different circumstances is the fact that one's relations are reason-giving properties: someone is elderly *for me* (and not just old), a roast is enjoyable *for me* (and not just meat), a certain weather is warm *for me* (and not just of a certain temperature). Therefore, if a person is elderly for me, I have (moral) reasons to act in a certain way, and if a weather is warm for me, I have (prudential) reasons to cool myself down by drinking cold water. The problem with the Gaozian position is that, if the weather is of a certain temperature, this on its own is no reason for me to drink hot or cold water — just as, if a person is of a certain age, this on its own is no reason for me to treat them as elderly. Only if the presence of warmth puts me in a position where I have reasons to cool myself down is it prudentially justified for me to drink cold water (in response to the weather).

Lessons from 6A4-5 for the Mengzi and Beyond

Reading the debate at 6A4-5 in light of the Guodian can not only make sense of our textual evidence, it also has philosophical implications for Mengzian ethics in general. In this final section I briefly outline five such implications.

²⁰ D.C. Lau takes Meng Jizi to be insisting that, although one acts righteously towards one's younger brother when he is an Impersonator of the Dead because one feels respect towards him, what makes one feel respect are external circumstances — therefore, righteousness is external (Lau, 2003, 384). The same reading is adopted by Chong (2002) and Nivison (1996), but Nivison correctly recognizes that Meng Jizi thereby begs the question against the Mengzians (165).

First, 6A4-5 does not support ascribing to Mengzi the view that a condition for performing moral actions is that one has to act from right feelings, emotions, or motives. Perhaps support for such a view can be found elsewhere, but not at 6A4-5. Although 6A4-5 on its own does not offer us an account of which conditions have to be met, it has plenty to say about those conditions.

This gets me to the second point. What 6A4-5 does have to say about those conditions is this. I have moral reasons to perform or abstain from performing certain actions solely by standing in a certain relation to the person that will be affected by my actions. If moral actions are those actions I have (most) moral reasons to perform, then we might suspect that, for Mengzi, we find out which action is morally required of us by weighing all the reasons we have for performing actions. Furthermore, the social status that a person occupies is a *prima facie* moral reason for treating them in a certain way. It is a *prima facie* moral reason because it is defeasible. From this, it plausibly follows that not everyone with a higher social status deserves being treated respectfully.

Third, scholars like Kim-chong Chong have long held the suspicion that Mengzi at 6A4-5 is arguing for a view that goes beyond the internal-external divide advocated for by Gaozi (2002, 111; 2006, 72–73), and in a way he does. But whereas Chong takes Mengzi to reject the view that righteousness is internal in Gaozi's sense of internality and furthermore takes Mengzi to introduce a radically different notion of internality, I find this less persuasive. After all, Meng Jizi right at the start asks Gongduzi, "why do you say that righteousness is internal?", and Gongduzi sets out to justify himself. But in a way, Chong is right. Mengzi goes beyond Gaozi's distinction in rejecting the view that, for a moral quality to be called "internal," it has to only concern matters within the household.

Such a Mengzian position is a significant departure from the perhaps rather common view expressed in the Guodian strips, by Jingzi at 2B2 and by the Gaozians at 6A4-5. What Mengzi denies is that there is a *sharp distinction* between benevolence and righteousness in terms of which moral quality governs which social relations. If Gaozi's view is that a moral quality is external if and only if it concerns matters outside the household, i.e., that the agent's family relations never make a difference to whether the agent's action is moral, then Mengzi rejects this by arguing that it *sometimes* concerns matters inside the household. He thereby blurs one presumably common distinction between benevolence and righteousness, namely that the former only applies to one's dealings with family members, whereas the latter only applies to one's dealings with non-family members.

Fourth, in his study of the Guodian texts, Holloway (2009) notices a discrepancy in the way benevolence and righteousness are used in the Guodian and in the *Mengzi*. At 7A15 Mengzi says that, "treating one's relatives as relatives is benevolence; treating elders with respect is righteousness," and Holloway correctly observes about it: "There is no indication that respect in this passage might be intended as a concept that is confined to either one's family or a larger social sphere." (2009, 37) He goes on to point out that in many examples "the distinctions between humanity and righteousness as contrasting social segments are unlike Guodian" (2009, 38) and that in the *Mengzi* there is sometimes "a blurring of

previously observed distinctions between humanity and righteousness, since both terms are here related to the family.” (2009, 39) I suggest that Mengzi's arguments at 6A4-5 are the key to understanding why there is such a blurring at all.

Fifth, going beyond 6A4-5, one might speculate what implications Mengzi's arguments have for his views on benevolence. Perhaps Mengzi would say that we have a moral reason to treat a person in a caring manner because they stand in a certain relation to us, and sometimes this relation is *not* a family relation, although often enough it is. The fact that a ruler ought to treat his subjects in a caring manner is not because his subjects are his children — they are *like* his children and he is *like* a parent (cf. 1A4, 1B7, 3A3, 4A7). But what is true of the ruler in relation to his children is also true of the ruler in relation to his subjects: he stands in a relation of care towards both of them.

One might even propose that, if X stands in a relation of care towards Y, then this is so because X stands in a relation of being a social superior to Y. Just as righteous actions are at least those actions that we are owed towards social superiors, benevolent actions might be at least those actions that are owed towards social inferiors. This might be so, but if there is anything to be learned at all from 6A4-5 is that we have to be careful not to ascribe to Mengzi too strict a distinction. After all, there are passages that say it is benevolent to act caringly towards one's parents (e.g. 4A27, 7A15), and one's parents are presumably one's social superiors. Rather than neatly aligning benevolent actions with those actions that social superiors owe towards people of a lower rank (and vice versa for righteous actions), the lesson of 6A4-5 seems to me a different one entirely. The lesson is that rulers have *prima facie* reasons to treat their subjects well simply by virtue of standing in a relation of social superiority to them and it is those *prima facie* reasons that Mengzi draws on in his various attempts (1A3, 1A7, 1B1-5, 2A6 etc.) to get various rulers to adopt policies that will benefit the people.

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