



The Epistemology of Mengzian Extension

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1 INTRODUCTION: A KING'S FAILURE TO ACT KINGLY

In a fourth-century BCE text, the *Mengzi*, the eponymous philosopher Mengzi is said to advise kings of various states on how to perform genuinely kingly actions. Mengzi's suggestion at 1A7 is that acting kingly requires that one *extend* one's kindness (*ēn* 恩) to the people under one's jurisdiction. But what is involved in such an extension? In this chapter, I argue that it is knowledge of a specific kind, namely knowing-to, that is both necessary and sufficient for extension to take place. Furthermore, it is this concept of knowing-to that can help resolve a long-standing debate on the nature of Mengzian extension.

At 1A7, Mengzi is invited to speak before King Xuan of Qi. The King has a problem. He wishes to become the ruler of all under Heaven, which necessarily entails that the remaining political contenders recognise him as a genuine King, but he is not making much progress. His conversation with Mengzi starts with a question about the conduct of the hegemons,

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which Mengzi quickly diverts to the question of what it means to be a genuine King, i.e., be genuinely kingly. This is, after all, the problem that King Xuan is trying to solve. Mengzi's answer is as poignant as it is short:¹

The King said, "What must one's power (*dé* 德) be like so that one can become King?"

Mengzi said, "Protecting the people is being kingly. This is something no one can stop." (1A7)

If all that it takes to put into practice kingliness is the 'protection of the people', then the next question is what exactly "protecting the people" entails and whether King Xuan is capable of doing so. Mengzi's answer is simple:

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

Elsewhere, at 2A6, Mengzi formulates the matter a bit differently:

If one can fill out [the sprouts], it will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas. If one merely fails to fill them out, it will be insufficient for serving one's parents. (2A6)

Recent commentators have assumed that the process of *tūi* 推 ("extending") and of *chōng* 充 ("filling out") are sufficiently similar for Mengzi's purposes, and that there is a close conceptual link between *duān* 端 ("the sprouts"; 2A6) and *ēn* 恩 ("kindness"; 1A7).² I agree, although I cannot discuss this matter in much detail here. I will simply assume for the sake of argument that Mengzi accepts one process of "extension" that is described

¹ All of the translations provided are from Van Norden (2008) with minor emendations. Major emendations are pointed out.

² See for example (Van Norden 2007: 235; Doil 2018: 5–7). In fact, Mengzian extension is usually taken to encompass a variety of terms, including *kuò* 擴 ("broadening"; 2A6), *dá* 達 ("attaining"; 7B31) and *jí* 及 ("reaching"; 7B1, 1A7). It is not usually taken to include *jìn* 盡 ("exhausting"; 1A3), probably because Mengzian extension is conceptually linked to an agent's moral cultivation, whereas one might "exhaust" one's heart in the pursuit of something that lacks moral worth.

in different terms at various places in our extant text. Mengzian extension is the solution to King Xuan's problem. Simply extend kindness and this will be enough to protect the people, and protecting the people is constitutive of kingliness.

But what exactly does it mean to extend one's kindness? And what is kindness supposed to be? Let us consider this question by attending to a related one: is King Xuan capable of extending his kindness and therefore, in this case, capable of protecting the people? Mengzi says that yes, the King has a "heart that is sufficient for kingship" (*xīn zúyǐ wáng* 心足以王), and he supports this by giving the following anecdote:

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

Mengzi continued, "I do not know if this happened."

The King said, "It happened."

Mengzi said, "This heart is sufficient for being kingly. The commoners all thought Your Majesty was being stingy. But I knew that Your Majesty simply could not bear the suffering of the ox." (1A7)

King Xuan's action of saving the ox was presumably an instance of kindness, that is, a token kind action, which is confirmed by Mengzi's repeated claim that "right now, the King's kindness is sufficient to reach the animals" (1A7). Therefore, if we believe Mengzi, then the King has a *xīn* 心 ("heart"), to which *ēn* 恩 ("kindness") is predicated, the latter of which is exercised in token kind actions like saving the ox from slaughter.³

³Is the action, in fact, a token kind action? McRae (2011) questions this, although she does not give an argument. If it were not a token kind action, then it would seem odd for Mengzi to say that the King's kindness is "sufficient to reach animals." What reason would Mengzi have for saying that? Someone sympathetic to McRae's suggestion might propose the following. Mengzi thinks that if the King as much as *intends* or *is motivated* to act kindly towards the animals (because, e.g., he feels compassion towards them), then this is enough for Mengzi to say that the King's kindness is sufficient to reach the animals, regardless of whether or not the King (in fact) helps the animals. The claim that "the King's kindness is sufficient to reach the animals" can then either be read either as saying that (i) the King is capable of performing kind actions towards the animals, or that (ii) the King has strong enough motivational dispositions so that he (regularly) intends to act kindly towards the animals. But it is implausible to infer (i) from the claim that the King merely felt motivated to help the ox but failed to do so, and (ii) is too weak for Mengzi's subsequent argument that

But is the King's kindness sufficient to protect the people? Mengzi gives a clear answer:

Mengzi said, "Suppose there were someone who reported to Your Majesty, 'My strength is sufficient to lift a hundred *jun* 鈞,⁴ but not sufficient to lift one feather. My eyesight is sufficient to examine the tip of an autumn hair, but I cannot see a wagon of firewood.' Would Your Majesty accept that?"

The King said, "No."

Mengzi said, "In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach animals, but the effects do not reach the commoners. How is this different from the examples I just gave? Hence, one fails to lift a feather only because one does not use one's strength. One fails to see a wagon of firewood only because one does not use one's eyesight. The people fail to be protected only because you do not use your kindness. Hence, Your Majesty fails to be kingly because you do not act, not because you are unable to act." (1A7)

The analogy is this. The King's kindness being sufficient to reach the animals is akin to one's strength being sufficient to lift a hundred *jun* 鈞, and the kindness required to protect the people is analogous to the strength required to lift a single feather. Exercising one's kindness towards animals is more difficult than exercising one's kindness towards fellow human beings; the King has on a previous occasion exercised his kindness towards animals; therefore, he is capable of exercising his kindness towards human beings. Mengzi therefore claims that if the King fails to protect the people, then this is because the King does not *use* his kindness towards the people. It is not because the King *lacks* the kindness required to protect the people.

We are now in a position to get a bit clearer on the question of what Mengzian extension is supposed to be. The King has kindness enough to protect the people and he merely fails to act on it. Mengzi now tells him to *extend* his kindness, because "extending kindness is sufficient to protect all within the Four Seas" (1A7). My argument is that extending one's kindness is nothing other than exercising one's capacity for acting kindly.⁵

the King has to make his kindness reach the people. I therefore see no reason for denying, *pace* McRae, that the King's action of saving the ox is a token kind action.

⁴ A *jun* 鈞 is a traditional measure of weight, roughly 30 catties (*jin* 斤) or 18 kilograms.

⁵ To preempt a possible confusion: I do not claim that such capacities for acting are also *tendencies* to act in such a way, as e.g. Munro does (1969: 69–70). It may be the case that someone who has a very well-developed capacity for ϕ -ing will more reliably *choose* to ϕ in apt situations, or even *desire* to exercise their capacity for ϕ -ing and this might even be neces-

The exercise of such a capacity is nothing other than a kind action—in this case, the action of protecting the people. Mengzi does not say that the King first has to undergo some process of development before he can act kindly towards the people, and he does not say that the King has to feel or be motivated in a specific way in order to protect them. Rather, Mengzi says:

Hence, Your Majesty fails to be kingly because you do not act, not because you are unable to act. (1A7)

King Xuan's failure to protect the people is therefore a failure to act on the basis of specific capacities for action. In what follows, I will consider why the King failed to act on his kindness *qua* capacity for action, and I will argue that the reason for this is because the King did not know to respond appropriately to the specific situation he was in. The King's failure was therefore a failure of knowledge; a particular *kind* of knowledge.

2 FAILURE OF ACTION AND FAILURE OF KNOWLEDGE

Let us examine how it is that King Xuan failed to put into practice his capacity to act kindly. It is clear that the King is in a situation apt for him to protect the people. What is less clear is whether the King's failure to protect the people is due to his failure to *recognise* that he is in a situation apt for protecting the people. I believe it is plausible to say that the King *does* see that he is in such a situation, although there is nothing in the text to indicate whether or not he does.

Most commentators disagree. They would say that King Xuan's fault is simply due to him not recognising that the situation of the people is relevantly similar to the situation of the ox being led to slaughter. Accordingly, Mengzi was meaning to point out to the King that the two situations are relevantly similar, so that the King would thereby come to see that the people are in need of protection and be motivated to act.⁶ For these commentators, the issue concerns whether King Xuan *perceives* or *recognises* in a motivationally efficacious way that the two cases are relevantly similar and what is supposed to help him do that is an analogy: just as the ox is

sarily so. But I do not wish to make the stronger claim that one's capacity for ϕ -ing is partially *defined* by one's inclination to ϕ in apt situations.

⁶ See for example (Shun 1989: 322; Yearley 1990: 62, 65; Nivison 1996: 96–99; Perkins 2002: 220; Ivanhoe 2002b: 89; Wong 2002: 197–199, 2015: 43; Van Norden 2007: 236; Yu 2013: 136f.; Kim 2018: 63).

suffering when it is lead to slaughter, so too are your people suffering under your dominion from, for example, inconstant livelihoods. But I argue that this cannot be right, because even if the King were to have seen that the people were in need of protection and even if he were thereby (indefeasibly) motivated to protect the people, he still would have failed to put into practice his capacity for acting kindly. He would have failed either because he does not know that acting kindly is a way for him to protect the people or because he does not know to perform *this* particular action to act kindly *qua* protecting the people.⁷

The case of King Hui of Liang at 1A3 I take to be illustrative of an agent who lacks the latter kind of knowledge. The people under King Hui suffer food shortages and the King clearly sees that they are in need of protection:

King Hui of Liang said, “We use Our heart to the utmost for Our state. When the region within the river has a famine, We move some of the people to the region to the east of the river, and move grain to the region within the river. When there is a famine in the region to the east of the river, We do likewise. When We examine the governments of neighbouring states, there are none that use their hearts to the utmost like We do. [...]” (1A3)

From the above it follows that the King sees that his situation is apt for protecting the people, he desires to protect the people, he knows that providing relief efforts is a way for him to protect the people and he even tries to do it.⁸ Does he succeed? As Mengzi points out, he does not:

Mengzi replied, “Your Highness is fond of war, so allow me to use war as an illustration. Thunderingly, the drums spur the soldiers on. Blades clash together. Casting aside their armor and weapons, they run. Some stop only

⁷This problem arises even if we follow Myeong-Seok Kim’s most recent suggestion that for Mengzi the relevant emotion of, for example, sympathy may be insufficient to motivate action and that a second source of moral motivation needs to be postulated, namely some capacity for practical reasoning (Kim 2018: 77–78). My argument is that even if one reaches a conclusion as to which action type is morally appropriate given the details of the situation, and even if one is maximally motivated to pursue said type of action, then this is still not enough to guarantee one’s performance of the token action in question. And that, however, contradicts Mengzi’s claim at 1A7 that “extending kindness is sufficient for protecting all within the Four Seas” (*tuī ēn zúyǐ bǎo sìhǎi* 推恩足以保四海); *mutatis mutandis* for 2A6.

⁸Henceforth, I will assume that King Hui spoke truthfully when he said that he relocated people and food resources in response to the famine.

after running a hundred paces, some stop only after running fifty paces. How would it be if those who ran fifty paces were to laugh at those who ran a hundred paces?”

[...]

Dogs and sows consume the food of the people and You do not know to set a limit to this. There are bodies in the streets dead of starvation and You do not know to open the granaries. When someone dies, You say, ‘It wasn’t me. It was due to the harvest.’ How is this different from killing someone by stabbing him and saying, ‘It wasn’t me. It was due to the weapon’? If your Majesty does not blame the harvest, then the people of the world will come to You.” (1A3)

Mengzi explains the King’s failure in terms of the fact that the King did not know (知 *zhī*) something—he did not *know to* open the granaries (*zhī fā* 知發) when the people were starving, and he did not *know to* regulate food distribution (*zhī jiǎn* 知檢). This failure of knowing is not a failure of knowing *how* to mandate for the granaries to be opened, although it is indicative of the King’s failure to know how to protect the people. Rather, I argue that the King did not *know to* open the granaries in that particular situation, so that his failure is a failure of a particular *kind* of knowledge, namely knowledge-to.

2.1 *Knowing-to*

The concept of knowing-to as a distinct kind of knowledge different from knowing-that and knowing-how has received some recent attention. Stephen Hetherington proposes that knowing-to is manifest whenever corresponding know-how is put into practice (2011, 2012). Elsewhere, Hetherington and Lai suggest that knowing-to is “the extra epistemic element *whereby* the knowledge-how is exemplified in the specific action” (Hetherington and Lai 2015: 282) and that we find knowing-to attributions in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (吕氏春秋) of Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (251 BC–235 BC). Lai furthermore claims that the conception of knowledge that we find expressed in early Confucianism, specifically as we find it in the *Analecets*, is better understood in large part as a “knowing-to act in the moment” (2012).⁹

⁹A precedent on knowing-to is found in Hamblin (1987) and Mason and Spence (1999).

Part of the aim of this chapter is to show that the concept of knowing-to sheds light on the heretofore unresolved debate on what Mengzian extension is supposed to be. For this purpose, I wish to highlight three characteristics of knowing-to relevant for a discussion on Mengzian extension. First, knowing-to is particular: in a specific situation *C*, you know to move in *this* particular way in order to exercise your capacity to φ , whereas you know how to φ in general.¹⁰ Second, knowing-to is necessary for exercising know-how: it is not enough for an agent to know how to φ , to want to φ and to be in a situation apt for φ -ing (or, perhaps, even to know that one is in a situation that calls for φ -ing); they also have to know to perform *this* particular set of movements in order to φ .¹¹ Third, knowing-to has a certain degree of normative force: if an agent knows to φ in *C*, then φ -ing in *C* is appropriate given the particular details of the situation.¹²

Let us now consider the case of 1A3 in more detail. At 1A3 King Hui says that in response to a famine, he relocated food resources with due diligence. In other words, he attempted to alleviate the suffering of his people and he thereby presumably attempted to protect them. All of this he did to strengthen his kingdom.

Let us furthermore say that, given the particular details of the situation, it is appropriate for King Hui to protect his people by way of opening the granaries. This will obviously not be the only action type available to the King, nor does there have to be only one action type that is appropriate

¹⁰ See Hetherington and Lai (2015: 287) and Chapter 2 of this volume.

¹¹ Hetherington in Chapter 2 of this volume goes so far as to suggest that an agent's knowing-to could be a part of their intelligent action rather than a separate event or state distinct from knowing-how and the resulting action *qua* exercise of that knowing-how. I take this to be plausible.

¹² However, an agent's knowing-to could have either broad or narrow normative force. Proponents of the broad conception of the normativity of knowing-to would say that if *S* knows to φ in *C*, then φ -ing is the *correct* response in *C* by virtue of being morally or prudentially required. It is what *S* ought to do given *C*. Lai (2012) and Huang (2017) seem to advocate a position like this. Proponents of the narrow conception would say that if *S* knows to φ in *C*, then φ -ing is what is required in order to exercise *S*'s capacity to ψ , because φ -ing is a way to ψ in *C*. However, it is not obvious that φ -ing in *C* is the *right* thing to do *qua* morally or prudentially required. For example, if *S* knows to move in *this* particular way to play a cover drive in an apt situation for doing so, then *S* knows to do what is required *in order to* exercise *S*'s capacity for playing a cover drive in that particular situation, but whether or not playing a cover drive in that situation is *morally* required of *S* is neither here nor there. Hetherington (2021) and Hetherington and Lai (2015) seem aligned with that position. For reasons I will discuss in Sect. 2.2, I take Mengzi's position to be the latter rather than the former.

given the details of the situation. After all, besides opening the granaries, there could have been various ways for the King to protect his people. But given the harshness of Mengzi's criticism towards the King's relief efforts, it is plausible to say that even though King Hui relocated food resources, he nonetheless completely failed to enact a way of providing relief and that in this particular situation relocating food resources simply was not a way for him to relieve the people's suffering.¹³ But if this is so, then it seems likely that the King does not even *know how* to provide relief in the first place and, given that providing relief during a famine is a way for the King to protect his people, he therefore does not know how to protect his people. The fact that in such a situation he does not *know to* open the granaries is, I believe, indicative of this more general failure of knowing how to provide relief.

However, given that King Hui rightly selects to provide relief efforts in an apt situation for doing so, we could say that in a certain way he *does* know to provide relief, but that this knowledge only amounts to having *knowledge-that* of a normative proposition. The King knows *that* he ought to provide relief when his people suffer famine (in order to protect them), but he does not know *how* to provide such relief, and he therefore does not know *to* open the granaries. He fails to exercise his capacity for providing relief, even though he knows that he ought to. The point I wish to emphasise is that, although we might be inclined to say of King Hui that he “knows to” provide relief by virtue of knowing *that* he ought to provide relief, my suggestion so far has been that there might be a distinct kind of knowledge, namely *knowing-to*, that cannot be reduced to either knowledge-how or knowledge-that; and it is the lack of knowing-to that explains King Hui's failure to put his capacity for providing relief into practice.¹⁴ His knowing-that he ought to provide relief makes the King

¹³ Mengzi says that the King does not even do what is called the “beginning of the Kingly Way” (*wángdào zhī shǐ* 王道之始) and he unfavourably compares the King to other rulers, saying that all of them collectively are akin to those who flee a battlefield, merely differing in degree (1A3). He nowhere praises the King's apparent relief efforts, which makes me think that the King dramatically failed in providing relief. On the other hand, Mengzi nowhere criticises King Hui for having relocated people and food resources in response to the famine—actions which may in fact have been partly constitutive of providing relief. If that is so, then maybe King Hui provided *some* relief, but not enough to prevent starvation, that is, not enough for it to count as a way of protecting the people. For the sake of argument, I will assume that King Hui failed *entirely* to provide relief efforts and merely attempted to do so.

¹⁴ This is what I believe explains the difference between the way that Huang (2017) uses the term knowing-to and the way that Hetherington and Lai (2015) do. Huang Yong takes

attempt to provide relief, but his lack of knowing-to, namely his lack of knowing-to do *this* to provide relief in this particular situation, makes the King's attempt unsuccessful.

Compare this to King Xuan of Qi (1A7): how is it that the King failed to put his kindness into practice even though, as I claim, he knew that the people were in need of protection? Mengzi gives us the reason.

Mengzi said, "Then Your Majesty's greatest desire can be known. You desire to open up new lands for cultivation, bring to Your court the states of Qin and Chu, oversee the Central States, and dominate the border tribes. But to seek what You desire by the means that You employ is like climbing a tree in search of a fish."

The King said, "Could it really be as extreme as that?"

Mengzi said, "It is worse than that! If one climbs a tree in search of a fish, although one will not get a fish, there will be no disaster afterwards. If You fully apply yourself to seeking what You desire by the means that You employ, it can only lead to disaster." (1A7)

Mengzi claims that King Xuan was "exhausting his heart's strength" to attain that which the King greatly desired, namely to rule all under Heaven, but his actions had the opposite effect. They only served to move the King further away from attaining his goal.¹⁵ The main thrust of Mengzi's argument at 1A7 is then to first convince King Xuan that protecting the people is the only way for him to attain all under Heaven and secondly that acting kindly towards the people *qua* exercise of the King's kindness is a way for him to protect the people.

Notice that, so far, what explains the failure of King Xuan (1A7) and King Hui (1A3) to protect the people is their lack of knowledge, namely knowing-how and consequently knowing-to; it is not a lack of motivation to protect the people. But if this is true, then I believe that the entire debate that has preoccupied recent commentators as to how Mengzi gets

knowing-to to be a kind of knowledge-that, namely knowledge-that of a normative proposition, while the latter take it to be a non-propositional form of knowing, namely the knowing-to that is required for exercising a capacity for ϕ -ing in an apt situation.

¹⁵I therefore take my initial assumption to be justified, namely that the King might have known that the people were in need of protection but failed to perform a kind action because he had other matters to attend to. If one "exhausts the heart's strength" in pursuit of a goal that does not bring about the protection of the people, then it seems that one simply does not have any strength left in protecting the people, regardless of whether or not one recognises that the people are in need of protection.

either of the kings motivated to protect the people is wrong-headed,¹⁶ because effecting a change in the motivations of either of the two kings is entirely beside the point. That this is so is easier to see in the case of King Hui: he *wants* to provide relief but he does not know how, so that changing anything about his motivation to provide relief (or to open the granaries) will not get him to enact a way of providing relief. I argue that the same is true, with minor differences, in the case of King Xuan as well.

To see why this is so, consider the example of a novice cook wanting to make an omelette. Assume that the cook, let us call him Xunzi, falsely believes that making an omelette consists in boiling eggs rather than frying them. He knows how to fry eggs, but he does not know that frying eggs is a way for him to make an omelette. In terms of Xunzi's abilities, he has all that he needs to make an omelette, he simply does not put those abilities into practice.¹⁷ But it would be misguided to say that what is required for him to make the omelette, all other things being equal, is a change in Xunzi's motivation to fry the eggs. In fact, if we were to effect such a change in Xunzi's motivation by, for example, forcing him to fry eggs, without at the same time making him realise that this is a way for him to make an omelette, it is doubtful whether he would even be engaged in making an omelette anymore. It is far more plausible that what is required is for Xunzi to learn that frying eggs is a way for him to make an omelette, so that, if he is motivated to make an omelette, he will thereby *equibus paribus* be motivated to fry eggs as a constitutive part of omelette making.

Likewise, Mengzi at no point objects to King Xuan's "greatest desire," namely his desire to attain all under Heaven, just as he nowhere objects to King Hui's policy of strengthening his kingdom, nor does he try to persuade either of the kings that they ought to protect the people *despite* (or *regardless* of) their imperial ambitions.¹⁸ What we find instead is Mengzi

¹⁶ Some believe that King Xuan in particular has to engage in some form of reasoning, be it analogical or otherwise, e.g., (Nivison 1980; Shun 1989; Wong 2002, 2015); others disagree, e.g., (Ihara 1991; Perkins 2002; Im 1999, 2002; Ivanhoe 2002a).

¹⁷ Does Xunzi in this case know how to make an omelette by virtue of having the relevant (sub-)capacities for omelette making without being aware of it? That depends on whether we are externalists or internalists about knowing-how. On an externalist conception of knowing-how, Xunzi knows how to make an omelette; on an internalist one, he does not.

¹⁸ This stands in contrast to the vast majority of commentators who either believe that Mengzi tries to persuade the King to protect the people by an appeal to the King's sympathy or by appeal to the King's rational consistency.

telling King Xuan that (a) the King already has all the abilities he needs to act kingly and thereby unite all under Heaven, that (b) protecting the people is a way for him to act kingly, and that (c) putting into practice the King's kindness is a way for him to protect the people. Mengzi proves (a) by the story of the King freeing the ox from slaughter and the King himself admits to his "greatest desire." All that is needed is for the King to learn how to satisfy this "greatest desire," namely by learning how to put into practice kingliness by means of doing *this*, for example, securing the people's livelihoods, so that, as long as the King is sufficiently motivated by his "greatest desire," he will thereby be sufficiently motivated to secure the people's livelihoods as a constitutive part of acting kingly. In short, what he needs is to improve his knowing-how and aptly exercise it by means of knowing-to.

I mentioned that this differs slightly from the case of King Hui. The reason is this. King Hui knows that he ought to protect the people because he knows that, for example, providing relief *qua* protecting the people is a way for him to strengthen his kingdom (and thereby to act kingly). What King Hui lacks, however, is knowing-to do *this* to provide relief, for example, open the granaries; and I believe that what explains his lack of knowing-to is that he does not know how to provide relief very well.¹⁹ His case is akin to that of a cook who knows that he ought to fry eggs to make an omelette but does not know how to fry eggs, whereas King Xuan's case is akin to that of Xunzi the cook, who knows how to fry eggs but does not know that frying eggs is a way for him to make an omelette. The failure of both Kings is, however, best explained by a lack of knowing-how and knowing-to; it is not explained by a lack of motivation.

2.2 *The Timeliness of Knowledge-to*

In the previous section, I have argued that we might take sentences of the kind "she knows to provide relief efforts" to mean "she knows that she ought to provide relief efforts" and that the knowledge referred to, if it is knowing-to at all, has to be distinguished from the knowing-to that an agent requires to exercise a capacity for acting. The explanation for King

¹⁹From this does not follow, however, that a person always and only lacks knowing-to because they lack the corresponding know-how. One could be an expert cricket player and still fail to play a cover drive in a situation that calls for one, but from this does not follow that the expert cricket player lacks knowledge how to play a cover drive.

Hui's failure to protect the people is partly a lack of the latter kind of knowing-to. If King Hui (1A3) had known-to open the granaries in his particular situation, then he would have aptly exercised his capacity for protecting the people. Likewise, I suggest that if King Xuan had known-to secure the people's livelihood, he would have aptly exercised his capacity for acting kindly. I take the following to be plausible: exercising the capacity for protecting the people requires that one exercises enough relevant (sub-)capacities that are constitutive of it, for example one's (sub-)capacity for giving orders or enforcing governmental policy.²⁰ If this is true, then one could fail to exercise one's capacity for protecting the people by failing to exercise some of these relevant (sub-)capacities in apt situations.

Consider the following hypothetical scenario. King Hui exercises his capacity for opening the granaries, but in a situation where opening granaries does not *even partially* constitute an act of protecting the people. If the people do not suffer food shortages, then depleting one's granaries will not bring much, if any, benefit to the people, and depleted granaries will make it more difficult for the King to alleviate food shortages in the future. An apt situation for opening the granaries *qua* protecting the people would rather be one in which the King under normal circumstances would succeed in protecting the people by opening the granaries. Therefore, for the King to protect the people, he must *inter alia* open the granaries at the *right* time and in the *right* circumstances for such an act to count as (partially) constitutive of protecting the people. It requires his action of opening the granaries to be *timely*.

The emphasis on timeliness, that is, on extending specific (sub-)capacities at the *right* time in order to exercise derivative capacities for, for example, acting benevolently, righteously or protecting the people in apt situations is found repeatedly in the *Mengzi*, especially in the criticism of the otherwise sagely figure Bo Yi. At 2A9 Mengzi claims that Bo Yi "extended his heart of disdain" in a way that is objectionable:

If someone was not Bo Yi's ruler, he would not serve him. If someone was not his friend, he would not treat him as his friend. He would not take a

²⁰ One might ask: how many (sub-)capacities are enough? Consider whether it is possible to exercise a capacity for playing a cover drive by missing the ball. I believe so, if missing the ball is not entirely due to the exercise of one's capacity but is rather because, for example, the flight trajectory of the ball was altered by blamelessly unforeseen gusts of strong wind. If so, then maybe the answer is: those (sub-)capacities are enough, whose exercise *would* result in a successful shot under normal conditions.

position at the court of a bad person, nor would he have a discussion with a bad person. He looked upon taking a position at the court of a bad person or having a discussion with a bad person like wearing one's court cap and gown and sitting down in filth. He extended his heart of disdain to the point that, if he stood with an ordinary villager, but his cap was not on correctly, he would leave without meeting his eyes, as if he thought he was about to be defiled. [...]

Mengzi said, "Bo Yi was too constrained; Liuxia Hui was not dignified. A *junzi* is neither too constrained nor lacking in dignity." (2A9)

It is clear that shunning the villager is an example of Bo Yi failing to act appropriately given the situation, but this is only true in a certain sense. After all, Bo Yi is said to have successfully extended his heart of disdainful badness and his action of shunning the villager was the result of such extension.²¹ Therefore, Bo Yi successfully exercised his capacity to act disdainfully in an apt situation for doing so, but he did not exercise his capacity in an apt situation for his (basic) act of disdain to count as an instance of a thereby constituted act of righteousness.²²

Bo Yi can be said to have *known-to* shun the villager *qua* acting disdainfully, but he cannot be said to know how to act righteously in situations of that kind. I believe it is plausible that, given his quasi-sage status, Bo Yi most likely knew that he ought to act righteously towards the villager and presumably tried to do so, but he did not know to do *this* in order for his action to be righteous, even though he knew to do *this* in order for his action to be disdainful. His disdainful action *lacked timeliness* in the sense that it was the (morally) inappropriate thing to do in that situation; and yet it was successful *qua* disdainful action. Consequently, Bo Yi exercised his capacity for acting disdainfully in a wrong way, i.e., in an unrighteous way, and this is exactly how, in other passages, Bo Yi is said to differ from Confucius:

²¹ Van Norden (2008: 49) takes this to mean that Bo Yi extended his heart "too far", but I disagree. I think Bo Yi extended his heart perfectly well, because his action is indeed disdainful towards the villager. It is just that Bo Yi did not do it in the right circumstances for his action to count as, for example, righteous and therefore morally appropriate. This, however, means that Bo Yi did not extend his capacity for (e.g.) acting righteously in a situation apt for doing so, which is why he falls short.

²² This point is made even more dramatic if we take Bo Yi's *è è zhī xīn* 惡惡之心 ("heart of disdainful badness") to be the sprout of righteousness that is mentioned at 2A6: *xīū è zhī xīn* 羞惡之心 ("heart of shame and disdain"). In that case, Bo Yi successfully exercised his sprout of righteousness in a situation that did not yield a righteous action!

If he was not his ruler, he would not serve him; if they were not his subjects, he would not direct them; if things were orderly, he would take office; if they were chaotic, he would leave office. This was Bo Yi. [...] When one should take office, he would take office; when one should stop, he would stop; when one should take a long time, he would take a long time; when one should hurry, he would hurry. This was Kongzi.” (2A2)

Bo Yi’s eyes would not look upon evil sights, and his ears would not listen to evil sounds. He would not serve someone who was not his ruler; he would not command those who were not his people. [...] When one should go quickly, he went quickly; when one should delay, he delayed; when one should stay, he stayed; when one should remain, he remained; when one should take office, he took office—such was Kongzi. (5B1)

Bo Yi would sometimes refuse to take office even though he should have, whereas Confucius’s actions are always appropriate given the circumstances—and they are appropriate in the sense of being in accordance with the four moral qualities of benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety and wisdom. Confucius *knows to* perform *this* particular action given *this* particular situation to thereby exercise his capacities for acting morally. This is also the reason, I believe, why Mengzi calls Confucius a 聖之時 (*shèng zhī shí*, “sage of timeliness”) and what the cases of Bo Yi (2A9), King Hui (1A7) and King Xuan (1A7) all have in common. All three lack knowing-to because they lack knowing-how: King Xuan does not know to protect the people because he does not know how to unite all under Heaven, King Hui does not know to open the granaries because he does not know how to protect the people, and Bo Yi does not know to perform a righteous action because he does not know how to act righteously towards the villager.

3 USING KINDNESS TO PROTECT THE PEOPLE

I have argued that King Xuan’s failure to protect his people is a failure to exercise his capacities for acting, and that this failure is to be understood partly in terms of the King’s lack of knowing-to. At this point one may raise two worries, both of which are related to what Mengzi tells King Xuan at 1A7:

Hence, one fails to lift a feather only because one does not use one’s strength. One fails to see a wagon of firewood only because one does not use

one's eyesight. You fail to protect the people because you do not use your kindness. (1A7)

The contrapositive of Mengzi's last sentence is that if the King uses his kindness, then he will protect the people. But one might worry that, contrary to what I have argued thus far, the King might know-to act kindly—therefore act kindly *qua* exercise of his relevant capacity—without the people being thereby protected. This can be taken in one of two ways. First, similar to the case of Bo Yi, the King might exercise his capacity for acting kindly without such an action (even partially) constituting an act of protecting the people. After all, he could exercise his kindness by freeing an ox that is led to slaughter (1A7) and thereby act kindly without protecting the people, just as Bo Yi might exercise his capacity for acting disdainfully without thereby acting righteously.

Secondly, even if the King were to put into practice a way of protecting the people by acting kindly, this does not mean that his action will thereby bring about a state of affairs where the people will be protected. The worry is that I am vulnerable to the objection I raised against previous commentators on the *Mengzi*. Just as they seemingly cannot account for the fact that an agent might fail to exercise their capacity to ϕ even though the agent is in an apt situation for ϕ -ing and is sufficiently motivated to ϕ , so likewise I cannot account for the fact that an agent might exercise their capacity for protecting the people without the people being thereby protected.

The first worry can be circumvented by appealing to the concept of timeliness that I introduced in the previous section. Just as Bo Yi's disdainful action lacks timeliness insofar as it does not constitute acting righteously, so likewise King Xuan's kind action would lack timeliness if it were not to constitute an act of protecting the people. It would lack timeliness in either one of two ways, depending on how strictly we read the requirements on timely actions. One might say that an action is timely only if such an action is (partially) constitutive of an act that is benevolent, righteous, ritually proper or wise. That way, if the King's action is kind but not benevolent, then his exercise of kindness lacks timeliness.²³

²³That protecting the people is a benevolent action, see e.g., 4A3, 3A3, 2A5, 7B3–4. One might worry: could it not be the case that the King might end up in a situation apt for performing a benevolent action that is *not* an action of protecting the people? I am not sure if Mengzi would agree. What it means for a king *qua* king to act benevolently could plausibly

But there is a second way. One might say that an action ϕ is timely only insofar as it is timely for the exercise of a derivative capacity to ψ , because ϕ -ing in such a situation is a way for the agent to ψ . For example, if the King performs *this* particular action, then this action might be timely for exercising the King's capacity for acting kindly, but it might lack timeliness for exercising the King's capacity for protecting the people. That way, Bo Yi's action of being disdainful towards the villager lacks timeliness in a certain specific way, namely it lacks timeliness *qua* being morally inappropriate, but it is timely *qua* being disdainful.

On either of the two readings of timeliness, it is unproblematic to claim that if the King were to use his kindness, then the people would be protected. This is because such a claim is to be read as saying that if the King were to use his kindness in a timely manner, namely to protect the people, then they would be protected.

The second worry can be circumvented by showing that Mengzi at 1A7 is not committed to the implausible claim that the King's actions only count as protecting the people if those actions were to bring about a state of affairs where the people are protected. When he says that "you fail to protect the people because you do not use your kindness" (1A7), this can plausibly be taken to mean that one fails to enact protecting the people if one does not use one's kindness in an apt situation. But enacting the protection of the people can be done without necessarily bringing about the state of affairs of the people being protected, just as one might be sculpting a statue without ever finishing it.

If the reconstruction I have given so far is adequate and if my argument from the first section is granted that Mengzian extension is to be understood in terms of the process of exercising a capacity for action, that is, it is to be understood in terms of *using* said capacity, then we are now in a

be restricted to performing actions that benefit the people, even if King Xuan *qua* father could be in a position to perform benevolent acts that do not necessarily benefit the people. But even if we deny this, one might still argue that what it means for an action to be benevolent is not just simply that it (for example) alleviates harm, but that it alleviates harm in a way that a benevolent person would do it, and that a benevolent person, when faced with the choice between protecting the people and saving an ox from slaughter, would choose the former over the latter. This might be because they would try to enact policies that have the most beneficial impact possible. I thank Sydney Morrow for pointing me in that direction. This issue, however, requires us to give an account of what it means for an action to be benevolent, which is beyond the scope of this chapter.

position to give a complete account of Mengzi's solution to King Xuan's problem that I drew attention to at the outset of this chapter.

Recall that King Xuan's problem was how to rule all under Heaven and thereby become a genuine, legitimate King. Mengzian extension is the solution to his problem. The King already has all that he needs to rule all under Heaven, because he already possesses all the relevant capacities required to protect the people, and protecting the people is a way for the King to rule all under Heaven. He merely does not *extend* those capacities. What does it mean to extend one's capacity for protecting the people? My argument has been that extending a capacity means putting that capacity into practice, and what is required for putting one's capacity into practice is *knowing-to* do this or that particular action given the details of the situation. I furthermore take it to be plausible that one's knowing-to move one's body in this or that way is a constitutive *part* of one's actions; knowing-to is therefore a constitutive part of what it means to extending one's capacity for protecting the people. It is the lack of such knowing-to that explains why the King fails in ruling all under Heaven and why he fails to protect the people—it furthermore indicates that the King might not even know how to perform either of the two. A failure of extension is therefore fundamentally a failure of knowledge, namely knowing-to.

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