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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Virtuous actions in the *Mengzi*

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### ABSTRACT

Many anglophone scholars take the early Confucians to be virtue ethicists of one kind or another. A common virtue ethical reading of one of the most influential early Confucians, namely Mengzi, ascribes to him the view that moral actions are partly (or entirely) moral because of the state from which they are performed, be it the agent's motives, emotions, or their character traits. I consider whether such a reading of the *Mengzi* is justified and I argue that it is not. I argue that there is no reason to believe that Mengzi distinguishes the moral value of actions that are performed from virtuous and non-virtuous states. Given this, virtue (as a feature of agents) is normatively *posterior* to virtuous actions. I conclude, first, that this poses a challenge to a wide range of common interpretations of the *Mengzi*, be they virtue ethical or otherwise, and second, that there might be conceptual space for an account of virtue ethics that rejects the normative priority of virtue over virtuous actions.

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### 1. Mengzi: what kind of virtue ethicist?

A recent trend in anglophone scholarship on ancient Confucianism has been to read the earliest Confucian thinkers, including Confucius (551 BC–479 BC) and Mengzi (c. 372 BC–289 BC), as virtue ethicists (e.g. Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius*; Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*; for a good overview, see Hutton, “On the ‘Virtue Turn’”), and to take the contemporary intellectual rivals of the Confucians as being opposed to virtue ethics more generally: the legalist philosopher Hanfeizi (c. 280 BC–233 BC) is said to have framed his objections to the Confucians based on arguments against their supposedly virtue ethical position (Hutton, “Han Feizi’s Criticism”), while the ancient Mohists opposed the Confucians on largely consequentialist grounds (Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 143; Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy*, 132).<sup>1</sup> Such a trend coincides with the amount of interest that

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virtue ethics has generated among philosophers over the past few decades. In this paper, I argue that at least one common way of reading Mengzi as a virtue ethicist fails. I aim to do so by showing that the way Mengzi evaluates actions is hard to reconcile with the thesis that virtue (as a characteristic of virtuous agents) is normatively prior to virtuous action.

Although there is much variety among virtue ethical theories, what they are frequently taken to have in common is that “the central concept in *virtue ethics* is virtue rather than duty or good consequences. Accordingly, it evaluates actions in terms of virtue [...]” (Van Zyl, *Virtue Ethics*, 12f.). Julia Annas puts it this way: “[W]hen we claim that the right thing to do is what the virtuous person would do, we recognize that the right thing to do can range from what the learner does to what the truly virtuous person does. These are different ways of being the right thing to do [...]” (Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 42). They are different, presumably, because the degree towards which an action is virtuous depends in part on how much of the agent’s virtue is expressed in it. Other virtue ethicists claim that virtue ethics “introduces the concept of the virtuous *agent* in the first premise of its account of right action, where utilitarianism and deontology introduce the concepts of *consequences* and *moral rule* respectively” (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 29). What this amounts to, I believe, is at least the following:

**(SN)** Virtuous agents are normatively prior to right action: If an action issues from an agent’s virtuous state, then the action has some normative property, or achieves some normative status, in virtue of (and to the extent that) it issues from such a state and not vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

Thesis (SN) is an account of an action’s *source of normativity*.<sup>3</sup> Any action that is performed from virtuous motives, emotions, or character traits derives at

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<sup>1</sup>For a different take on Mozi’s criticism of the Confucians, see Fraser, *The Philosophy of Mozi*.

<sup>2</sup>Three brief notes of clarification. First, I take a normative property to be such that, if it is predicated of an action, then the action is successful in some domain of achievement. For example, if an action is virtuous, then it has whatever normative properties are required for it to be virtuous, and it achieves the normative status of being a virtuous action because it has such normative properties. Second, I take an agent’s feelings, dispositions, traits, motives, etc., to be states that can be expressed in actions, and if these states are virtuous, then the resulting action expresses a virtuous state – that is, the agent manifests (or exercises) her virtuous state in the performance of her action. Third, I take an agent’s *virtue* to be (whatever else might be required) at least (i) a virtuous state of the agent, and (ii) such that, if the agent possesses virtue *v*, then she is thereby made virtuous in respect to *v*. But my argument does not require me to say that all virtuous states must be virtues, nor that all virtuous states make their possessors virtuous. For example, my argument is compatible with saying that I can occasionally feel compassion (i.e. have a virtuous feeling) without thereby being a compassionate person (i.e. without possessing the virtue of compassion). This is because I do not assume any particular account of what makes an agent’s state a virtue. I thank an anonymous referee for allowing me to clarify this point. Finally, much of the terminology I use here is adapted from Greco, *Achieving Knowledge*.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Crisp takes something like (SN) to be a defining feature of virtue ethics (Crisp, “A Third Method”, 267–9), although, of course, we may question whether it is. Perhaps there is conceptual space for a normative theory that is both virtue-theoretic and that rejects (SN). I return to this point in Section 6. For now, my argument only concerns those virtue ethical interpretations of Mengzi that ascribe to him (SN), which, I believe, are currently all of them.

least part of its moral value *from* the fact that it expresses (or manifests) such virtuous states of the agent. In line with (SN), scholars who have interpreted the *Mengzi* as advocating a kind of virtue ethics have commonly ascribed to it the view that the virtue of an agent's state from which she acts, be it her motive, emotion, or character trait, makes a difference to the moral value of her action (see, e.g. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 289; Im, "Emotional Control", 19; Angle, "Is Conscientiousness a Virtue?", 185f.; Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*, 94; Perkins, "Mencius, Emotions, and Autonomy", 209).

What is surprisingly absent in such virtue ethical approaches to the *Mengzi* is the distinction between the moral value an action has by virtue of being the kind of action that it is and by virtue of being performed in a certain way. In other words, what is absent is the distinction between the moral value of virtuous actions and virtuous actions done virtuously. Such a distinction is commonly drawn by neo-Aristotelians (e.g. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 41–5; Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 125; Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 72–3; see also Vasilioi, "Aristotle, Agents, and Actions", 180) and it goes back all the way to the three conditions Aristotle introduces at EN II.4 that an agent has to satisfy for her action to be fully virtuous: (a) the agent must know what they are doing, (b) they must perform the action for its own sake, and (c) they must perform it out of a stable disposition of character.

To illustrate, according to EN II.4, what makes a compassionate action a compassionate one is, say, the fact that it alleviates suffering, and an agent does not have to alleviate suffering from virtuous motives for the action to be compassionate. I do not have to already *be* a compassionate person (or feel compassion) for me to, for example, save a child from drowning. I can save the child because I am instructed to do so, or because I intend to impress my peers. Aristotle would grant that in such a case my action might still be a *compassionate* action, but it is not an action performed in the way a virtuous agent would characteristically perform it. A virtuous agent would save the child because it is compassionate to do so, or because she cares about the child's well-being, rather than because someone told her to.<sup>4</sup> In other words, she would save the child from virtuous motives, emotions, or character traits – hence, she would do so from a virtuous state. What it therefore means for a compassionate action (e.g. an action of saving a drowning child) to be done *compassionately* is for the agent to perform the action *and* do so from a virtuous state.<sup>5</sup> In terms of the moral

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<sup>4</sup>One might say: the virtuous agent would save the child *for the sake of* saving the child – that is, she would perform an action with a specific end or "teleological motive" (Meyer, "Aristotle on Moral Motivation", 44–6).

<sup>5</sup>Compare this with actions that are competent: it is very plausible that an action is competent only if the action is competently performed, and an action is competently performed only if it expresses the agent's competence. Actions do not have to be successful to be competently performed – there are competent failures, and there are lucky successes. In a similar vein, I take an action to be virtuously

value that an action has, we can thus broadly distinguish two different cases: in a situation where alleviating suffering is virtuous qua compassionate, an agent might perform a *virtuous action* (VA) or a *virtuous action done virtuously* (VV).<sup>6</sup>

Although (VV) is more virtuous than (VA), what explains the difference is that, according to (SN), an action can derive part of its normative value from being performed in a certain way. The fact that (VA) has normative value is, in other words, *independent* of whether the agent who performs the action does so from a virtuous state, whereas the fact that (VV) has normative value *depends* in part on the virtuous state of the agent. The dependence relation is, furthermore, definitional: virtuous actions (VA) are not *defined* in terms of virtuous agents, they are rather defined by (e.g.) being actions that alleviate harm in morally apt situations.<sup>7</sup> But virtuous actions done virtuously (VV) *are* partly defined in terms of an agent's virtuous state – that is, they are those virtuous actions that are performed from virtuous motives, emotions, character traits, etc.

Therefore, if we do not distinguish the normative value of (VA) and (VV), and if we say that virtuous actions have normative properties because of something *other than* the fact that they issue from an agent's virtuous state, then we reject a central tenet of many virtue ethical views, namely (SN). That is, we reject the view that performing an action from a virtuous state thereby makes a difference to the normative value of the action.<sup>8</sup>

As I mentioned before, proponents of virtue ethical approaches to the *Mengzi* are unanimously silent on the distinction between the moral value of virtuous actions (VA) and virtuous actions done virtuously (VV). This is, I believe, entirely understandable, because Mengzi himself does not seem to distinguish the moral value of (VA) from that of (VV). In other words, he seems to hold that, *ceteris paribus*, if an action is (VV), it is morally no better or worse than an action that is (VA).<sup>9</sup> But if that is so and Mengzi is taken to hold (SN), namely the view that the virtue of an agent's state from which she acts makes a difference to how virtuous her action is, then

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performed only if it expresses an agent's virtuous state, be it her virtuous feelings, traits, motives, etc. Hence, I accept that all virtuously performed actions are actions that issue from virtuous states.

<sup>6</sup>This distinction has been drawn in various ways even by those who are not neo-Aristotelians, see, e.g. Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory", 45, or Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 231f. It has been drawn even by those who are not virtue ethicists, e.g. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 204; Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 156. Henceforth, I use expressions like 'acting from virtue' interchangeably with 'acting from a virtuous state'.

<sup>7</sup>Aristotle defines them as actions that hit the mean: see EN II.6, 1106b17-29.

<sup>8</sup>Applied to the *Mengzi*, this means we reject the view that, for example, how benevolent an action is depends (even in part) on the emotions or motives from which it is performed. To clarify, I take actions that express any of the four Mengzian qualities (benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, or wisdom) to be virtuous actions.

<sup>9</sup>I return to the significance of the *ceteris paribus* clause in Section 2.

Mengzi ought to be committed to the view that an action is virtuous *only if* it is performed from a virtuous state. In that case, Mengzi ends up saying that *all* of the normative properties of an action derive from the way it is performed, whereas neo-Aristotelians would admit this only for *some* of an action's normative properties, namely those that are required for the action to be (VV).

Given that Mengzi is so commonly interpreted to hold (SN), and given that he does not seem to *ceteris paribus* distinguish the moral value of (VA) and (VV), it comes as no surprise that those who either explicitly or implicitly favour virtue ethical readings of the *Mengzi* ascribe to him the view that an action is virtuous *only if* it is performed from virtuous motives, emotions, traits etc. (e.g. Kim, "Respect in Mengzi", 243f.; Chong, "Virtue and Rightness", 69–78; Xiao, "Agency", 637). Call this view, therefore, the *agent-based condition* for the performance of virtuous actions: if an action is a virtuous action, then it is performed from a virtuous state.<sup>10</sup>

My argument is this. First, we have no reason to think that Mengzi distinguishes (*ceteris paribus*) the moral value of (VA) and (VV). Second, there is textual evidence to suggest that Mengzi does not hold an agent-based condition for the performance of virtuous actions. From this follows that he does not hold (SN). The implication of this is that a common way of reading Mengzi as a virtue ethicist fails, namely one on which an agent's feelings, motives, or character traits make a moral difference to how virtuous her action is. However, I leave open the question of whether a normative theory without (SN) can still be a kind of virtue ethics. Perhaps it can. In that case, perhaps Mengzi is a virtue ethicist in a way that is remarkably different from anything currently available.

In the following section, I defend the first step of my argument (Section 2). I then present a three-part argument against the claim that Mengzi accepts the agent-based condition. First, Mengzi does not mention such a condition in passages where one would expect him to (Section 3). Second, he suggests that one could perform virtuous actions from non-virtuous states (Section 4), and, finally, he affirms that some agents act virtuously from non-virtuous states (Section 5). I end by discussing the broader implications of this for Mengzian ethics (Section 6).

## 2. Virtuous actions done virtuously

Does Mengzi distinguish *ceteris paribus* the moral value of virtuous actions (VA) and virtuous actions done virtuously (VV)? I believe he does not. However, by far the clearest passage that one might draw on to argue that he does is 4B19.

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<sup>10</sup>For such agent-based virtue ethical accounts, see, e.g. Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 7, 15; see also Swanton, *The Virtue Ethics of Hume*, 21.

Mengzi said, “That by which humans differ from animals is slight. The masses abandon it. The gentleman preserves it. Shun was enlightened about things. He had scrutinized human roles. He acted from benevolence and righteousness; he did not act out benevolence and righteousness”.<sup>11</sup>

(4B19)

4B19 establishes an important distinction. The passage mentions “acting from benevolence and righteousness” (*yóu rényì xíng* 由仁義行) in distinction to “putting into practice benevolence and righteousness” (*xíng rényì* 行仁義), the former being associated with sage king Shun, the latter with non-sage people. Huang Yong suggests that the latter refers to actions that are benevolent or righteous, i.e. virtuous actions, while the former refers to actions that are benevolent or righteous and that are done *from* benevolence or righteousness (Huang, “Why Confucian Ethics is a Virtue Ethics”, 2f.). This corresponds to the distinction between (VA) and (VV).

However, recall that my argument is not that Mengzi fails to draw a (VA)–(VV) distinction, but rather that he fails to distinguish the *moral value* of (VA) from that of (VV) – that is, I argue that for Mengzi actions that are (VV) are not morally better merely by virtue of being (VV). But there is nothing at 4B19 that points towards the view that Shun’s virtuous action is *better or more virtuous* on the basis of it being done from virtue, even if we grant that Shun himself is a more virtuous agent. In fact, classical commentators on this passage, like Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), explain the difference between ‘acting from benevolence and righteousness’ and ‘putting into practice benevolence and righteousness’ in terms of the moral standing of the *agent* rather than the moral value of the action:

[This passage says that] benevolence and righteousness are already rooted in one’s heart, so one’s actions follow from them. It is not that one takes benevolence and righteousness as fine and only then forces oneself to put them into practice.

(Zhu, *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu*, 4B19)

It is the agent, namely Shun, who has the virtues, i.e. whose benevolence is rooted in his heart, and who therefore performs virtuous actions habitually, while those who are not virtuous have to put effort into it. Such virtuosity makes Shun a better moral agent, but there is nothing in the text that indicates whether his actions are thereby morally better actions. A similar take on this passage is given by the Han Dynasty scholar Zhao Qi 趙岐 (?–201), as quoted by Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820): “Benevolence and righteousness come from within, so they stem from the inside and one puts them into practice. It is not that one exerts one’s strength to act benevolently and righteously” (Jiao, *Mengzi Zhengyi*, 568).

<sup>11</sup>All translations are taken, with minor changes, from Van Norden’s edition. I point out more substantial changes. Translations of commentaries are my own.

There is, I would say, no reason to interpret the passage as saying anything more than that. In fact, if we grant the claim that 4B19 distinguishes between a virtuous and a non-virtuous agent performing an action, while calling the action that the non-virtuous agent performs a *benevolent* and thereby *virtuous* action, then this is textual evidence against the agent-based condition that the moral value of virtuous actions depends entirely on the virtue of the agent who performs them. If we conflate the moral value of (VA) and (VV) by saying that virtuous actions count as virtuous only if they are performed by an agent acting from a virtuous state, then it would be impossible to claim, *contrary* to our classical commentators, that non-virtuous agents can perform benevolent or righteous actions.

If my interpretation of the commentaries is plausible, then 4B19, rather than undermining my point, is textual evidence against both neo-Aristotelian and agent-based virtue ethical readings of the *Mengzi*. It is indirect evidence against the neo-Aristotelian reading because *Mengzi* does not distinguish the moral value of (VA) and (VV), and it is direct evidence against the agent-based reading because 4B19 implies that virtuous actions can be performed by non-virtuous agents (i.e. from non-virtuous states).<sup>12</sup>

At this point one might raise the following objection. At 4B19 *Mengzi* advises us to perform virtuous actions *from* virtue (VV) rather than to merely perform virtuous actions (VA). Hence, he does not treat the two the same way. A plausible explanation for this is that *Mengzi* takes (VA) and (VV) to differ in their moral value after all. Therefore, I am wrong that *Mengzi* at 4B19 does not distinguish the moral value of (VA) and (VV).<sup>13</sup>

My response is this. If we take the classical commentaries on the passage into account, then it seems to me that 4B19 should be read as saying that Shun *habitually* performs virtuous actions – that is, he does not have to force himself to do so. And so the reason why *Mengzi* recommends us to become like Shun (i.e. to acquire virtue) is that we should become people who habitually perform virtuous actions. Having acquired the relevant habits, we become more reliable *virtuous action performers*. But from this does not follow, at least not without begging the question, that virtuous actions reliably performed are morally better than virtuous actions unreliably performed (see, e.g. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 301–2). In a similar vein, a novice archer should not merely concern herself about hitting targets, but should aim to become like Archer Yi, that is, to have the relevant skills

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<sup>12</sup>Proponents of the agent-based reading might help themselves to a counterfactual account of virtuous actions, namely the view that virtuous actions are those actions that *would* be performed by someone acting from a virtuous state. I agree with Brady that such an account is unpersuasive (“Against Agent-Based Virtue Ethics”; for more plausible variations, see van Zyl, “Agent-Based Virtue Ethics” and Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*). But even if it were not, I see no evidence that *Mengzi* holds anything like a counterfactualist view, nor do I know of any scholar who defends such a reading.

<sup>13</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for bringing this and the next objection to my attention.



‘rooted in one’s heart’, because only then does she become reliable at hitting her targets.

One might object in response that there is more to Shun’s virtue than being reliable at performing virtuous actions. After all, Shun is a moral exemplar – by acting virtuously, he *inspires* others to become virtuous. Mengzi says:

When superiors are fond of something, subordinates must be even more so. The virtue of the gentleman is the wind. The virtue of the petty person is the grass. When wind is upon the grass, it must bend.

(3A2)

Suppose, for example, that Shun performs a benevolent action by opening the granaries to relieve his people from a bad harvest. He not only alleviates the suffering of his people, he also inspires others to cultivate benevolence. Presumably, actions that alleviate suffering and inspire others are *ceteris paribus* morally better than actions that merely alleviate suffering. But, so the objection continues, for one’s action to have such an inspiring effect on others, it is *necessary* that one act from a virtuous state (VV). Hence, some actions performed from a virtuous state (by fully virtuous agents) are morally better than actions which are not performed from a virtuous state (or by agents that are not fully virtuous), because the former are inspiring. Therefore, Mengzi implicitly distinguishes the moral value of (VA) and (VV).

This is an important objection – and it fails in ways that are instructive. Suppose I grant for the sake of argument that it is necessary to perform (VV) to inspire others, and I grant that an action A which achieves X *and* inspires others is morally better than an action A\* that only achieves X without inspiring others. The question is: what *makes* A better than A\*? Is it because A inspires others in addition to achieving X, or is it because A is a virtuous action virtuously performed (VV)? The answer, it seems to me, is that A inspires others in addition to achieving X. The reason is simple. Not all (VV) are actions that inspire others. If I perform a (VV) without anyone finding out about it, then it will not inspire anyone. Likewise, presumably, only those (VV) that are performed by fully virtuous agents (or sages) are inspiring, whereas those that are performed by less than fully virtuous agents are not. But if only *some* (VV) are actions that inspire others, then it cannot be that, *just by virtue of being* (VV), an action is morally better than an action that is (VA). Therefore, the objection fails to show that, all else being equal, Mengzi distinguishes the moral value of (VA) and (VV). If in some circumstances an action that is (VV) has additional normative properties (e.g. it inspires others), then all else is *not* equal, and what explains that in these circumstances the action that is (VV) is morally better than a similar action that is (VA) is the fact that the former has these additional normative properties, rather than the fact that it is (VV).

Hence, I conclude that Mengzi neither at 4B19 nor at 2A3 distinguishes *ceteris paribus* between the moral value of (VA) and (VV). But if that is so, what reason do we have for ascribing such a distinction to him?<sup>14</sup> As I mentioned in Section 1, proponents of reading Mengzi as a virtue ethicist that holds (SN) can still accept that he does not distinguish the moral value of (VA) and (VV). They can do so by ascribing to him an agent-based condition for the performance of virtuous actions. In the following sections I argue that there is textual evidence that speaks against interpreting Mengzi as holding such an agent-based condition.

### 3. Seemingly virtuous actions

We do not get a straightforward account in the *Mengzi* of what it takes for an agent to perform a virtuous action, but we can start by considering what Mengzi has to say about the actions of moral exemplars. At 1B4 Duke Jing of Qi is said to have asked Minister Yan what it would take to perform an imperial inspection tour in the manner of the Former Kings. This is helpful for our purposes, because we are looking for the conditions that an agent has to satisfy to perform a virtuous action, and given that the Former Kings are taken by the early Confucians to be moral exemplars, it is plausible to assume that their actions are virtuous. Therefore, one would expect Minister Yan's answer to shed light on the conditions for performing virtuous actions. This is how he responds:

A fine question! When the Son of Heaven visits the various lords, it is called an "inspection tour" [...]. Nothing that the Son of Heaven or the various lords do is not a public service. In the Spring they supervise planting and assist those who do not have enough. In the Autumn they supervise the reaping and help those who do not have a sufficient amount.

(1B4)

Suppose Duke Jing is motivated by a desire for power and follows Minister Yan's suggestions because he believes that doing so will help him establish himself as an emperor. Suppose that he successfully puts into practice these suggestions and thereby ensures that his people have enough to sustain themselves. In such a case, does Duke Jing thereby *fail* to act in the manner of the Former Kings? If so, then Minister Yan's answer is misleading. If a necessary condition for performing virtuous actions is that they are performed from the right motives, with the right reasons etc., then Minister Yan should have mentioned that. But he does not. This suggests that, perhaps,

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<sup>14</sup>Objection: surely absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. That Mengzi fails to explicitly mention something does not mean that he fails to hold it. My response: a good interpretation is surely one that we have reasons to adopt. If there is no reason to think that Mengzi holds view X, then why should we continue to believe that he does?

Mengzi accepts that an action is virtuous independent of the moral quality of the agent's motives for performing it.

One may want to excuse Minister Yan's silence on the exact conditions for performing virtuous actions by saying that Duke Jing only wants to learn how to conduct affairs that 'are comparable' (*kěyǐ bǐ* 可以比) to those of the Former Kings. After all, two actions can be comparable in their moral value and they can be comparable in their non-moral value. If Duke Jing's question is about how to conduct an inspection tour that will be prudentially (and non-morally) as valuable as the inspection tours held by the Former Kings, then one would not expect Minister Yan to tell him under which conditions his inspection tour would be equally as morally valuable. This in turn is still compatible with an agent-based condition on the moral value of actions. That is, it is compatible with the claim that two actions can, for example, benefit the people equally as well but still differ in their moral value, given that one of the actions is performed from a non-virtuous state while the other is performed from a virtuous state. At most, we might say that an action that benefits the people from ulterior motives *resembles* a virtuous action, because it yields the same good outcomes as an otherwise virtuous action does.

However, there are passages that speak against accepting such a distinction between those actions that *resemble* virtuous actions and those that are virtuous actions. Take for example 7B37:

Confucius said, "I hate that which seems but is not. I hate weeds out of fear that they will be confused with grain sprouts. I hate flattery out of fear that it will be confused with righteousness. I hate glibness out of fear that it will be confused with faithfulness. I hate the tunes of the state of Zheng out of fear that they will be confused with proper music. I hate purple out of fear that it will be confused with vermillion. I hate the village worthies out of fear that they will be confused with those who have virtue".

(7B37)

If actions performed from non-virtuous states that (intentionally) benefit the people are actions that merely *seem* virtuous and are therefore easily mistaken for genuinely virtuous ones, then Confucius ought to disapprove of them. He ought to disapprove of an agent opening granaries from ulterior motives in times of famine because alleviating suffering in this way might easily be mistaken for a genuinely virtuous action. But that is not a plausible reading of 7B37.

One might respond by pointing out that Confucius objects to the fact that, for example, flattery resembles righteousness, because employing those who flatter will lead to bad consequences down the line, just as nourishing weeds is, in the end, not going to yield grain. Presumably, a reasonable farmer would only nourish weeds out of ignorance, just as a reasonable ruler would not employ flatterers. Therefore, there are two kinds of actions that resemble

virtuous ones, namely those whose performance yields good consequences and those whose performance yields bad ones, and Confucius at 7B37 only objects to the latter.

But what this response fails to take into account is that Confucius simply does not make such a distinction between seemingly virtuous actions that yield good consequences and seemingly virtuous actions that yield bad ones. At most, Confucius only distinguishes those actions that *seem* virtuous from those actions that *are* virtuous, and he clearly says that he hates what seems but is not (*wù sìrěfěizhě* 惡似而非者) – he does not say that he only hates *some* of what seems but is not. Therefore, given that it is implausible to say that Confucius hates some seemingly virtuous actions, namely those actions that yield equally as good consequences as virtuous ones but are performed from ulterior motives, and given that Confucius says that he hates *all* seemingly virtuous actions, it follows that those actions that yield equally as good consequences as actions performed from virtuous motives are not *seemingly* virtuous actions anymore – no, they are fully virtuous actions. Their moral value is not derived from whether or not they are performed from a virtuous state.

Mengzi confirms this elsewhere, namely when he says that, “not to govern the people through that which Yao governed the people means to plunder the people” (4A2). If what is essential to that which sage king Yao uses to govern the people is that the ruler acts from a virtuous state, then it is simply false to say that the people will be plundered if their non-virtuous ruler (from ulterior motives) puts into practice government policies that will benefit the people. If such policies are enforced, the people will benefit rather than be plundered, and that is regardless of the ruler’s motives for enforcing such policies.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, namely at 4A2 and 7B37 above, either Mengzi and Confucius were ignorant of the distinction between non-virtuous actions that have the same consequences as virtuous actions or they did not consider it to be an ethically useful distinction to make. I take the latter to be a more charitable interpretation.

#### 4. How to unify all under heaven

So far I have argued that it is unlikely that Mengzi distinguished virtuous and non-virtuous actions in terms of anything other than their outcomes. If this is right, then the fact that he does not explicitly state the agent-based condition for the performance of virtuous actions is perhaps best explained by the fact that he simply does not hold it. In this section, I give two arguments in

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<sup>15</sup>Objection: if a ruler is not virtuous, then in the end the people will be plundered, because the ruler is not reliable at enforcing the right policies. My answer is that, even if plausible, this is not what Mengzi says at 4A2. He only says that not using what Yao uses to govern the people *just means* to plunder them.

support of the claim that Mengzi does not hold an agent-based condition. Both of them concern the question what a ruler has to do to unify “all under Heaven”.

The first argument is this. At 2A5, Mengzi gives us a straightforward account of what it takes to become a genuine king and rule all under Heaven:

Mengzi said, “If one respects the worthy, employs the capable, and puts the outstanding in office, then the nobles of the world will be pleased and will wish to take their place in your court. If one taxes the shops in one’s markets, but not their goods, or regulates them but does not tax either the shops or their goods, then the merchants of the world will all be pleased and will wish to store goods in one’s markets. If one’s customs officers inspect but do not tax, then the travelers of the world will be pleased and will wish to go out on your roads. If those who plow must provide assistance but are not taxed, then the farmers of the world will be pleased and will wish to plow your fields. If shopholders need not pay the personal or village surtax, then the people of the world will be pleased and willing to be one’s subjects.

If one is truly capable of putting into effect these five measures, then the people of neighboring states will welcome you like a father or mother. [...] If it is like this, one will have no enemies in the world. One who has no enemies in the world is the agent of Heaven. It has never happened that someone is like this yet fails to become King”.

(2A5)

In this passage, Mengzi makes the striking claim that if a ruler puts into practice “these five measures”, then (a) the people will treat him as their parent, (b) the ruler will have no enemies in the world, and (c) they will be an agent of Heaven (*tiān lì* 天吏) and a genuine king (*wáng zhě* 王者). Both (a) and (b) are elsewhere in the text identified as belonging to those who are benevolent (1A5, 4A7, 7B3, 7B4, 1A4) and Mengzi at 4A3 is clear that one attains all under Heaven and therefore becomes a genuine king through benevolence (*yǐ rén* 以仁), i.e. through being benevolent or acting benevolently: “The Three Dynasties got the world through benevolence. They lost the world through not-benevolence. The states of the various lords decay or thrive, survive or perish in the same manner” (4A3). That it is *only* through benevolence that one attains all under Heaven is confirmed at 7B13:

Mengzi said, “There are cases of those who obtain a state and (are not/do not) benevolent, but there are no cases of those who obtain the world and (are not/do not) benevolent”.<sup>16</sup>

(7B13)

Consider now once again what “these five measures” are that Mengzi claims will make a ruler attain all under Heaven. Four of the measures outlined at 2A5 are specifically about reducing taxes for certain groups of people, one of them is about employing the right kinds of people. But

<sup>16</sup>My own translation.

can I *only* mandate the reduction of taxes or the appointment of people if I act from a virtuous state, be it a virtuous emotion, motive, or character trait? Surely, at the very least, I can do so from a desire for power. But if that is so, then acting from a virtuous state is not required for becoming a genuine king.

One might object that, perhaps, Mengzi is not serious when he says at 2A5 that all one needs to obtain all under Heaven is to enact certain policies. After all, perhaps Mengzi is only saying this because it will catch the attention of whichever ruler he is addressing. My answer is that, Mengzi repeats what is basically the same point at least three more times and none of the passages occur in the context of a conversation with a ruler. What reason, then, do we have for saying that Mengzi did not mean what he said, and meant something that he did not say?

For example, the same basic idea from 2A5 is repeated at 4A13/7A22. Mengzi claims that King Wen came to govern all under Heaven by being good at ‘nurturing the elderly’ (*yǎng lǎo* 養老):

Bo Yi fled Tyrant Zhou and lived on the coast of the Northern Sea. When he heard that King Wen had arisen, he got up and said, ‘Why do not I go to him? I have heard that Wen nurtures the elderly well’ [...]. This was a case of the ‘fathers’ of the world turning to him. With the ‘fathers’ of the world turning to him, where will their ‘sons’ go? If some among the various lords put into effect the government of King Wen, within seven years they would definitely govern all under Heaven.

(4A13)

The spoken lines by Bo Yi are repeated *verbatim* at 7A22, but at 7A22 Mengzi helpfully goes on to clarify what it means to ‘nurture the elderly’:

If one plants a mulberry tree beside the wall of every household with five acres, so that the wives can spin silk from the caterpillars, then the elderly will be able to wear silk clothes. If there are five hens and two sows that are allowed to breed, the elderly will be able to eat meat. If a man can plow a field of a hundred acres, a household of eight mouths can have enough food. When one says that King Wen is good at nurturing the elderly, then this means that he regulated the large and small farms, instructed people about planting trees and animal husbandry, and also led the wives and children to nurture the elderly.<sup>17</sup>

(7A22)

In short, one nurtures the elderly by putting into practice certain agricultural policies that will yield outputs sufficient for the elderly to enjoy material comforts (for a related claim, see also 4A9). However, it seems unlikely that an agent can put into practice such agricultural policies *only if* the agent acts

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<sup>17</sup> I changed the translation of the last sentence to better reflect the grammatical structure of it, namely “謂 Y 者 Z”.

from a virtuous state. In fact, Mengzi recommends exactly the same agricultural policies to both King Hui of Liang (1A3) and King Xuan of Qi (1A7), claiming on both occasions that this will make the rulers attain all under Heaven, but on neither occasion does he say that a necessary condition for the Kings to be able to put into practice such policies is that they, e.g. feel sympathy for their people. Given that such a claim would have been implausible anyway, the fact that Mengzi does not make it should come as no surprise.

At this point one might raise the following objection. If I am right, then we cannot accommodate Mengzi's criticism of Guan Zhong (2A1), the minister responsible for turning Duke Huan of Qi into a hegemon, and indeed, for the same reason we cannot accommodate Mengzi's distinction between hegemons and genuine kings. The distinction, so the objection goes, is one of enacting beneficial policies either from ulterior motives or from benevolence. Mengzi supposedly captures this distinction when he says at 2A3 that hegemons "use force and pretend benevolence [...], use force to submit the people, which fails to make them submit in their hearts",<sup>18</sup> while genuine kings "use virtue and enact benevolence [...], use virtue to submit the people, which gladdens them in their hearts and makes them genuinely submit". This is repeated at 4B16: some "use goodness to submit others" and fail to make them submit, while others "use goodness to nourish others" and succeed (see also Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 169). Likewise, Guan Zhong fails to cultivate Duke Huan's virtue and is therefore criticized, even though he advises Duke Huan to enact policies that have the right kinds of outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

My response is this. Mengzi says that the policies he outlines at 4A13/7A22 will, in fact, "nourish" (*yǎng* 養) the people, which is, according to 4B16, a precondition for making them genuinely submit. Mengzi also says that, if one puts into practice the five measures from 2A5, then "the people of the world will be pleased and willing to be one's subjects" (2A5). They will, moreover, treat the ruler as their parent. If that is so, would such a case not be an instance of the people "submitting [to the ruler] in their hearts" (2A3)? Would it not be a situation where the ruler "gladdens them in their hearts and makes them genuinely submit" (4B16)? I think it would.

Therefore, it seems to me that the difference between success and failure, when it comes to making the people genuinely submit, is one of succeeding and failing to enact Mengzi's policies, rather than enacting the policies from specific motives. Given that Mengzi at 2A3 and 4B16 distinguishes hegemons from genuine kings in terms of how successful they are in genuinely winning over the people, could it not be that what distinguishes them is policy rather

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<sup>18</sup>Translations of 2A3 and 4B16 are my own.

<sup>19</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

than motive? In fact, Mengzi says at 2A3 that hegemonies use *force* (*li* 力) to submit the people, but none of the recommended measures at 2A5, 4A13/7A22, or 4A9 mention the use of force. Perhaps, then, neither hegemonies like Duke Huan or their advisors like Guan Zhong have produced the right kind of outcomes, and Guan Zhong is singled out for criticism because he was in a position to make his ruler a genuine king but ended up making him a hegemon.

Both the cases of 2A5 and 4A13/7A22 have striking implications for Mengzi's concept of benevolence. As I mentioned before, Mengzi claims that only those who are benevolent or act benevolently can become genuine kings and rule all under Heaven (7B13). If we read 'benevolence' at 7B13 and 4A13 as a property of actions, then from the fact that one can attain all under Heaven by putting into practice certain governmental policies (i.e. by acting benevolently), and from the fact that this seems to be the *only* way for one to attain all under Heaven, it follows that being in a virtuous state is not necessary for performing benevolent actions. This in turn contradicts the agent-based condition that one can perform virtuous actions *only if* one is in a virtuous state.

## 5. Virtuous actions from ulterior motives

In the previous section, I have argued that Mengzi suggests that virtuous actions could be performed from non-virtuous states. In this section, I argue that there are frequently overlooked passages that explicitly feature non-virtuous agents performing virtuous actions from ulterior motives. One such passage is 3B7:

Yang Huo, who was Counselor in Lu, wanted to invite Kongzi to have an audience with him, but he disliked violating ritual propriety. Now, when a Counselor presented a gift to a noble, if the noble was unable to accept it at his own home, then he had to go and pay his respects at the Counselor's door. So Yang Huo checked to see when Kongzi was not home and sent him a gift of a cooked pig. But Kongzi also checked to see when Yang Huo was not home and only then went to pay his respects. At that time, if Yang Huo sent it right away, how could he have failed to meet with him?<sup>20</sup>

(3B7)

What is important to note is that Yang Huo is described as performing an action that is ritually proper. If his gift-giving had violated ritual propriety, then, as Mengzi tells us at 2B3, one is not under any obligation to accept

<sup>20</sup>The final sentence is very compressed and only reads, literally, "Yang Huo first, how get not to see [him]?" (*Yáng Huò xiān, qǐ dé bú jiàn* 陽貨先, 豈得不見) I take this to mean that, if Yang Huo had sent the gift first, namely without checking whether Confucius was at home, Confucius would surely have come to court. This makes sense, because the reason why Confucius did not go to court is that Yang Huo first checked whether Confucius was at home before sending his gift.



the gift, but if the gift had been given in accordance with ritual, then it would be inappropriate for one to turn it away (5B4). And yet Yang Huo sends the gift to Confucius from the ulterior motive of getting Confucius to attend court. Given that ritual propriety is treated as one of the four virtues (2A6, 6A6), there is no reason to doubt that ritually proper actions count as virtuous actions. Yang Huo therefore performs a virtuous qua ritually proper action from ulterior motives. This is only possible if virtuous actions can be virtuous independent of the virtuous state of the agent who performs them, which contradicts the agent-based condition on virtuous actions.

In response to this one might draw a distinction between actions that are ritually binding, e.g. an act of gift-giving that is performed in a way that morally obliges the recipient to respond, and actions that are ritually proper. In such a case, all ritually proper actions are ritually binding, but it does not have to be that all ritually binding actions are ritually proper. However, this once again introduces a distinction that Mengzi himself does not make. He only distinguishes between actions that are in accordance with ritual and actions that are not.

One might object: but surely there is a *moral* difference between sending a gift after having made sure that the recipient is not at home and doing so without first checking whether the recipient is at home. The latter is a morally better action than the former, and the reason for this might be that the latter is performed from the right motives.<sup>21</sup>

I do not think this objection is successful. 3B7 is clear that Yang Huo's motive is to get Confucius to attend his court. Suppose Yang Huo had sent a gift to Confucius *without* first checking whether Confucius was at home. Yang Huo would have *still* acted from the ulterior motive of wanting Confucius to attend court, and according to the text, Confucius in that case would have gone to see him. Therefore, even if there is a moral difference between gifting-after-checking and gifting-without-checking, what explains this difference does not seem to be the motive from which the action is performed.<sup>22</sup>

There is further textual evidence for this at 5A2. In that passage, Shun's elder brother Xiang is said to have enacted "the Way of a loving elder brother" (*àixiōng zhī dào* 愛兄之道):

Shun's brother, Xiang, said, 'The plan to bury this *ruler of the capital* was all my achievement! [...]' Xiang then went into Shun's home. Shun was on his couch, playing his zither. His face flushed with embarrassment, Xiang said, 'I was wracked with concern, worrying about you, my lord!' "Shun said, 'My numerous ministers, rule them with me'. [...]

Xiang approached in accordance with the Way of a loving younger brother.

<sup>21</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

<sup>22</sup>I speculate that, perhaps, what best explains the difference is that gifting-without-checking is a ritually more adequate performance of gift-giving than gifting-after-checking.

Hence, Shun genuinely had faith in and was happy about him. How could he be feigning it?"

(5A2)

Xiang approaches Shun with the intent of murdering him, but when he is seen by Shun, he claims to have merely come because he is "wracked with concern". The fact that Xiang had performed a loving-elder-brother action makes Shun happy, even though, as the text points out, Xiang has no love for him at all and "takes it as his daily task to try to kill Shun" (5A3). He therefore merely claims to have been concerned about Shun for the sake of covering up his failed murder attempt. But despite the fact that Mengzi knows that Xiang was not sincere in his expression of brotherly love, he nonetheless says that Xiang had acted "in accordance with the Way of a loving younger brother". The text therefore says that one can perform a loving-younger-brother action not only from ulterior motives, but also without feeling or being motivated by love. But for Confucians, acts such as these are not morally neutral – they are moral actions. Therefore, 5A2 is a case of an agent performing a virtuous action from ulterior motives.

What the textual evidence therefore suggests is that virtuous actions are not virtuous because of the moral value of the agent's state from which they are performed. It might even be, perhaps, the other way around. The motives, feelings, or character traits of a person who reliably performs virtuous actions have normative value exactly because they disposes the agent to produce consequences of a certain kind.<sup>23</sup>

## 6. The primacy of sages

So far I have argued that there is no reason to ascribe to Mengzi the view that virtuous actions (VA) and virtuous actions done virtuously (VV) differ in their moral value. I have furthermore argued that there is textual evidence in favour of saying that Mengzi takes actions to be virtuous regardless of the moral value of the agent's state, and there is independent textual evidence that suggests that Mengzi takes actions to be virtuous because of the kind of actions that they are. From this follows that virtue (as a feature of agents) is normatively *posterior* to virtuous actions. That is, what makes an action more or less virtuous is not that it is an exercise of virtue.

All of this is compatible with saying that virtuous agents characteristically perform virtuous actions, that they perform them from virtuous motives, and that Mengzi puts great emphasis on the acquisition of virtues. There might be plenty in the *Mengzi* that supports all of these points and I speculate that

<sup>23</sup> I therefore agree with a comment made by an anonymous referee that having a ruler cultivate specific emotional dispositions is valuable insofar as it disposes the ruler to enforce and maintain the right kinds of policies. Perhaps it is even *necessary*, although I doubt whether it is. But from this does not follow that actions performed from such dispositions are thereby morally better actions.

this might be partly responsible for inspiring virtue ethical readings of the text to begin with. If virtuous actions are virtuous because of their consequences and virtuous agents are those agents that characteristically perform virtuous actions, then why should Mengzi *not* emphasize the acquisition of certain traits of character? In fact, if cultivating emotions or developing habits makes one reliably perform virtuous actions, then one would expect Mengzi to advocate for the development of complex dispositions to feel, act, and think in certain ways, but this does not mean that any of these dispositions are part of the definition of Mengzian virtues or virtuous actions – and it therefore does not commit Mengzi to the claim (SN) that virtue is normatively prior to morally right action.

All of this is furthermore compatible with the view that the early Confucians took sages to be importantly prior to virtuous actions in at least *some* way. But if there is any such primacy of sagehood in the *Mengzi*, then I believe it is at most an epistemic rather than a metaphysical one. It does not concern the question what virtuous actions *are* but rather how we come to *know* them. Confucian sages are people who reliably identify virtuous actions as virtuous and they do so even in situations where others might have great difficulty in getting it right. After all, Mengzi himself is able to identify in detail what would count as an action of protecting the people (and thereby an action that is benevolent) in a case where King Hui of Liang does not (1A3), even though the latter is moved by sympathy for the suffering of his people. In other words, virtuous agents *know how* to find out which actions are virtuous and perhaps they are able to do so because their virtues are, at least in part, capacities for doing so:

The compass and the carpenter's square are the ultimate for circles and squares. Likewise, the sages are the ultimate for human roles. If one desires to be a ruler, fathom the Way of a ruler. If one desires to be a minister, fathom the Way of a minister. In both cases, one should simply model oneself on Yao and Shun.

(4A2)

Just as the compass and square play an important epistemic role in not only identifying which geometrical figures are squares, but also in identifying which particular actions of drawing a geometrical figure are ways for one to draw a square, so virtuous agents likewise play an important epistemic role in identifying virtuous actions – they are *virtuous action detectors*. An ordinary person lacking in virtue comes to know which actions are virtuous through the guidance of a virtuous agent, be it as a teacher or exemplar. Confucian sages can therefore be taken to be prior to virtuous actions, but such a priority is perhaps only epistemic rather than metaphysical.

This raises a question. Can a normative theory on which virtuous agents are epistemically but not metaphysically or normatively prior to virtuous actions still be a kind of virtue ethics? I am not sure, but perhaps it can. David Bronstein has most recently argued that a theory may still count as a

kind of *virtue epistemology* even though virtue is not metaphysically or normatively prior to epistemic acts (Bronstein, “Aristotle’s Virtue Epistemology”, 173). Although he believes that what justifies us treating the theory as a kind of virtue epistemology is that virtue is at least *causally* prior to epistemic acts, I speculate that perhaps, in the case of virtue *ethics*, it is enough if virtue is merely *epistemically* prior to virtuous acts. If so, then Mengzian ethics, if it is a kind of virtue ethics at all, is perhaps one on which virtuous agents stand in a peculiar kind of priority relation to virtuous actions, namely a purely epistemic one.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this explains why Mengzi does not distinguish moral from intellectual virtues (2A6, 6A6), or theoretical and practical reason, and why moral failings are often tied to failures of knowing (see also Brys, “Epistemology of Mengzian Extension”). But if this paper’s argument is successful, then regardless *whether* Mengzian ethics is a kind of virtue ethics or not, it does not share certain features that are held in common by many contemporary virtue ethicists, specifically the thesis that performing actions from virtuous states makes *ceteris paribus* a difference to how virtuous the action is.

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<sup>24</sup>Alternatively, one might argue that a normative theory can be a kind of virtue ethics even if it rejects the normative, metaphysical, *and* epistemic priority of virtuous agents over virtuous actions. Target-centred virtue ethics strikes me as one such candidate (see Swanton, *Target Centred Virtue Ethics*, Ch.5; cf. Smith, “Right-Makers”). Roughly, according to target-centred accounts, an action is virtuous in respect to virtue *v* just in case it hits the targets of *v*, and an agent is virtuous in respect to *v* just in case she is disposed to pursue the targets of *v*. I am not sure whether this is Mengzi’s view, given that we find no account of the targets of the virtues in the *Mengzi*, but I cannot pursue this topic here any further.

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