

Moral advance and moral risk – a Mengzian reflection

(manuscript 2019-05-04; forthcoming in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*)

L. K. Gustin Law

University of Pittsburgh

Moral advance and moral risk – a Mengzian reflection

L. K. Gustin Law

(manuscript 2019-05-04; forthcoming in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*)

Abstract. On one view of moral development, someone not yet virtuous can reliably progress by engaging in what meaningfully resembles virtuous conduct. However, one's character may degrade from one's well-intended conduct precisely because of the way in which one's character falls short of virtue. This risk of degradation casts doubt on the developmental view. I counter the doubt by refining the developmental view through interpretation and application of the *Mengzi*. In passage 2A2, invoking the image of a farmer who "helped" the crop grow by pulling the sprouts, MENG Ke cautions, "do not help it grow." I defend a novel interpretation: it warns the less-than-virtuous not to advance with a naïve negligence about their psycho-physiological constitution. I then construct a way to advance with realistic care also from the *Mengzi*: by suitably reflecting on one's morally advanced undertaking, one can mitigate the risk of degradation without forgoing the action.

Keywords: David Nivison, Early Ruism (Confucianism), Moral psychology and development, Nourishment of vital energy (*yǎng qì* 養氣), Self cultivation and corruption, Virtue ethics

Introduction

Consider an individual who cares to be right in their¹ conduct but is not yet perfect in character.

As such, they can understandably be conflicted or hesitant in the following situation. They see what

in an ideal sense the best thing to do is: virtuous individuals, as this subject envisions them, would

all do A on the same ground, that *p*. This subject can even be sufficiently moved by the

consideration that *p* and have the resolve to do A *if* it is clear to them that this is the right thing *for*

them to do. However, as it turns out, whether this is so is rightly unclear to them, for they have

¹ For an indefinite individual in third person singular, I use "they" instead of "he" or "she," and "themselves" as the reflexive instead of "himself" or "herself." These uses date back to early 16th century and late 15th century, respectively. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Themselves, n.5" and "They, n.2."

certain ethical imperfections, because of which their doing A would risk things somehow turning out badly. This special risk is what gives our circumspect agent pause. A well-referenced example of such a risk (Doris, 1998: 518) is a squash player with bad temper or some similar imperfection: maybe they should not approach the other player for the sporting handshake after suffering a humiliating defeat, if they anticipate themselves smashing the victor in the face with their racquet. Risks like this can give pause to someone who is not fully virtuous but sufficiently apprehensive.

Imperfection-based risk can be invoked to object to the claim that an action is right if and only if it is what the virtuous person would characteristically do in the situation. This biconditional is proposed, for example, in Hursthouse, 2000: 28. It implies that what is right to do for anyone is always what the virtuous person would characteristically do. Against this implication, one may object thus: the risk due to the imperfect person's imperfection is so severe that they should choose an option other than the virtuous person's (Doris, 1998: 518; see Williams, 1995: 190), even if the situation is one in which every virtuous person would choose the same option. The risk can also ground an objection in the other direction: there are situations in which there is the right thing for the imperfect agent to do but no such thing as what the virtuous person would characteristically do in this situation, for the virtuous as such does not face such a risk (Harman, 2000: 224). Furthermore, as Eric Hutton (2008) suggests, the danger of imitating the virtuous without their virtue poses a two-prong challenge to the more general idea that a virtuous individual is a model for those who are not (yet) virtuous. The more concretely one takes the lives of exemplary individuals (e.g. the legendary sages) as a model for imitation, the greater seems to be the risk of disaster. Conversely, the more abstractly their lives are taken as a model for imitation (only with

respect to their characters, for example), the less informatively they can guide someone who has to make decisions but does not yet possess wisdom completely.

However, whether or not the legendary sages are suitable as informative precedents for the less-than-virtuous, they can provide guidance in a different way. They can leave behind relics of their wisdom by establishing social practices that facilitate the ways to and of virtue. These practices track, up to a point, how the virtuous person would behave in certain contexts. Suitably practiced, they help people (not just try but) perform what resembles the virtuous person's characteristic actions, both in their effects *and* in their grounds. Part of the early Ruist² rationale behind the Zhou 周 social practices may be that

(Progress-by-deeds) By having done more and more what meaningfully resembles the virtuous person's characteristic conduct, the less-than-virtuous can progress toward being virtuous.

Since this picture of development is silent on what happens if one tried but failed to do what one means to do, it is not challenged by the imperfection-based risk of failing to effect the action's local ends (for instance, a sporting handshake) or of doing something opposite (smashing the victor in the face). However, this is not the only imperfection-based risk. Regress of one's character is possible as a result of their well-motivated action even if the action achieves its local goals as intended and does not adversely affect anyone else. If so, then those who stand *Progress-by-deeds* – especially as a rationale behind certain social practices – had better be aware of the risk and have an accordingly refined understanding of that picture.

² I use “Ru” or “Ruist” (儒) to convey what is conveyed commonly by “Confucian.”

MENG³ Ke 孟軻,⁴ a major early Ru in the fourth century BCE as we know him through the text of *Mengzi* 孟子, is aware of and advises on the above, imperfection-based risk of degradation. This paper seeks to explicate the advice as well as to uncover other resources in the *Mengzi*⁵ for moral cultivation despite and against this risk. Imperfection-based risks are part of Meng's concern when he, in *Mengzi*2A2,⁶ cautions those with aspirations by way of a parable of an impatient farmer, who pulled his sprouts to help them grow. At this level, my reading is the same as that of David Nivison's (1996), and I will explain why we are right on this shortly. More determinately, I think the imperfection-based risk of *degradation* is at least part of the concern in the passage, and my interpretation parts with existing ones – as far as I am aware – on what exactly Meng tells the less-than-virtuous not to do, in view of this risk. Although it seems to imply that *sometimes* the less-than-virtuous should forbear what the virtuous would do (which means that Meng does not subscribe to the Hursthouseian biconditional above), it is more plausible and complex than requiring the less-than-virtuous to forbear *every* action with the said moral risk. The other aim of this paper is to demonstrate, drawing on resources in the *Mengzi*, a way for someone less than virtuous to *mitigate* the risk and *thereby grow* as they do what the virtuous person would do.

³ Some individuals either belong to or adopt traditions according to which one's surname comes first. To avoid confusion, whenever I present someone's name in this order, I replace the lowercase letters in the surname with small caps.

⁴ The more common name "Mengzi" is the combination of Meng's surname and the honorific *zi*.

⁵ Although in the present paper I focus on the *Mengzi* as a guide to living an ethical life, I do not hereby suppose this to be the only significance of the text, to the exclusion of its political or rhetorical significances, for example.

⁶ My citations of the *Mengzi* conform to the divisions in the edition by ZHAO Qi 趙岐. (For example, "2A2" signifies book 2, first half, chapter 2.) The number after the point (such as the "2" in "6B6.2") refers to the specific section within a chapter in the Chinese-English edition by James Legge (1895), who divides the sections at where ZHU Xi 朱熹 inserts commentary in his *Mengzi jizhu*.

Here is an example of a shortfall-based risk of self degradation that is itself grave, apart from other considerations. Suppose some organized power is systematically oppressing a certain social group, and there is a way to help the oppressed by working inside the oppressing system. Suppose it therefore ought to be done – there should be someone doing this. An entrepreneur sees such an opportunity to help, and she knows that any virtuous person would take the opportunity. However, this industrialist is aware that working inside the system is not unlikely to corrupt herself, *even if* she beautifully succeeds in protecting the targeted group: she may become obsessed with profit-making or, if the oppressive organization is defeated and she is indiscriminately punished severely for having been part of it, she will become regretful and resentful. “Perhaps only an incorruptible character should try,” thinks this entrepreneur, “but currently hardly anyone else other than myself has this opportunity.”

The Question is:

Given that I want to do A because p , the virtuous person in this situation would do A because p , but I am not as good as the virtuous person, should I do A?

David Nivison identifies “a genuine perennial dilemma of moral life” one may face when trying to settle this Question, a dilemma he takes to be reflected as a tension in the *Mengzi* (Nivison, 1996: 108-106; see also 1979: 427-8). According to Nivison, sometimes Meng seems to say “Why not?” to the Question – for example when he likens “applying” virtuous sentiments to moving one’s limbs (1A7.10-12) – and “Yes” when he urges his interlocutor to convert all the way as soon as they realize what is right or wrong to do (3B8). However, in 2A2.16, Meng seems to express a more reserved

stance. Likening the moral life to farming and using the image of someone who “helped” his crop grow by pulling the sprouts, Meng cautions, “do not help it grow.”

Again, I agree that this agriculturally phrased caution is at least partly concerned with imperfection-based risks, like the ones faced by the entrepreneur above. On the view I shall develop, however, the caution does not tell one when not to undertake an advanced action and, thus, stands in no tension with Meng’s own remarks in 1A7.10-12 and 3B8.

This paper has four sections. Section I begins with a review of why Meng in 1A7.9-12 and some other passages appears committed to a naïve picture of moral psychology and, accordingly, “Why not?” in response to the Question. I will then show that we do not have to attribute these commitments to Meng to make sense of him in those passages. In section II, I examine passages that suggest a much more cautious response to the Question. I argue that existing readings of the farmer parable in 2A2 can hardly be plausible and complete without some interpretation of “do not help it grow” that is *like* Nivison and Van Norden’s. On either Nivison’s or Van Norden’s exact construal, however, this caution and the exhortation to immediate conversion in 3B8 run into a conflict, which Nivison excuses Meng for just reflecting a dilemma in real life. In section III, I illustrate the dilemma with an example in which the ideal act is urgently due, but it risks the agent’s own degradation. Then I propose a new reading of “do not help it grow”: *do not proceed with naïve negligence about your psycho-physiology*, which cautions us well regarding the dilemma without conflicting with the exhortation in 3B8. Section IV explores what it is to proceed with realistic care about one’s psycho-physiology without forbearing what the virtuous person would do. I identify forms of reflection that can be reconstructed from the *Mengzi* (including 1A7 and 3B8) and show

how they can mitigate risks of degradation, such as the one discussed in section III. If we bear the possibility of such techniques of self nourishment in mind, I urge, we can rightly be confident in doing more of what meaningfully resembles the virtuous person's way.

I.

There is textual evidence that, for Meng, virtuous individuals would all do the same in some situations.⁷ To this extent, our Question, whether an imperfect person should do what they are motivated to do by the same reason for which the virtuous person would do it, is not an insensible question for Meng. To this, "Why not?" seems to be the response in *Mengzi* 1A7, if we interpret it along Nivison's line. In 1A7.9, King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 asks Meng why the heart/mind (*xin* 心) with which he once spared a sacrificial ox is fit for kingship. Meng replies that since the King has had pity for even a mere animal, clearly he must be capable of caring for his human subjects:

If someone reported to your Majesty saying, 'My strength is sufficient for lifting three thousand catties but is not enough to lift a feather; my eyesight is good enough to see the tip of an autumn fine hair but I cannot see a cartload of firewood,' would your Majesty accept that?

No.

Now why is it that your kindness is enough to reach mere animals and yet does not benefit the people? So, then, that a feather is not lifted is due to one's not using strength; that a

⁷ In both 4B29 and 4B31, Meng speaks of situations as ones in which choices of different virtuous individuals would converge. (See also 6A7.) He discusses in 4B29, for instance, three exemplary figures, Yu 禹, Ji 稷, and YAN Hui 顏回. Yu and Ji are known for their illustrious accomplishments as ministers of flood control and agriculture, respectively, at a time of peace and order, whereas Yan is known for being content living a quiet and austere life in a time of chaos. In relating that KONG Qiu (more honorifically referred to as Kongzi, Confucius, that is, Master Kong) regarded all three figures as virtuous, Meng himself indirectly endorses them as such. Although they led contrary lives, Meng says that they were "of the same way" (*tóng dào*) and they would have done what each other did if they had been in each other's situation.

cartload of firewood is not seen is due to one's not using sight; that the people is not cared for is due to one's not using kindness.⁸ (1A7.10)

After introducing this distinction between inability and inaction, Meng now urges the king to exercise his kingly capacity:

Treat one's elders as elders [ought to be treated], and extend it to others' elders; treat one's younglings as younglings [ought to be treated], and extend it to others' younglings. All under Heaven can then be managed on one's palm. The Odes say, 'He sets an example in relation to his wife, and to his brothers, as to master his family and state.' What it means is nothing but to raise this heart/mind (*jǔ sī xīn* 舉斯心)⁹ and apply it over there (*jiā zhū bì*). (1A7.12)

So, Meng urges the king to “use” his kindness, likens that to using one's physical strength and eyesight, and asks him to “raise” his heart/mind of commiseration for an ox and “apply” it to his people. Nivison (1979: 425, 427-8, 1996: 99-100, 108-9) argues that, in so doing, Meng presupposes that

(*Virtuous-at-will*) To any present situation, a standard human being can activate at will and act with whatever sentimental reaction is virtuous, even if this involves reshaping their disposition of the particular sentiment.

By “a standard human being” I mean a mature human being without any psychological or cognitive impairments, whose psychological and cognitive capacities may nonetheless be subject to limitations that are normal for the species. To act with a virtuous sentimental reaction in some cases, for instance, might be to act appropriately from commiseration or direct concern toward

⁸ Unless noted otherwise, English translations are mine.

⁹ The primary meaning of *xīn* 心 is *heart*, the physical organ, but it is also a standard use of *xīn* to mean the faculty where both cognitive and affective activities take place. See Shun (2004: 185-186). Sometimes in the *Mengzi* (here in 1A7.12, 2A6, and 6A6, for example) *xīn* is used with yet another meaning: a specific (moral) sentiment or the disposition for it.

another human being. *Virtuous-at-will* implies that in every situation of a type in which one has not responded well before, one can at once reshape one's capacity for the appropriate sentimental response to cover this type if one wills so. Nivison finds *Virtuous-at-will* problematic, for it seems to oversimplify the human psyche. In the case of many humans with normal limitations, it probably takes much time and proper habituation before one is able to recognize the needs or sufferings of some others, for instance, those remote from one's day-to-day experience.

I now argue that 1A7 does not commit Meng to *Virtuous-at-will*. Although his exhortation appears to demand some sort of immediate change of heart on the part of King Xuan, it does not commit Meng to the supposition that, for *every* standard human with normal limitations facing *any situation*, it only depends on their volition to make all the needed changes in their sentimental dispositions to respond appropriately. For here Meng is persuading a particular audience to do their job in a specific way, neither theorizing in pure contemplation nor even giving general advice on how to. Therefore, the supposition of possibility he implies here might only be about this king he is addressing with respect to a specific issue. However, one may point to 6A6.7:

Humaneness (*rén* 仁), propriety (*yì* 義¹⁰), ritual principle (*lǐ* 禮), wisdom (*zhì* 智) are not welded to me from without — I already possess them; it is just that people do not think (*sī* 思).¹¹ That is why it is said, 'one will attain it (*dé zhī* 得之) if one seeks, one will lose it if one lets go.'

¹⁰ Sometimes also translated as "righteousness."

¹¹ Like the English verb "think," *sī* can be used intransitively or transitively and, in each case, it can denote different modes or processes of the mind. What sense of "think" is meant by each occurrence of *sī* in the quotations above and elsewhere, is a much treated topic. For some recent scholarship, see Shun (1997: 149-153) and Van Norden (2000: 112-115).

and 6A15.2: “One will attain it if one thinks; one will not attain it if one does not think.” In these passages, Meng seems to affirm as a general truth that moral attainment will occur if one seeks or thinks. If Meng thinks that it depends only on one’s volition to seek or think in the relevant sense, then he seems to endorse *Virtuous-at-will*. My reply is that in both passages, Meng is explaining why, being all human, some individuals turn out to be great *persons* and some petty or bad *persons* (6A6.1-4, 6A15.1). Therefore, the implicit object of “attain” and “lose” in these passages is likely to be a certain consummate way of life or personality, something that is not attributed to a person just on the basis of how they act on a single occasion. Therefore, the endorsements in 6A6.7 and 6A15.2 do not presuppose that it is possible for every standard human being with normal limitations to instantaneously reshape themselves sentimentally to respond appropriately to every situation.

In fact, what Meng says just later on in 1A7 is evidence that he does not endorse *Virtuous-at-will*. He says that only the educated could possibly maintain a “constant heart/mind” without constant means of livelihood, whereas ordinary folks in such a circumstance would go so astray that “there is nothing they would not do.”¹² He argues that it is unfair to punish the latter for immoral conduct when they are living under this impoverished condition. Thus, not everyone in all circumstances can stay on the moral course, and Meng thinks that we should take this difference into account.

¹² For more discussion on this particular moral challenge to keep a constant heart/mind, see Cua (2002: 140-142).

II.

There is no shortage of passages in which Meng displays a subtler moral psychology than *Virtuous-at-will*. A case in point, as Nivison observes, is 2A2 – arguably the richest and most important passage in the entire *Mengzi*. There, Meng warns against some sort of over-eagerness or over-exertion in self cultivation. The self cultivation about which he speaks is what he calls “nourishing vast, flowing *qi* (氣),” at which he claims to be good himself. *Qi* here refers to an energy or vapor certain states of which account for some psychological and physiological states of human beings. More specifically, the significance of *qi* in 2A2 is that it is a supposed medium through which the conscious and the corporeal aspect interact *within each individual*, a property of *qi* Shun (2004) focuses on.¹³ What, then, is this “vast, flowing *qi*”? Meng elaborates thus:

[2A2.12 cont’d]...It is difficult to describe it. [13] As for its being *qi*: It is exceedingly great, and exceedingly strong...

For what is such *qi* exceedingly great and strong? In the earlier passage, 2A2.9-10, leading up to the present quote, Meng describes how *qi* is related to one’s “will/resolve” (*zhi* 志). The first thing one should understand is that, when Meng describes various states of an individual’s *qi*, he is speaking of the psycho-physiological states¹⁴ (as opposed, roughly, to the intellectual, cognitive

¹³ On this term, see Riegel (1979: 439-45) for a discussion that draws on other sources of the early Chinese corpus. On the more general, Ruist conception of *qi* and how it interacts with the heart/mind and will/resolve, see Shun (2004: 185-89). For an alternative interpretation of the significance of *qi* in 2A2, according to which *qi* is a “configurative energy” that arises “out of worldly *interactivity*— out of collective action” *between* individuals, see Robinson (2016: 145-6), for instance. To address this alternative properly, however, requires another occasion.

¹⁴ Some examples are the emotional and sentimental aspects of a person’s inner experience (especially the spirited experience of anger), indignation, and courage.

states) of the individual. Now, specifically and intriguingly, he thinks that *qi* follows the lead of the will/resolve on the one hand but, on the other, one should “hold one’s will/resolve” and “not abuse one’s *qi*” – as if otherwise the will/resolve would in turn be moved. Indeed, Meng immediately explains himself as follows:

[2A2.10] ...When the will/resolve is one, it moves the *qi*. When the *qi* is one, it moves the will/resolve. For instance, now, if one stumbles or hurries, this is [a matter of] *qi*, and yet it moves the heart/mind.

Meng seems to mean that, while (a) *qi* normally follows one’s focused will/resolve, (b) if one in some sense “abuses” one’s *qi* so that it tenses up as it would when one stumbles or hastens, then the *qi* may move one’s will/resolve in turn.¹⁵ This means that, although (a) one’s psycho-physiological states normally accord with one’s aim, (b) one’s psycho-physiological states sometimes can affect one’s aim. In the context of the normality in (a) and the abnormality in (b), then, it is at least part of having “vast, flowing” and “exceedingly strong” *qi* that one’s psycho-physiological dispositions accord with one’s will/resolve unremittingly and robustly. Thus, to “nourish vast, flowing *qi*” would be to cultivate one’s psycho-physiological dispositions *so that* they accord with one’s will/resolve thus.¹⁶ Now, back at 2A2.13 where we left off, Meng goes on to discuss how one nourishes vast, flowing *qi*:

[13 cont’d]...If one nourishes it with rectitude and does not harm it, it fills up what is between heaven and earth. [14] As for its being *qi*, it is to be matched with propriety and the Way. Without these, it will languish. [15] It is generated in the

¹⁵ “今夫蹶者趨者·是氣也·而反動其心。”

¹⁶ This is not to say that moral cultivation consists solely in cultivating one’s psycho-physiological dispositions.

gathering of propriety (*jí yì*); it is not that one seizes it in a raid of propriety.¹⁷ If one's action leaves the heart/mind unsatisfied, it will languish. I therefore said, 'Gaozi has never understood propriety, because he renders it something external.' [16] You must do the work (*bì yǒu shì yān*), but do not have yourself fixed (*ér wù zhèng*), with respect to the heart/mind (*xīn*),¹⁸ do not be forgetful (*wù wàng*), do not help it grow (*wù zhù zhǎng yě*)...¹⁹

The claim that the vast, flowing *qì* is generated through the “gathering of propriety” seems to me a specific version of *Progress-by-deeds*, the picture of development according to which, by having done more and more what meaningfully resembles the virtuous person's characteristic conduct, one can progress toward being virtuous. However, what I go on to argue does not depend on the truth of this particular reading. So long as “gathering” here means some gradual process over time, Meng clearly commits himself to the view that

(*Virtue-takes-time*) It takes time and delicate effort for moral dispositions to mature.

This stands in apparent tension with *Virtuous-at-will*, which implies that a standard human being with normal limitations can instantaneously reshape their sentimental dispositions at will to respond to their present situation appropriately, whatever it may be. However, the textual evidence for attributing *Virtuous-at-will* to Meng is far from conclusive, as I have argued, and, therefore, this apparent intra-textual tension on what is possible for the human being with normal limitations

¹⁷ “非義襲而取之。”

¹⁸ “With respect to the heart/mind” corresponds to the single character *xīn* 心, which may be read as the end of a clause or the beginning of the next one, potentially giving rise to different interpretations. I try to preserve this ambiguity by my wording and punctuation in the translation.

¹⁹ These last two sentences translate 必有事焉而勿正心勿忘勿助長也, as our earliest extant source, ZHAO Qi (second century CE), has it. Scholars have suspected errors in the text's transmission and suggested various character emendations. Fortunately for our purpose, there is little ground to dispute that the last clause is exactly 勿助長也.

may be merely apparent in the *Mengzi*. However, it seems that this text does countenance one thought that is related to *Virtue-takes-time* and another thought related to *Virtuous-at-will*, though they regard how the human being with normal limitations *should* live, and these two thoughts stand in a tension that cannot be as easily resolved. One of them is expressed in the three characters translated above as “do not help it grow,” if Meng’s meaning behind it is relevantly like what Nivison takes it to be: *do not do something you are not yet ready to do*. (I will discuss this interpretation shortly.) In 2A2.16 itself, Meng explains what he means with a parable of a foolish farmer:

[16 cont’d]...Do not be like the person of the state of Song. There was a person of Song who was upset that their sprouts were not growing longer, and so they pulled them. Having done this, they returned home, looking very stupid, and said to their folks, “I’m exhausted today. I’ve been helping the sprouts grow.” Their son ran to look at it and found the sprouts all withered...

The agricultural image conjured is then immediately deployed to state the following assessments:

[16 cont’d]...There are few in the world who do not help the sprouts grow. Those who deem it unbeneficial and leave it are the ones who do not weed for the sprouts. Those who help their growth are the ones who pull the sprouts. Not only is it not beneficial, but it also harms them.

The second to last sentence in this quote makes it clear that “do not help it grow” opposes some analogue of the farmer’s foolish action, namely, pulling the sprouts *out of their desire to help the crop grow*. Thus, what Meng means by “do not help it grow” depends on what mistake he intends the farmer’s foolish action to be the analogue for, since what he cautions against in uttering the

imperative must be at least part of his intended analogue of the farmer's foolish action. Thus, any interpretation of the imperative will commit the interpreter to what the intended analogue includes and, conversely, any take on the intended analogue will commit the interpreter to a boundary of options of what the imperative could mean. In a moment, I shall defend my reading of the imperative (in one of its dimensions, even if this turns out to be not its only dimension²⁰) insofar as it concerns how a human being with certain normal limitations should, in their conduct, ignore neither those limitations nor a certain psychological quality of their conduct. I will call this dimension of Meng's directives, claims, and imageries their finite-psyche dimension, and I will call interpretations of this dimension finite-psyche interpretations. My finite-psyche reading of "do not help it grow" will be in the same spirit as that of Nivison's but critically distinct from it. Before defending my reading, however, I will first show that Nivison's take on "do not help it grow" belongs to a family of interpretations of 2A2.16 that agree, at a general level, on what the intended analogue to the farmer's foolish action is and show what advantage this family has over some other alternative

²⁰ There may be another dimension if, for example, the significance of *qi* in 2A2 for Meng is not limited to its being something to be cared for within each person but also as something to be fostered collectively between people (see fn. 13 above), since "do not help it grow," appearing in the context of 2A2.12-6, presumably is about how to "nourish vast, flowing *qi*." "Do not help it grow" may also have another dimension if (a) the agricultural mistake Meng alludes to when he says "do no help it grow" in 2A2.16 is *not merely* analogical for what this directive cautions against about *qi* cultivation and if (b) that agricultural mistake includes doing something other than working with the growth environment, as Robinson (2016: 81-4) suggests. However, Meng in 2A2.16 specifies the agriculturally mistaken "helping-grow" in terms of the pulling of sprouts, and what is saliently wrong about such pulling is that it does not benefit but rather harms the sprouts, *period*, regardless of their environment. Perhaps more can be said to address this and to explain, more concretely, why doing something other than working with the growth environment in some sense is as expectably, irreversibly, and severely harmful to *qi* as pulling the sprouts is to the sprouts. Robinson's type of reading can then be better appreciated as a reading of 2A2.16 and better compared with other existing readings.

finite-psyche readings. Then I will explain how, within this family, Nivison's particular reading of "do not help it grow" is compatible with other specific takes on the farmer image.

The farmer (i) engages in farming in an unnatural, forced way, (ii) raising the sprouts to a height prematurely and, presumably, (iii) subscribing to some false conception about what counts as growth for the crop. Thus, unsurprisingly, according to the majority of existing finite-psyche construals, the farmer's pulling the sprouts of their crop out of their desire to help their crop grow is an image for one or more of the following possible deviant aspects of someone's moral life:

1. some unnatural or forced form of moral effort of the morally conscious
2. doing things without the suitable moral maturity
3. subscribing to some false conception about what counts as personal moral progress

Taking a person's cultivation of their own moral dispositions to be the analogue of a farmer's general enterprise of farming, the majority of finite-psyche readings of the parable includes 1 as part of the analogue of the Song farmer's course of action.

Two notable finite-psyche readings lie outside this family: they do not take the farmer parable to concern the effort of the morally conscious at all, thus excluding aspect 1 from the intended analogue. One such reading is proposed by A. C. Graham (1967: 234-5). Apparently attending to Meng's description of the "vast, flowing *qi*" that "it fills up what is between heaven and earth" as a result of proper nourishment (2A2.13), Graham interprets the nourishment of this *qi* as a leader's cultivation of a certain mana that emanates from their person and acts directly on other people. Accordingly, Graham reads the Song farmer as Meng's image for "rulers who try to assume the charisma which would qualify them to reign over the Empire in advance of their own

moral maturity.” The ethical analogue, on this reading, would include aspect 2 apart from aspect 1. A second reading, proposed by ZHENG Zemian 鄭澤綿 (2013: 41), includes aspect 3 without aspect 1. He denies that the farmer parable is about any unnatural form of effort and suggests that, instead, it concerns one’s falling prey to a certain illusion of moral progress that has not in fact been achieved.

Both of these readings of the farmer image seem unnecessarily narrow. Granted that it is *part* of Meng’s idea of a person’s “vast, flowing *qi*” that this *qi*, per Graham, emanates and acts directly on others – which makes the person charismatic – the Song farmer need not be an image *exclusively* for those who try to advance in just this respect as a leader. Likewise, granted that part of the analogue to the farmer image is some misunderstanding about what the moral life is – and even if we grant Zheng’s particular construal of it, for the sake of argument – there is no need to read the parable as concerning moral understanding *as opposed to* moral conduct or effort. As we observed above, insofar as Meng’s own remarks about *qi* in 2A2.10 has bearing on his topic of nourishing a “vast, flowing *qi*” in 2A2.12-16, the vast, flowing *qi* that Meng cares for is vast, flowing *in* supporting the focused will/resolve, the *qi* moving in accordance with will/resolve rather than the other way around. Correspondingly, a farmer’s pulling the sprouts out of their desire to help their crop grow would be the image partly for handling one’s psycho-physiological aspects so abusively that the latter, upset and stressed, would drag the will/resolve along in their commotion. Moreover, if one pulls the sprouts, the damage to the crop is expectable, lasting, and severe. If we follow Graham’s interpretation, it is unclear how a ruler’s attempt to assume a certain socio-political charisma *per se* will lead to the said psycho-physiological abuse and its consequence in

such an expectable, lasting, and severe way. If we follow Zheng in taking the farmer's action to be the analogue *only* for having a certain illusion about one's moral progress as opposed to how one acts, it is likewise unclear how this would amount to the self abuse and its consequence in the said way. In contrast, if we read the intended analogue to include some forced form of moral effort of the morally conscious, that is, aspect 1, as the majority family of finite-psyche readings does, we can more easily account for the expectable, lasting, and severe harmfulness of self abuse.

The majority I mentioned includes ZHU Xi 朱熹 (*Mengzi jizhu* 孟子集注), HUANG Zongxi 黃宗羲 (*Mengzi shishuo* 孟子師說), JIAO Xun 焦循 (*Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義), UCHINO Kumaichirō 內野熊一郎 (1962), Jeffrey Riegel (1979), YANG Bojun 楊伯峻 (1984), TANG Junyi 唐君毅 (1986), Nivison (1996), Kwong-loi Shun 信廣來 (1997), Alan Chan (2002: 60), and Van Norden (2007). Of those in this family who venture more specific readings, Nivison (1996: 109) interprets Meng's caution "do not help it grow" as (*Don't-unless-ready*) *do not do something you are not yet ready to do* (even if you want to do it for good reasons in a good way). A more specific version of this is suggested by Van Norden (2007: 245): "one should not force oneself to do things for which one does not yet have the appropriate feelings." Thus, Nivison and Van Norden each take both aspects 1 and 2 to be part of the moral analogue. However, the twelfth-century neo-Ru ZHU Xi (*Mengzi jizhu*) interprets "(do not) help it grow" as (*do not*) *do something just to expedite your moral cultivation*. A related but distinct reading of the meaning of the farmer's pulling the crop to help it grow is offered by Tang (1986: 102-103): dealing with one's situation with too much conscious effort to feel a moral reaction (even if the action is right in some of its more public guises), so that it distracts one from what really matters in the situation. In contrast to Nivison and Van

Norden, then, Zhu and Tang locate the unnaturalness of the effort primarily in how and at what the agent *aims* in their conduct, excluding aspect 2 – doing things without the required moral maturity – from the intended analogue. Riegel (1979: 445), on the other hand, reads pulling the plant as “correcting [one’s better feelings] to what one might anticipate as correct because of the rules or conventions of others.”²¹ This is similar to the 17th century interpretation given by HUANG Zongxi, who in addition attributes the “helping” to the person’s impatience. Huang and Riegel thus both include aspect 3, that is, the person’s having a wrong conception of personal moral progress, in addition to aspect 1, to be part of the moral counterpart to the farmer’s pulling the crop out of a desire to help it grow.

Despite the above differences, the Nivison-Van Norden type of reading of “do not help it grow” need not be viewed as a rival by someone sympathetic to the Huang-Riegel type or to Tang’s or Zhu’s as readings of the farmer’s course of action. For, first, the farmer, as we observed, is mistaken in more than one way and Meng, accordingly, in saying *wù zhèng (xīn)*, “do not have yourself fixed (with respect to the heart/mind),” and *wù zhù zhǎng*, “do not help it grow”, could be cautioning against distinct errors. Thus, if either the Huang-Riegel type of reading or Tang’s reading rightly captures a part of the intended moral analogue, it can amount to a good reading of *wù zhèng (xīn)* – which would mean, respectively, *do not correct yourself solely according to an external standard* or *do not get yourself fixated on feeling a moral response*. This, however, leaves open what the caution “do not help it grow” means. Second, Zhu’s reading is compatible with the

²¹ Behuniak Jr. (2005: 53-4) attributes a very similar idea to Meng, though he does so without explicitly claiming this to be his interpretation of the Song farmer’s action.

Nivison-Van Norden type even when applied to this very same caution. One way to synthesize these readings of “do not help it grow” renders it thus: do not do something just to expedite your moral cultivation *lest* you do what you do not yet have the suitable disposition to do.

In addition to mere compatibility, in fact, if a Huang-Riegel or a Zhu-Tang type of reading of the farmer’s action is to be made complete, it must include something like the Nivison-Van Norden type of reading of “do not help it grow.” That is to say, it must include an account of how the intended analogue of the farmer’s action involves doing something in advance of suitable moral maturity, i.e. aspect 2, in addition to some forced form of moral effort of the morally conscious (aspect 1). Otherwise, it is obscure why the *qi* of the individual erring in the ways described by Huang/Riegel or Zhu/Tang will suffer such expectable, lasting, severe harm as the farmer’s crop did.

I have just advocated for the Nivison-Van Norden sort of reading “do not help it grow” – among finite-psyche interpretations – as a welcome component of a comprehensive understanding of the farmer parable, especially if a Huang-Riegel or Zhu-Tang reading of the parable captures other aspects of it. I now turn to why Nivison and Van Norden’s particular proposals call for refinement. The caution, on their readings, has an implausible implication, as we will see shortly via Nivison’s reflection over the *Mengzi* according to his own reading.²² On the finite-psyche reading I eventually propose, the analogue of the farmer is someone who (among other things)

²² “Do not help it grow” is also likely part of how Meng distinguishes his own teaching from that of Gaozi’s, and Zheng (2013) bases his reading precisely on his reconstruction of the latter. My reading of the caution goes naturally with another, plausible construal of Gaozi’s thought, which I will defend in a separate work.

does something they are not ready to do, and the caution “do not help it grow” is concerned with the potential moral danger of taking some such courses of action. On these, I agree with Nivison and Van Norden. However, *contra* their readings, the caution does not universally forbid one to do what one is not ready to do.

Nivison, by the lights of his own reading of “do not help it grow” as *Don’t-unless-ready*, senses that Meng sometimes shifts to a seemingly incompatible stance. Nivison imagines, if someone in heeding the caution says to themselves, “I see that this is the right thing to do, but I’m not ready yet – so let me do what I can but not all of it?” then Meng’s response would be, “If you can see that it’s right, do it now, all of it!” (Nivison 1996: 109) Nivison projects this response from *Mengzi* 3B8: a high official, DAI Yingzhi 戴盈之, tells Meng that it is now “not yet possible” to remove certain taxes completely, and he asks if it is alright to reduce a little bit this year, and then completely next year. In reply, Meng compares this to someone who, conceding that stealing is not the way of the gentleman, asks nonetheless if it is alright to moderate his stealing, from one chicken per day to one per month, and cease stealing altogether only next year. Meng does seem to imply that if one recognizes that something is *wrong*, one should cease doing it immediately. Nivison, as I understand him, takes Meng also to imply this general exhortation:

(*Act-right-now*) Immediately switch over to what you know to be the right course of action for you to take

even if you are only reluctantly moved by the reason for switching course. Call this moral stance *Act-right-now*. Nivison thinks there is a “shifting of position” on Meng’s part between *Don’t-unless-ready* and *Act-right-now*. This “shouldn’t embarrass Mencius,” he says, for it reflects a

“genuine perennial dilemma of moral life”: “Sometimes we *aren’t* ready: yet the obligation on its face *can’t* be denied or put off” (1996:109). I am with Nivison in sensing a potential difficulty someone morally conscious may encounter in heeding the exhortation *Act-right-now* and the caution, “do not help it grow.” The most definite interpretation Nivison offers for the caution, however, is still in rather loose terms: *do not do what you are not ready to do*. We need a more worked-out notion of moral *readiness* so that we may not underappreciate the apparent practical difficulty that strikes Nivison.

Meng’s caution not to “help it grow” is life-relevant and insightful because it is sensitive to the danger for an individual with normal limitations to undertake certain things. It can prove exacting on someone’s psychological economy over time to do such things as help suicidal people full-time, donate an undue amount to charity, give away one’s possessions and join a monastery on an impulse, volunteer in an utterly unfamiliar part of the world, or let a stranger or mere acquaintance in trouble sojourn in one’s living room. These are things we can picture a virtuous person undertaking with no damage to their character (and with no harm done to others either). However, in the case of someone who has particular vulnerabilities, in some circumstances, some such undertaking can conceivably lead to consuming obsession, depression, regret, or resentment, which in turn causes lasting damage to their moral dispositions. Call these “morally advanced” undertakings for the person. What counts as advanced is, of course, relative to the individual’s personality, but for most people, who are not yet perfect, there would likely be some undertakings that are advanced for each. If we cash out “not ready to do” in terms of advanced undertakings, Nivison’s interpretation amounts to something like this:

(Don't-advance-if-self-harming) Do not undertake something for which you are so inadequately disposed that your moral dispositions are likely to be seriously harmed as a result.

I think this is as plausible an elaboration of *Don't-unless-ready* as it can be. Again, in describing the practical difficulty, Nivison says, “Sometimes we *aren't* ready: yet the obligation on its face *can't* be denied or put off” (1996:109). If he says this with the Song farmer’s withered sprouts in mind, he can be plausibly understood to mean this: sometimes we are inadequately disposed for an undertaking so that it would put our moral dispositions at significant risk of getting seriously harmed, but we also seem to be obligated to embrace it right away. I agree with Nivison that this is a genuine dilemma one might face in life, but I am going to argue that, first, *Don't-advance-if-self-harming* is an overreaction to this difficulty and, second, Meng means something more moderate, nuanced, and plausible when he says “do not help it grow.” I will argue both points in the next section by imagining a dilemma of the said kind – a fleshed-out version of the entrepreneur’s operation I sketched in the introduction – and determining what “do not help it grow” would mean to the agent facing it.

III.

I need a clean illustration of the dilemma, in the sense that the less-than-virtuous agent’s urgency to take an action the virtuous person would take is in tension solely with the risk of self degradation itself. To illustrate this, the possible character degradation in the thought experiment must be imagined not to adversely affect the execution of the action or other people than the agent himself.

I need such a scenario so that the less-than-virtuous protagonist genuinely faces an option of doing what is relevantly the same thing as what the virtuous person would do: except for the risk of self degradation, this protagonist can rightly anticipate from taking the action everything the virtuous person can rightly anticipate. Thus, I will imagine a human agent's situation in which (1) the agent's obligation to engage in a certain undertaking "on its face can't be denied or put off", (2) the undertaking would put this agent's moral dispositions at significant risk of getting seriously harmed, and (3) it is clear that the degradation would be bad without jeopardizing the undertaking itself or adversely affecting anyone else. I shall borrow certain details from the example of Oskar Schindler and Julius Madritsch, with modifications, in *Schindler's List* by Thomas Keneally (1982). Suppose the party in power in a country has begun to persecute a minority. An entrepreneur, Otsuka, has seen people from this minority being randomly picked off the street by the paramilitary. Some are sent on cattle cars to labor camps, some are even executed right on the spot. However, workers in an "essential industry" for the fascists' war effort are usually safe from such harassments. The factory Otsuka owns is one of the few that belong to "essential industry" and she is well connected with the middle management of the party in power. Otsuka now realizes, "To help protect the minority I can employ as many people from it at my plant for as long as possible," hoping that the persecution will end soon. For the sake of her own safety and the covert objective to help the persecuted, however, she will have to hide her sympathy with this minority, pretending to run her business only for profit, for the party, out of nationalism, and so forth. However, the regime has also recently made it illegal for people of this minority to receive wages: they can only live by their rations. And suppose the fee Otsuka will have to pay instead to the regime is at

considerably lower rates than the open market rates. Suppose her business is at a point where her profit would shrink if she further expands production at the market labor rates, but it would increase under the new rules if Otsuka expands by recruiting more minority workers. Thus, the new rules make it more profitable for Otsuka both to keep any minority workers she happens to have and to recruit more, but the rules also turn her minority workers formally into her slaves: she will profit further from their labor as they barely survive on their state rations. Under these rules, whether it is to protect the minority or to maximize profit makes no difference to how Otsuka should overtly act in the foreseeable future: keep and recruit more minority workers while not making any gesture of sympathy toward them. And, as it happens, it independently gratifies Otsuka to make ever more profit and it is gratifying for her much more than it would for a sage or a saint. Second, the regime is losing the external war and Otsuka knows that she will likely be captured by the winning forces. She thinks to herself, “Since I will have hidden my sympathy with the minority very well and the winning forces are hostile to capitalists, or if somehow they do not hear enough of a plea from my ex-workers on my behalf, I can be convicted as a slaveholder and spend the rest of my life in prison in isolation.” Suppose, however, she is willing to take this risk.

Given that it will be right for Otsuka to undertake this rescue scheme, here we seem to have a counterexample to “do not help it grow” *insofar* as it is construed as *Don’t-advance-if-self-harming*, and this is the sort of scenario in which Nivison thinks Meng’s caution clashes with his exhortation, *Act-right-now*. On the one hand, it seems obvious, to Otsuka herself anyway, that the right thing to do is to try to save as many of this minority as possible by employing them. On the other hand, this is a morally advanced undertaking for Otsuka and, if Otsuka undertakes it, her

moral dispositions will thereby likely be seriously damaged. For, first, though now she wants to recruit people from this minority just in order to protect them, the economic setting poses to profit-thirsty Otsuka a constant temptation to think of her employing the minority as profit maximizing and to think of those workers as mere means. And it does seem to matter with what attitude Otsuka employs the minority. If part of Otsuka begins (if only subconsciously), say, to hope that those convenient rules will last for a while, this seems in itself bad – even if it is just a mere hope, even if what Otsuka outwardly does is exactly the same, and even given that those minority workers will be much better off working for her. Second, if Otsuka is convicted as a slaveholder with a life-sentence in isolation, since she is not perfect, she will likely regret employing the minority, resent the people she sheltered, and become misanthropically bitter and cynical. This seems to matter – whether Otsuka can be at peace with what she has done – even if she, living in an isolated cell, will no longer harm or benefit anyone else.²³ Such degradations are much less likely if, say, Otsuka just hires non-minority workers.²⁴

What would Meng say? There is indirect textual evidence in *Mengzi* 2A2 itself, 5B1, and 6B6 that he would not oppose Otsuka’s employing more of persecuted population on the fascists’ terms to save the persecuted. Meng regards the legendary Yi Yin 伊尹 as a sage in serving “at a time of chaos” to benefit the people (2A2.22). Specifically, he attributes this conduct to Yi’s sagely

²³ See Iris Murdoch’s use of her example of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Murdoch ([1964] 1971:16-23).

²⁴ Of course, the risk of an internal, lasting damage to one’s character highlighted above need not happen in isolation from other risks, which I have deliberately set aside in Otsuka’s scenario. One’s character may be so imperfect that one ends up failing to do the good deed one means to do. One may also give in to temptations to take unjust means to get the good deed done. These can be more likely to occur if one’s character degrades, and one’s character may degrade further also as a result of their occurrence.

assumption of responsibility to care for the welfare of the world, because of which he partook in public life at times of order and chaos alike (5B1.2), be it to serve under a corrupt ruler or a virtuous one (6B6.2). This shows that Meng is at least not universally opposed to someone's being cooperative under a corrupt regime to help those in need. The salient extra detail about Otsuka's situation is that her undertaking runs a real risk of corrupting herself, even though this corruption would not jeopardize the rescue plan itself or adversely affect anyone else as a result. Insofar as we judge that Otsuka's cause is worth this personal risk, we should prefer, other things equal, an interpretation that renders Meng's caution compatible with this judgment.

If the caution not to "pull the sprouts" or "help it grow" means *Don't-unless-ready* or *Don't-advance-if-self-harming* (*per* Nivison), or if it means "one should not force oneself to do things for which one does not yet have the appropriate feelings" (*per* Van Norden), then it seems that Meng must either be committed to prohibiting Otsuka's rescue scheme or concede that the caution in Otsuka's case does not apply. However, the caution can in fact be understood differently, to the effect that, while still concerned with the potential danger of advanced undertakings (as *per* Nivison and Van Norden), it does not (*contra* them) dictate what particular advanced thing one should not undertake. According to this alternative reading, the caution warns against acting or living with a certain naïveté and negligence. It warns against acting or living as if one's heart/mind could move or pose correctly in its will/resolve (*zhi*) *always regardless* of the states of one's *qi*:

(*Don't-advance-with-naïve-negligence*) Do not make moral advances *as if* you can respond correctly to everything at any time and indefinitely, regardless of your preexisting psycho-physiological states.

This reading may find some further support from another passage:

One who is into reputation can cede a state of a thousand chariots, but if one is not the proper sort of person to do it, [one's reluctance in ceding even] a basket of rice and a bowl of soup will show on one's face. (7B11)

This is a sign – especially if the visibly reluctant person is meant to be the same agent who can cede a state of a thousand chariots²⁵ – that, according to the *Mengzi*, a human with normal limitations cannot respond to everything correctly regardless of their preexisting psycho-physiological states. And given the opinion that people with normal limitations cannot manage this, it is reasonable to advise them not to live as if they could: special care must be taken especially if they are to act in advance of their moral dispositions. From time to time, one can resolve to act beyond their comfort zone, and there may be times one must – after all, the real world is not tailored to fit some timetable of our individual development. On my reading, making such a leap *per se* is not meant by Meng to be analogous to the farmer's pulling of their sprouts or pulling-to-help-grow, which is meant to be always bad for the sprouts. (Note that, interestingly, 7B11 does *not* say that the reluctant person should hold on to their food or state of a thousand chariots.) However, every such leap takes energy and increases the tension between where the intellectual aim is and where the psycho-physiological tends to rest. And the ordinary human does not have a vast energy stock to sustain this stretched pose, in which they are more prone to give out in one way or another under certain trying conditions. The more and farther one has stretched, the greater the risk of such a collapse. If one undertakes advanced tasks without heeding these facts, over time this amounts to an abuse of the psycho-

²⁵ The wording in the original text is unfortunately ambiguous about this, as I reflect in my translation.

physiological. This is perhaps partly why Meng says that, though the *qi* can follow one's will/resolve, when one is restless the *qi* may move one's heart/mind in turn, and so one should not "abuse their *qi*" (2A2.9-10). If this reading is right, then "do not help it grow" does not define for the agent when a good undertaking is not worth the risk of character degradation. Accordingly, doing something in advance of moral maturity *per se* is not intended by Meng to be an analogue for the farmer's action but, rather, taking such a leap *in negligence or oblivion of one's psychological frailty* is. On my reading, it is true that "do not help it grow" is concerned with forced moral effort of the morally conscious (aspect 1) and acting without some suitable moral maturity (aspect 2), as Nivison and Van Norden would have it, but what it prohibits is not acting without some suitable moral maturity *per se*. Rather, it opposes a *manner in which* one makes what might otherwise be a laudable effort to so act. Rendered thus, "do not help it grow" can be consistent with *Act-right-now*, and what Otsuka faces is not that she must violate one or the other. A difficulty she does face is that, if she forbears, the action and what is good about it are *ceteris paribus* much less likely to be realized, but if she undertakes it, serious harm to her character is *ceteris paribus* quite more likely.

Here is a recapitulation of what I have tried to do. (a) I am defending a reading of "(do not) help it grow" among readings of the finite-psyche dimension of Meng's image of the Song farmer. (b) To this end, I have shown that an interpretation of "(do not) help it grow" of the Nivison-Van Norden type is compatible with and complements a Huang-Riegel or Zhu-Tang interpretation of the farmer's pulling-the-sprouts-in-order-to-help-them-grow. (c) I have argued that *Don't-advance-with-naïve-negligence*, which is of the Nivison-Van Norden type, is more plausible and

charitable to the construals published by Nivison (1996) and Van Norden (2007). Construed my way, Meng's caution "do not help it grow" does not advise Otsuka so much against employing people from the minority as, if she decides this is what she must do, to go in with both eyes open and take care to not be "pulling the sprouts" as she proceeds.

What, then, is it to advance with such care, to be realistic about one's limiting psychophysiology, without forbearing the advanced undertaking?

IV.

Being mindful of temptations and one's vulnerabilities is already a start, but there are also things one can *do* to preserve one's character in relation to one's undertaking even after it has ended. They involve techniques, one may say, of self cultivation. For Meng, self cultivation is a matter of nourishing one's moral dispositions, which he thinks are innate to the human being in nascent, incomplete forms. The *Mengzi* can be understood to allude to at least the following methods of cultivation: participation in the established social rituals (*li* 禮), learning and appreciation of classics and music, the study of exemplary figures from history, and moral reflection. Often neglected in contemporary Anglophone philosophical ethics,²⁶ methods of cultivation are a great concern in the long tradition of Ru and Ruist study. They are discussed in contemporary

²⁶ Iris Murdoch is a notable exception. She emphasizes loving attention to reality as an inner, daily, on-going moral activity ([1964] 1971: 41-42), recommends great art and virtuous people as objects of focus for moral energy and for detachment from the self ([1969] 1971: 53-55), and seeks a secular analogue or substitute for prayer (and, if possible, even for sacraments and ritual in the narrow, religious sense) that "belongs to the moral life of the ordinary person" ([1969] 1971: 67-68). For a vivid illustration see Dora's trip to London in the novel *The Bell* (Murdoch 1958: 194-204). Murdoch's moral development "program" both echoes and complements that of the Ru's.

Anglophone Ru scholarship, but here they are usually discussed as ways to nourish or grow one's moral dispositions for responding to *new*, more complex situations, for doing greater deeds, or for benefiting those who are socially more distanced from oneself. This is, of course, important and important to Meng. What I purport to add is the following. First, as I hope the example of Otsuka has illustrated, moral regress can result even from a well-motivated, successfully executed action that brings about good ends, as intended, without adversely affecting anyone else. Certain personal imperfections in certain circumstances make this possible. Second, whether Meng intended it or not, some of the cultivation techniques illustrated in the *Mengzi* can also nourish one's incipient, imperfect moral dispositions *to preserve* them from regress in circumstances like Otsuka's. Third, such preservation is itself important, independently of whether the agent's subsequent life will have any effect on others.

Of the methods of cultivation mentioned, moral reflection stands out in two ways. First, moral reflection is most self-sufficient in depending the least on circumstances: it is possible for Otsuka, for instance, to reflect even when she has no leisure to appreciate literature or music, no means to study the ancients, and no occasion to participate in social rituals. Second, in moral reflection one can nurture oneself directly in the context of one's own practical situation. These features make moral reflection especially useful for protecting one's vulnerable character when it is exposed to trials by an undertaking. Therefore, I will focus on this particular method of self cultivation.

For Meng, some affair or affair-type seems indispensable as the object and a point of departure for the process of moral reflection: a situation, an action, or choice between actions –

which may be bygone, going on, or possible – involving parties under certain descriptions, specific circumstances, and so forth. *Given* a certain affair(-type), one may be able to nourish one’s moral disposition by reflecting on the affair itself or on the very way in which they are disposed in relation to the affair. One can reflect on an affair by attending directly to it, by contrasting it with an alternative, or by likening it to a relevantly similar affair.²⁷ With regard to the first or any other affair brought into view, one can turn inward and reflect on how oneself responds to the affair or its elements.²⁸

A simple and clear example of affair-oriented reflection can be reconstructed from 4B29 where Meng, as we saw earlier, recounts the exemplary lives of Yu, Ji, and YAN Hui. In particular, when Meng explains the way in which Yu and Ji concentrated on their work with urgency and dutifulness as ministers of flood control and agriculture respectively (they allegedly passed by their own homes thrice without entering), he attributes this achievement to such thoughts:

Yu thought of (*si*) all those in the world who drowned as if he himself had drowned them, and Ji thought of (*si*) all those in the world who were starving as if he himself had been starving them.²⁹

By what reflection may someone in Yu or Ji’s position arrive at their dutiful dispositions in relation to their work and the people under their ministry? If someone ever drowns or starves because of my oversight or laziness as the minister, or if someone actually drowned or starved in a way that could have been prevented by better work of my ministry, that is like their being drowned or starved

²⁷ See Yearley (1990: 62-67) and Van Norden (2007: 235-46).

²⁸ Note that the distinction between affair- and disposition-oriented reflection does not sort every articulable act of reflection exclusively into one or the other group.

²⁹ Meng attributes a similar thought to Yi Yin in 5B1.

by me personally.³⁰ Given that I found personally drowning or starving someone more vividly unacceptable at the beginning of the reflection, now my ministerial work may appear to me as my duty more urgently. A similar affair-oriented reflection can be reconstructed from the conversation we have seen in *Mengzi*3B8, where Meng compares imposing an unjust tax (and its gradual repeal) to personal stealing (and the gradual withdrawal from it) *as* something one finds more vividly unacceptable.

As for moral reflection that attends to one's own disposition in relation to affairs, that Meng is familiar with it is evident in the very conversation he holds with King Xuan about the ox incident, in 1A7.4-9. He leads the king to wonder "what heart/mind" (*hé xīn*) it was with which he, saving the ox from being sacrificed for a rite, had a sheep take its place. Why did he send the sheep to death if he spared the ox because it pained him that the ox, innocent, was on its way to the place of death? Why did he treat the two animals differently? (So people thought that he saved the ox for an economic reason.) It is because he had seen the ox but not the sheep, says Meng, and it belongs to a gentleman not to bear witnessing the death of an animal he encountered and not to bear eating its meat. The king finds this diagnosis spot-on and feels a movement in his own heart/mind.

Reflection of this form might nourish one's moral disposition in at least three ways. Two of them seem to be intended by Meng in 1A7. First, the subject may better register that they in fact possess a certain moral disposition. As mentioned before, Meng's invocation of the ox incident is

³⁰ The reflection here does not imply that every omission to prevent harm amounts to an infliction of that harm, or that the failure to prevent harm is exactly as bad as intentionally inflicting it. Wong (2002: 204-216) provides a thorough argument against the model of top-down moral justification by necessitating, universal principles.

in part to show the king that he has the compassionate heart/mind for authentic kingship and the capacity to care for his people. Second, the subject may be readier to respond to new kinds of situations with this disposition, now that they have better acknowledged it. This is intended in the example if Meng means, through the extended conversation in 1A7.2-11 in which the ox reflection figures, to *extend* the king's compassionate heart/mind to (care more for) his people. There has been a rich and instructive debate about how exactly this might be accomplished.³¹ Third, in recognizing one's action as a (incipiently) moral reaction, the subject may, in addition, embrace the action more robustly in the incipiently virtuous way in which they originally chose it. Thus, the subject's (incipiently) moral disposition would be nourished in relation to the past incident, even if we bracket this agent's potential for future situations and actions. Of course, the self is nourished in this third way only given that the action chosen was in fact good. And so it is unlikely to be what Meng actually intends to bring about in King Xuan in relation to his sparing of the ox, since Meng probably thinks that the ox should have been sacrificed as ritual requires. From this perspective, the king was misguided by his incipiently good disposition to act incorrectly.³² Thus, I argue only that the *general reflection technique* illustrated in 1A7.4-9 has a third potential benefit, not that it is intended in this particular instance of deployment. The reconstruction of reflection I offer below aims at highlighting this last form of nourishment.

³¹ See, for example, Nivison (1979; 1996: 104-6), Shun (1989), Van Norden, (1991), Shun (1997: 139-49), Wong (2002), Ivanhoe (2002).

³² Even so, for Meng's purpose in 1A7 – to show King Xuan that he has the capacity for authentic kingship and to make him kinglier – it is an unimportant and distracting detail that the king's life-sparing turns out to be wrong. If Meng knew of an incident in which the king had *rightly* spared a life in response to the suffering he witnessed, Meng would probably invoke this story instead.

So, imagine a parallel dialogue between Meng and the king about an otherwise identical incident, in which the king's sparing of the ox is not only not wrong but even the ideally right thing to do. At first, the ox-sparing episode called to the king's mind appears to him rather plain: the only thing to be explained is that he spared the ox, and that was because he could not stand having the innocent life executed. However, when his attention is called to the fact that he put the sheep, *another innocent life*, to death in place of the ox, he realizes he never fully understood how his heart/mind worked. Now he begins to reflect on his own disposition in that affair. And insofar as this reflection involves reexperiencing his inner experience of that affair purposefully, now he begins to reflect also on the ox affair itself, which has until now only been experienced, recalled, but not reflected upon. As Meng tells the king that it is because he saw the ox but not the sheep, he is invited to reimage what he really saw – now he with his mind's eye should look again, and perhaps only now does he really look again, at the *frightened look* of the ox. Thus, even though Meng beats him to singling out a more precise cause, it is the king's own disposition, now exercised once more in face of the ox's face, de-clouded, that confirms. His disposition is activated – “there is a movement in my heart/mind” – as if it resonates with Meng's diagnosis. Perhaps the movement he feels is even the one he felt before the ox, but this time with more transparency: the pained heart/mind with which he spared the ox is pained not, or not merely, at the innocent being put to death but (also) at the face of suffering. Insofar as the movement of his heart/mind, with noises muffled, rings true to him, he now relates more authentically to his own action of sparing, even

though it is already an affair of the past. After a momentary, puzzling self confrontation, he is now at greater peace with what he did.³³ He is now more himself.

Suppose the entrepreneur Otsuka from my example undertakes to protect the minority by employment. Here is how she can protect her own moral dispositions by reflection of the forms just illustrated. First, as in the case of Yu and Ji, this industrialist could think of her affair as follows: “If someone is taken off the street to a labor camp or executed whom I could have hired, this is as if I personally harmed them.” Given that she found personally sending someone to a labor camp or death more vividly unacceptable at the beginning of the reflection, now it may appear to her more her duty to recruit as many people from the persecuted group as possible. Second, Otsuka could also reflect on both the affair and her own disposition in the affair, as King Xuan may have been led to reflect. She can recall how she decided on recruiting more minority workers. “Of course, I decided to get as many of the minority into my factory as possible in order to prevent them from being harassed or sent to a labor camp.” There was more to it, however. She actually *saw* people being picked off the street by an armed force. She has seen on their faces sometimes fright, sometimes helplessness, sometimes hopeless resigned acquiescence. She has seen human beings who, trembling, were about to board cattle cars, not knowing exactly what awaited them. She has seen the cruel, inhumane satisfaction on the faces of the paramilitary. If she looks again at these faces with her mind’s eye, she can reexperience her inner experience of the affair purposefully. This

³³ My reading is similar to the one in Ivanhoe (2002). However, whereas Ivanhoe aims to show how the ox reflection could help the subject identify and appreciate the same “sound” in their heart/mind in new situations and act on it, I emphasize how it better disposes them in relation to the situation they have already experienced.

will be to reflect on the affair itself as well as her own disposition. Her disposition is once again activated, but this time with more transparency: the heart/mind with which she decided to hire more minority was not just the heart/mind to do some good, but also the heart/mind before the face of suffering and the face of inhumaneness. Insofar as the recurring movement of the heart/mind before the trembling or the cruel face, with noises muffled, rings true to her, she now relates even more authentically to her own decision to recruit, even if it is already an affair of the past. She is now at greater peace with what she did. She is now more herself. The more she attends to the affair in the ways just sketched, the less likely she will relate to her recruitment as a matter of increasing her profit or hope that the labor rules will last any longer. If she later suffers misfortunes because of her good deed, it is less likely that she will regret her action, resent the people she sheltered, or become bitter or hateful.

Conclusion

Recall the Question: Given that I want to do A because p , the virtuous person in this situation would do A because p , but I am not as good as the virtuous person, should I do A? This sometimes amounts to a dilemma between forbearing a really good deed and possibly getting oneself seriously degraded. I have suggested that, while Meng's caution "do not help it grow" warns one in view of the risks of the latter horn, it leaves it to one to determine whether to assume a particular advanced undertaking. Some occasional leaps do not necessarily lead to calamities, especially if we proceed with care. For even if the undertaking exposes one to risks of corruption, they may be mitigated by reflection and other techniques. Some forms of moral reflection, as we have seen, are well

demonstrated in the *Mengzi*. Via reflection – suitably facilitated by a teacher or a friend, or by tradition, where necessary – we can be better conciliated to our current undertakings as well as past choices, seeing more clearly the reality to which we have responded to.

Recall that, in the parable of the farmer, Meng not only cautions against pseudo-cultivation (“pulling the sprouts”) but also alludes to weeding as work that counts as genuine cultivation: “Those who deem it unbeneficial and leave it are the ones who do not weed for the sprouts” (2A2.16). Moral reflection may be to moral cultivation as weeding is to agriculture. Just as a farmer can uproot the plants surrounding their crop that compete for nutrients, those after the Way can stanch tendencies of obsession, prejudice, grudge, resentment, and so forth by attending to what really matters. While it is important to help grow one’s moral dispositions for ever more complex situations, for ever greater actions, for benefiting ever more people (as it is important to irrigate and fertilize), care should also be taken to protect one’s imperfect dispositions from degradation. Perhaps the rightness of our past choices is not final unless we go on to relate to them in the right way. If we neglect that there can be some inner work of catching-up to do even after the action’s completion, we may overestimate the moral risk of a prospective action or be ourselves subject to a higher risk when we undertake an advanced action. By contrast, if we do not forget about the inner work, we can be rightly confident in undertaking more than we otherwise would be. We can even grow as we reflectively navigate morally risky situations. After an attentive reading of the *Mengzi*, we may now view *Progress-by-deeds* with more assurance, that one can progress toward virtue as one has done more and more what meaningfully resembles the virtuous person’s way of

conduct. This deed-based picture about moral development, enriched with nourishing reflections about prior or ongoing undertakings, should now be less dubious.

Acknowledgements

This essay was originally part of a study on issues related to filial piety in Ruism, which I did under the supervision of Kwong-loi Shun at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in summer 2011. I am deeply in debt to Kwong-loi, who continued to give me insightful feedback and candid encouragement on this study in subsequent years. I also benefited greatly from the comments of Chung-Yi Cheng, Harvey Lederman, Kieran Setiya, Winnie Sung, Joshua Eienthal, Chris Yang, Manyul Im, Liam Kofi Bright, the discussants at Logi Gunnarsson's research seminar in summer 2015 at Potsdam University, and my anonymous reviewers, who had all read various versions of this paper. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the work-in-progress colloquium in 2012 at the University of Pittsburgh and my audience at the Australasian Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy Conference 2012 at the University of New South Wales, the 2016 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, the 2016 Northeast Conference on Chinese Thought in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and the inaugural meeting of the Bay Area Conference on Chinese Thought at UC Davis in 2017. Last but not least, the original research project was funded by the Chinese Nationality Room Scholarship, part of the Nationality Room Program at the University of Pittsburgh. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Chinese Nationality Room Committee for making all this possible.

References

- Behuniak Jr., James. 2005. *Mencius on Becoming Human*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Chan, Alan K. L. 2002a. "A Matter of Taste: Qi (Vital Energy) and the Tending of the Heart (Xin) in Mencius 2A2." See Chan 2002b, 42-71.
- Chan, Alan K. L., ed. 2002b. *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Cua, Antonio S. 2002. "Xin and Moral Failure: Notes on an Aspect of Mencius' Moral Psychology." See Chan 2002b, 126-150.

- Doris, John M. 1998. "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics." *Noûs* 32.4, 504-530.
- Graham, A. C. 1967. "The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature." *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 6: 215-71.
- Harman, Gilbert. 2000. "The Nonexistence of Character Traits." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100.2: pp. 223-226.
- Huang, Zongxi 黃宗羲. *Mengzi shishuo* 孟子師說 (*The Teacher's Sayings on the Mengzi*).
- Hutton, Eric. 2008. "Han Feizi's Criticism of Confucianism and Its Implications for Virtue Ethics." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 5: 423-453.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2000. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2002. "Confucian Self Cultivation and Mengzi's Notion of Extension." See Liu and Ivanhoe 2002, 205-241.
- Jiao, Xun 焦循. *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 (*Corrected Interpretations of the Mengzi*).
- Keneally, Thomas. 1982. *Schindler's List*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Legge, James, trans. (1895) 1970. *The Works of Mencius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Reprint, New York: Dover Books. Citations refer to the Dover edition.
- Liu, Xiusheng, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. 2002. *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1958. *The Bell*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Murdoch, Iris. (1964) 1971. "The Idea of Perfection." See Murdoch 1971, 1-44.
- Murdoch, Iris. (1969) 1971. "On 'God' and 'Good.'" See Murdoch 1971, 45-74.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1971. *The Sovereignty of Good*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Nivison, David Sheperd. 1979. "Mencius and Motivation." See Rosemont, Jr., and Schwartz 1979, 417-432.
- Nivison, David Sheperd. 1996. *The Ways of Confucianism*. Peru, Illinois: Open Court.
- Riegel, Jeffrey. 1979. "Reflections on an Unmoved Mind: An Analysis of Mencius 2A2." See Rosemont, Jr., and Schwartz 1979, 433-457.

- Robinson, Douglas 2016. *The Deep Ecology of Rhetoric in Mencius and Aristotle: A Somatic Guide*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Rosemont, Henry, Jr., and Benjamin I. Schwartz, eds. 1979. "Studies in Classical Chinese Thought." Thematic issue, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47.3.
- Shun, Kwong-loi. 1989. "Moral Reasons in Confucian Ethics." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 16.3-4: 317-43.
- Shun, Kwong-loi. 1997. *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Shun, Kwong-loi. 2004. "Conception of the Person in Early Confucian Thought." In *Confucian Ethics: a Comparative Study of Self*, edited by Kwong-loi Shun, and David B. Wong, 183-99. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tang, Junyi 唐君毅. 1986. *Zhongguo zhexue yuanlun: daolun pian* 中國哲學原論：導論篇 (*On Chinese Philosophy – Origins: Introductory Chapters*). Taipei 臺北: Taiwan xuesheng shuju 臺灣學生書局.
- Uchino, Kumaichirō 內野熊一郎. 1962. *Mōshi* 孟子 (*Mengzi*), vol. 4 of *Shinshaku kanbun taikai* 新釈漢文大系 (*A Newly Interpreted Compendium of Chinese Classics*). Tokyo: Meiji shoin 明治書院.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. 1991. "Kwong-loi Shun on Moral Reasons in Mencius." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 18.4: 353-70.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. 2000. "Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency." In *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline, III, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 103-134. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1995. "Replies." In *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, edited by J. E. J. Altham, and Ross Harrison, 190. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Wong, David B. 2002. "Reasons and Analogical Reasoning in Mengzi." See Liu and Ivanhoe 2002, 187-220.
- Yang, Bojun 楊伯峻, ed. 1984. *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 (*Translation of and Commentary on the Mengzi*). Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Yearley, Lee H. 1990. *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtues and Conceptions of Courage*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Zhao, Qi 趙岐. *Mengzi zhu* 孟子注 (*Commentary on the Mengzi*).
- Zheng, Zemian 鄭澤綿. 2013. "The Source of Gao Zi's Thought and the Starting Point of Mencian Ethics 告子思想淵源考——兼論“求則得之”作為孟子倫理學思想的起點." *Wuhan University Journal (Humanity Sciences)* 66.1: 36-42.
- Zhu, Xi 朱熹. *Mengzi jizhu* 孟子集註 (*Collected Commentaries on the Mengzi*).