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Moral Reasoning in Mencius (*Mengzi zhong de lunli tuili*)

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The problem of moral reasoning is the questions what form of reasoning enables one to reach the correct moral judgment, and what sort of reasoning produces good justification for one's judgment. This is a major topic in normative ethics. According to those who believe that there are no moral rules (i. e., formulable principles that hold true for every case), it also is the only legitimate topic in normative ethics. Normative ethics is either the search for moral rules or the search for the best way of reasoning in particular cases. If you believe that there are no moral rules, then only the latter search seems to be worthwhile.

Contemporary normative ethics is largely frustrated. The two most prominent candidate normative theories, utilitarianism and Kantianism, are fatally flawed. Utilitarianism espouses a rule that commands that innocents be used as means to maximizing the net happiness the group. But sometimes using innocents in this way is wrong. Utilitarian efforts to solve this fundamental problem have failed. Kantianism puts forth the categorical imperative as the rule which will filter out wrong intentions: Do what you could will everyone, no matter what his or her identity, do in the situation at

hand. However, this formula is a trivial and empty truth. It says only that one should act impartially. That is contained in the meaning of the moral "should". It doesn't help us to discern the impartial thing to do in a given circumstance. After so many centuries, it is time to put these theories aside. One is false, the other empty. And there are no other rule-based normative theories. So, normative ethics should inquire into moral reasoning, rather than attempt to vindicate rules.

What help can Mencius give us in the inquiry into moral reasoning? Here my goal is to draw out the theory of moral reasoning in Mencius. I will argue that Mencius is a coherentist about moral reasoning. I believe that coherentism is true. Nowhere in the text does Mencius either explicitly state that he is a coherentist or even explain what this theory is. However, he does explain how to reason morally, and his explanation is coherentist. The "coherentism" which I attribute to Mencius is the view that the correct moral judgment in any case is the one that bears the most analogical coherence with the other judgments that one accepts (or with the largest and most coherent set of these). In section I, I will explain coherentism further. In section II, I will present and discuss every point in the text at which Mencius gives arguments for particular moral judgments. Almost all of these are arguments by analogy: arguments for analogical coherence. They therefore support the coherentist interpretation of Mencius. In section III, I will discuss passages in the *Mencius* that speak more generally to normative theory, and I will show that they point to coherentism. In the end, we will be able to take stock of the case for interpreting Mencius as a coherentist.

I. Coherentism and Argument by Analogy in Ethics

Coherentism is the view that the correct moral judgment in any case is the one that bears the most analogical coherence with the other judgments that one accepts (or with the largest and most coherent set of these). If coherentism turns out to be true, then we need make no adjustments in ordinary moral reasoning. In other words, coherentism is the view we implicitly assumed to be true in our common practice. For ordinary moral reasoning is analogical in just the way coherentism prescribes. (By contrast, for example, utilitarianism would require that we make a radical change in our form of moral reasoning.)

Notice the way in which people ordinarily argue. First, they appeal to analogy. They say, "You should not lie when paying taxes. That's like stealing from your neighbors." And "Abortion is murder, since it is just like killing a child." And "Capitalism is like slavery. Therefore, it is wrong."

Second, people appeal to a relevant difference between the proposed analogy and the case at hand. They say, "But everyone lies when paying taxes." And "But the fetus isn't a person" or "But the fetus is dependent on the mother's body, while a child is not." And "Labor in a capitalist society is optional, while slavery is forced."

Third, people appeal to principles. A crucial tenet of coherentism is that this sort of appeal is merely a gesture at a large set of analogies. In other words, the appeal to a principle, according to coherentism, is not an appeal to a rule (i. e., a principle that holds

in every case) but an appeal to a rule of thumb (a principle that holds in most cases). Moral principles are mere rules of thumb. Therefore, this third sort of appeal is merely a stylistic version of the first two: appeals to analogies or to relevant differences. If I say "Abortion is wrong because it is wrong to kill a human being," while you say "But a woman has a right to control her body," we are not pointing to universal rules but to sets of cases that are analogical to the case of abortion. I say it's like the many cases of murder that we can easily call to mind. You say stopping an abortion is like the many cases of infringing upon a woman's right to do as she likes with her body that we can easily call to mind. But neither rule holds absolutely. Killing in self defense is permissible, and woman may not flail her arms violently in a crowded hallway. As we will see in section IV, Mencius takes up the issue of the nature of moral principles. We will find that his view is conducive to the coherentist view that they are not rules but rules of thumb.

Complete justification for a moral judgment is reached when the deliberators have uncovered the judgment about the case in question that coheres best with the largest and most coherent set of judgments about other cases to which they are committed. This is ordinary inductive reasoning. It is thus like ordinary prudential reasoning, except that it strives to satisfice one's impartial values or altruistic desires, as well as one's self-interested desires. Of course, there are objections to coherentism: why does coherence with one's other judgments justify the judgment in the case at hand? Why can't those other judgments just as well be false? And without rules, isn't coherentist moral reasoning unprincipled? We will find the beginnings of

an answer to these questions in Mencius.

II. Instances of Moral Reasoning in the *Mencius*

(a) Instances of argument by analogy in Mencius. Here, and in the following section, section (b), I will simply compile every instance in the *Mencius* of an argument by analogy for a moral judgment. This will enable us to evaluate the case I am making here that Mencius is a coherentist. (This compilation will serve as a reference tool for any future research into Mencius' moral argumentation). Of course, there are many other arguments by analogy in the text, such as the famous arguments about human nature that rely upon agricultural analogies: cultivation, seeds, sprouts, etc., or the arguments that intend to persuade the opponent to act morally, rather than selfishly. But these are not relevant here. Our concern is moral reasoning: reasoning that attempts to reach the correct moral judgment in a case.

Consider the analogical reasoning in the following cases.

1B. 6 Mencius argues that the King has a duty to insure the people's welfare, just as a man entrusted with another's family and a guard entrusted with troops have a duty to look after their charges.

2B. 10 Mencius argues that using one's position to get members of one's family appointed to office is wrong, since it is like profiteering in the marketplace.

3A. 4 Mencius argues against the followers of Shen Nong that it is not obligatory to farm for one's own food or even to do manual labor for a living. He argues that it is not obligatory to weave one's own clothes or to do one's own pottery work or blacksmithing. Fur-

ther, he says that intellectual labor is analogous to the various sorts of manual labor.

1A.4 Mencius argues that government that causes death of the governed is wrong. He makes an analogy to killing with a staff and killing with a knife. Killing with government is like those cases of wrongful killing.

3B.8 An official asked Mencius whether gradually reducing the tax burden to fair levels is permissible, instead of doing so immediately. Mencius replies that it is analogous to a thief judging that stealing fewer chickens than he usually steals is a permissible option for him.

1A.7 Mencius argues that if the King judges it wrong to kill an ox, then he should judge it wrong to kill a lamb. And if he judges it wrong to kill the ox or lamb, then he must judge it wrong for him to cause the death of his people. All three cases are analogous to one another.

2B.4 Mencius argues to the governor Ping Lu that his failure to discharge his governmental duties obligates him to step down. Mencius gives the analogy to a lancer who fails to show up to his post. The governor agrees that the lancer should be removed.

(In the longer version of this paper, I cite many more instances of such argument by analogy in Mencius.)

(b) Instances of counterargument from relevant difference between the analogical case and the case at hand. This form of counterargument is to offer a rebuttal by disanalogy: by pointing out a morally relevant disanalogy between the analogical case and the case at hand. There are more instances in the *Mencius* of this sort of

argument than there are of a simple argument by analogy for a moral judgment. This is as it should be. The real challenge and interesting part of moral reasoning lies in wrestling with fine distinctions between the case in question and analogous cases. The initial drawing of an analogy is merely the general form of moral reasoning.

3B.4 In the case of Mencius' argument with the Shen Nong philosophers, we find a reply. The Shen Nong philosophers argue that intellectuals shouldn't be paid for their work, although laborers should, since intellectuals don't intend to make a living but simply intend to seek knowledge. Mencius replies that intention is not a relevant difference. He gives an analogy to a manual laborer who intends to make a living but whose work is so bad as to be destructive: a mason who flails about with his trowel in a fruitless effort to lay tile. One would judge that he is not entitled to a wage. Hence, intention doesn't matter. There is no basis to deny that the intellectual is entitled to a wage.

1B.16/2B.7 Mencius' critics took him to task for having a more lavish funeral for his mother than he had had for his father. This is apparently inconsistent behavior in analogous situations. Mencius replies that there is a relevant disanalogy: At the time of his father's funeral, Mencius couldn't afford a lavish funeral, while at the time of his mother's funeral, he could.

2B.3 Mencius is taken to task for accepting a gift from Song and a gift from Xue but refusing a gift from Qi. The situations seemed analogous, so Mencius' judgments were apparently inconsistent. However, Mencius reports a relevant difference in the case of Qi. In that case, there was no proper occasion for a gift. Mencius

was in danger in Xue, so it was proper for the King to give him funds for his protection. In Song, it was proper to give Mencius a gift to mark his departure. In the case of Qi, the gift was gratuitous and, therefore, more analogous to a bribe.

5B.7 Mencius judges that he should wait for the King to come to see him rather than go to see the King. An interlocutor points out that in an analogous case Confucius went to see his ruler when summoned. Mencius replies that there is a difference: Confucius held office, while Mencius does not.

4B.29 Mencius points to several cases in which he judges that one should go to great lengths to look out for one's own people. It is like rushing to the aid of a housemate who is being assaulted. But there is a difference in the case of someone who is merely a fellow villager being assaulted. One is not obligated to rush to his aid. The implication in this elliptical passage would seem to be that a king needn't rush to the aid of the people of other countries.

6B.10 When someone suggests that it would be best to keep taxes low (5%), Mencius replies that this would be appropriate in a barbarian society without a civilization to support. But in the case of Chinese states, there is a difference: a culture that ought to be financed. Mencius thus thinks that the tax rate should be higher.

(In the longer version of this paper, I cite many more instances of such argument by analogy in Mencius.)

In sum, we see that coherentist moral reasoning uses uncontroversial judgments held in common by the disputants and attempts to determine how to judge a controversial case by determining the closest analogy between the controversial case and an uncontroversial

case. Where the analogy seems dubious, disputants look for disanalogies and even more analogous cases with different implications.

III. Normative Theory in the *Mencius*

What, then, is Mencius's normative theory? Sometimes he is taken to be a virtue ethicist. ^① Virtue ethics, as a normative position (and not merely as the subfield of moral psychology devoted to the study of the virtues), is the view that moral reasoning is best construed as the deliberation over what a virtuous person would do in the case in question. There are only two places ^② in the *Mencius* where Mencius argues that a certain action is right on the grounds that it is what a virtuous person would do. In 5A.9 Mencius argues that a certain action was right because Boli Xi, a virtuous man, would have done it. In 5B.4 Mencius argues that, since Confucius felt it appropriate to fight over a limited supply of food, it is permissible not to be too fastidious when one suspects that one is being given stolen goods. (Obviously, Mencius is also relying on an argument by analogy here, as well.)

Confucianism certainly takes the ancient sages as moral

^① I argued that Mencius is not a virtue ethicist. James A. Ryan, "Moral Philosophy and Moral Psychology in Mencius," *Asian Philosophy* 8 (1998), pp. 47-64.

^② 2A.9 is also a place that might seem to be an instance of reasoning as virtue ethics prescribes. However, Mencius doesn't give any reasoning in the passage. He merely makes a judgment that the gentleman avoids both clinging too much to a principle and being too loose with it. 5B.7 (discussed in section II b) might also have an element of virtue ethics in it, but it is clearly a case of relying mainly on reasoning for coherence.

exemplars. However, in the *Mencius* there are only two instances of the sort of moral reasoning recommended by virtue ethics. And there is a long list, given above in section II, of cases of reasoning by analogy in the *Mencius*. Nowhere does Mencius say that he supports the thesis of virtue ethics. Therefore, Mencius' moral theory is probably not virtue ethics.

On the other hand, we do find fragments of coherentist theory in Mencius. He tells us that the way to discover what is right is to take the altruistic desire that one feels in one case and "apply it to other cases" analogous to the first (1A. 7). One checks oneself; "What is the reason for making the exception?" (1A. 7). By thus "weighing" (*quan*) the considerations, one reaches the judgments of an "unvarying heart" (*heng xin*) (1A. 7). The issue is one of weakness of will, and Mencius' moral psychology is important here. But the issue is also one of coherence. The goal is clearly to reach a coherent set of judgments. Mencius says, "For everyone there is something which he cannot bear. Everyone has something which he would not do. Extending this to the class of things which he does is rightness" (7B. 31).

The challenge to this reading is to explain passages in which Mencius seems to espouse rule-based moral reasoning instead of non-rule-based coherence reasoning. He speaks of following established rules as the way to virtue, giving for them the symbols of the square and compass, which seem to be precise rules, rather than ambiguous coherence relations (4A. 1, 4A. 2).

However, the evidence is clear that Mencius does not mean to embrace a rule-based theory of moral reasoning. He emphasizes that

the "rules" are always overridable. They are merely rules of thumb in his eyes. Rules of thumb are summary gists of frequently encountered cases. They may be called "principles", as long as one doesn't mean by this that they are rules (i. e., principles which hold in every case, come what may). Mencius says, "The 'ritually proper' which is not ritually proper, the 'right' which is not right, the great person does not do" (4B. 6). And "The great person speaks without having to be truthful, acts without having to carry the action through to the end. He aims only at rightness" (4B. 11). Finally, he says that to apply a principle too strictly is to "overfill a kind (*chong lei*) and come to the end of rightness" (5B. 4).

Therefore, Mencius has in mind not rules but rules of thumb that may be canceled when weighed against others. However, one might still wonder whether the prioritization of these rules of thumb is not strictly rule-based, so that Mencius' theory of moral reasoning would indeed be rule-based on the level of second-order principles, while employing first-order rules of thumb. Clearly there are "priorities" (*wu*) (7A. 46). But while one ought to apply the principles according to the famous "mean" (*zhong*), this is a case-by-case prioritization, rather than a single rule of prioritization. Mencius explains,

Yangzi upholds egoism. If he could benefit the whole world by plucking out one of his hairs, he would not do it.

Mozi upholds impartial love. If he could benefit the world by shaving his head and showing his heels, he would do it. Zimo clings to a medium. In clinging to a medium he is closer to the right idea, but clinging to a medium without

any weighing is like clinging to one point [as Yang and Mo do]. What is undesirable in clinging to one point is its impairing the way. Holding up one point, one neglects a hundred others (7A.26).

This is the reasoning of satisficing large sets of constraints, not the algorithmic logic of rules.

Mencius clearly states that a consideration may override another in one case but fail to override it in another. In debate with the Moist Yizi, Mencius responds to Yizi's claim that one ought to show impartial love for everyone and treat one's own children no better than one's neighbor's children. He says, "He has a particular case in mind: when the infant is innocently about to fall into a well" (3A.5). In some cases, it is right to show more concern for one's own children. In other cases, their needs are outweighed by those of a neighbor's child.

There are instances in which Mencius explains why one should not always follow the principles he espouses. In 2B.12 Mencius is asked why he took so long to leave Zhou, when its King turned away his advice. It seems that a scoundrel should be left behind immediately. But Mencius disagrees with this principle, presumably on the grounds that people have the potential to become good; he argues that the King can change. By stalling on his way out, Mencius was giving the King a second chance.

Similarly, in 4B.30, Mencius argues that although a scoundrel should not be associated with, in the case at hand, in which Mencius associates with a man who has wrongly scolded his father, the wrongdoer has undertaken sincere atonement. There seem to be ex-

ceptions to every principle, for Mencius. Of course, sometimes the principle holds even in a case in which one thinks there ought to be an exception. For example, in 4A.24 Mencius upbraids a man who, upon his arrival in the town where Mencius is staying, is not prompt in going to pay his respects to Mencius. Upon hearing the man's excuse for the unseemly delay, Mencius says, "Where did you get the idea that one goes to see one's elders only after arranging for one's accommodation?"

5A.2 presents a case in which Mencius finds that one principle overrides another. There Mencius says that Shun eloped because in this case the principle that one ought to give one's parents grandchildren overrides the principle that one ought to obey one's parents. Shun's parents had forbidden the marriage.

Finally, in 3B.10 and 4B.23 Mencius argues out that clinging to principles as rules can be too hard on oneself and show a misunderstanding of morality. There is a principle that one should avoid accepting stolen goods. But in 3B.10 Mencius shows that being absolutely sure not to break this principle would require starving oneself to death, lest one perchance eat stolen food. Self-interest overrides when one doesn't know that the food was stolen. Moreover, being too self-abnegating also shows a misunderstanding of morality. One should try to integrate the various principles in a way which isn't too self-interested or self-abnegating. As 4B.23 explains, giving too much or always taking as much as the principle will allow at its limit betrays a failure to understand that the point of moral reasoning is to seek the most harmonious coherence and the best balance that weighing can determine, rather than to stretch as close to either extreme as

one can at every point.

In 4A. 17, Mencius explains that deciding whether a principle should be followed in a case is a matter of “weighing”. As the passage explains, there is principle that forbids a man from touching his sister-in-law, but when she is drowning and must be touched to be saved, the principle is overridden. The challenge to the coherentist view of moral reasoning is to show that this weighing of considerations is not an arbitrary arrangement without rational order. If there are no genuine rules, then how can the coherentist still maintain that there are principles? In other words, how can these “principles” be normative when each is overridden at some point in the set of judgments which the coherentist says we do and ought to uphold? Morality can't be unprincipled. But if the principles in one's morality don't hold as rules, then in what sense are they true?

The answer lies in 6B. 1. There Mencius is given two counterexamples to his principles that ritual is more important than food and that it is more important than sex. In cases in which overlooking ritual form in dining and in proposing marriage would save one from starving to death or enable one to get married where one otherwise could not get married, it seems that one should overlook the rituals.

Mencius replies as follows:

If you do not keep in mind their bases, and you put their tips at the same level, a one-inch stick can be made taller than a large building. Take the point that “gold is heavier than feathers”. How can one mean the gold of one clasp and one cartload of feathers? . . . If twisting your older brother's arm and grabbing his food would result in

your obtaining food, while, by not twisting it, you would not get food, would you twist it? If scaling your neighbor's wall and dragging away the daughter of the house would result in obtaining a wife, while, by not dragging her away, you would not obtain a wife, would you drag her away? (6B.1)

Mencius maintains that the moral principles he espouses are truths even though they are overridden in some cases. The reason he gives is quite original: moral principles are true rules of thumb in that they correctly describe the most probable case we are likely to meet. He gives an analogy to two non-moral principles: (1) A large building reaches higher than a two-inch stick; (2) Gold is heavier than feathers. Since these are truths, in spite of the counterexamples, the moral principles may as well be truths, in spite of their counterexamples. The reason is that the case of a cartload of feathers is highly unusual. So, too, are the cases of a two-inch stick being raised above a large building, of a person dying of hunger but unable to find eating utensils, and of the necessity of forgoing propriety in order to obtain a wife. But almost constantly we face cases in which we have an opportunity to steal a family member's food or to grab people by force. With the ratio of occurrence in the ordinary person's life being so high, we may say that the moral principles that hold that ritual propriety is more important than food or sex (marriage) are true. And they are normative, in that one may not decide by whim in which cases they are overridden. Otherwise, one could make it true that one may take one's brother's food by force, or abscond with the neighbor's daughter. But one may not do those

things.

Mencius therefore gives coherentism the reply it needs to the challenge that it countenances an arbitrary hodgepodge of values devoid of normativity. There are principles, as generalizations covering the vast majority of cases which we encounter. And the individual may not just decide how to prioritize these principles. That prioritization is reflected in the set of values to which he is beholden. Although the priorities cannot be reduced to rules, they are there nonetheless: in most of the situations which we face, ritual weighs heavier than sex or food. That is the sense of the principle that ritual is more important than sex or food.

The rule-based theorist may not be satisfied. He may want the one value to weigh more than the other *in itself*, and not merely as a lucky function of the contingency of what sort of situation people usually face. Thus, he may say that unless the former value doesn't always trump the latter, it isn't really more important. Here the coherentist must make the reply implicit in 6B. 1: quantity counts. When one's food reserves are at zero, or when one faces a lifetime without one's beloved, then the importance of ritual can be outweighed. Rendering the quality of values commensurable by considering their quantity may seem perverse. But the rule-based theorist bears the burden of proving that there are moral rules. For it seems that holding to any moral rule is what is perverse, as in the famous Kantian case in which, on the basis of the rule that one ought not lie, Kant prescribed that one tell the truth about the whereabouts of his intended victim to a man on a killing spree. That, and not the weighing that Mencius has in mind, is perverse: a practice fit for the

life of an "earthworm" (3B.10).

IV. Conclusion: Mencius and the 21st Century

In the 21st Century, different countries will interact more closely than ever before. This will require cooperation, and cooperation requires common moral values. Therefore, countries with differing values will have to deliberate together. Mencius's coherentism offers a plausible format for such deliberation. Countries with differing moral judgments will first establish the judgments they share in common. Then they will determine which of the controversial judgments is most coherent with that common set. This international debate will therefore be similar to debate between individuals. Moreover, it seems that there is no other way to settle moral disagreements rationally. *Mencius* is therefore a source of insight for the 21st Century. It should be studied by diplomats.

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