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Moral Beauty and the Beast:
Ethical Dilemmas in the Mencius

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Abstract

This article analyzes *Mencius* 7B.23, a concise passage that offers complex ethical dilemmas. It provides a close reading of the passage, along with relevant passages elsewhere in the text and, occasionally, in other texts. The narrow goal of the article is to present a coherent reading of the passage within the context of the *Mencius* as a whole. This reading suggests that while the passage touches upon a wide range of topics, including personal credibility and political responsibility, the overarching concern is on being a morally superior person, on the difficult dilemmas such people may face, and on how they would respond to them. More broadly, the article shows that while the philosophical practice of "weighing circumstances" (*quan* 權) allows moral agents in exceptional cases to break certain moral or ritual rules, Mencius seems unwilling to apply this discretion when morality as a whole, or the integrity of the person who embodies it (*shi* 士), are involved.

Keywords: Mencius, tiger, anecdote, morality, ethical dilemma, *shi* 士, *quan* 權

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The *Mencius* 孟子 is a revered Chinese philosophical text. Scholars readily admit to deriving "pleasure from *Mencius* as a work of literature," as they place its supposed author, Mencius, on a pedestal as one who "besides being one of the greatest thinkers, happens to be one of the greatest stylists in the whole history of Chinese literature" (Dobson 1963, vii; Lau 1970, 222). The work is indeed both insightful and delightful, but it also contains passages that are hard to grasp, especially on a first read, because they do not "provide transparent information about the philosophical position he holds" (Geisz 2007, 190). This article analyzes one of those passages:

> Qi was struck by famine. Chen Zhen said, "The people in the state all think that you, Master, will [make a plea to] distribute [from] the Tang for them again, but I apprehend you cannot do so again." Mencius said, "That would be to act like Feng Fu. Among the inhabitants of Jin there was a certain Feng Fu, who was great at catching tigers. Ultimately, he became a great gentleman. Thereupon he [once] went to the countryside. There was a crowd in pursuit of a tiger. The tiger had its back to a crag, but no one dared to attack it. Seeing Feng Fu in the distance, they rushed to welcome him. Feng Fu rolled up his sleeves and alighted from the carriage. The whole crowd was pleased with him, but those who were gentlemen laughed at him."[1]

This passage raises many questions. For example: Who is Chen Zhen? What is the Tang? Did Feng Fu subdue the tiger in the end? Why would gentlemen laugh at him? How does Mencius judge their laughter? If he disapproves, does he consider them snobs who shy away from rolling up their sleeves to help others? In that case, why would he call them gentlemen? If he approves, does he applaud laughing at people who lend a helping hand? In that case, would he recommend *not* helping others? If so, does a relatively minor

1 *Mencius* 7B.23: 齊饑. 陳臻曰, "國人皆以夫子將復為發棠, 殆不可復." 孟子曰, "是為馮婦也. 晉人有 馮婦者, 善搏虎. 卒為善士. 則之野, 有眾逐虎. 虎負嵎, 莫之敢攖. 望見馮婦, 趨而迎之. 馮婦攘臂下車. 眾皆悅之, 其為士者笑之." Translations in this article are my own. Translations from the *Mencius* are based on the *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏 edition (cf. Zhao 2000). My translation of 7B.23 sticks close to the source text to facilitate discussion of textual issues (see below).

personal inconvenience, such as becoming a laughingstock, in his view outweigh the life-threatening tribulations of the multitudes? In short, what is the meaning of this passage?

The passage's perplexity explains its relative obscurity. Overviews of Chinese philosophy do not use it to illustrate Mencius's thought, and *Mencius* studies likewise tend to prefer interpretively more accessible examples from the text. Even translators treat the passage with underwhelming enthusiasm. For instance, Lionel Giles does not include it in his abridged *Mencius* translation (Giles 1942, 122). Others do include it, but either without explanatory comments (Couvreur 1895, 639–640; Ware 1960, 160; Lau 1970, 198), or with a few textual notes at best (Lyall 1932, 232; Dobson 1963, 50–51; Lévy [2003] 2008, 196). Some translators do touch on the meaning of the passage, but their encapsulations differ widely. Richard Wilhelm prefaces his translation of the passage with the Latin adage *tempora mutantur* (times are changed), which suggests that to him its import is that different times call for different approaches ([1916] 1921, 177). James Legge and Ernst Faber both speak of "dignity" when they put the passage in a nutshell (Legge [1861] 1991, 488n23; Faber 1882, 121). Irene Bloom calls it "a matter of credibility," and Robert Eno sees it as an example of Mencius "tempering righteous action with pragmatism" (Bloom 2009, 161; Eno 2016, 156). Bryan W. Van Norden focuses on yet another aspect of the text, when he comments: "What is appropriate for a person to do depends upon his social role." (2008, 189). The passage has been discussed by a few Chinese scholars, past and present. The discussions tend to be brief (one barely covers half a journal-page) and limited to one textual issue (discussed below). In English academic literature, the passage is used as an example by Sungmoon Kim (who aptly calls it a "largely unattended episode" in the *Mencius*) in his essay on political responsibility; by Myeongseok Kim in his research into the sources of moral motivation in the *Mencius*; by Michael LaFargue in his portrayal of the sociohistorical background of a Chinese philosophical text; and by Robert Eno who, in his article on Mencian casuistry, synopsizes the passage in just one sentence (S. Kim 2010, 37–38; M. Kim 2014, 67; 2018, 74; LaFargue 1994, 89–90; Eno 2002, 197–198). In short, while scholarly attention is

not wholly absent, treatment of the passage tends to be brief, limited, and highly divergent.

In my view, the *Mencius* passage merits an in-depth study, as it is more insightful than a cursory reading suggests. A fuller understanding requires background knowledge, careful scrutiny, and a receptivity to this mode of expressing philosophical views. As Paul R. Goldin points out (2017, 55): "Chinese philosophy tends to demand a high level of interpretive participation from its audience." This article "participates" through a close reading of the passage, supplemented by relevant passages elsewhere in the text and, occasionally, in other texts. This methodology follows the example of scholars such as David S. Nivison who pays meticulous attention to particular passages, phrases, and even words while never assuming that he understands their meaning (Van Norden 1996, 4–5). Accordingly, Nivison's methodology involves reading relevant commentaries and translations, looking for glosses of words and paraphrases of key phrases, and preferring interpretations that attribute a sensible meaning to the text and cohere with the larger context. This is a slow method, as it involves pondering over seemingly insignificant issues such as the importance of the common word "again" (*fu* 復). As a consequence, this article may be a slow read at first, but a well-grounded interpretation of the passage has major implications, insufficiently brought out by earlier studies, as it reveals ethical dilemmas of considerable gravity, as well as Mencius's treatment thereof. The dilemmas will be discussed in the latter part of this study (Sections 4–5), a discussion for which the former part (Sections 1–3) lays the groundwork.

The main goal of this article is modest: to provide a coherent reading of the passage within the context of the *Mencius* as a whole. This reading suggests that while the passage touches upon several topics, including personal dignity and political responsibility, the overarching concern is on being a morally superior person, on the difficult dilemmas such people may face, and on how they would respond to them. More broadly, the article shows that while the philosophical practice of "weighing circumstances" (*quan* 權) allows moral agents in exceptional cases to break certain moral or ritual rules, Mencius seems unwilling to apply this discretion when

morality as a whole, or the integrity of the person who embodies it (*shi* 士), are involved.

I. Close Reading

This section offers a textual analysis of the *Mencius* passage translated above. It addresses the narrative structure, sentence segmentation, and several key terms.

A. Narrative Structure

The translated passage is 7B.23, a section located roughly in the middle of the final chapter in the *Mencius*. The enclosing sections focus on other topics (7B.22 on the music of sage-kings, 7B.24 on destiny), thereby demarcating our section as a self-contained unit of text. Hence, a proper understanding of 7B.23 depends primarily on this textual unit itself.

The narrative structure of 7B.23 consists of an outer story and an inner story. The outer story, or frame narrative, is a simple dialogue (one question, one answer) about a famine. The inner story is an anecdote about a tiger. Importantly, the outer story does not fully envelop the inner story. The dialogue's answer relays the anecdote but does not continue afterwards. As a result, the final sentence of the textual unit as a whole concludes both stories, inner and outer. This leaves it to readers to contemplate how a tiger relates to a famine, and how both relate to the philosophy of the text that contains this nested narrative.

The format of the outer story is common in early Chinese philosophical texts, which attribute statements to so-called "masters" (here Master Meng, or Mencius), and those statements can be preceded by questions from others (such as rulers, pupils, and rivals). The format of the inner story is also conventional. It conforms neatly to the characteristic features of anecdotes in early Chinese philosophical texts, as described by Van Els and Queen (2017, 7–24). Accordingly, the inner story is short (44 characters), has one main protagonist (the tiger

catcher), and three discernible narrative components: a beginning, which provides the background ("among the inhabitants. . ."); a middle part, which tells the incident ("went to the countryside. . ."); and an ending, which reveals the consequence ("the whole crowd. . ."). The ending of anecdotes in general tends to be a punchline whose value lies, for example, in the "inculcation of a moral lesson" (Fadiman 1985, xvi). In this case the moral of the story is not instantly clear, as Mencius does not elaborate on the anecdote. Fortunately, we can gain clarity by continuing our close reading of the passage, which will ultimately suggest that his opacity might be intentional.

B. Sentence Segmentation

The text of 7B.23 is generally agreed upon, except for this string of characters: 卒為善士則之野有眾逐虎. The lack of punctuation in the original text tasks readers with the parsing of the string to create meaningful phrases. Three readings have been proposed:

(1) 卒為善士. **則之野.** 有眾逐虎.
(2) 卒為善. **士則之. 野**有眾逐虎.
(3) 卒為善士**則. 之野.** 有眾逐虎.

In translation:

(1) Ultimately, he became a great gentleman.
Thereupon he went to the countryside.
There was a crowd in pursuit of a tiger.
(2) Ultimately, he became great.
Gentlemen took him as a model.
In the countryside there was a crowd in pursuit of a tiger.
(3) Ultimately, he became a model for great gentlemen.
He went to the countryside.
There was a crowd in pursuit of a tiger.

Option (1) is the oldest and most prevalent reading to date. This is how Zhao Qi 趙岐 (d. 201), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), and others read the text (Zhao 2000, 462; Zhu 1983, 369;

Jiao 1987, 988–989). Option (2) was proposed by Liu Changshi 劉昌詩 (13th c.) and his younger contemporary Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–1298). It never gained wide currency, but at least one present-day scholar, Cui Aofei, favors this reading (Liu 1983, 507; Zhou 1984, 232; Cui 2012, 41). Option (3) was proposed recently in two separate publications: an article by Wang Changlin, and a brief research note by Qin Hualin and Ling Yu (Wang 2002, 64; Qin and Ling 2005, 31).

The different readings are facilitated by the ambiguity of Classical Chinese, in which words can have different semantic meanings and grammatical functions. In this case, *ze* 則 can be a conjunction indicating a temporal relation between phrases (here translated as "thereupon") and a verb meaning "to imitate" (here translated as "to take as a model"); *wei* 為 can be a copula verb ("he *became*. . .") and a passive marker ("he *was* taken. . ."); and *zhi* 之 can be a verb of motion ("he *went* to. . .") and an object pronoun ("took *him* as a model"). In view of the many possibilities, how to determine what reading is best? We can start by recognizing that while the string of characters is problematic, the proposed solutions are not flawless either.

Option (1) reads *ze* as introducing a singular event (the outing to the countryside), even though it "typically refers to situations and expectations that reflect general patterns" (Kroll 2015, 586).

Option (2) separates *shan* 善 "great" from *shi* 士 "gentleman" and associates each with a different sentence (". . . became great. Gentlemen took. . ."). However, the combination *shanshi* 善士 "great gentleman" occurs eight more times in the *Mencius* (once in 3B.6 and seven times in 5B.8) and is clearly a special term in the text (cf. LaFargue 1994, 58). Moreover, this reading does not specify how the protagonist *became great*, which is strange because the preceding sentence in the anecdote already declares that he *was great* at catching tigers. Finally, as Yan Ruoju 閻若璩 (1636–1704) points out, having "gentlemen took him as a model" immediately followed by "in the countryside there was a crowd . . ." introduces a narrative gap by not expressing that the protagonist made a trip to the countryside (Yan 1983, 391).

Option (3) suggests that the protagonist was taken as a model by great gentlemen because he was great at catching tigers, in which

case the ending of the anecdote, where gentlemen laugh at him for engaging in catching a tiger, makes little sense.

With each reading being somehow flawed, "in the end it is difficult to decide which side is correct" 很難決定究竟是那一面對, as Lu Xun (1881–1936) remarks with regard to this anecdote ([1934] 1963, 461). While it is admittedly difficult, there is a significant difference between the traditional reading (option 1) and the later proposals (options 2 and 3). The latter parse the text in ways that vitiate the narrative, but the former merely involves a lexical peculiarity, as *ze* rarely introduces specific events. Not only is this less problematic, but the particular usage of *ze* possibly even strengthens the narrative. The conjunction suggests a logical connection between two sentences. Specifically, it suggests that the protagonist went to the country *as a gentleman*, that is, after he had become one. The *Mencius* translation by Dobson expresses this most clearly: "Traveling in the countryside *in this latter capacity* he found the inhabitants pursuing a tiger." (1963, 51, emphasis added).

C. Key Terms

The frame narrative opens with a statement about a famine in Qi 齊. This powerful state was something of a mecca for Mencius, who hailed from a nearby statelet. On several occasions he confabulated with King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 (r. 319–301 BCE), and his political career included a brief stint as a minister of the state (*Mencius* 2B.6). In his world, famine in Qi was big news.

In the text, Mencius is asked about the famine by a certain Chen Zhen 陳臻. This person is known only from the *Mencius*. He occurs in one more passage, in which he also asks a question, leading Zhao Qi to call him a student of Mencius (*Mencius* 2B.3; Zhao 2000, 129). Two further passages mention a certain Chenzi 陳子, which possibly translates as "Master Chen," whom Zhao Qi considers to be the same person (*Mencius* 2B.10, 6B.14; Zhao 2000, 143). Scholars commonly follow the commentator in seeing Chen Zhen, a.k.a. Chenzi, as a pupil of Mencius. "This is all that is known of him," concludes Legge ([1861] 1991, 215). However, the various apparitions of Chen Zhen in

the *Mencius* offer two relevant insights.

(1) Three out of four passages involving Chen Zhen mention Qi. One passage discusses Mencius's resignation from office in that state, from which Dobson logically concludes that the student was with him towards the close of his tenure in Qi (*Mencius* 2B.10; Dobson 1963, 91–92). Following the resignation, the king wanted to keep Mencius in Qi by offering him a residence and a stipend. He conveyed the offer to a certain Shizi 時子, who relayed it to Chenzi, who told Mencius. This suggests that Chenzi was an associate of Mencius with ties to government circles in Qi. That he would ask about the famine in that state is understandable.

(2) All four passages involving Chen Zhen address the relationship between rulers and advisors, and highlight the latter's integrity and incorruptibility. In one passage, Mencius informs Chenzi that exemplary people refuse to serve rulers who do not treat them with proper respect, and who have no intention of implementing their advice (*Mencius* 6B.14). This is also a main theme in the passage about the famine in Qi, as we shall see.

Chen Zhen's question about the famine includes the words *fa tang* 發棠. The first word, *fa*, has a plethora of meanings. Here it is a verb meaning 'to distribute,' which specifically refers to issuing food to the hungry. As Yang Bojun (1909–1992) points out, the same usage of the word is found in the opening chapter of the text, where Mencius accuses a king of dereliction of duty, for the king "does not know to distribute" 不知發 food even when starved corpses fill the roads (*Mencius* 1A.3; Yang [1960] 1988, 333). The second word, *tang*, is obscure. It does not occur elsewhere in the *Mencius*. Zhao Qi notes that Tang was a town in Qi, which scholars have since identified as present-day Jimo 即墨 in Shandong 山東 province. In Mencius's time, this was apparently where Qi kept grain in store. Hence, the two words combined refer to the distribution of grain from the state granaries.

In his question, Chen Zhen uses the word "again" (*fu* 復), thereby alluding to an earlier famine in Qi, during which Mencius had apparently made a plea to open the state granaries for the relief of starvelings. While the earlier plea is not recorded in the transmitted

Mencius, famine is a recurring theme in the book. For example, Mencius tells the governing officer of Pinglu 平陸, a town in the western part of Qi: "In years of famine and starvation, the old and frail among your people fell dead in the ditches, while the able-bodied fled by the thousands in all directions."[2] He also speaks with the ruler of Liang 梁 about famine in that state (*Mencius* 1A.3), and he avers that just like "years of scarcity cannot kill those who stockpile victuals, times of depravity cannot corrupt those who stockpile virtue."[3] Famine is clearly an important concern for Mencius. Whether or not there actually was an earlier occasion in which he pleaded with the ruler of Qi to open the state granaries is irrelevant, because the text makes it believable that he did. Hence, the main value of Chen Zhen's use of the word "again" is not historical but philosophical, as repetition of action is a main theme in this *Mencius* passage.

Chen Zhen suggests that Mencius would not repeat his plea now that Qi is facing famine again. Mencius does not expressly agree, but merely notes that doing so would be to act like Feng Fu 馮婦. This person is virtually unknown in ancient Chinese literature. Even his name is remarkable. Feng 馮 is a common surname, but Fu 婦 means "woman." Commentators hasten to explain that Feng Fu is not a woman surnamed Feng, but a man with the given name Fu. That Mencius feels the need to introduce this man ("among the inhabitants of Jin. . .") suggests that Feng Fu was unrenowned. It is even possible that Mencius made him up. After all, Fung Fu's native state of Jin was located several hundred miles from Mencius's main area of activity, which conveniently complicates verification of the story. Hence, the opening line of the anecdote could be read as "somewhere far away there was someone who. . ." with the specific details merely adding a coating of credibility. Still, even if Feng Fu is a fictional character, this would make no difference for the meaning of the passage, which is not about historical accuracy, but about conveying a philosophical message through the medium of an anecdote.

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[2] *Mencius* 2B.4: 凶年饑歲, 子之民, 老羸轉於溝壑, 壯者散而之四方者, 幾千人矣.

[3] *Mencius* 7B.10: 周于利者凶年不能殺, 周于德者邪世不能亂.

II. Tiger Catcher

The anecdote told by Mencius suggests that Feng Fu as a young man excelled at catching tigers, which merits a closer look as this is no workaday occupation. Of the various words for hunting and catching animals in Classical Chinese, Mencius here uses *bo* 搏. The written form contains the stylized image of a hand, 扌, as a semantic element. The spoken form, now *bo*, in ancient times was closer to *pak*, which is possibly the onomatopoeic representation of a punch or a blow from the fist.[4] If the latter conjecture is correct, the visual and oral forms combine to suggest a violent action involving hands. This coheres with the word's usage elsewhere in the *Mencius*. In the famed debate on human nature, Mencius says of water that "by striking it you can make it splash up above your forehead"[5] In another dialogue he speaks of someone being "held down and detained" 搏執 (*Mencius* 4B.3). Both cases involve physical contact between the hands and an external object upon which they apply force, whether by splashing up water or holding down a person. The story of Feng Fu similarly involves physical contact between him and tigers, whom he fights and pins down with his bare hands. These fights require athletic ability, dexterity, and above all intrepidity. They are spectacular displays of his closeness to nature, both literally and figuratively. This is man at his most primitive; his animal nature comes fully to the fore. In the traditional Chinese dichotomy between "civility" (*wen* 文) and "martiality" (*wu* 武), the tiger fighter perfectly embodies the latter value.

When Mencius introduces Feng Fu as a tiger fighter, he mentions an extraordinary but no imaginary occupation. Animal fights of this kind were more common in ancient China than today. In those days, as Mark E. Lewis observes, the Chinese "battled animals hand-to-hand as displays of courage during hunts" (Lewis 1989, 154). An apposite example is an Ode 詩 titled "Senior Younger Brother in the [Hunting] Fields" 大叔於田 (*Maoshi zhengyi* 4.2; cf. Mao 2000, 333),

4 Baxter and Sagart (2014) reconstruct this word in Old Chinese as *pˁak.

5 *Mencius* 6A.2: 搏而躍之可使過顙.

which contains these lines:

You bare your chest for the apprehension	襢裼暴虎
of a tiger to present to the lord's mansion.	獻於公所
Oh, younger brother, don't be reckless,	將叔無狃
beware or you'll sustain a laceration.	戒其傷女[6]

The Ode's portrayal of the younger brother baring his chest is reminiscent of Mencius's remark that Feng Fu rolled up his sleeves when he alighted from the carriage. Both vestiary actions add colorful detail to the narration, and they signal an eagerness to engage in hand-to-paw combat. These men were not involuntarily thrown to the lions; they readily flung themselves at tigers!

Animal combat in ancient China occurred even at the highest echelons of society (Lewis 1989, 155). The Ode illustrates this, as it tells the story of Duan 段, the younger brother of Lord Zhuang of Zheng 鄭莊公 (r. 743–701 BCE). The first two lines depict Duan's intention to present his older brother with a feral gift as an unsubtle hint of his fearlessness and strength. In real life, Duan fearlessly led a rebellion against his brother in 722 BCE (*Zuozuan*, Yin 1; cf. Zuo 2000, 57–62). The last two lines of the Ode warn that his rashness may lead to injury, ostensibly by the tiger but possibly by his brother as well. In real life, the ruler of Zheng indeed crushed the rebellion.

Animal combat also occurred in the lower strata of society where, Lewis notes, the fights "were associated with men prone to violence," such as "wastrel youths [. . .], criminals, and other marginal figures" (Lewis 1989, 155). If he ever lived, Feng Fu was probably one of those marginal figures, because Mencius introduces him as someone "among the inhabitants of Jin," not as a member of the elite. His animalistic skills must have been of great use, because recent research shows that tigers roamed over most of China in those days (Kang et al. 2010, 337). Hence, there likely was a demand for dauntless men who could safeguard society from these ferocious creatures. In the literary world of the anecdote, this is reflected by the observation

6 My translation reflects the rhyme in lines 1, 2, and 4: *q^{hs}ra?, *s-q^{h}ra?, and *nra? in the Baxter and Sagart reconstruction.

that the villagers "rushed to welcome him," and that "the whole crowd was pleased with him."

Not everyone appreciated men who were that close to nature. For example, Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE) would not put someone who fights tigers in charge of the army, because the commanding officer "must be someone who stands in awe of the task that he faces, and succeeds due to his predilection for devising strategies."[7] In Confucius's view, the very qualities required for wrestling with wild animals, such as bravery and celerity, disqualify someone from overseeing the troops, which requires reflection and restraint, two qualities he clearly ranks higher. Others likewise recognized the dangers of martiality, especially when insufficiently accompanied by civility. They argued for a balance between the two, or even better, as one text puts it, "two measures of civility for each measure of martiality" 二文一武 (*Huangdi sijing* 1.5; cf. Chen 1995, 172). Mencius seems to share this sentiment, as he presents a new side of Feng Fu that outbalances his animalistic nature.

III. Gentleman

Mencius suggests that Feng Fu later in life became a *shi* 士. This term has several meanings, in the *Mencius* as well as in general. Absent a perfect equivalent in English, it is variously translated as "knight," "scholar," "official," "gentleman," and so on. The latter translation is adopted in this article, as it captures some of the versatility of the Chinese term. As a prominent cultural concept, *shi* occurs in many ancient texts, and features in several modern studies (e.g., Hsu 1965, 89–106; Yu 1987, 1–128). However, in order to understand what it means specifically for Mencius to call Feng Fu a *shi*, we must explore the meaning of this term in the *Mencius*, which mentions it over ninety times. The following overview is based on my analysis of all *shi* mentions in the *Mencius*.[8]

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7 *Analects* 7.11: 必也臨事而懼, 好謀而成者也.

8 For a comparable analysis, see LaFargue (1994, 69–94), who describes what he calls "Shih-Idealists" based on numerous *Mencius* passages.

Mencius broadly divides society into four levels (ruler, high nobility, low nobility, common people), and he associates *shi* with the third level. While the first two levels held the highest and often hereditary offices, *shi* offered various services to those above them (*Mencius* 3B.4). As men of service, *shi* barely outranked those below them. Mencius even mentions the lowest two social strata in the same breath when he speaks of "gentlemen and commoners" 士庶人 (*Mencius* 1A.1, 4A.3). He also notes that the starting emolument of a *shi* is comparable to that of a commoner who, when performing a public task, had to be compensated for not being able to cultivate the land (*Mencius* 5B.2).

What truly characterizes *shi* is not their social status or wealth, but their mentality. As Mencius puts it, "only gentlemen are capable of keeping a stable mind while lacking stable means."[9] They acquire this steady mentality through education. He gives the example of someone called Chen Liang 陳良, whose excellence in learning earned him the appellation "preeminent gentleman" 豪傑之士 (*Mencius* 3A.4). As educated men, *shi* were the intelligentsia of their time and nearly all philosophers, including Mencius, belonged to this social stratum. The education of *shi* was aimed not at erudition, but at moral cultivation. For example, Chen Liang is said to have "delighted in the ways of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius" 悅周公仲尼之道, two paragons of virtue (*Mencius* 3A.4). As cultivated men, *shi* observe core values such as "humaneness" (*ren* 仁) and "rightness" (*yi* 義) (*Mencius* 7A.33). On the latter value, *Mencius* says:

> When impoverished, gentlemen do not lose hold of rightness. When accomplished, they do not stray from their path. By not losing hold of rightness, even when impoverished, they acquire character. By not straying from their path, even when accomplished, the people do not lose hope in them.[10]

As "practitioners of humaneness and rightness" 為仁義者 who "preserve the ways of the ancient kings while awaiting those who would learn

[9] *Mencius* 1A.7: 無恆產而有恆心者惟士為能.

[10] *Mencius* 7A.9: 士窮不失義, 達不離道. 窮不失義故士得己焉, 達不離道故民不失望焉.

them" 守先王之道以待後之學者, *shi* are ideally suited to advise rulers (*Mencius* 3B.4). Similar to farmers, weavers, carpenters, and wheelwrights, who provide food, clothes, and other tangible goods, *shi* offer models of proper conduct. It may be difficult to appraise their intangible wares, but Mencius maintains that *shi* should be decently remunerated, presumably because of their impact. While other professions improve the livelihood of rulers, *shi* refine their behavior. In Mencius's ideal world, rulers lead by example and their refined behavior permeates through society in what we may call "trickle-down morality." The populace benefits from this, which is presumably why Mencius in the quotation above claims that "the people do not lose hope" in *shi*.

As advisors to rulers, *shi* had a solemn duty to speak truth to power. Mencius even claims that a state may perish without "gentlemen who offer admonishments" 拂士 (*Mencius* 6B.15). This epithet also applies to himself, as evidenced by many episodes in the text. Consider the well-known opening passage, where a king courteously welcomes Mencius in hope of enriching his kingdom. Mencius instantly asseverates that he only intends to discuss moral enrichment (*Mencius* 1A.1). "Everyone is shocked, reeling from [his] audacity in rebuking the king," in Van Norden's lively depiction of the scene (2011, 84).

When *shi* endeavor to offer well-intentioned advice to a head of state, they may expect that the advice be followed. This did not always happen, leading to two unpleasant scenarios:

(1) In the worst case, the advice could invoke the ruler's wrath and lead to the advisor's untimely death. An example well known to Mencius is Bi Gan 比干, whose unappreciated advice led to his gruesome end at the behest of Zhòu 紂, the infamous last king of the Shang 商 (16th–11th c. BCE) dynasty. In Mencius's view, such examples should not deter *shi*, because "a strong-minded gentleman never forgets that he may end in a ditch, and a stout-hearted gentleman never forgets that he may forfeit his head."[11] Speaking for himself, he adds: "I am very fond of life, but I am also fond of rightness, and if I

[11] *Mencius* 3B.1: 志士不忘在溝壑, 勇士不忘喪其元.

cannot have both, I will give up life and go with rightness."[12] Ivanhoe illuminates Mencius's view:

> virtuous agents who face extreme adversity and risk death are fully aware of how bad it is and *intensely dislike* the prospect. Yet despite finding the thought of their own death repulsive, they do not turn away from such threats when these stand in the way of doing what is right. Ethically good people feel the danger and loathe the prospect of dying but are *unmoved* in their pursuit of the good. (Ivanhoe 2006, 230)

As Mencius himself puts it, a *shi* does what is right, even if it would kill him, and avoids what is wrong, even if it would benefit him, because "those who bend themselves can never straighten others."[13]

(2) In a not-worst-but-still-bad scenario, the ruler simply ignores the advice. In that case, the advisor's work would be in vain, and he dies what I would call a "vocational death," which for a man devoted to service differs little from the physical death of someone whose unwanted advice cost him his life. Unappreciated by the ruler, the vocationally dead gentleman must seek his employ elsewhere. In Mencius's words, if the person in charge is unworthy, "gentlemen keep themselves over a thousand miles away," and only if he is worthy do "gentlemen from all over the world come to him in great numbers."[14]

In summation, what does it mean for Mencius to call Feng Fu a gentleman? Zhao Qi relates it to Feng Fu's courage as a tiger fighter (Zhao 2000, 462). Being a *shi* indeed requires a strong dose of courage, but it involves much more than that. Mencius generally presents *shi* as exemplary men who are well-educated and well-mannered, who have a highly developed sense of dignity and honor, and who—at the risk of life if need be—endeavor to do what is right. In other words, being a *shi* is not a logical extension of being a tiger fighter. Rather, it

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[12] *Mencius* 6A.10: 生亦我所欲也, 義亦我所欲也, 二者不可得兼, 舍生而取義者也.
[13] *Mencius* 3B.1: 枉己者未有能直人者也.
[14] *Mencius* 6B.13: 士止於千里之外; 5A.1: 天下之士多就之.

involves a radical transformation from a martial temperament to a civility-driven mentality.

IV. Laughter

While Mencius presents *shi* as exemplary men, in the anecdote that he tells, they laugh at someone who helps others fight a tiger. This help can be seen as an expression of humaneness, which is a core value of the *shi*. Why, then, do they laugh at a man who lends a helping hand?

The answer, in my view, is rooted in Mencius's understanding of human nature. While he is known for the slogan "human nature is good" 性善, he actually describes humans in less positive terms. He espouses what I would call a scale of sophistication. At the one end, there are the uncouth who give free rein to their animal instincts; at the other, civilized people who bridle their instincts and behave appropriately at all times. The average person does not dwell in the center of the scale, as we might expect, but towards the lesser end: "humans have a propensity to fill their belly, dress warmly, and live comfortably; they are close to birds and beasts, were it not for education."[15] In other words, in fulfilling our basic needs we are barely distinguishable from animals, and only learning (specifically, moral learning) can set us apart. As Roger T. Ames notes: "For Mencius, an undeveloped human being—someone who is resolutely uneducated and uncultured—is not in any important sense 'human'" (Ames 1991, 163).

Mencius famously assumes that all people (even the uncouth) possess "sprouts" 端 of moral behavior. Moral growth involves developing those inner sprouts, which requires dedication, perseverance, and above all, patience:

> A peasant in Song was disappointed that his seedlings would not grow, so he pulled at them. Coming home dead beat, he told his family, "What a back-breaking day! I helped the seedlings grow."

[15] *Mencius* 3A.4: 人之有道也, 飽食, 煖衣, 逸居而無教則近於禽獸.

> His sons ran out to inspect the seedlings, but they had already withered.[16]

Analogous to growth in nature, progress on the scale of sophistication cannot be rushed. It is "a learning process with which we must engage," Xinzhong Yao notes, adding that the process only "gradually leads to the realization of our potential" (2018, 195). Ordinary people need a role model (parent, teacher, etc.) to guide them in this process and encourage them to do right, but *shi* have successfully learned to exhibit proper conduct of their own accord. In Mencius's own words:

> Those who await a King Wen before they bestir themselves are average people, whereas preeminent gentlemen bestir themselves even when there is no King Wen around.[17]

Proper conduct is "second nature" to gentlemen, or rather, the sprouts that were latent in their first and only nature are fully grown. On the scale of sophistication, they inhabit the positive end. It would be inconceivable for such a person, after a long process of careful self-cultivation, to suddenly slump to the negative end of the scale. Yet that is exactly what happened to Feng Fu.

As a gentleman on an outing to the countryside, he encountered frightened villagers who were unable to subjugate the sharp-clawed creature he was formerly trained to fight. Feng Fu now faced a dilemma (cf. Wang 2002, 63). If he rejected their appeal for help, he would show callous disregard for their distress. This would make him inhuman: not humane and barely even human. In one word, he would be a beast (*Mencius* 4A.17 brands such people as "jackals and wolves" 豺狼, as discussed below). However, if he heeded their plea, the ensuing hand-to-paw combat would rekindle his primal instincts and essentially reduce him to an animal as well.

Feng Fu may not have been aware of the dilemma. For him, helping others while at the same time enjoying his former profession

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16 *Mencius* 2A.2: 宋人有閔其苗之不長而揠之者. 芒芒然歸, 謂其人曰 "今日病矣! 予助苗長矣." 其子趨而往視之, 苗則槁矣.

17 *Mencius* 7A.10: 待文王而後興者凡民也, 若夫豪傑之士雖無文王猶興.

meant putting his old skills to good use—a win-win situation for the villagers and for himself. This explains his instantaneous reaction. The locals had only just welcomed him when he "*immediately* bared his arms, and descended from the carriage."[18] On the spur of the moment, Feng Fu must have forgotten that the demeanor of a tiger fighter is incompatible with that of a gentleman.

The other gentlemen were not that forgetful. When they learned how easily Feng Fu fell into his old and ungentlemanly habits, they snorted with laughter. As a gentleman, Feng Fu must have undergone the long moral training that made them into sophisticated men who control their animal instincts. Yet as soon as the opportunity arose he charged at a tiger again. Myeong-Seok Kim calls this "emotional backsliding," which is when "a person of some degree of moral cultivation falls back to succumb to his old temptation and do what is not morally desirable" (2014, 67). This retrogression shows that Feng Fu had not managed to shake off his old animalistic self. His refinement turned out to be no more than a thin layer of varnish. With his descent from the carriage to fight the tiger, he effectively excommunicated himself, unbecoming as it is for a gentleman to "engage in feats of such foolhardiness," as Dobson puts it (1963, 51).[19]

Now that we know why the gentlemen in the anecdote laughed at Feng Fu, how does the narrator, Mencius, judge their laughter? He ends the anecdote rather abruptly with a remark in which he presents two diametrically opposed responses to Feng Fu's descent: approval by the crowd ("pleased with him") versus disapproval by the gentlemen ("laughed at him"). He does not express a preference for either response, leaving it to readers to assess them.

Given the overwhelmingly positive portrayal of *shi* throughout the *Mencius*, and the text's suggestion that Mencius belonged to their group, as discussed in the previous section of this article, readers may reasonably assume that he would side with the gentlemen in

[18] As translated by Legge ([1861] 1991, 488), who added the word in italics to highlight the immediacy of the action.

[19] For similar remarks, see Legge ([1861] 1991, 489), Faber (1882, 121), LaFargue (1994, 90), and Van Norden (2008, 189).

disapproving of Feng Fu's behavior in the countryside. However, this assumption may be challenged by a similar ethical dilemma elsewhere in the text, which revolves around the question whether a man may lend a helping hand to a drowning woman if it violates the moral rule that prevents physical contact between (unmarried) men and women (*Mencius* 4A.17). In response to that dilemma, Mencius pulls an ideal tool from his philosophical toolbox: *quan* 權, variously translated as "weighing circumstances," "moral discretion," etc. In her in-depth analysis of *quan*, Griet Vankeerberghen (2005, 74) remarks that "moral or ritual rules are never absolute, and that the agent, occasionally, may face the necessity of breaking them," because "a failure to break the rules would have extreme and unpleasant consequences." Wielding *quan* enables Mencius to declare that a man is exceptionally allowed, and even morally obliged, to extend his hand when a woman is at risk of being swallowed by water. By parallel, he may hold that Feng Fu was morally obliged to bare his arms when villagers were at risk of being clawed by a tiger. Hence, readers could reasonably assume that he would side with the crowd in approving of Feng Fu's behavior in the countryside.

If readers can muster arguments and evidence for either view, why did Mencius not follow the anecdote with his final judgment of Feng Fu. We could conveniently argue that the text is corrupt, and that the judgment was somehow omitted from Mencius's statement in the course of the text's transmission. However, note that the statement is not only open-ended, but also open-started. When told that the starving population of Qi hopes that he will plead once again with their king to open the state granary, Mencius does not provide a straightforward answer, whether affirmative or negative, but merely states that it "would be to act like Feng Fu," which can be interpreted either way. Hence, it seems that the text is not necessarily corrupt, and that the ambiguity is deliberate. The underlying reasons may become clearer when we take a closer look at the frame narrative that contains the anecdote.

V. Repetition

The anecdote involving the tiger is a story within a story involving famine. When the Mencius character in the outer story speaks of acting like the Feng Fu character in the inner story, he draws a parallel between himself and the tiger catcher. This suggests that their situations are analogous. How, exactly, does the analogy work? This question is important, because the answer affects our understanding of the meaning of the passage as a whole.

One interpretation of the analogy is expressed most elaborately by Cui Aofei (2012, 40–41). In this interpretation, the tiger corresponds to the ruler, and catching the tiger to persuading the ruler.

Table 1. Target-Action Scenario

Protagonist	Target	Action
Feng Fu	tiger	catching the tiger
Mencius	ruler	persuading the ruler

There are several problems with this scenario. For starters, the ruler is not mentioned in the outer story, which renders a correspondence with the tiger in the inner story unlikely. Furthermore, in this interpretation the main message of the nested narrative would be that persuading a ruler is as dangerous as catching a tiger, and that just like Feng Fu may fail to catch the tiger, Mencius may fail to persuade the ruler. Indeed, several scholars apparently consider this to be the main takeaway from the passage, for they also think that Mencius expects another plea to be futile. For instance, Bloom notes that "Mencius evidently believed that his second request would be rejected" (2009, 161).[20] In my view, this reading may not be altogether plausible for two reasons.

Firstly, Feng Fu is introduced as a skillful tiger catcher, and nowhere

[20] For similar remarks, see Faber (1882, 121) and Eno (2016, 156).

does the text hint that he may lose. We may therefore reasonably assume that Feng Fu "presumably dealt with the tiger, though the text does not say so" (Dobson 1963, 51). One could, of course, argue that his skills had faded over time, or that even the best fighters at some point lose. However, in that case the main message of the passage would be a bland "quit while you're ahead," which is hardly the kind of advice one would expect from Mencius.

Secondly, nowhere does the text suggest that Mencius believes his request would be in vain. Even if that were the case, the main message would be a bleak "do the right thing, except when you think you may fail." Mencius would not want to be associated with this defeatist outlook, which clashes with his aforementioned view that a *shi* does what is right, even if it would kill him.

My interpretation of the analogy is different. In my view, the tiger corresponds to the famine (both are problems), and catching the tiger to distributing grain (both are solutions).

Table 2. Problem-Solution Scenario

Protagonist	Problem	Solution
Feng Fu	tiger	catching the tiger
Mencius	famine	distributing grain

Both Feng Fu and Mencius faced a problem. For the former, it was a stray tiger that threatened locals in a rural area; for the latter, a famine that starved the inhabitants of a state. The two men did not cause these problems, but they were called upon to offer solutions: Feng Fu by the locals; Mencius by the people of Qi. Both men were hailed as potential saviors on account of previous successes in their respective fields: Feng Fu in catching tigers, Mencius in persuading rulers. In all these ways their situations are analogous, but the analogy falls short in two regards.

(1) As a former tiger catcher, Feng Fu has the ability to attack the problem directly, but Mencius lacks the authority to issue grain. He

can only address the problem indirectly, by imploring the authorities to do so. This has important implications, as we shall soon see.

(2) Fighting the tiger makes Feng Fu revert to his animalistic self, which from a *shi* perspective is inherently wrong, but asking the ruler to open the granary does not make Mencius an animal. Hence, the analogy he sees between the tiger catcher and himself is not in *what* they do, but in *repeating* what they do. Feng Fu is asked to fight again; Mencius to plead again. From a *shi* perspective, pleading for the distribution of grain is not inherently wrong, but repeating it is (cf. S. Kim 2010, 37–38).

To understand the problem of repetition, we may start by looking at Mencius's views on rulership. He maintains that the responsibility for order in a state lies with the person in charge. Order requires sensible governance, including agricultural policies that account for the possibility of a failed harvest so as to guarantee the continued nutrition of the populace. Famine, a manifest aberration of the orderly state, denotes failure of governance. Mencius leaves no doubt about who is to blame, when he tells a head of state:

> When people starve to death and you say, "it wasn't me, it was the harvest," how does this differ from stabbing someone to death and saying, "it wasn't me, it was the knife"?[21]

During a previous famine in Qi, which Chen Zhen hints at in the frame narrative, Mencius had apparently implored the ruler to issue grain, as an expedient measure for the emaciated and, presumably, as a warning for the ruler to improve his agricultural policies. That Qi now faces famine anew suggests that the warning has not been heeded, at least not adequately. "Considering the recurrence of the same problem," Sungmoon Kim notes, "the famine was indeed man-made, which makes it a social problem affiliated with the failure of the local government's public policy" (2010, 37–38). Failed policy not only caused the famine, but also exacerbated the hunger, because while people are starving again, the king had "apparently decided it

[21] *Mencius* 1A.3: 人死則曰 "非我也, 歲也" 是何異於刺人而殺之, 曰 "非我也, 兵也."

is not yet time to dip into the grain the state has stored up for such occasions" (LaFargue 1994, 98), even though Mencius's previous plea had suggested this to be the proper course of action. Naturally, Mencius could repeat his plea to open the granary. However, as I mentioned earlier, he holds gentlemen who offer admonishments in high esteem. In this case, not repeating his request could be construed as an admonition through silence, for it gives the king a nonverbal schooling in who is responsible for the problem and its solution.

Mencius's theory of political responsibility explains the merit of not repeating the plea, but not the harm of repeating it. Chen Zhen seems to have the latter in mind when he tells Mencius "I apprehend you cannot do so again." This forces us to find a stronger explanation of why repetition would be wrong. As I have shown, when a *shi* offers advice to a ruler who fails to appreciate it, his talents are wasted and he should seek employ elsewhere. Suppose, hypothetically, that Mencius repeated his request. He would thereby acquiesce in the paucity of action following his earlier imploration, and implicitly admit that his advice need not be heeded, which weakens his credibility as an advisor. As Bloom (2009, 161) notes, "Mencius evidently believed that [. . .] he would lose a measure of credibility, as did Feng Fu when he reverted to an earlier role of tiger tamer." More generally it diminishes the gravity of the role of advisor, which may explain why he expects to be derided by other *shi* if he were to act as Feng Fu. He would betray their dignity and no longer deserve to be in their midst. That, in my view, is why Mencius carefully ponders the consequences and presumably declines to repeat his plea for grain, though the text does not explicitly say so.

This raises the question of why *shi* identity is so important to Mencius. In the anecdote about the tiger, the villagers welcome Feng Fu to lend them a helping hand, and in the frame narrative about the famine, the inhabitants of Qi want Mencius to help them as well. If a helpful action pleases the multitudes, why would it matter that it displeases the relatively small group of *shi*? Feng Fu seems unbothered by this, for he charges at the tiger anyway, but Mencius is more cautious. I suspect that this is related to the opportunities of *shi* to do good. As a tiger catcher, Feng Fu can help only one village at a

time, but as an advisor to a head of state he would be able to enhance people's livelihood on a much larger scale. Sadly, he squandered this opportunity with his ungentlemanly behavior in the countryside. Unlike Feng Fu, Mencius seems fully aware that he faces a devilish dilemma:

- If he repeats his plea for the distribution of grain, he would help the ill-fed now, but diminish his credibility and his standing as a *shi*, and thereby limit his chances of offering similar help in the future.
- If he does not repeat his plea for the distribution of grain, he would leave the ill-fed to their fate, but retain his credibility and his standing as a *shi*, and thereby maintain his chances of offering similar help in the future.

This ethical dilemma is a real quandary over choosing between *actual* help-seekers in the present, and an unknown number of *potential* help-seekers in the future. If I am right in assuming that Mencius opts to *not* act like Feng Fu, he leaves the victims of this one famine to their fate, which his theory of political responsibility enables him to do, in hopes of aiding victims of disasters to come. While there is no good answer to the dilemma, as people die either way, Mencius seems to opt for the largest possible reach of his talents, which he expects to find in the future.

One might ask, as I did earlier, why Mencius does not apply *quan* here. After all, since he asserts that the perils of drowning override objections to physical contact between unmarried men and women, he could similarly argue that the perils of starving override objections to repeating a plea. However, this may be approaching it from the wrong angle, because what if Mencius actually did consider *quan*, and concluded that the situation did not warrant an exception? To explore this a little further, it may be worth quoting the passage on the drowning woman in full:

> Chunyu Kun asked, "Does ritual propriety entail that, in giving and receiving, men and women must not touch one another?" "It does," said Mencius. "If your sister-in-law were drowning, would you

> rescue her with your hand?" Mencius replied, "Only a beast would not rescue a drowning sister-in-law. While ritual propriety entails that in giving and receiving men and women must not touch one another, rescuing a drowning sister-in-law with a hand is a matter of expedience [*quan*]." "Then why is it that you do not come to the rescue now that the whole world is drowning?" Mencius replied, "When the world is drowning, you rescue it with the Way. When a sister-in-law is drowning, you rescue her with your hand. Do you wish me to rescue the world with my hand?"[22]

The first part of this passage is often invoked in discussions of *quan*, for it illustrates the view that the moral agent may occasionally face the necessity of breaking moral or ritual rules. The latter part of the passage is less popular, but no less important. After Mencius asserts that extending a hand to rescue a woman is a matter of expedience, his contemporary Chunyu Kun, the quick-tongued courtier from the state of Qi, asks why Mencius would not lend a helping hand to rescue the world. Mencius thereupon draws a distinction between the means to rescue one person and the means to rescue the whole world. He ends with a rhetorical question that perplexes scholars. For example, Legge notes "I hardly see the point of the last question" ([1861] 1991, 308), and Lau suggests that "Mencius' final question seems totally irrelevant" (1963, 180). In my view, the rhetorical question serves two purposes, namely (a) to ridicule Chunyu Kun, by pretending to take literally the phrase "the whole world is drowning," which the courtier clearly meant figuratively, and (b) to make the important point that expedience does not apply when rescuing the world.

In his in-depth analysis of this passage, D.C. Lau distinguishes between instrumental and constitutive means to achieve goals (1963, 180). The hand is an instrumental means to rescue someone from drowning; it is one of several possible means (one could also use a stick); and it is morally neutral (a hand can be used for good or bad ends). The Way is a constitutive means to rescue a world in disorder.

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[22] *Mencius* 4A.17: 淳于髡曰 "男女授受不親, 禮與?" 孟子曰 "禮也." 曰 "嫂溺則援之以手乎?" 曰 "嫂溺不援, 是豺狼也. 男女授受不親, 禮也; 嫂溺援之以手者, 權也." 曰 "今天下溺矣, 夫子之不援, 何也?" 曰 "天下溺, 援之以道; 嫂溺, 援之以手. 子欲手援天下乎?"

When rescued, the world is said to "have the Way" 有道, which suggests a strong bond between means and end. The Way is not morally neutral, because immoral usage equals "lacking the Way" 無道. Unlike moral or ritual rules, which in exceptional circumstances may be broken, the Way may never be compromised. When Chunyu Kun suggests that Mencius should treat saving the world as a matter of expedience (*quan*), he "did not realize that the price for such a compromise was so high as to defeat its very purpose" (Lau 1963, 184).

This brings us back to the tiger and the famine. It seems that in both cases, *quan* does not apply, because being a *shi* is a constitutive means to achieve goals. It is not a ritual prohibition that can be broken as a matter of expedience, but a lifestyle of the highest moral caliber that cannot be compromised, because even a single exception —fighting one tiger or repeating one plea—would defeat its very purpose. It would strip the moral agent of his gentlemanliness, his raison d'être.

In summary, when it comes to ethical dilemmas, Mencius seems to uphold a hierarchy. If a situation exceptionally calls for breaking a specific moral or ritual rule, this is allowable when observing the rule would yield worse consequences than violating it. However, if the situation affects the sum total of all rules (the Way), or the integrity of the moral agent (the *shi*) who embodies it, exceptions do not apply.

VI. Conclusion

In his article "Casuistry and Character in the *Mencius*," Robert Eno draws attention to casuistic passages in the text. Such passages provide instances of how exemplary people—first and foremost, Mencius himself—respond to morally difficult situations. Exploring the case-specific responses enables readers to gain access to the authoritative morality of these sages. As Eno puts it, casuistic passages invite readers "to engage in a hermeneutic of personal exploration, approaching through imaginative acts of *verstehen* [understanding] the perspective of the authoritative sage" (2002, 189–190). The

methodology of *verstehen*, which he defines as "an empathetic grasp of virtue perspectives cultivated through hermeneutic probing of historical narratives," can be challenging, especially when the narrative is unclear. The present article has attempted to understand the abstruse passage involving the reappearance of famine in Qi. If Mencius serves as an exemplary figure in the text, as Eno suggests, what are readers to learn from his response to this morally difficult situation? In my view, there are several take-aways from this passage, both methodological and philosophical.

While casuistic passages present specific cases of morally difficult situations, reading them in isolation would be unwise. The passages are embedded in a textual and cultural context, which may be helpful in understanding their full import. In this particular case it proved helpful to glance at other *Mencius* passages featuring Chen Zhen, as they tend to address the integrity of political advisors, a main concern in this passage as well. Similarly, other ancient writings illustrated the prevalence of tiger fighting, and the distaste for the practice by some scholars, particularly those of a Confucian persuasion. Finally, to understand the pivotal concept in this passage, *shi*, it proved vital to analyze portrayals of these men elsewhere in the *Mencius*.

This passage teaches readers that the *shi*-ideal, the perfect embodiment of the Confucian way, is sacrosanct to Mencius. The ideal cannot be abandoned, even in situations of dire need, and exceptions of moral discretion (*quan*) do not apply. Mencius views *shi* as people of the highest moral caliber, who care deeply for the wellbeing of others. They strive for the largest possible reach of their care, by improving the living standards of the people though guidance of those in power. They accept the sovereign's authority, but not unconditionally, for they possess the wisdom and the courage to speak truth to power. In return they expect recognition, which entails that their advice is taken up. If recognition is not forthcoming, this violates their credibility and dignity, and forces them to look for rulers who do appreciate their insights, even if this means, as it seems to do here, that they must leave the emaciated to their fate. By opting to not address the life-threatening tribulations of the population of Qi, Mencius is making the point that for a *shi* something more important

is at stake: his principles. To him, these outweigh everything, even life. Mencius is willing to give up life, his own or that of others, to prevent the dilution of principles. After all, he who bends himself can no longer straighten others.

This passage also teaches readers that the *shi*-ideal represents a reflective frame of mind. It portrays Feng Fu as a rash character who acts, seemingly without thinking, based on his primary impulses. By contrast, the text reveals how Mencius, as a moral exemplar, responds to a similar situation, that is, with thought and restraint. He resembles the kind of military commander that was admired by Confucius. Strength and courage may be important qualities in battle, but impulsively charging at an opponent, whether human or feline, creates unnecessary exposure to risk. Wise commanders, and *shi*, make decisions only after careful contemplation.

Finally, the passage suggests that a reflective mind expresses itself through measured speech. Morally difficult situations involve painful choices. In this particular case, the choice is between, on the one hand, helping people now while losing one's credibility as a *shi* and, on the other hand, maintaining one's credibility as a *shi* while hoping to help people in the future. If my reading of the passage is correct, Mencius opts for the latter. It must be painful for him to turn a deaf ear to the cries of hunger coming from Qi, which may explain why he does not offer a straightforward answer to Chen Zhen's question, and responds with an allusive anecdote about a tiger catcher instead.[23] If he had made his choice explicit, he would have shown the people of Qi that he abandoned them, which someone who maintains that humans have "a heart that does not remain indifferent to others" 不忍人之心 simply could not do (*Mencius* 2A.6). Moreover, by not expressing his choice, Mencius forces readers to ponder the problem with him, thereby enabling them to come to their own *verstehen* of the course of action preferred by moral exemplars.

[23] Wilhelm calls this *redend schweigen* ([1916] 1921, 177n21), which implies that Mencius remains silent on a certain topic, deliberately avoiding addressing it, while still talking.

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