

Philosophical Foundation of Reasonableness in Mencius's Argumentative Discourse: Based on the use of dissociation

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Mencius was known as “being fond of argumentation”. The philosophical foundation of reasonableness in Mencius's argumentative discourse is analysed by resorting to the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion where dissociation appears with different argumentative functions. The analysis reveals that reasonableness is originated in goodness in human nature, which is embodied as humaneness and righteousness respectively, and which is reflected in holding to the Mean that is based on principle and allows for expediency.

KEYWORDS: Reasonableness, Mencius, Argumentative discourse, Dissociation, Humaneness, Righteousness, Holding to the Mean

1. INTRODUCTION

Mencius (372 BC - 289 BC), the “second sage” after Confucius in the school of Confucianism, was one of the reputed public intellectuals of “Hundred Schools of Thought” in the Warring States period of ancient China. He was known as “being fond of argumentation” in his times, as was recorded in Book 3B9 (See in this paper all the quotes of Mencius's

discourse in APPENDIX) of his work *Mencius*. In response, Mencius gave his reasons for argumentation. The numerous researches on the work *Mencius* also conclude that Mencius is well recognized as being good at argumentation, too. Then a question must have come to our minds: Since Mencius was known as being fond of and good at argumentation, and he seemingly had noble reasons for argumentation, what is the philosophical foundation of reasonableness in his argumentative discourse?

To elaborate the philosophical foundation of reasonableness in Mencius's argumentative discourse, examples with the argumentative technique of dissociation will be analyzed with the use of the theoretical model of critical discussion in pragma-dialectics, especially the four discussion stages at which dissociation may appear, namely, the confrontation stage (establishing the standpoint and the difference of opinion), the opening stage (clarifying the parties concerned and common grounds), the argumentation stage (putting forward argumentation and critical responses) and the concluding stage (getting a result of the discussion) (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p. 35). Section 2 will probe into the moral metaphysical foundation of reasonableness through analyzing examples of dissociation in Mencius's argumentative discourse on human nature. Following the moral metaphysical foundation of reasonableness, Section 3 will discuss examples of dissociation which may lay bare the embodiments of the metaphysical foundation, namely, humaneness and righteousness, a combination of Confucian virtue ethic and Confucian deontic ethic. Section 4 will further analyze examples of dissociation to see how Mencius put humaneness and righteousness into practice in terms of Confucian practical ethic. Section 5 will conclude the paper.

2. REASONABLENESS ORIGINATED IN CONFUCIAN MORAL METAPHYSICS – HUMAN NATURE BEING GOOD

In Mencius's times, an era of "Hundred Schools of Thought", discussion about human nature was not just heated but also indispensable, for different views about human nature led directly to different claims about moral and political life. The term "nature" or "human nature" has been acknowledged to be one of the key terms in the "common discourse" in the Warring States period (Schwartz 1985, p. 174). More specifically, views on human nature constitute the philosophical bases of the different academic schools. In Book 6A6 of the work *Mencius*, Gongduzi quoted four different views about human nature. Mencius was the first Confucian who proposed that human nature is good in Book 3A1 and argued for it with quite a few passages in the work *Mencius*. According to Mencius, human nature being good should be more precisely elaborated as

inclination to goodness that is inherent in human nature, which is also the metaphysical ground of Confucian ethics (Xiao 2004, pp. 234-235; Yang 2017, p. 87). Such metaphysically philosophical foundation of reasonableness can be expounded in the following examples using dissociation.

Dissociation is an argumentative technique used to separate an original concept into two new ones, whose prototype is considered to be the philosophical pair of “appearance-reality”, with Term I representing the “appearance” level and Term II the “reality” level, while “Term I corresponds to the apparent, to what occurs in the first instance, to what is actual, immediate, and known directly”, and “Term II provides a criterion, a norm which allows us to distinguish those aspects of term I which are of value from those which are not” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, pp. 415-416). Agnes van Rees (2009) systematically analyzed and evaluated the use of dissociation at the four discussion stages in the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion, whose work can thus set as an example for the analysis of dissociation in Mencius’s argumentative discourse.

According to the work *Mencius*, Mencius argued mainly with Gaozi in an explicit manner on human nature, where Mencius argued that human nature is good, while Gaozi held that human nature is neither good nor non-good. For example, in Book 6A3, Gaozi explicitly claimed that that which is inborn is what is meant by “nature”, including human nature, while Mencius disagreed with him by putting as an example “white” as an abstract attribute opposed to the specific “white-colored” things. Book 6A4 further clarifies what Gaozi meant to be that which is inborn - appetite for food and sex.

Referring to Book 4B19, where Mencius pointed out on the one hand that “human beings differ from the birds and beasts (in nature)”, and on the other hand also emphasized that such difference is “slight”. This may imply that Mencius did not deny that the physiological aspect like appetite for food and sex is also part of human nature but in the meantime indicated that it is just not the total of human nature.

Apart from the physiological part, the rest part in human nature that differentiates human beings from birds and beasts is indicated in Book 3A1 and Book 6A6. Book 3A1 mentions for the first time that Mencius held that human nature is good, and in Book 6A6, Gongduzi, one of Mencius’s disciples, quoted the then prevailing views of human nature and asked Mencius straightforwardly what Mencius meant when saying human nature is good. In other words, Mencius dissociated human nature into the physiological part like appetite for food and sex (the “appearance” level) and the moral part of being good that distinguishes from birds and beasts (the “reality” level). So, the dissociation of human

nature here is used at the confrontation stage (**bolded**) of the discussion about human nature.

Mencius's dissociating human nature into the physiological part (the "appearance" level) (Book 6A3, Book 6A4) and the moral part (the "reality" level) (Book 4B19, Book 3A1 and Book 6A6) paves the way for expounding and argumentation on all his philosophical, ethical and political ideas. He especially highlighted the moral part in human nature, that is, the inclination to goodness that is inherent in human nature, which functions as a moral metaphysical source for reasonableness in his argumentative discourse. Such a moral metaphysical conception of reasonableness can explain the origin of humaneness (*Ren*), the core virtue put forward by Confucius, and of righteousness (*Yi*), the core deontic concept that was expanded by Mencius on the basis of the concept humaneness, while humaneness and righteousness are the internal embodiments of the moral goodness in human nature, as is illustrated in Book 4B19 quoted above. In Book 4B19, after pointing out that there is but slight difference between human beings and the birds and beasts, Mencius offered the example of the noble person Shun to show that Shun's noble actions came from his following humaneness and righteousness inherent in him. Here Mencius dissociated "doing humaneness and righteousness" into "following humaneness and righteousness inherent in him" (the "reality" level) and "just performing acts of humaneness and righteousness" (the "appearance" level). This dissociation belongs to the argumentation stage (underlined) of the discussion about human nature.

3. REASONABLENESS EMBODIED AS HUMANENESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS – A COMBINATION OF CONFUCIAN VIRTUE ETHIC AND CONFUCIAN DEONTIC ETHIC

Section 2 elaborates the moral metaphysical source of reasonableness in Confucianism, that is, the inclination to goodness that is inherent in human nature, which was put forward and expounded by Mencius. Such a moral metaphysical perspective on reasonableness in Mencius's argumentative discourse is embodied as humaneness, which includes the feeling of pity and commiseration and the feeling of approving and disapproving, and righteousness, which includes the feeling of shame and dislike and the feeling of respectfulness and reverence (See Book 2A6, Book 6A6 and Book 7A15), a combination of the Confucian virtue ethic and the Confucian deontic ethic. The following examples of dissociation in Mencius's kingcraft politics will be quoted to illustrate this point.

For example, in Book 2A3, according to a king's motives in performing humaneness, Mencius first differentiated a hegemon and a true king by dissociating "the act of performing humaneness" into

pretending to be humane by force (the “appearance” level) and practicing humaneness out of Virtue (the “reality” level). This dissociation functions as setting a common ground between Mencius and his potential audience (including the kings and dukes with whom he talked, like King Hui of Liang, King Xuan of Qi, Duke Wen of Teng and so on) by definition. So, this dissociation belongs to the opening stage (*italicized*) of the discussion about kingcraft.

Mencius further dissociated “people’s submission” into “people’s submission under force” (the “appearance” level) and “people’s submission out of Virtue” (the “reality” level) (Book 2A3). By quoting the example of the seventy disciples all submitting to Confucius and the ode taken from *Book of Songs*¹, we can see that what Mencius wanted to highlight is the “reality” levels in the two dissociations, thus forming his implicit standpoint about kingcraft: when a true king practices humaneness out of Virtue, people will submit to him sincerely. So, this second dissociation belongs to the argumentation stage (underlined).

Book 1B8 is another example with the use of dissociation that centers about humaneness and righteousness and is related with kingcraft. Between King Xuan of Qi and Mencius, after with the common acknowledgements of the previous ministers like Tang and Ji Fa (later King Wu of Zhou) banishing or assaulting the previous kings like King Jie of Xia and King Zhou of Shang, King Xuan of Qi raised the question whether it is allowed for a minister to slay a ruler. The doubt in King Xuan of Qi indicates the difference of opinion between him and Mencius about the issue. In reply, Mencius first explicated by definition the natures of those rulers who offend against humaneness and righteousness, as brigands, outlaws or outcasts. He then dissociated “the act of killing a ruler” into “slaying a ruler” (the “appearance” level) and “punishing an outcast who offended against humaneness and righteousness” (the “reality” level) (Book 1B8). Such a dissociation appears at the argumentation stage (underlined) of the discussion about how to view the act of killing rulers.

Mencius’s argumentation by dissociation in Book 1B8 shows that he treated as reasonable the killing of those rulers who were determined as outcasts, which is the reality level of the dissociation. Such conception of reasonableness is founded on the criteria of whether a ruler goes for or against humaneness and righteousness. So, in this discussion, Mencius’s implicit standpoint is that rulers who offended against humaneness and righteousness deserved to be slayed and overthrown by

¹ *Book of Songs*, also called *Classic of Poetry* or *Odes* (*Shi Jing*), is one of the five Classics of ancient Chinese literature. It is said to have been compiled by Confucius and is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry.

their ministers. Hence this idea is also part of Mencius's kingcraft politics, only narrated in a negative manner.

Book 1B3 begins with the question posed by King Xuan of Qi to Mencius about the means of dealing with relations with neighboring states. In reply, Mencius emphasized the importance of a king to be humane in such diplomatic affairs, which is also part of Mencius's thought of kingcraft and which seemingly earned King Xuan of Qi's agreement according to his exclamation "How great are these words". Then King Xuan of Qi confessed his failing of being fond of valor, which implies the difference of opinion between him and Mencius about whether a king being fond of valor can be a humane king. Mencius first took the concession of King Xuan of Qi's being fond of valor, but then differentiated the valor of an ordinary man in confronting just one person and the valor of King Wen of Zhou and King Wu of Zhou in confronting evil rules and bringing peace to all the people in the world. So, here Mencius dissociated "valor" into "small valor" in terms of an ordinary man confronting just one person for the sake of his personal benefit (the "appearance" level) and "big valor" in terms of confronting evil rulers for the benefit of all the people in the world (the "reality" level) (Book 1B3). The dissociation here belongs to the argumentation stage (underlined) of the discussion about the standpoint explicitly expressed in the concluding stage (**CAPITALIZED**): that King Xuan of Qi's being fond of valor should bring peace to all the people in the world. Mencius's standpoint in terms of valor indicates he favored the "big valor" at the reality level.

Conversations between King Xuan of Qi and Mencius continued in Book 1B5, where King Xuan of Qi confessed another two failings - being fond of wealth and being fond of women, and Mencius again adopted the argumentative technique of dissociation. In Book 1B5, following King Xuan of Qi's question about whether to demolish the Hall of Light, Mencius once again drew King Xuan of Qi's attention to his thought of kingcraft by connecting the Hall of Light with true kingly government. With the same people-oriented ideas expressed in the dissociation of valor, Mencius dissociated "one's fondness of wealth" into "enjoying one's fondness of wealth by oneself" (the "appearance" level) and "sharing one's fondness of wealth with the people" (the "reality" level), and dissociated "one's being fond of women" into "enjoying one's fondness of women by oneself" (the "appearance" level) and "sharing one's fondness of women with the people" (the "reality" level) (Book 1B5). The two dissociations here belong to the argumentation stages (underlined) of the two discussions about the same topic, namely, how to enforce true kingly government or how to become a true king. The corresponding two standpoints are explicitly stated at the concluding stages (**CAPITALIZED**): that if a king shares his fondness of wealth with the people, he can become a true king, and that if a king shares his fondness of women with

the people, he can become a true king. The explicit standpoints put forward by Mencius indicate again his preference for the “reality” levels of the two dissociations.

4. REASONABLENESS REFLECTED IN HOLDING TO THE MEAN THAT IS BASED ON PRINCIPLE AND ALLOWS FOR EXPEDIENCY - A PERSPECTIVE OF CONFUCIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS

Discussions in Section 3 indicate that Mencius regarded humaneness and righteousness as the guiding principle for his kingcraft politics. In the meantime, Mencius made some concessions in convincing his target audience, like King Xuan of Qi, to adopt his kingcraft claim by holding to the principle of humaneness and righteousness. For example, in Book 1B3 and Book 1B5, Mencius did not deny King Xuan of Qi’s fondness of valor, wealth and women. Instead, Mencius dissociated the said fondness into “fondness of valor, wealth and women by oneself” (the “appearance” level) and “fondness of valor, wealth and women together with the people” (the “reality” level), and encouraged King Xuan of Qi to extend his personal fondness to his people. Such concessions set a common ground between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi for Mencius’s subsequent argumentation on his claim of kingcraft, as is analyzed in Section 3. They also imply that in argumentation for his kingcraft claim that is founded on the principle of humaneness and righteousness, Mencius took the strategy of conciliation - adopting the other party’s arguments for defending one’s own standpoint (van Eemeren 2009, p. 13; 2010, p. 165) by means of expediency, while adopting expediency serves in the end the purpose of holding to the principle of humaneness and righteousness. This idea can be summarized as holding to the Mean that is based on principle and allows for expediency (Ding 2004, p. 192; Xu 2004, pp. 589-590, 593-594), which is the conception of reasonableness reflected in Confucian practical ethics. Examples will be analyzed below to elaborate the reflection of reasonableness in Mencius’s argumentative discourse.

Mencius expressed his preference for holding to the Mean several times in his work *Mencius*, for example, in Book 4B20, Book 7A26, Book 7A41 and Book 7B37.

In Book 4B20, Mencius quoted Tang, King Wen of Zhou, King Wu of Zhou, and the Duke of Zhou, who all “held fast to the Mean”, while these quoted persons are all moral models admired by Mencius and other Confucians. In Book 7B37, When Wan Zhang, one of Mencius’s disciples, asked Mencius why Confucius, being in the state of Chen, was still thinking about the mad scholars of the state of Lu, Mencius pointed out that what Confucius really preferred was those scholars who “followed the middle way”. “Holding fast to the Mean” and “following the middle way” are synonyms, meaning not going to extremes.

However, according to Mencius, one's holding to the Mean does not mean that one can do without holding to the principle. In Book 7A41, Gongsun Chou, another one of Mencius's disciples, acknowledged on the one hand that the Way or Dao that Mencius claimed and tried to promote, namely, the moral idealist principle of humaneness and righteousness, is very much lofty and beautiful, but on the other hand pointed out that it is much too difficult for ordinary people to attain it. So, Gongsun Chou asked his Master Mencius why not make the Way or Dao more easily attained by ordinary people in their daily life, implying that the Way or Dao can be more attainable with expediencies considered. Gongsun Chou's question indicates the difference of opinion between him and Mencius about whether the Way or Dao (the principle) can be compromised to be more attainable for ordinary people. In response, by resorting to examples of the great artisan and the proficient archer Yi, Mencius argued implicitly that the Way or Dao (the principle) should not be compromised to adapt to others (holding to the principle) but instead should be held fast to by positioning oneself "at the center of the Way" (or holding to the mean). So, here Mencius coordinated holding to the principle with holding to the mean.

Although Mencius argued that one should hold to the principle while holding to the mean, he did not neglect the changing circumstances where holding to the principle may confront in practice. In 7A26, Mencius first offered Yangzi's and Mozi's examples of choosing extremes - egoism and impartial care respectively. Then he gave Zimo's example of holding to the Mean. Compared with the two extremes, Mencius took a positive attitude to holding to the Mean, but immediately added that in holding to the Mean exigencies (or expediencies) should be allowed for; otherwise, holding to the Mean would resemble holding to one point (or extreme).

Mencius's idea of holding to the Mean that is based on principle but allows for expediency can be expounded with examples using the argumentative technique of dissociation. For example, in Book 1A1, which is well known as Mencius's debate on righteousness and profit in Chinese history, Mencius came to the kingdom of Wei to meet its ruler King Hui of Liang. In their first conversation, King Hui of Liang asked Mencius straightforward whether Mencius brought with him some means to profit the kingdom of Wei. From Mencius's rhetorical question "Why must the king speak of profit?", we can see that the difference of opinion between Mencius and King Hui of Liang is whether a king should speak of profit (the confrontation stage, **bolded**). In reply to King Hui of Liang's question, Mencius stated that he had only humaneness and righteousness with him, and then listed by reasoning the consequences of speaking of profit and the consequences of putting profit-pursuing before righteousness pursuit, from the king to his officers till the gentlemen and the common people (the argumentation stage,

underlined). At the end of this conversation, Mencius restated his standpoint that a king should only speak of humaneness and righteousness instead of profit (the concluding stage, CAPITALIZED).

The expressly formulated standpoint in Book 1A1 seems to indicate that Mencius is against a king's pursuit of profit. However, looking more closely at Book 1A1, we may notice that what Mencius really disapproved of is the pursuit of profiting just "our state", "our house" or "myself", which are all privately-cantered. In Book 1B3 and Book 1B5 (quoted in Section 3), Mencius did not deny King Xuan of Qi's personal fondness of valor, wealth and women, but argued that King Xuan of Qi should extend his fondness of valor, wealth and women to all the people in the world. So, from Book 1B3 and Book 1B5, we can see that Mencius approved of the pursuit of profit for the sake of the people. Now connecting Book 1A1 with Book 1B3 and Book 1B5, Mencius dissociated "the pursuit of profit" into "the pursuit of self-centered profit" (the "appearance" level) (Book 1A1, Book 1B3, Book 1B5) and "the pursuit of people-centered profit" (the "reality" level) (Book 1B3, Book 1B5). He also highlighted the importance of holding to the principle of humaneness and righteousness in the pursuit of profit (Book 1A1) but in the meantime acknowledged the necessity of allowing for expediency (Book 1B3 and Book 1B5) (Wang 2018, p. 472). The debate on the relationship between (humaneness and) righteousness and profit is an outstanding reflection of Mencius's idea of holding to the Mean based on the principle of humaneness and righteousness and allowing for expediency, which is also the core of Confucian practical ethics.

Holding to the Mean based on principle and with expediency is also reflected in Mencius's view on the war. For example, in Book 1A6, in answering King Xiang of Liang's consecutive questions about how to settle and unite an empire, Mencius stated his claims (CAPITALIZED) explicitly that an empire can be settled through unity, that a king who is not fond of killing people can unite a settled empire, and that people will return voluntarily to a king who is not fond of killing people. Here Mencius expressed his disapproval of wars because people would be killed and of the kings who were fond of killing people in his time. He also promoted the humaneness-centered kingcraft - humane governance in not being fond of killing people (Chen 2018, pp. 40-41).

In Book 4A14, Mencius first quoted Confucius's negative attitude to the example of Ran Qiu for his enriching a ruler who was not practicing humane governance. Then Mencius associated such lack of humaneness with those men bent on making war. Claiming making wars as "leading the earth to devour human flesh", Mencius stated his opposition to wars so vehemently that he suggested sentencing the severest punishment to those who are skilled in war. Mencius's strong opposition to war is again because people are killed in wars, which is against the principle of

humaneness and righteousness as well as the human-oriented and people-oriented thoughts rooted in the principle (Chen 2018, p. 41).

Book 1A6 and Book 4A14 seem to suggest that Mencius was against wars and against rulers making wars because people would be killed and the principle of humaneness and righteousness was not practiced. However, in Book 1A5, when King Hui of Liang asked Mencius how to make revenge for those who had died for the kingdom of Wei in wars with the kingdoms of Qi, Qin and Chu, Mencius suggested that if King Hui of Liang practice humane governance and pursue profit for his people, then he could easily defeat those other rulers who did not practice humane governance and did not pursue profit for their people. This implies that Mencius approved of the wars made by the humane rulers and for the sake of the people's profit.

Book 1B11 further confirmed Mencius's positive attitude to wars made by rulers like Tang who practiced humane governance and acted for the people's profit (the opening stage, *italicized*). At the same time, Mencius on the one hand approved of King Xuan of Qi's making a war against the kingdom of Yan as a punishment of the ruler of Yan who oppressed its people and did not practice humane governance. On the other hand, Mencius pointed out the acts of Qi after conquering Yan were against the wills of the people and as a result against the principle of humane governance (the argumentation stage, underlined). At the end of the conversation, Mencius suggested that King Xuan of Qi stop his inhumane acts in the kingdom of Yan and consult with the people of Yan in order to stop an attack from the other states (the concluding stage, CAPITALIZED). Mencius's two-fold analysis on the state of Qi's making a war against the inhumane ruler of Yan and on Qi's stopping an attack by other states because of its inhumane acts after conquering Yan shows his consideration of expediency according to the principle of humaneness and righteousness in state governance and in terms of wars, which is essentially founded upon the differentiation between self-centered pursuit of profit and people-oriented pursuit of profit.

Now combining Book 1A5, Book 1A6, Book 1B11 and Book 4A14, we can see that Mencius dissociated "wars" into "unjust wars made by rulers who do not practice humane governance but aim for enlarging private profit" (the "appearance" level) (Book 1A6, Book 4A14) and "just wars made by rulers who practice humane governance and enlarge the people's profit" (the "reality" level) (Book 1A5, Book 1B11) (Chen 2018, p. 98). So, Mencius's view on wars also reflects his conception of reasonableness in holding to the Mean based on the principle but with expediency. In other words, Mencius did not totally negate wars and the necessity of making wars, but just indicated that pursuing the profit for the people under the guidance of the principle of humaneness and

righteousness should become the starting point of deciding on making a war.

5. CONCLUSION

The Confucian philosophy is a moral philosophy (Yang 2017, p. 124). Following but also developing from Confucius's core moral concept - humaneness (*Ren*), Mencius extended humaneness into humaneness and righteousness (*Ren Yi*), a combination of Confucian virtue ethic and Confucian deontic ethic. He further traced humaneness and righteousness back to a moral metaphysical basis - human nature being good, which can be more precisely elaborated as inclination to goodness that is inherent in human nature. Unlike the pursuit of pure knowledge as a philosophical interest in ancient Greece, ancient Chinese philosophers pursued to put knowledge into practice. Just as Mencius explained to his disciple Gongduzi why he argued, the ultimate purpose of Mencius's developing Confucian humaneness into humaneness and righteousness and tracing their source of moral metaphysics is to influence the realistic politics in his times by seeking a sound philosophical foundation for his advocacy of kingcraft as humane governance and to benefit the massive ordinary people. Such a philosophical foundation can be summarized as the conception of reasonableness in the moral idealist perspective. The extensive use of dissociation in the work *Mencius* helps lay bare what was counted as reasonable by Mencius in his argumentative discourse.

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APPENDIX

The appendix has been omitted for brevity and is available upon request from the authors.