



Mengzian Sensitivity to Social Roles

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Abstract

Classical Confucian philosopher Mengzi 孟子 offers resources that can help shed light on the metaphysical status of moral qualities and answer the question of how we come to perceive them. I argue that Mengzi puts forward an account of virtue as sensitivity similar to that offered by John McDowell. Both thinkers endorse a particular kind of motivationally internalist naturalistic moral realism, and both explain virtue as analogous to perception of secondary qualities. I offer an original contribution to existing literature by further arguing that Mengzi's view includes an understanding of moral perception as including perception of uniquely human roles and the moral obligations they generate. This essay thus offers a novel textual interpretation of the *Mengzi*. Based on this interpretation, it then puts forth the argument that Mengzi's version of virtue as sensitivity allows the Confucian thinker to avoid criticisms of McDowell's "Sensitivity Account" of virtue. In particular, I argue that Mengzi's account of sensitivity—as one that includes sensitivity to human roles and relationships—is better able to explain variation in perceived moral qualities both over time and across cultures. This is because Mengzi's view recognizes that what is called for morally shifts with the agent's social roles. Thus, a Mengzian-influenced Sensitivity Account of virtue can better account for differences in moral judgment by emphasizing that moral facts are a feature of human relationships, which likewise vary between cultures and individuals and change over time.

Keywords Human nature · John McDowell · Mengzi · Moral perception · Virtue ethics

1 Introduction

A persistent question in ethics concerns "the metaphysical status of moral qualities and how we come to perceive and appreciate them" (Ivanhoe 2011: 273). Do moral qualities—like righteousness or benevolence—exist objectively, or are they merely products of human thought? If they do exist, how do we discover them?

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One branch of virtue ethics offers a promising answer to these questions by positing a particular type of naturalistic moral realism in which virtue involves a kind of sensitivity to moral qualities. This view, whose most influential proponent is John McDowell, will be referred to here as the “Sensitivity Account” of virtue and explained in detail below. We will see, however, that McDowell’s Sensitivity Account is vulnerable to criticisms that it does not adequately account for changes in moral judgments over time, nor can it easily explain disagreement about moral facts across cultures. I argue that Classical Confucian philosopher Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius) offers resources that can help address this criticism.

In *Mengzi* 1A7,¹ to demonstrate that King Xuan 宣 has the capacity to care for his people, Mengzi relates a story of the king sparing an ox being led to sacrifice. The king, who could not “bear [the ox’s] frightened appearance,” ordered that it be exchanged for a sheep. As Mengzi points out, the king does this because he “saw the ox but had not seen the sheep. Gentleman cannot bear to see animals die if they have seen them living.... Hence, gentlemen keep their distance from the kitchen” (1A7). Mengzi further remarks that “This heart [*xin* 心]” that led the king to feel compassion for the ox and spare it “is sufficient to become [a true, virtuous] King” (1A7). Why does Mengzi approve of this even though he asks Xuan “what is there to choose between an ox and a sheep,” since both result in an animal being killed? How does this exchange demonstrate that the king has the capacity for virtue (1A7)? And what does this have to do with McDowell or the metaphysical status of moral qualities?

In short: I claim that Mengzi puts forward an account of virtue as a sensitivity that includes perception of uniquely human roles and the moral obligations they generate. His view is thus largely in agreement with, but more expansive than, McDowell’s Sensitivity Account. Mengzi explicates moral qualities as both real and yet dependent on agents’ social positions; for Mengzi, what is called for morally shifts with the agent’s social roles.² I argue, further, that this sensitivity to human relationships makes Mengzi’s account better equipped to explain variation in perceived moral qualities than McDowell’s Sensitivity Account.

My project is therefore both exegetical and philosophical. I offer a novel reading of the *Mengzi* and argue, based on this reading, that Mengzi’s version of the

¹ In this essay references to the text of the *Mengzi* are to Yang 2018 (Chinese) and Van Norden 2008 (English translation); the numbering follows that of Van Norden 2008.

² My interpretation of Mengzi’s moral philosophy is indebted to insightful work by A. C. Graham, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Xiusheng Liu, Emily McRae, Bryan Van Norden, and David Wong (Graham 2002; Ivanhoe 2002a, 2002b, 2011; Liu 2002; McRae 2011; Van Norden 2007; Wong 1991, 2002).

Sensitivity Account helps answer criticisms of McDowell's. Before exploring Mengzi's addition, though, let us get clear on naturalistic moral realism and the Sensitivity Account in contemporary Western ethics literature.³

2 Naturalistic Moral Realism and Its Problems

Briefly, moral realism is the view that moral claims “purport to report facts and are true if they get the facts right” (Sayre-McCord 2021). One attractive feature of moral realism is that it accords with most peoples’ intuition that when we say something is ethically right or wrong we are making a judgment that could be true or false. Naturalistic moral realism is a type of moral realism which holds that moral qualities exist as real features of the world; they “supervene on the basic nature of things” in much the same way as other natural properties supervene on empirically discoverable facts “such as ... the property of *being deciduous*” (Sturgeon 2007: 91).

An advantage of naturalistic moral realism is that in this view moral judgments have an objective truth value grounded in natural properties. To say that a certain moral response is called for is thus to say that something about the nature of the situation grounds the correct moral response, just as something about its nature would ground a scientific judgment. An upshot is that moral qualities are not only real but also (at least potentially) discoverable by humans, in much the way other natural qualities are. The judgment in this view that I should help an injured person, for example, could be grounded in the fact-of-the-matter that the person is hurt, just as a judgment that a given tree is deciduous is grounded in the fact that it loses its leaves annually. That these qualities are at least potentially discoverable by humans—what I shall call the “accessibility” desideratum—entails that for naturalistic moral realism there are moral truths, and these moral truths are available to people. This is a desirable feature because the opposite position—holding that moral truths either do not exist or are not accessible to moral agents—problematizes moral responsibility. After all, if an agent cannot learn what is right and wrong, or cannot develop the virtues, how could they be blameworthy for failing to do so?

In the naturalistic moral realist view, then, moral qualities are real and are features of the natural world. This answers the first half of the question we started with, about the metaphysical status of moral qualities. However, the question of how to perceive and identify them remains; after all, we do not “see” that help is required in the same way we see leaves falling. If moral qualities exist in the same way other natural properties do, why can we not measure them objectively and achieve a rational consensus in response to moral questions, like we can settle whether a tree

³ I will not be offering a defense of naturalistic moral realism or sensibility theory in this essay. Rather, I simply aim, first, to show a few of these theories’ strengths and weaknesses; second, to show that Mengzi adopts natural moral realism of the sensibility kind; and third, to demonstrate some ways his version of sensibility theory—which, I argue, includes a sensitivity to the moral force generated by social roles and relationships—helps answer some prominent critiques of the view.

is deciduous? What feature of the situation King Xuan was faced with provided the grounding for his moral judgment that the ox should be substituted for a sheep?

The two most prominent critiques of naturalistic moral realism were put forward by G. E. Moore and J. L. Mackie. Briefly, these critique naturalistic moral realism by pointing out that, if moral qualities are natural features of the world, they should be measurable in the same way as other, for example, scientifically quantifiable, natural features.⁴ In short: naturalistic moral realism opens itself up to questions about how we can perceive these qualities, and why this (moral) perception is not as easy or measurable as our perception of other natural qualities. These influential critiques reveal that a satisfying account of naturalistic moral realism must preserve the theory's desiderata of moral qualities as objective features of the natural world, while also explaining why they do not resemble other natural features in being objectively measurable.

3 The McDowellian Sensitivity Account

The Sensitivity Account aims to answer criticisms of naturalistic moral realism through its analogy of virtue to secondary qualities. Secondary qualities, like color or taste, are qualities of an object that can only be understood with reference to an observer—that is, qualities that are perceived. Proponents of the Sensitivity Account hold that moral qualities, while natural, cannot be understood without reference to someone's experience of them. In this way, the Sensitivity Account aims to retain the desiderata of naturalistic moral realism—the claims that moral judgments are objectively true or false, and that their truth or falsity is grounded in natural, discoverable properties—without implying that moral qualities should be objectively measurable features of the natural world outside of human perception. Rather, in

⁴ To briefly summarize these critiques: Moore's "Open Question" argument maintains that moral goodness cannot be identical to any natural property; if it were, it would be nonsensical to ask whether a property, like pleasure, were good (since this would be tautological) (Moore 1922: 9). Because goodness is not identical with or reducible to any natural property (it is still an "open question" whether any given natural quality is morally good), moral realism must be false, and moral truths cannot be derived from, or supervene on, natural features (Hurka 2021). Mackie's "argument from queerness" targets moral realism generally. He argues that "[i]f there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe" (Mackie 1990: 38). Moreover, he argues that these qualities would be metaphysically "queer" in that they would neither supervene on qualities of the natural world nor would their moral force be recognizable by "ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection"; so, he reasons, "although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim... to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false" (Mackie 1990: 35). Ivanhoe also provides a helpful overview of these two critiques. Ivanhoe calls Mackie's view—the claim that "any form of moral realism should be rejected"—the "pure projection" view, and contrasts it with a "moral faculty" view: that "moral qualities are out there in the world and available to us through a special faculty of moral sapience" (Ivanhoe 2011: 274). The moral faculty view, which Ivanhoe takes neo-Confucian Wang Yangming 王陽明 to represent, also has problems according to Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe argues that Wang Yangming "presents a conception of ethical understanding that in several key respects is quite similar to McDowell's views, [but...] presents ethical perception and judgment as strongly analogous to visual perception, without attempting the qualifications or expressing the reservations that McDowell does" (Ivanhoe 2011: 281).

this view moral qualities are conceived as “partly mind-dependent and partly mind-independent” (Ivanhoe 2011: 275).

The Sensitivity Account can be distinguished from other accounts of the metaphysical status of moral qualities by two central claims to which it is committed: 1) motivational internalism, and 2) a type of naturalistic moral realism that holds that moral qualities are analogous to secondary qualities.⁵ According to the Sensitivity Account, moral qualities are discoverable, objective, but partially mind-dependent features of the natural world. Upon discovering these qualities, the agent responds correctly and is motivated to act accordingly. Let us consider motivational internalism first.

Motivational internalism is the view that “necessarily, if a person judges that she morally ought to ϕ , then she is... motivated to ϕ ” (Björklund, Björnsson, Eriksson, Olinder, and Strandberg 2012: 125). The contrasting view, motivational externalism, holds that it is possible to judge that one ought to ϕ without being motivated to ϕ . The Sensitivity Account endorses motivational internalism, suggesting that virtuous action is merited by a perception of, or sensitivity to, moral qualities that exist as part of the natural world; virtue is “an ability to recognize requirements [that] situations impose on one’s behaviour” (McDowell 1979: 333). Thus, in this view deciding what a virtuous act would be requires perceiving the facts of a situation using a properly cultivated moral perception.⁶

A second feature of the Sensitivity Account is a type of naturalistic moral realism that sees moral qualities as similar to secondary qualities; moral qualities are thus “both out there in the world (that is, objective) and yet at the same time dependent on the mind (that is, subjective)” (Ivanhoe 2011: 275). The Sensitivity Account therefore denies that moral qualities exist apart from human perception,

⁵ Put another way: according to the Sensitivity Account, moral facts are intrinsically motivating and real, natural features of the world analogous to objects of sensory perception.

⁶ Motivational internalism is an appealing feature because this view accords with an everyday understanding of motivation and reasons: that to recognize something as a reason for acting (whether normative or not) is also to feel some inclination to do it (Finlay and Schroeder 2017). Motivational internalism can be understood, on the one hand, narrowly as “strong” motivational internalism. In the strong motivational internalist view, if moral qualities are perceived correctly an agent is *necessarily* moved to act virtuously. This view suggests that any agent who fails to act morally must be mistaken about the moral facts of the situation. Note that strong motivational internalism has been criticized as unsatisfactorily explaining the seemingly widespread experience of weakness of will—that is, of experiencing a conflict between our moral judgment (what we believe we should do) and our motivation (what we want to do). My definition of the sensitivity view entails only a second, weaker understanding of motivational internalism. A proponent of a weaker account of motivational internalism may argue that agents must be motivated to some extent by moral reasons, but not to such an extent that other (non-moral) reasons could not override them. However, this weaker version of motivational internalism also comes with its own problems. Briefly, a weak version runs the risk of what Michael Stocker calls “psychological disharmony” (Stocker 1976) by suggesting that even a virtuous moral agent would have to navigate conflicting motivations when deciding whether to do the right thing. It also fails to provide a clear distinction between virtue and strength of will or continence, since the virtuous agent must still fight against conflicting considerations to do the right thing (Clarke 2017). McDowell seems to endorse a strong motivational internalism, but it is not clear a) that this is a necessary feature of a Sensitivity Account or b) whether Mengzi would agree on this point. Here, I do not take a definite stance on whether Mengzi adopts strong motivational internalism.

while still holding that they are objective, natural features of the world. McDowell's famous analogy of virtue to secondary qualities like color helps describe this partly mind-dependent, partially mind-independent feature of moral qualities. McDowell explains,

A secondary quality is a property the ascription of which to an object is not adequately understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of an object's disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance ... an object's being red is understood as something that obtains in virtue of the object's being such as (in certain circumstances) to look precisely, red. (McDowell 1998: 133–134)

So, to say something is “red” is to say that, in ideal conditions, it appears red to humans. It is true that something is red (it is an objective fact of the world), but its redness can also not be understood without reference to human perception of it. Similarly, “[t]he idea of value experience involves taking admiration, say, to represent its object as having a property that (although there in the object) is essentially subjective” (McDowell 1998: 142).⁷

Through this analogy, McDowell advocates for what Ivanhoe calls a “middle way” position between a “pure projection” view—which calls for a “blanket rejection of moral realism”—and a “moral faculty” view—that “moral qualities are out there in the world and available to us through a special faculty of moral sapience” (Ivanhoe 2011: 274–276). To use McDowell's language, values “are not brutally there—not there independently of our sensibility—any more than colours are:

⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer for directing me to David Wiggins, who endorses a similar position. In his 1987 essay, “A Sensible Subjectivism?”, Wiggins argues for a middle ground between subjectivism and objectivism by noting not only the partly dependent, partly independent feature of moral qualities but also the extent to which coming to a consensus about moral qualities can be relational or socially constructed. Using the analogy of finding something amusing, Wiggins writes, “Amusement for instance is a reaction we have to characterize by reference to its proper object, via something perceived as funny (or incongruous or comical or whatever). There is no object-independent and property-independent, ‘purely phenomenological’ or ‘purely introspective’ account of amusement. And equally there is no saying what exactly the funny is without reference to laughter or amusement or kindred reactions” (Wiggins 1987: 195). Likewise, we can conceive of virtue (as in the Sensitivity Account) as being impossible to characterize without reference both to a natural, objective feature and an agent's perception of it. Wiggins goes on to note that “one person can improve another's grasp of the concept of the funny; and one person can improve another's focus or discrimination of what is funny. Furthermore, the process can be a collaborative one, without either of the participants to a dialogue counting as the absolutely better judge.... Finer perceptions can both intensify and refine response. Intense responses can further heighten and refine perceptions” (Wiggins 1987: 196). I think that Mengzi would agree with this point. As I discuss in detail later, Classical Confucians generally believed that our relationships played important roles in constituting our selves, including our moral obligations. Wiggins further suggests that we can think of moral values as broadly intersubjective—that is, grounded not in individual attitudes but collective agreement about what attitude or moral response a fact evokes, such that “ x is only really ϕ if it is such as to evoke and make appropriate the response A among those who are sensitive to ϕ -ness” (Wiggins 1987: 205). If we add, from Mengzi, that “those who are sensitive to ϕ -ness” means humans, by virtue of possessing the uniquely human heart-mind and the sprouts within it, we come around to a naturalistic, objective grounding for virtue conceived of as a sensitivity to moral qualities that is characteristic of human nature. For McDowell, of course, this “sensitive to ϕ -ness” of human agents is not grounded in the heart-mind but in an Aristotelian-inspired account of human function and *eudaimonia* (McDowell 1980).

though, as with colours, this does not prevent us from supposing that they are there independently of any particular apparent experience of them” (McDowell 1998: 146). McDowell’s view thus retains the conviction that moral qualities are natural and real, but insists that they cannot be understood or identified without reference to an agent’s perception.

The Sensitivity Account therefore provides a promising response to the question of “the nature of moral qualities and how we come to know them” (Ivanhoe 2011: 273). Its analogy between moral and secondary qualities meets the desideratum of providing a metaphysically “real” source of virtue—a grounding for moral qualities such that moral judgments are objectively true or false—while at the same time not suggesting moral qualities should be measurable or perceptible in the same way other natural features are. And, because moral qualities are objects of the natural world yet dependent on human perception, they are necessarily accessible to human moral agents.

4 Problems with the McDowellian Sensitivity Account

We have seen that one feature of the Sensitivity Account is that virtue is conceived of as a sensitivity to motivating objective moral facts. Because of this, the account suggests that once a moral quality is perceived correctly a (virtuous) agent will make the correct moral judgment. It is impossible, then, to (really) understand what is morally required and not be motivated to do it. This is because the virtuous agent develops “a virtuous person’s distinctive way of seeing situations” (McDowell 1979: 346).

This raises the question of how to account for moral disagreement. If moral facts are accessible to us in a way analogous to secondary qualities, why do people disagree about what is morally correct? We do not seem to have these kinds of disagreements about secondary qualities—at least, not nearly as often.⁸ A proponent of the Sensitivity Account can answer that “the weak-willed or indifferent agent does not, however much she herself might think otherwise, possess the same perception, or conception of the facts, as the virtuous agent” (Clarke 2017: §11). As McDowell explains, we may say her perception is “unfocused,” insofar as she does not recognize the correct features of the situation as the motivating ones (McDowell 1979: 334). So, while nonvirtuous agents may *think* they know the right thing to do, they are misperceiving the situation.

While the response that nonvirtuous agents are misperceiving the properly motivating features of a situation is initially helpful, it becomes unsatisfying when considered in a cross-cultural context. Evidence that what are regarded as virtues and as correct moral judgments vary from culture to culture is abundant in contemporary psychology literature.⁹ More generally, broad cultural differences between “tight”

⁸ For example, while there is some cultural and individual variation in identifying colors, and people do sometimes revise their identification of colors, everyday experience shows that disagreement about this and other secondary qualities is much less widespread than moral disagreement (Ivanhoe 2011).

⁹ See, for example, Abdollahimohammad, Jaafar, and Abul Rahim 2014; Aghababaei et al. 2016; Atari, Graham, and Dehghani 2020; Atari et al. 2022; Jabbari, Oanaghi, and Mazaheri 2019; Park and Peterson 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Shahidi, Furnham, Grover, and Movahedi 2023; Tong et al. 2016.

and “loose” cultures, and between “collectivist” and “individualist” ones, have been well-documented in scientific literature and proposed to have significant effects on moral norms.¹⁰

One virtue with strong evidence of cross-cultural variability is filiality, or respect and care for parents. Comparisons between East Asian and Western cultures (e.g., between Singaporean and Australian by W. Li, Singh, and Keerthigha 2021; Korean and American by Sung 1994; Chinese and American by Dai and Dimond 1998; between Canadian immigrants of Chinese descent and their Chinese parents by Zhang 2020) demonstrate that cultural background plays a significant role in shaping adult children’s views on their obligations toward their elderly parents.¹¹ What’s more, some recent work in cross-cultural psychology suggest that the significant differences in the metaphysical commitments of Western and East Asian philosophical traditions may belie even more fundamental differences in perception between these communities (Hamamura 2012, Nisbett and Masuda 2003, Nisbett 2003, Nisbett et al. 2001, Ueda and Komiya 2012, K. Wang et al. 2014, Z.-D. Wang et al. 2022).¹² Because

¹⁰ As Michele Gelfand et al. explain, tight cultures “have many strong norms and a low tolerance of deviant behavior,” while loose cultures “have weak social norms and a high tolerance of deviant behavior” (Gelfand et al. 2011: 1100). Examples of tight cultures include Japan, Germany, and Singapore. Examples of loose cultures include Brazil and the United States (Gelfand et al. 2011, Gelfand 2018). For more on tight versus loose cultures and the effect these overarching cultural differences have on moral norms and judgments, see also: Chan 1996; Gelfand et al. 2021; Pan, Nau, and Gelfand 2020; Jamshed, Stewart, and Overstreet 2022. Collectivism is defined as “a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives” (Triandis 1995: 2; Hamamura 2012: 3). Individualism, in contrast, is “is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and contracts they establish with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analysis of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others” (Triandis 1995: 2; Hamamura 2012: 3). Regarding differences in collectivist and individualist cultures, see also: Nisbett and Masuda 2003; Nisbett 2003; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan 2001; Ueda and Komiya 2012; K. Wang, Umla-Runge, Hofmann, Ferdinand, and Chan 2014; Z.-D. Wang, Y.-L. Wang, Zhang, and F.-Y. Wang 2022.

¹¹ Another example of cross-cultural virtue variability is along the “honesty-humility dimension” of the HEXACO personality model (Aghababaei et al. 2016, Jabbari et al. 2019, Shahidi et al. 2023, Sahragard 2003, Tong et al. 2016). As Shahidi et al. note, “humility has been found to be encouraged more in eastern cultures (Tong, Tan, Chor, and Koh, 2016) [and] has been defined as synonymous with ‘modesty’ and ‘humbleness’, as a quality of having a modest or low view of one’s importance (Sahragard, 2003)” (Shahidi et al. 2023: 453). The importance of humility as a virtue is also highly correlated with religiosity (Aghababaei et al. 2016, Shahidi et al. 2023). Additionally, Nansook Park and Christopher Peterson note that “individuality and competition ... are valued traits in some cultures but not others” (Park and Peterson 2005:14).

¹² In particular, Ueda and Komiya’s work suggests that Westerners and East Asians tend to focus on different aspects of visual scenes, such that “Westerners are more likely than East Asians to attend to central objects (i.e., analytic attention), whereas East Asians are more likely than Westerners to focus on background objects or context (i.e., holistic attention)” (Ueda and Komiya 2012: 1). One explanation that has been suggested for this perceptual difference is a “higher sensitivity to the relationship between contexts and objects” for East Asians (K. Wang et al. 2014). Of course, we should be careful as responsible scholars to recognize that these are broad generalizations about cultures and traditions that themselves are diverse and varied, and that individuals within these traditions may not hold views reflected by these findings.

the Sensitivity Account endorses naturalistic moral realism, it can only explain these kinds of cultural differences by suggesting that (at least) one of the cultures obscures peoples' perception of, or access to, moral truth. As Ivanhoe puts it, the explanation for cultural disagreement about moral qualities is thus that "some cultures ... do not pay attention to moral qualities that they are fully capable of perceiving" (Ivanhoe 2011: 279).

Are we to believe, then, that either (or both) Westerners or East Asians are simply unable to see the truth about what children owe their parents? That either (or both) Westerners or East Asians are too focused (or not focused enough) on the relationship between objects and their contexts, or between individuals and their communities? The fact of widespread disagreement about normative matters would seem, on the Sensitivity Account, to entail that accurate moral perception is rare and largely a matter of moral luck. This could be taken as an objection to, or at least a puzzling implication of, the Sensitivity Account. At best, it runs counter to the accessibility desideratum, since it suggests that one may not have access to moral truths due merely to circumstances of one's birth.

An additional problem with the secondary quality analogy is that it cannot adequately explain our ordinary experience of revising moral judgments. As Ivanhoe explains,

[I]f values are really like colors and ethical understanding is strongly analogous to visual perception it should be the case that we either *see* things rightly or we don't ... [if] we need to appeal to a conception of the good life, rational deliberation, thought experiments, and the like in order to account for our ability to revise our ethical judgments, then ethical understanding is no longer primarily a matter of perception. (Ivanhoe 2011: 279–280)

Of course, McDowell does not deny that moral self-cultivation requires time and effort to develop. His account of moral perception departs from the analogy to sight by acknowledging that moral perception requires cultivation.¹³ However, it does imply that once an agent has fully developed their moral perception (that is, become a virtuous person), they will "see" correctly every time. So, we might wonder whether a virtuous person can ever change her mind morally. It seems right that the virtuous agent always correctly perceives what is called for, but it also seems that she would be epistemically humble, keen to improve and learn from others, and willing to revise her judgments. How can this be so if it is impossible for her to misperceive moral qualities?

In the following sections, I show that Mengzi provides resources that can help retain the idea of moral qualities as analogous to secondary qualities, and ethical understanding as akin to perception, while also accounting for variations in moral judgment both between cultures and over time. In particular, I argue that Mengzi puts forward a special version of sensitivity theory—one that sees moral perception as including perception of uniquely human roles and the moral obligations they

¹³ Virtue as a perceptual capacity is, as Bridget Clarke explains, "perfectible and character dependent... 'seeing' involves capacities for feeling and for thought that are conceptual in nature. These capacities can always be improved" (Clarke 2017).

generate. His theory thus presents moral qualities as both real (such that moral facts are “out there” in the world) and dependent on agents’ social positions, so that what is called for morally shifts with the agent’s social roles.

5 The Mengzian Sensitivity Account

As Xiusheng Liu has compellingly argued (Liu 2002), Mengzi directly addresses the issue of motivational internalism versus externalism in his debate with rival philosopher Gaozi 告子 in *Mengzi* 6A4. Gaozi asserts that righteousness (*yi* 義), a key Confucian virtue, is external. He supports this by arguing that “[t]hey are elderly, and [so] we treat them as elderly. It is not that they are elderly because of us. Similarly, that is white, and [so] we treat it as white, according to it being white externally to us. Hence, I say [righteousness] is external” (*Mengzi* 6A4.1–4.2).

According to Liu’s reading, Gaozi’s argument in this passage is that our motivation to be righteous comes from some feature of the world outside us (such as a social convention to respect the elderly) (Liu 2002). In his reply, Mengzi states that

Elderliness is different from whiteness. The whiteness of a white horse is no different from the whiteness of a [white]-haired person. But surely we do not regard the elderliness of an old horse as being no different from the elderliness of an old person? Furthermore, do you say that the one who is elderly is righteous, or that the one who treats another as elderly is righteous? (*Mengzi* 6A4.3)

In this reply, Mengzi demonstrates two points. First, although elderliness is a fact of the world, its moral force is at least in part dependent on human recognition or perception of it. While objectively true that both the horse and the white-haired person are elderly, the moral fact of what this elderliness demands (respect and reverence in the case of the old person but not for the horse) differs because of some internal recognition on the part of the subject observing the elderliness. In short: Mengzi is putting forward a “middle way” account of moral realism, like McDowell (Ivanhoe 2011).

Second, Mengzi is claiming that the moral motivation to treat elderly people with respect is a feature of human nature; hence, the “righteousness” is a part of one who respects the elderly person (internal), not part of the elderly person (external). As Liu explains it,

Moral qualities are conceptually tied to certain sensibilities. The line between moral and non-moral facts is then to be drawn by reference to characteristically human feelings. [T]he question [of]... why ‘respecting an old horse’ does not involve moral approval but ‘respecting an old person’ does can now be given a full answer. The former does not possess a moral quality, but the latter does. Why? Because the former does not evoke characteristically human feelings or sensibilities, while the latter does. (Liu 2002: 119–120)

Again, as Liu explains, Mengzi here makes a claim like McDowell's about the partly mind-dependent, partly mind-independent nature of virtue through his example of social features like "elderliness" as demanding respect. Mengzi is therefore able to avoid the pitfalls of a pure "moral faculty" view of the type Mackie criticizes, while retaining the desiderata of naturalistic moral realism (Ivanhoe 2011). Like color, elderliness is both external and internal, in that it exists in the world as an objective feature but can only be understood from a human perspective. Through this reading, Liu thus positions Mengzi as a "moral realist of the sensibility theory kind"; in other words, as endorsing a Sensitivity Account (Liu 2002: 101).¹⁴

Moreover, though, Mengzi is here arguing that a "characteristically human feeling"—itself a feature of human nature—is evoked or activated by our relationship to human elders. Elsewhere, Mengzi states that "fine patterns and righteousness [in short: virtue] delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths," and that all hearts prefer these "in common" (*Mengzi* 6A7). This shows that Mengzi, like McDowell, also believes virtues are intrinsically motivating. Like McDowell, Mengzi also uses analogies to senses to explain how humans perceive the motivating force of moral qualities.¹⁵

Mengzi's moral theory thus aims to answer the same questions the Sensitivity Account does, and has much in common with McDowell's version.¹⁶ If we accept Liu's motivational internalist reading of Mengzi, though, Mengzi seems open to the criticisms Ivanhoe had of McDowell. If virtues are partly mind-dependent (insofar as only humans have the capacity to recognize their motivating force) and partly mind-independent (insofar as they really exist), why do even virtuous humans seem to change their minds about what virtue calls for? Why is there so much disagreement

¹⁴ Liu's argument has been criticized by A. T. Nuyen. In short, Nuyen accuses Liu of confusing two different meanings of "internal": in this passage, Nuyen argues, Mengzi means that the motivation to act compassionately (if or when one is motivated to act in this way) comes from within the agent (because of the sprouts). This does not mean that this motivation necessarily overrides other reasons, as a strong motivational internalist account would (Nuyen 2009). In my view, it is unclear whether Mengzi adopts a strong motivational internalism (see Footnote 6 above). However, I do believe that Mengzi adopts motivational internalism at least in the weaker sense. Relatedly, in my view Nuyen's criticism fails to consider that Mengzi believes that virtues are naturally attractive to all people—evidenced, for example, by *Mengzi* 6A7 noting that "fine patterns and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths," and all hearts prefer these "in common." In short, Nuyen's criticism fails to take into account Mengzi's moral psychology. When the claim that compassion is "internal" in the sense of coming from our *xin* (heart-mind) is combined with the claim that all *xins* recognize the attractiveness of virtue, the gap between these two notions of internalism—as coming from the agent and as motivating—collapses. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to develop this point.

¹⁵ Note that the taste metaphor Mengzi uses here is one that takes for granted that the sensory capacity to perceive righteousness, like the capacity for taste, is common to humans. In short, virtue is universally attractive. Mengzi similarly presents the sprouts as common to all people in 2A6; virtues are thus not only accessible to everyone but pleasing because of humans' shared capacity for moral perception. Elsewhere, Mengzi also compares acting viciously to doing violence to oneself—see, for example, the metaphor of Ox Mountain (*Mengzi* 6A8).

¹⁶ However, we should note that Mengzi's and McDowell's metaphysical commitments importantly differ. In particular, Mengzi endorsed a strongly teleological understanding of nature that would be incompatible with contemporary natural science. I thank Bryan Van Norden for encouraging me to clarify this difference.

about what morality calls for between cultures? I believe there are important differences between McDowell's and Mengzi's Sensitivity Accounts that can be illuminated by understanding Mengzi's context, and which help to answer these critiques. For Mengzi, an old person's elderliness is indeed a natural feature of the world that elicits a response, but—as I argue in detail later—the response it elicits is a product of human relationships.

6 Mengzi's Context and Moral Psychology

Mengzi puts forward an understanding of moral qualities as real, motivating features of the natural world. For Mengzi, the sprouts (*duan* 端) provide the capacity to discover these motivating responsibilities—for example, of benevolence or righteousness. For Mengzi, the virtues lie at the center of the human psyche but in an underdeveloped form. He states,

The feeling [*xin*] of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom.

People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts, yet to claim that one is incapable (of virtue), is to steal from oneself. (*Mengzi* 2A6.5)¹⁷

Humans are born with the capacity to be virtuous, as they are born with four limbs, which must (and can) be strengthened to be useful. Just as McDowell's Sensitivity Account is in part a response to criticisms of naturalistic moral realism, Mengzi's philosophy responds to the views of rival philosophical schools—those of YANG Zhu 楊朱 and Mozi—in addition to expanding on ideas already present within the Confucian tradition. Let us consider Mengzi's Confucian context first.

Mengzi's philosophy is sometimes read as an expansion on earlier Confucian ideas that attempts to develop a robust Confucian theory of human nature (*xing* 性).¹⁸ Mengzi, like his contemporary Confucians, holds the metaphysical commitment

¹⁷ In this same passage, Mengzi claims that “if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human” (and likewise for the other sprouts) (*Mengzi* 2A6.4). Some have wondered how Mengzi's moral psychology can account for people like sociopaths, who seemingly do not possess the moral sprouts. Bryan Van Norden discusses this problem at length (Van Norden 2007: 218–227). He points out that we may take Mengzi's claim about all humans possessing the sprouts to be a claim about humans as a species, a claim about a “large subset of the members of the human species that is defined in terms of its members having some kind of proper cultivation,” or a claim about “generic” or “normal” humans. He endorses the third understanding, pointing out that in this view “membership in *ren* [humankind] may be compromised by the damage done by a bad environment (e.g., severe childhood abuse) or ethically relevant congenital abnormalities” (Van Norden 2007: 220, 221). Similarly, Richard Kim points out that Mengzi acknowledges that poor environments can hinder the proper development of the sprouts (cf. *Mengzi* 6A7, 6A8), and that Mengzi can thus respond to this problem by arguing that the environment in which sociopaths develop is defective (Kim 2018).

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insightful comment. See also Ivanhoe 2002b, Kim 2018, Liu and Ivanhoe 2002.

that Heaven (Tian 天) assigns a Way (Dao 道), discoverable because of our Heaven-granted human nature (*xing*). Literally meaning Way or path, the Dao refers to the right or proper mode of living. For Confucians, the Dao is given by Heaven and prescribes humans' roles, which they see as including virtuous activity (Graham 2002; Ivanhoe 2002b; Kim 2018; Van Norden 2007, 2008; Wong 2002, 2021).¹⁹ This context is important because it provides the metaphysical grounding for Mengzi's understanding that moral qualities must be both natural and discoverable by humans.

Next, let us consider Mengzi's philosophical rivals. Briefly, YANG Zhu is presented in the *Mengzi* as promoting a type of ethical egoism; Mozi's school, Mohism, can be thought of as a type of consequentialism.²⁰ Mengzi laments that

the doctrines of YANG Zhu and Mozi fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward YANG Zhu, then it leans toward Mozi. YANG Zhu is "for oneself." This is not to have a ruler. Mozi is "impartial caring." This is not to have a father. (*Mengzi* 3B9.9)

Mohists advocated "universal love" (*jian ai* 兼愛), arguing that we should regard others' states, cities, and families as we do our own (Johnston 2013: 90). Mohists further argued that it is possible to do this because human nature is malleable. YANG Zhu argued that human nature is selfish.

As compellingly argued by A. C. Graham, Mengzi combats YANG Zhu's individualism and understanding of human nature as self-serving by arguing that humans have a Heaven-given potential for goodness—through his claim that the source of the virtues are innate "sprouts" (*duan*) present in each of our "heart-minds" (*xin*).²¹ It is in this sense—that each human has the potential for goodness that need only be realized through individual effort, given a suitable environment—that Mengzi argues that "human nature is good" (*xing shan* 性善). This famous claim should thus not be understood as meaning that humans are good from birth, but rather that all humans have the potential for—and indeed tendency toward—goodness.²²

Against the Mohists, Mengzi argued that attempting to divorce natural inclination (e.g., to care for those close to us more than for strangers) from the source of

¹⁹ Some authors have likened the Classical Confucian understanding of the Way, or Dao, to the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* insofar as it is a naturalistic and normative, objectivist grounding for evaluating flourishing. That is, both the Dao and *eudaimonia* represent a *telos*, or goal, toward which human nature is directed. For an argument that Mengzi's Dao is roughly equivalent to *eudaimonia*, see Huff 2015. For a comparison between the Dao and *eudaimonia* in Confucianism more generally, see Yu 2007 and Wong 2021. I am not in this essay arguing that the Dao and *eudaimonia* do not have important and interesting differences; rather, I am merely noting that they are relevantly similar insofar as they both provide an objectivist and naturalistic grounding for human flourishing.

²⁰ Here, as throughout the essay, I am following Van Norden's insightful interpretation of these traditions. See also Wong 2021 for a similar analysis.

²¹ I follow Van Norden in reading *duan* as "sprout," though this reading is not universally accepted. See Van Norden 2008: 211–218.

²² As Graham explains, when Mengzi uses the term "nature" (*xing* 性) he is not thinking of it as made up of static qualities; rather, he "seems never to be looking back toward birth, always forward to the maturation of continuing growth" (Graham 2002: 2). As Mengzi puts it, "As for what [humans] are inherently, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential" (*Mengzi* 6A6.5).

morality as universal love was psychologically unattainable. The Mohist view asks agents to deny their natural partiality to loved ones, arguing that what is moral is not dependent on human nature.²³

Mengzi considered both YANG Zhu and Mozi as advocating moral theories contrary to human nature. Mengzi—like his contemporary Confucians—believes that human nature is teleologically directed toward the good, and that ethics must be grounded in humans' natural capacities—in particular, for Mengzi, in the proto-moral sprouts. Because Mengzi argues that all humans possess the sprouts of virtue as part of their nature, his conception of ethical understanding is that of a sensitivity to moral qualities that are also tied to human nature, insofar as they are generated by uniquely human “feelings or sensibilities” or by the human way of life (Liu 2002: 120).

Moreover, Mengzi thinks that the sprouts are “sufficient” for virtue, meaning that if we have the sprouts we can become virtuous as long as we make an effort to morally improve ourselves (and assuming the sprouts are not destroyed by a harmful environment).²⁴ Again, Mengzi—in accordance with the Classical Confucian tradition—holds that the heart-mind, containing the sprouts, is given to humans by Heaven. Because of this, human nature has a normative, teleological tendency toward virtue; as Kim puts it, Mengzi identifies protomoral inclinations as part of humans' first (or fundamental, precultural) nature (Kim 2018: 147). But how do the nascent beginnings of virtue that are a part of human nature become fully-fledged virtues?

²³ Mengzi criticizes Yi Zhi 夷之, a Mohist, stating that “Heaven [Tian], in giving birth to things, causes them to have one source, but Yi Zhi gives them two” (*Mengzi* 3A5.3). As Van Norden explains in his commentary on this passage, “People naturally love their own family members. This is the ‘one source’ of love that gradually extends outward to encompass friends, strangers, and even nonhuman animals. Mengzi holds that, because our compassion for others grows out of this source, it will naturally have gradations, being stronger for relatives than for strangers. Yi Zhi acknowledges that this is the psychological source of human compassion, and that he acted out of it in giving his parents a lavish funeral. However, Yi Zhi insists that there is also a second source of benevolence which is the Mohist doctrine of ‘impartial caring’ [or universal love].” Confucians, by contrast, advocated for “graded love” (*ai you cha deng* 愛有差等 or *cha deng zhi ai* 差等之愛) (Van Norden 2008: 74–75). Again, for Confucians ethics is grounded in (Heaven-given) human nature; so, they would reject any argument that suggested we must change or ignore our nature in order to do what is right. Since we have a natural tendency to love our family and friends more than strangers, this “graded love” is seen as morally correct. As Mengzi puts it, gentlemen “treat their kin as kin, and then are benevolent toward the people ... and then are sparing of animals” (*Mengzi* 7A45.1). In my understanding of Mengzi's sensitivity theory, reflection on and extension of the sprouts can lead us to adopt this graded love by helping us come to perceive the way we relate to those close to us and those more distant, and the appropriate degree of love that comes with each. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to develop this point.

²⁴ Mengzi tells King Xuan of Qi that the heart (or sprout) of compassion is “sufficient” (*zuyi* 足以) for him to care for his people and become a virtuous king (*Mengzi* 1A7). This is further supported by the fact that Mengzi elsewhere “goes so far as to identify the four feelings with the virtues themselves, saying, ‘The feeling of compassion is benevolent. The feeling of disdain is righteousness...’” (Sim 2017: 192; she here quotes from *Mengzi* 6A6.7). Moreover, Mengzi argues that “Humaneness [*ren*] is simply being human. The Way is simply to harmonize with benevolence and put it into words” (*Mengzi* 7B16).

For Mengzi, to develop the sprouts into virtues we first reflect on (attend to or come to recognize, *si* 思) the sprouts, then extend (*tui* 推) them.²⁵ To further develop this point, it is helpful to look more closely at Van Norden's reading of Mengzi. Van Norden argues that Mengzi distinguishes between "passive" and "active" types of ethical cultivation. As Van Norden explains it,

"[Active] Self-cultivation" refers to practices that an individual engages in through his own agency. Self-cultivation may be divided into two types: "inner-directed" and "outer-directed." Inner-directed cultivation involves a turning of mental focus inward. Outer-directed cultivation involves turning one's mental focus to external situations, individuals, and texts. The lines between these kinds of cultivation are not sharp. If passive cultivation is to be effective, the subject of the cultivation must take an active role in responding appropriately to the environment provided. In addition, outer-directed cultivation involves inward processing of what is experienced as external. (Van Norden 2007: 227–228)

Active inner-directed ethical cultivation requires reflecting (*si*) on the sprouts.²⁶ Active outer-directed ethical cultivation, or extension, Van Norden argues, "is a way of focusing one's mind on external situations that allows one to come to see them more clearly and (we might say) 'feel them more clearly'" (Van Norden 2007: 234). Thus, Van Norden adopts a reading of Mengzi's moral cultivation that emphasizes the emotive component of the sprouts ("inner" cultivation) as well as a notion of extension as improving a kind of sensitivity ("outer" cultivation).

As Mengzi uses it, then, reflection emphasizes attending to the innate feelings the sprouts produce in response to morally relevant features of a situation. Once we reflect upon the sprouts, extension helps us come to recognize the proper moral response to a situation, including expanding what our sprouts respond to. It is therefore important to understand reflection and extension as emotional-rational processes, which defy a

²⁵ Mengzi also sometimes uses *ji* 及 or *da* 達 for extension.

²⁶ As Van Norden further explains, "To *si* the sprouts is to focus one's attention on the sprouts in a way that involves longing for their proper development [and...] delighting in their operation" (Van Norden 2007: 232). In his notes on *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, Van Norden similarly defines reflection (*si*) as "focusing one's attention upon and thinking about one's feelings and the situations that elicit them... an activity that involves feelings, thoughts, and perception" (Van Norden 2008: 149).

reductive reason/emotion dichotomy.²⁷ In addition to being an expansion of our natural ethical feelings to relevant situations, I argue, Mengzi's processes of moral cultivation—reflection and extension—should be seen more fully as also reflection on the moral force of, and extending one's emotional-rational sprouts to notice, different relational or role-based ties and obligations that are present within the same situation. This cultivation may include not just changing the object of moral attention—as McRae 2011 rightly notes—but also coming to perceive more clearly what is called for.

Virtue cultivation for Mengzi is a heightening and perfecting of an existing faculty. Again, this conviction is based on his commitment to the Confucian view that our human nature is set by Heaven and teleologically directed toward the Dao. As he tells Gongduzi 公都子, a disciple, the virtues “are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect [*si*] upon them” (*Mengzi* 6A6.7). Later, he clarifies

That which people are capable of without studying is their best capability. That which they know without pondering is their best knowledge.... Treating one's parents as parents is benevolence. Respecting one's elders is righteousness. There is nothing else to do but extend these to the world. (*Mengzi* 7A15)

The example of “treating one's parents as parents” is particularly illuminating because it implies that parents' existence *as parents*, that is, as occupying the position of parent within (a particular) human society, is what motivates us to act virtuously toward them. By properly perceiving the moral properties of a parent-child relationship the correct treatment of parents is merited.

²⁷ What exactly the process of extension consists in—including the extent to which it is reasoning versus emotional—has been a matter of debate. To provide a few prominent examples, David Wong understands extension as a type of “analogical reasoning,” in which, as Emily McRae explains, “the moral agent judges one case to be relevantly analogous to another prior to formulating an abstract principle stating that relevant characteristic” (McRae 2011: 593; see also Wong 2002). He rejects both a “logical extension” view, which posits that extension plays the role of a systemizing rational principle, and “emotive extension,” which suggests that extension has no rational component at all (Wong 2002: 196). Wong positions Van Norden's and Craig Ihara's readings as close to the emotive extension view, and Kwong-loi SHUN's as a relatively logical one (Wong 2002: 191). Emily McRae similarly emphasizes the emotional-rational nature of the sprouts, and “agree[s] with Wong's rejection of the logical and emotive interpretations of extension” (McRae 2011: 593). She argues that, “First, extension requires careful examination of one's heart, since, as the story of [King Xuan and the ox] shows, locating the sprouts in oneself and recognizing them as sprouts is not always easy. Second, extension engages our rational and intellectual capacities by requiring some reflection on human nature, the nature of virtue, and the nature of its cultivation. Third, extension works to cultivate our feelings by accessing and manipulating those beliefs, judgments, and images that trigger, maintain, heighten, and lessen our affective state” (McRae 2011: 594). As Ivanhoe explains, extension can also be thought of as analogous to learning music. A student learning to extend the moral feelings of the sprouts into full virtues first learns to recognize the moral sprouts based on past experience; he then learns to “regularly engage his moral sense,” and to “pick out the chord again” in new situations (Ivanhoe 2002a: 232). Through the process of extension, Mengzi argues, we can achieve full virtue. My own reading of extension, as noted in the body of the article, is as a heightening of an existing capacity. My view is that one perceives the motivating force of moral qualities through concentrating on the sprouts (with reflection)—these protoethical, cognitive-affective features of human nature can then be cultivated into virtues through recognizing a kind of “resonance” (Ivanhoe) or feeling in similar social-relational contexts or other circumstances. My reading is thus similar to Wong and McRae's readings, but perhaps closer to the emotive extension view as with Van Norden.

We might think again of Liu's point that human elders' existence *as* human elders evokes a characteristically human emotion (i.e., a sprout) that, when reflected on, leads us to recognize that they are worthy of respect (Liu 2002).²⁸ This reading, I argue, better accounts for one way of extending one's moral understanding without changing the "appropriate object" of moral concern, but by coming to understand (or perceive) one's *relationship* to the relevant object(s) more clearly (McRae 2011: 592). This, in turn, makes Mengzi's theory of moral cultivation more able to respond to questions plaguing the McDowellian Sensitivity view about how to account for changes in moral judgment and cross-cultural variation.

7 Mengzian Sensitivity to Social Roles and Relationships

That Mengzi's theory seems vulnerable to the same objections as McDowell's Sensitivity Account is, I argue, because it has thus far been underappreciated how central relational qualities are to his view. This is my second—original and more ambitious—exegetical argument. Once we appreciate this, we not only have a better understanding of Mengzi but also a version of sensitivity theory that is resilient in the face of criticisms to a McDowellian Sensitivity Account.

Mengzi's account of moral cultivation allows him to endorse naturalistic moral realism and motivational internalism, while also noting that moral facts change with one's relationships. Cultivating one's sprouts into virtues includes improving one's perception of what it means to be a king, a wife, or a son, which in turn includes being sensitive to the way these roles and their related responsibilities may change or be conditioned by one's particular context. Just as the sprouts provide a naturalistic but mind-dependent recognition of the fact that righteousness compels us to treat elderly people (but not old horses) with respect, properly attending to and extending the moral inclinations merited by our relationship toward our parents furnishes us with the correct moral response. Through thinking of reflection on and extension of the sprouts as a cultivation of our sensitivity to moral facts, *including* moral facts about uniquely human roles and relationships, Mengzi's moral psychology and theory of moral cultivation can help explain changes in moral judgments while also maintaining that the motivational force of moral qualities does not change.²⁹ Rather, it is simply that the moral facts of a situation shift as one's relation to those involved shifts.

To illuminate this process, let us return to the example of King Xuan and the ox. We are now ready to answer the question: why does Mengzi approve of King

²⁸ This may lead one to ask what, exactly, the moral properties of this relationship are that incite the motivation to, for example, behave respectfully. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this interesting and pertinent question. However, I believe identifying these properties definitively would require more research (both philosophical and empirical) and careful argumentation than the scope of the present essay allows.

²⁹ I am not here arguing that relational or role-based qualities are the only moral qualities in Mengzi's view. As I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out, there do seem to exist moral dilemmas that do not obviously involve roles and relationships. We might think, for instance, of a Kantian duty to oneself prohibiting suicide, or obligations to protect non-living features of the environment—of course, whether or not we actually have these obligations is an open question and outside the scope of this essay. Similarly, the question of how Mengzi's moral cultivation as sensitivity would lead us to decide these kind of nonrelational moral issues is outside the current scope.

Xuan's actions even though he asks him "what is there to choose between an ox and a sheep?" The king's potential—the "heart of a king" that Mengzi recognizes—is that the king both feels compassion for the ox in front of him, yet was able to "see" that his role as ruler necessitates that he serve his people by making the necessary ritual sacrifices (*Mengzi* 1A7).³⁰ The king's caring attitude toward the ox was not in itself a failure, nor was the substitution. Rather, the king's relationship to the ox was changed when he saw it, which merited a change in response.

Although the king cannot explain it, his decision to swap out the ox he had seen for a sheep he had not can be illuminated by Mengzi's statement that "gentlemen keep their distance from the kitchen" (*Mengzi* 7A45.1). The gentleman keeps out of the kitchen in order to maintain his proper relationship with animals. Mengzi states,

Gentlemen, in relation to animals, are sparing of them but not benevolent toward them. In relation to people, they are benevolent toward them but do not treat them as kin. They treat their kin as kin, and then are benevolent toward the people. They are benevolent toward the people, and then are sparing of animals. (*Mengzi* 7A45.1)

The crucial point here is that both roles (conceived of broadly as one's position in society) and relationships to particular others³¹ are seen as importantly generating ethical obligations for Mengzi. So, the perception of the moral force, say, to help someone near us and directly dependent on or caught up with us—like King Xuan's ox—may sometimes condition other, more distant moral concerns—like our role as ruler dictating we perform the necessary sacrifice. One who possesses a properly cultivated moral sense would, in this case, see the correct response that allows one to both show compassion to the ox in front of him and meet one's responsibilities to one's people.

³⁰ Performing animal sacrifices was seen as an important duty of the king to appease Heaven. As Van Norden explains in his commentary on this passage, ZHU Xi 朱熹, an influential Neo-Confucian commentator, interprets the situation like so: "Killing the ox was something that the king could not bear to do. On the other hand, anointing the bell [for the ritual] was something that could not be dispensed with" (Van Norden 2008: 9).

³¹ This term "particular others" is borrowed from feminist ethics of care (see, for instance, Held 2006). Li Chenyang has argued that both feminist care ethicists and Confucians reject impartiality in favor of attending to our obligations to those with whom we have close relationships. As Li explains, "For the Confucian and the one-caring, parents and others who are closely related certainly have a stronger pull. Accordingly, although we should care for everyone in the world, if possible, we do need to start with those closest to us" (C. Li 1994: 81). This is also related to the Confucian commitment to "graded love" (see Footnote 23). For evidence that Confucians hold this view, Li cites *Analects* 1.2 and 6.28, and *Mengzi* 1A7, 3B9, and 7A45. Note that this language of our closer relations having a "stronger pull" seems to reflect Mengzi's conviction that virtues are attractive by nature. One may agree that our obligations toward those who we are close to in a figurative sense (like our family) are stronger than to strangers without holding that our obligations to those who are literally close to us, like the ox, are stronger than those who are far from us. However, given Mengzi's insight that "Gentleman cannot bear to see animals die if they have seen them living.... Hence, gentlemen keep their distance from the kitchen," it is clear that Mengzi recognizes the powerful force of the immediately perceivable features of our environment on evoking moral emotions (*Mengzi* 1A7). Reacting with compassion to those we see suffering—even if they are animals—is an important part of cultivating moral feelings.

As Van Norden explains in his commentary on this passage, King Xuan “fails to be a true gentleman, because he shows more compassion to animals than to his own subjects” (Van Norden 2008: 183). In both the King Xuan example of an animal being led to sacrifice and the example of an animal being butchered, the animal is being used to serve people. It would be a mistake in either situation to show compassion toward the animal to the detriment of people, thus failing to perceive the properly motivating relationship—however, the king is able to maintain his responsibility to his people through his substitution.³²

The analogy in the King Xuan passage to “seeing” not only people or animals but also one’s relationship to them—for example, as ruler—reveals that extension may be thought of, at least in some cases, as a process of better perceiving one’s social positioning and the obligations this role generates. This suggests that, in Mengzi’s version of the Sensitivity Account, there is a moral fact-of-the-matter that comes from one’s particular relationships to others; hence Mengzi’s assertions that “[t]reating one’s parents as parents is benevolence” (*Mengzi* 7A15) and that gentlemen “treat their kin as kin” (*Mengzi* 7A45).³³

These points are also related to the Classical Confucian idea of rectifying or correcting names (*zhengming* 正名). Mengzi discusses this in, for example, 3A4.8:

The sage Shun [舜, a legendary emperor upheld as a moral exemplar] ... appointed Xie [契] to be Minister of Instruction, and instruct [the common people] about human roles: between father and children there is affection; between ruler and ministers there is righteousness; between husband and wife there is distinction; between elder and younger there is precedence; and between friends there is faithfulness. The Distinguished Sovereign advised, “Work them, draw them, straighten them, rectify them, help them, make them practice, assist them, make them get it themselves, and thus benefit them.”

³² However, as Mengzi notes, King Xuan’s “kindness is sufficient to reach animals, but the effects do not reach the commoners” (*Mengzi* 1A7.12). This helps to shed light on why “gentlemen” should avoid the kitchen, and why Mengzi seems to approve of King Xuan swapping the ox and the sheep. Again, the gentleman avoids the kitchen so that he can maintain the proper relationship to animals; once he sees them, his relationship to them changes and must condition or modify his moral response. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point, which I have included almost verbatim.

³³ This idea—that our relationships give rise to moral qualities that evoke or activate our natural, proto-moral and conative sprouts and which, if correctly reflected on and extended, will reveal our related moral obligations—while not explicit in the *Mengzi*, is suggested by a number of passages. Consider, for example, *Mengzi* 1A1.5—“never have the benevolent left their parents behind. Never have the righteous put their ruler last”; 2A9.1—“If someone was not BoYi’s [伯夷, a moral exemplar] ruler, he would not serve him. If someone was not his friend, he would not treat him as his friend”; 3A3.8—“When the human roles are illuminated above [by rulers], the people are caring below.” Relatedly, 3A2 and 7B24.2 both argue that the correct moral response to a given situation depends on one’s social role. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to these passages. An interesting note about this reading is that Mengzi seems to suggest here that a sprout, despite being teleologically directed toward virtue, can sometimes lead one to act incorrectly, if it has not been cultivated into a virtue. See for instance *Mengzi* 2B9.3.

Here, Mengzi points out that sage king Shun saw the importance of rectifying people's roles, so that each person properly understood and enacted the moral obligations their roles came with. Together with the previous claim that treating one's parents as parents is benevolence (*Mengzi* 7A15), it seems clear that rectifying names is a matter, for Mengzi, of illuminating the proper moral qualities each role or relationship produces. A true king, for example, is one who recognizes the moral qualities that supervene on this role, and enacts his duties accordingly.³⁴

As noted in the previous section, Classical Confucians believed that the Dao is given by Heaven and prescribes humans' roles (Graham 2002; Ivanhoe 2002b; Kim 2018; Van Norden 2007, 2008; Wong 2002, 2021). For Mengzi, it is our Heaven-given human nature, including the sprouts within the uniquely human heart-mind, that gives us the capacity to follow the Dao. Li Chenyang has argued that, for Classical Confucians, morality "is a matter of fulfilling one's proper role in the society, as a son, a brother, a father, and, further, as a ruler or a subject under the ruler" (C. Li 1994: 71–72). Indeed, influential contemporary commentators have argued that roles and relationships were, for Classical Confucians like Mengzi, importantly constitutive of the self (Bockover 2010; D'Ambrosio 2023, 2024; C. Li 1994, 2014; Sarkissian 2010, 2017; Xu 2018; Yu 2007).³⁵

³⁴ See also *Mengzi* 1B8, in which Mengzi argues that tyrant Zhou 紂 was not a true ruler. Although the Classical Confucians, including Mengzi, recognized five basic (or "constant") social relations (*wu lun* 五倫), the general idea that there are some natural, universal human roles and that these produce moral obligations does not entail accepting that the Confucians' roles were the correct ones. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this point. One might wonder why people must be instructed, as the commoners during Shun's time were, on human roles and their related moral obligations if understanding the moral force of one's roles and relationships is merely a matter of moral perception. However, to this Mengzi can simply reply that the environment during Shun's time was poor, such that the natural development of the sprouts was unsupported (cf. *Mengzi* 6A7, 6A8; Kim 2018).

³⁵ Similarly, Hagop Sarkissian has pointed out that "Notions such as autonomous agency, independence, privacy, will, and freedom are often associated with this particular conception of individuality, common in Western (and especially American) cultures.... On the other hand, 'individual' can also be understood contextually, as a locus or focal point within a web of social relations. On this relational view, an individual, while unique, remains nested in and significantly determined by larger group structures, while also (and simultaneously) affecting the dynamics of these structures in turn. This notion, prevalent in East Asian (and especially Confucian) culture, is quite different from the idea of a private, individual, inscrutable 'will' as a ground for action. Instead, individuals and their groups are inseparable.... The idea that our behavior is highly interconnected with others is pervasive in classical Confucian thought" (Sarkissian 2010: 7). A related point about the extent to which individual identities depend on or are constituted by our relationships and roles has been made by feminist philosophers such as Margaret Urban Walker, Susan Brison, and Paul Benson (Walker 2008; Brison 2002; Benson 2000). These feminist thinkers have put forward a relational view of the self; in this view, the self is relational insofar as it can be understood only by considering one's relationships, choices, and actions as shaped by, and in response to, her community and culture. One feature these feminist accounts of relational selfhood share is their belief that the self is a kind of narrative or nexus of relationships which is constituted by, and plays a role in constituting, a community of shared understanding. We might think for example of the way one's "self" depends on values passed down by parents, by the camaraderie one feels with coworkers, or by the way one understands her professional obligations. Each of us has a self and relationships that are mutually constituting. As Walker puts it, a relational view of the self means that moral accounts "even if individuating, cannot be private or idiosyncratic" (Walker 2008: 63). Based on this relational understanding of the self, Walker proposes an "ethics of responsibility," which provides a notion of moral responsibility that respects "the changing, deeply relational character of human lives and the ways we make sense of them" (Walker 2008: 63–64). It is my view that, similarly, Mengzi's (and other Classical Confucians') understanding of the self is not cleanly divorceable from one's social context.

Putting these convictions together, in the Confucian tradition—and for Mengzi in particular—individual human flourishing cannot be divorced from the flourishing of one's community and relations, nor from humans' natural capacities. The sprouts, then, must allow us the ability to perceive and act according to our Dao (that is—virtuously). Because our Dao, our roles, and the sprouts are all given by Heaven—thus features of the natural world—it seems plausible that, for Mengzi, our moral cultivation with respect to human roles would resemble other aspects of our natural development.³⁶ So, it further seems likely that the virtue entailed by or supervening on relationships—for example, between a parent and child or a king and his subjects—must “supervene on the basic nature of things” in the same way as other natural properties (Sturgeon 2007: 91).

Recall that Liu argued “the question [of]... why ‘respecting an old horse’ does not involve moral approval but ‘respecting an old person’ does” is answered by noting that “the former does not evoke characteristically human feelings or sensibilities” (Liu 2002: 120). With my reading of Mengzi's method of moral cultivation as cultivating a moral perception *including* about relationships, we can expand upon this point. This example not only shows that Mengzi believes moral judgment contains an implicit motivational component (as Liu notes); it also demonstrates that it is our relationship to the elderly, not merely their age, that reveals a salient moral fact. Likewise, King Xuan's role as king means he has a relationship of being “sparing” toward animals, but also a relationship of protector of his people (*Mengzi* 7A45). This latter relationship means he has a responsibility to perform sacrifices. When he sees the ox, his relationship to it changes; so, he substitutes a sheep in order to still fulfill his role in serving his people while also showing compassion to the ox. As our relationships change, so must our response.

I have offered a novel reading of the *Mengzi*, in which—in agreement with Liu—Mengzi can be considered a virtue theorist of the sensitivity kind but one who, further, applies the notion of virtue as sensitivity to the moral force of relationships and roles. Further evidence for this reading can be found in what Mengzi says about Sage-King Shun. Mengzi states,

That by which humans differ from animals is slight. The masses abandon it. The gentleman preserves it. Shun was insightful about things. He had scrutinized (*cha* 察)³⁷ human roles. He acted out of benevolence and righteousness. He did not act out benevolence and righteousness. (*Mengzi* 4B19.1)

³⁶ Here, it is helpful to briefly explain what I mean by “natural world.” Mengzi, like his contemporaries, endorsed a strongly teleological understanding of the natural world, such that Heaven is the source of human virtues and roles, as well as other aspects of nature (including human nature). As such, to say that the human Dao, virtues, and relationships are part of the natural world does not suggest, as it might to modern readers, that they are not the product of “supernatural” forces (like Heaven), nor does it suggest that we should distinguish between aspects of human life that are “natural” as opposed to “cultural.” Rather, what I mean to emphasize here is that the sprouts and other aspects of human nature have the same (natural yet teleological, Heaven-given) origin, and that for Mengzi human roles and relations are part of the Heaven-given human Dao. Thanks to both Bryan Van Norden and Waldemar Brys for encouraging me to clarify this point.

³⁷ *Cha* could mean “observe,” “look into,” “inspect,” or “examine.”

This quote demonstrates that virtue includes a kind of perception about, or scrutiny of, human relationships; moreover, this perception is so important that it is what separates humans from animals. That “by which humans differ from animals” is morality for Mengzi,³⁸ so being perceptive about human roles is (at least part of) being moral.

Sage-King Shun displays a properly cultivated moral perception, which he achieved through his attention to human relationships and the obligations of benevolence and righteousness they generate. Should the rest of us aspire to become similarly virtuous, we must too “preserve” (*cun* 存) that which separates us from animals—our cognitive-emotional, conative sprouts, present in the heart-mind—and use them to scrutinize human relationships.

One might argue, however, that one could agree that being perceptive about human relations is essential for developing full virtue without accepting the claim that this perception is one of moral qualities that motivate action (like the perceptual analogy of the Sensitivity Account).³⁹ I agree, but respond that—far from being an implausible reading of Mengzi—my view that Mengzi’s method of moral cultivation is analogous to perception is evidenced by his common metaphors of our attraction to virtue to perceptions of secondary qualities and to virtue as intrinsically beautiful or attractive (e.g., see *Mengzi* 6A6, 6A7, 6A17, 7A27, 7B24). The fact that Mengzi thinks of virtue as attractive in the same way delicious foods or handsome people are (6A7), combined with his frequent claims that the sprouts are endowed by Heaven and virtues part of human nature (2A6, 3B9, 4A10, 6A16, 7A21), suggests that the cultivation of the sprouts is similar to the cultivation of senses and that moral qualities are parts of the natural world—since, again, they are set by Heaven. Granted, this does not *entail* that this is the way Mengzi regards moral cultivation. And, as with McDowell’s sensitivity view, this does not mean that effort is not required to develop or perfect the moral sense.

To apply this to an example from McDowell, “Concern for the welfare of one’s friends, together with awareness that a friend is in trouble and open to being comforted, can explain missing a pleasant party in order to talk to the friend” (McDowell 1979: 347); should one’s relationship to her friend change, this would sufficiently explain a change in what the virtuous response would be. In a similar example, Mengzi points out that, if one’s younger brother is playing the role of the deceased in a sacrifice, this role affords him respect above an uncle, who would normally be afforded more respect by virtue of his age; in this case “[t]he reason [why my respect changes] has to do with the role my younger brother occupies” (*Mengzi* 6A5.4). So, reflection and extension can be used to recognize changing ethical obligations and norms based on individuals’ ever-shifting social positions or roles.⁴⁰

I have argued that, for Mengzi: 1) roles and relationships are constitutive of the self—including one’s moral responsibilities; 2) our Heaven-given sprouts give us the

³⁸ For this point I am indebted to A. C. Graham and Xiusheng LIU.

³⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to address this point.

⁴⁰ Mengzi makes a similar claim in 3A4, noting that rulers and subjects have different obligations based on their social roles.

teleological direction toward virtue; 3) our social roles are likewise set by Heaven; and 4) roles come with moral responsibilities, such that being perceptive about these role-related responsibilities is part of being virtuous. I have further argued that this evidence suggests that Mengzi holds a Sensitivity Account of virtue analogous to McDowell's, but which includes a sensitivity to moral facts generated by (natural, Heaven-given) human roles and relationships.

Further, I claim that drawing on (my reading of) Mengzi to supplement the Sensitivity Account can maintain motivational internalism and naturalistic moral realism—and the attractive qualities that come along with them—while explaining changing moral judgments and lack of moral consensus. It can do this without suggesting that variation in moral judgments or recognized virtues is a result of widespread misperception. This is because Mengzi's reflection and extension are processes of developing a sensitivity that includes perception of uniquely human roles and the moral obligations they generate. He thus offers an account of moral qualities as partly mind-dependent and partly mind-independent, like the Sensitivity Account's. However, because Mengzi's account emphasizes that some moral qualities are generated by or supervene on human roles and relationships, it makes room both for variation from culture to culture (due to differing social structures) and for apparent changes in moral judgments (perceptual capacity does not change, but the relationships do, and with them the moral qualities). Virtue remains a capacity analogous to perception, but because relationships and social roles vary over time and across cultures, and are importantly constitutive of our moral selves, moral qualities also vary. Let us explore this implication in more detail.

8 Mengzi's Answer to Problems of Changing Moral Judgments and Cross-Cultural Variation

Both Mengzian and McDowellian sensitivity require development and aim to help agents better perceive intrinsically motivating moral qualities. As we have seen, however, Mengzi recognizes that the moral qualities to which the virtuous person responds are not only akin to secondary qualities; they are also generated (sometimes or in part) by characteristic features of human life like the social structures and relationships we form—which, because they are set by Heaven, are also features of the natural world. Thus, we can think of Mengzi's ethical cultivation as improving our recognition or perception of naturalistic moral features, but also as calling for different moral responses in different cultural or societal contexts, since moral facts change with our roles.

With regard to how this helps to answer the question of whether or how virtuous agents can change their moral judgments, this notion of sensitivity as *including* sensitivity to relationships and roles illuminates that context and environment are extremely important in moral decision making. A virtuous person may decide to spare an ox but not a sheep due simply to a change in her relationship to the animal, even if there is no clear logical difference between killing one or the other. Likewise, two virtuous agents may come to differing moral conclusions—not because one of them is mistaken or misperceiving—but because a given moral dilemma, though

seemingly the same from the perspective of an outside observer, differs in relation to the agents' different roles or relationships.

I have noted above that empirical evidence of cross-cultural variation in identified virtues is abundant in contemporary psychology literature. Again, under a McDowellian Sensitivity Account such differences—insofar as they may have moral significance—could only be explained by suggesting that (at least) one of these two affective attitudes is mistaken. Moreover, I have shown that for both Classical Confucians and contemporary East Asians—speaking very generally—individuals can be seen as “a locus or focal point within a web of social relation ... nested in and significantly determined by larger group structures” (Sarkissian 2010: 7).

If we take up the Mengzian Sensitivity Account I have argued for, we can combine these two observations and note that cultural variations in virtue may, indeed, be a result of differences in environment, culture, and social roles—in short, culturally conditioned—without concluding based on this that (at least) one of two cultures which come to differing moral conclusions is mistaken. Rather, we could argue that their moral judgments are rightly based on the idiosyncratic features of their social environments. Based on these differences, I have argued that Mengzi's version of the Sensitivity Account—which includes a sensitivity to the moral force of relationships and social roles—can better account for variations in moral judgments both across cultures and over time.⁴¹

Returning to the example of filiality, a Mengzian Sensitivity Account can help us see that children's obligations to their parents differ based on the roles that each occupy in different cultures. First, as Van Norden notes, a culture must provide a conducive environment for moral cultivation by ensuring that its citizens' basic needs are met (Van Norden 2008: 227–230). Assuming that the “passive” conditions for ethical cultivation are met, though, Mengzi's account of “active” moral cultivation still allows for variation in one's moral responses.

A fully virtuous American and Chinese daughter might come to different, but equally correct, conclusions about the proper moral response because their relationships to their parents differ, and the salient moral features their cultures attend to

⁴¹ One might argue that Mengzi's view seems ill-suited to address the cultural variation problem because Mengzi himself says nothing about non-Chinese cultures, nor much about cultural differences in general. When he does discuss other cultures, it is often only to label them as uncivilized, and suggest that they would benefit from adopting Confucian culture (for instance, in *Mengzi* 3A4.12, 3B5.4, 3B9.11). I thank two anonymous reviewers for raising these thoughtful points and encouraging me to consider this counterargument. Despite Mengzi's own narrow focus, I believe his broader ideas can be applied to non-Chinese cultures, and indeed that Mengzi saw himself as developing a theory about human nature broadly. As Jiyuan YU notes, “Both [Greek virtue ethics and Confucian ethics] seek to understand what is good for human beings as such, rather than just for the Greeks or for the Chinese” (Yu 2007: 10). Just as Greek virtue ethics has been revived and fruitfully applied even to those who Aristotle and his contemporaries would have considered barbarians, Mengzi's insights can still prove useful despite his context.

differ.⁴² In cases like King Xuan's, it is his role as king that generates the moral obligation to show compassion to his people. His mistake is not in showing compassion for the ox—again, Mengzi speaks admirably of the “heart of virtue” this compassion demonstrates—but in not recognizing his responsibilities toward his people, and not extending the compassion he shows to the ox to them as well. A butcher, who occupies a different role, has different moral obligations. Should either's role change, so too would the correct moral response.

One may worry, though, that recognizing that social roles differ in different cultures, and arguing that moral obligations are (at least in part) predicated on these roles, opens the door to charges of moral relativism. That is, one might argue that the acknowledgement that two people from different cultures could have different (yet both correct) responses to the same social situation when occupying the same (broad) social role is incompatible with naturalistic moral realism.⁴³

To address this criticism, it is helpful to turn to Mengzi's favorite analogy for virtue cultivation: agriculture. Mengzi notes that

In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are violent. It is not the case that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies like this. They are like this because of what sinks and drowns their hearts. Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them. The soil is the same and the time of planting is also the same. They grow rapidly, and by the time of the summer solstice they have all ripened. Although there are some differences, these are due to the richness of the soil and to unevenness in the rain and in human effort. (*Mengzi* 6A7.1–2)

Here, Mengzi is making the point that poor environments can affect the sprouts' ability to flourish, and that humans must also put in effort to cultivate their sprouts into full virtues. However, we might also ask: what about when the soil or climate is not the same? Is it possible for the sprouts to flourish in different ways, based on adapting to different (but not necessarily bad) environments?

Certainly, in the case of plants and animals, a family or species may adapt to form subfamilies and subspecies that allow it to flourish in different environments. Darwin's finches are a famous example—these birds evolved from a single common

⁴² I do not here offer an opinion on what the correct moral roles or attitudes are toward one's parents—this is not a question I have been able to answer for myself, and I believe the answer depends on features not only of one's culture but of one's particular relationships. As moral objectivists have long argued, however, the fact of moral disagreement or that one does not know a moral truth does not entail that an objective moral truth does not exist. While it may be difficult to ascertain the moral responsibilities that supervene on our individual relationships and roles, I do feel confident asserting—with Martha Nussbaum and Jiyuan Yu (Nussbaum 1988, Yu 2007), as well as with Mengzi—that it is likely that some basic human roles are universal, and that humans' particular way of life is such that we must come to understand the moral force relationships have in order to flourish as social creatures. This does not mean that multiple avenues of flourishing, based on varied cultural, historical, and personal factors, are not open to people.

⁴³ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to consider this objection.

ancestor into distinct species with unique feeding habits, skills, and morphologies to fill niches in their environment (Grant 1986). We might say that they are all flourishing and occupy broadly the same role, but that the way they are flourishing has also been conditioned by the particulars of their environment. Similarly, plant breeding, artificial selection, and genetic modification have been used to adapt food-producing plant species to thrive in disparate environments. People, needless to say, are not plants, and the environments in which we grow are shaped not only by our climate but by complex historical, social, and political factors. However, I believe this analogy can still be instructive.

Note that, for Mengzi, both plants and humans have a Heaven-given nature, which directs them toward flourishing. There is a right way for humans to live, as there is a right way for plants to live, based on objective, species-dependent standards. However, within that teleological framework there is room for variation. Mengzi argues that “in general, things of the same kind are all similar” (*Mengzi* 6A7.3). He provides the example of a shoe: “‘When one makes a sandal for a foot one has not seen, we know that one will not make a basket.’ The similarity of all the shoes in the world is due to the fact that the feet of the world are the same” (*Mengzi* 6A7.3–4). But, of course, shoes *do* differ in some respects, based on the materials, size, sole, and so on, that are suitable for the person and their circumstances. This suggests that there are some objective, cross-cultural moral norms that we can discover, but that the particular enactment of virtues, or the judgments these moral facts evoke, can vary in response to broader social and environmental context and to the particulars of an agent’s situation.

This is further evidenced by Mengzi’s conviction that the virtues look different in different contexts. Take, for example, *Mengzi* 1B1. In this passage, Mengzi’s disciple Yuezhengzi 樂正子 argues that the fact that Mengzi’s mourning rituals for his mother were more “lavish” than for his father does not indicate that he was improperly enacting the virtue of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), but rather was “due to the difference between being poor and being wealthy” (*Mengzi* 1B1.1–2). Yet, in *Mengzi* 3A5.4, Mengzi argues that filiality naturally leads children to desire to bury their parents. In short, the relationship of a child to their parents generates a moral obligation to mourn them respectfully at their death, but features of one’s circumstances may make this mourning look different in different contexts. Two people may, for example, occupy the same broad role of son—and thus have the same obligation to respectfully mourn their parents—but this role may generate very different

particular obligations in funerary practices for, for instance, a modern-day secular American and a Confucian from the Warring States period.⁴⁴

Similarly, we might think of Mengzi's claims in 6A7 that "No one in the world does not appreciate the handsomeness of a man like Zidu [子都]." In this passage, Mengzi is arguing that our sensory organs all "have the same preferences" and that hearts (*xin*) likewise have a common preference for, or attraction to, virtue (*Mengzi* 6A7.8). Of course, contemporary readers will understand that aesthetic tastes are importantly culturally conditioned. So, our particular tastes—for example, in sexual attraction—will, in fact, not all be "in common" across cultures. That said, there is empirical evidence to suggest that attraction to some features is common across cultures. For instance, symmetry is seemingly universally considered attractive (Bode, Helmy, and Bertamini 2017; Che, Sun, Gallardo, and Nadal 2018).

Again, extending this analogy to our attraction to or perception of virtue, it may be that broad features of virtue—for example, an attraction to righteousness, benevolence, or filiality—are cross-cultural, even if the particular details of how the virtues

⁴⁴ Of course, Classical Confucians (including Mengzi) had strict rules about proper mourning and funerary rituals (see for instance *Mengzi* 1B16, 3A2), so one may argue that Mengzi would not approve of funerary customs from non-Chinese cultures. He certainly did not approve of Mohists' frugality with respect to funerals (*Mengzi* 3A5). However, one may also argue that it is the expression of a universal human virtue—filiality—through a respectful funerary and mourning process, not the particular Confucian rituals designed to express this virtue, that is important. Van Norden argues similarly, noting that "Mengzi's thought experiment [about early humans feeling shame at leaving their parents' bodies unburied] suggests that mourning rituals are grounded in innate human reactions," and that "Mengzi's account entails acceptance of our inclinations to give our parents more than the sort of bare-bones funeral (no pun intended) the Mohists advocate" (Van Norden 2007: 311–312). That is, a more contemporary and charitable reading of Mengzi on this point suggests that the morally correct action with regard to funerals is whatever shows respect and filiality, though the way this is done may vary cross-culturally. Again, this suggests that there are some universal or cross-cultural virtues but that their expression can differ based on one's particular context, culture, and relationships or roles. I thank Bryan Van Norden for further pointing out that another way one might think about this point is to distinguish between *particularism* and *pluralism*. Although there is not room to develop this distinction fully in this essay, briefly: particularism may be regarded as the view that values are highly context-sensitive, and depend on the particulars of an individual's relationships, history, circumstances, and so on. Pluralism, in contrast, is the view that "[t]here are a variety of incommensurable kinds of value," and that different values are weighted or emphasized differently by different cultures—note that this view is still compatible with the belief that there are universal human values shared by all cultures (Van Norden 2014: 66). So, while both particularism and pluralism suggest that we should be sensitive to the differing relationships, roles, and contexts of a given situation in order to determine the moral response that is called for, one emphasizes the importance of attentiveness to the idiosyncrasies of an individual's social positioning while the other emphasizes the importance of attentiveness to the moral values or norms that are emphasized in that individual's culture or broader social context. In this example, Mengzi's more lavish funeral for his mother is justified due to the particular context of his situation—he had more to spend on her funeral than his father's. At the same time, he is rightly critical of Mohists' frugality due to the Classical Chinese culture's shared norms about expressing filiality through burial practices.

are enacted are conditioned by one's environment.⁴⁵ These responses, admittedly, are speculative. But I hope, at least, to have shown that it is possible to endorse my understanding of a Mengzian sensitivity account—including its attractive features of allowing for some variation in moral response cross-culturally and among virtuous agents—while also retaining moral objectivism.

9 Conclusion

In this essay I have had three major aims. First, I have offered evidence for reading the *Mengzi* as putting forward a Sensitivity Account view of virtue. Second, I have offered a novel reading of the *Mengzi* as, further, putting forward a Sensitivity Account in which some moral qualities are produced by or supervene on social roles and relationships. I have argued that Mengzi's moral cultivation processes of reflection and extension allow us to expand our perceptual capacity to notice the moral force of social relationships. I have also argued that the Confucian philosopher's view thus goes further than McDowell's by recognizing that not only humans' unique perceptual capacity but also our unique social structures have moral salience. Virtue is indeed analogous to color insofar as it is a natural fact that also depends on human subjectivity, but its moral weight and motivating force comes from the uniquely human capacity for reflection and extension and the sprouts that are part of our human nature. These allow us to develop a sensitivity to moral qualities including those that supervene on our ever-shifting social relationships and roles.

Based on these exegetical claims I have, third, shown that—because of this more robust understanding of the objects of moral perception—Mengzi's theory provides a means for us to improve our response to ethical calls to action, to revise our previous opinions on ethical matters as our relationships and roles change, and to account for differing moral responses cross-culturally. Mengzi's moral psychology is rightly considered motivationally internalist. At the same time, his location of the sprouts in human nature, and his notion of moral cultivation as—at least in part—improving our sensitivity to uniquely human relationships and roles, allows for a naturalistic moral realism that aligns with a McDowellian notion of virtue as sensitivity to secondary qualities while also explaining how moral judgments can change over time and across cultures.

Thus, I have argued that Mengzi offers fruitful resources for the Sensitivity Account. In particular, a Mengzian-influenced Sensitivity Account of virtue can

⁴⁵ In order to discover whether certain core virtues or moral qualities are indeed cross-cultural would require empirical research beyond the scope of this essay. This is a popular area of research in contemporary psychology, and some research has argued that some core virtues are indeed cross-cultural (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, and Seligman 2005; Lomas 2019). Similarly, contemporary virtue ethicists like Martha Nussbaum and Jiyuan Yu have suggested that there are some basic desires, needs, or spheres of experience that are common across all human cultures, and that as a result some basic virtues related to these shared experiences are objective and universal (Nussbaum 1988, Yu 2007). Similarly, as noted previously, David Wiggins argues that we can find a "Sensible Subjectivism" in the middle ground between objectivism and subjectivism by arguing that moral values are intersubjective—that is, grounded not in individual attitudes but collective agreement (Wiggins 1987).

better account for differences in moral judgment by emphasizing that moral facts are a feature of human relationships, which likewise vary between cultures and individuals, and change over time. I have also noted, however, that this view may come with its own weakness related to whether the dependence on one's roles and relationships as a source of moral obligations makes the theory vulnerable to charges of relativism; and I have offered some preliminary responses to this charge.

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