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What Is the “Similarity” of Humankind? A Difference between Confucian and Mohist Religious Ethics

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Abstract: Both pre-Qin Confucianism and Mohism aimed to find a universalist consensus of belief in order to deal with social chaos and disunity, but they diverged at a basic level on what is the fundamental universality of humankind and how to achieve it. In the debate between Mencius and Mohists, Mohists believed that the fundamental “similarity” of humankind lies in the field of “self-interest”, so they emphasized the acquisition of Heaven’s favor through external achievements and sacrificial offerings. On the contrary, Mencius took the fundamental similarity of humans to the level of the inner heart-mind and believed that the fundamental “sameness” of humans lies in their “heart-mind” rather than in being “self-interested”, so he advocated the connection with the heavenly part within us when we follow the guidance of the heart-mind. Their differing interpretations of the fundamental question of “the similarity of humankind” ultimately resulted in the divergences and discrepancies between two religious ethical forms and their outcomes in early China.

Keywords: Mencius; Mohists; religious ethics; similarity of humankind



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1. Introduction

The “Confucian–Mohist debate” is an extremely important topic in the history of Chinese religious studies.¹ As the two “celebrated schools known in the world”,² the relevant discrepancies between Confucianism and Mohism on many theoretical issues have had a profound impact on later generations. But what exactly is the essence of this divergence and what is the fundamental discrepancy between the two have always been subjects of varied interpretations.³ Under different theoretical perspectives, people either focus on the difference between “humane love” (*ren ai* 仁愛) and “impartial love” (*jian ai* 兼愛), or summarize it as the difference between the “mandate of heaven” (*tian ming* 天命) and the “will of heaven” (*tian zhi* 天志), or relish in the difference between “venerating propriety (*li* 禮)” and “rejecting propriety” (*fei li* 非禮). These divergent points between Confucianism and Mohism summarized from different angles are all reasonable to varying degrees, but they all seem to ignore a more fundamental and substantive question: why did such a discrepancy take place, and what exactly was its cause?

We know that most kinds of religious theories, be it ancient or modern, Chinese or Western, are integral to a certain presumption and conception regarding “human nature” (*renxing* 人性), an understanding of what is “common” in human nature, that is, the innate “commonality” between humans. The answer to the question regarding the “commonality” of human nature, of what is the fundamental “similarity” between humans and of what constitutes the intrinsic quality of humankind as such, differentiating it from other “kinds”, not only determines the basic form and theoretical characteristics of a religious doctrine, but also shapes its subsequent development path and final outcome. However, the long-lasting neglect of this primary and foundational issue has hindered a comprehensive understanding of the “discrepancy between Confucianism and Mohism”.

It must be acknowledged that academic research on the theories of human nature in Confucianism and Mohism is not uncommon in academic circles, but this article attempts

to provide a new perspective to understand this issue. That is, instead of using “human nature theory” to summarize the supposed differences between the “heart-mind” of Mencius and the “self-interest” of Mozi, I choose to replace it with the perspective of “what makes humans human” or “the fundamental similarity between humans”, or “what distinguishes humans as a category from other categories, their categorical essence”. This is because the so-called “human nature theory” does not cover the views of all pre-Qin philosophers. For example, Mozi does not discuss “human nature”, but he is concerned with the question of “what constitutes the fundamental similarity among humans”. Moreover, the concept of “nature” cannot encompass all understandings of “innate tendencies of humans” or “essential attributes of humans” (for example, Huang-Lao Daoism uses the concept of “emotions” instead of “nature”). So, I believe that using the question and perspective of “what makes humans human” to discuss related issues is more inclusive, broader and more novel than using the perspective of “human nature theory”. But the discussion from this perspective has not yet emerged in the academic community. This is the innovative aspect of my problem perspective.

In view of this, this article intends to provide a new perspective for understanding the differences between Confucian and Mohist religious ethics. We take Mozi and Mencius as an example. Of course, when discussing the differences between Confucian and Mohist ethics, it is important not to neglect the fact that both Confucianism and Mohism internally exhibit complex changes and variations. For instance, there are distinctions between the views of Mozi and those presented in the “Mojing”, and the perspectives of Xunzi and Mencius diverge even more significantly. However, due to limitations in length, this article cannot provide a comprehensive exploration of pre-Qin Confucianism and Mohism. Instead, it merely selects Mencius and Mozi as representatives (both being the most important representatives of Warring States Mohism and Confucianism). Naturally, they cannot encompass all the differences between early Confucianism and Mohism, but an examination of these two cases may offer one aspect and dimension for understanding the dispute between Confucianism and Mohism. In the specific practice of their mutual critique, Mozi and Mencius gave different answers to the problem of “the fundamental similarity of humankind”, and it was precisely this divergence that finally led to their respective conceptions on how to approach and lead to the highest faith, thus shaping the distinct configurations and the fundamental differences in the two religious doctrines. The difference in their religious ethical choices stemmed from their very starting points.

2. “One Root” or “Two Roots”: The Debate between Mencius and Mohists

Before systematically starting our discussion, it is necessary to start from a specific debate between Mencius and Mohists. The reason for this rests on an indisputable basic fact: to an important degree, pre-Qin scholars’ learning evolved gradually through active debates in the intellectual environment of the Hundred Schools of Thought. This means that Mencius’s argumentative practice of “resisting Yang and Mo” (*Mencius*, 3B9) also constitutes an important basis for our understanding of the discrepancy between Confucianism and Mohism.

The *Mencius*, 3A5, registers a famous public case between the Confucian master Mencius, and the Mohist follower called Yi Zhi:

Yi Zhi, a Mohist, sought, through Xu Bi, to meet Mencius ... Mencius said, “... I have heard that Master Yi is a Mohist. In regulating funeral practices, the Mohist way is that of simplicity, and Master Yi is contemplating changing the world accordingly. What makes him think that, unless the deceased are buried in this way, they are not honored? Master Yi himself buried his parents in a lavish style, thus serving his parents in a way that he himself disparages”. ... Yi Zhi ... said, “According to the Confucian way, the ancients acted as if they were protecting an infant. What does this teaching mean? To me it means that one should love without distinctions but that the love begins with parents and extends from there”. ... Mencius replied, “Does Master Yi believe that a man’s affection for his brother’s

child is just like his affection for the child of a neighbor? What he should have taken from the teaching [he cited] is that, if a child crawling toward a well is about to fall in, this is not the fault of the child. Heaven, in giving birth to living beings, causes them to have one root, while Master Yi supposes they have two roots.⁴

In response to Mencius's criticism of his inconsistency between knowledge and action (Mohism advocates for moderation in funerals, but Yi Zhi buried his parents lavishly), Yi Zhi tries to respond that "one should love without distinctions but ... the love begins with parents and extends from there". Nonetheless, Yi Zhi's defense is counterattacked by Mencius. According to Mencius, Confucian ethical principles are basically characterized as having "one root", while his opponent Yi Zhi's ethical principles are disdainfully said to have "two roots". The difference between having "one root" or "two roots" constitutes the fundamental difference between Confucian and Mohist thought according to Mencius.⁵ Then, the question is, what exactly are these "one root" and "two roots" mentioned by Mencius?

It should be pointed out that the meaning of these two terms, "one root" and "two roots", is not clear in ancient books, so the commentators of the past dynasties have come up with various interpretations. For example, according to Zhao Qi, a scholar of the Han Dynasty, "The myriad of things born by the heavens come out from one root. But here we have Yi Zhi who treats strangers as parents, as if they were his own, and by applying himself to two roots, he strives to make his love the same".⁶ That is to say, the myriad of things are born from the heavens, so they must have only one source (coming from their own parents), but Yi Zhi regards the value of his own parents as equal to other people's, thus making "two loves stand equally". According to Zhao Qi's explanation, Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi inherited this line of thought. In Zhu Xi's view, "The life of beings and persons all have their root in their respective parents and in no other. This is a natural principle, as the heavens have made it this way. Therefore, their love is established from this, and this love is different when extended to others. Now, according to the words of Master Yi, one should rather regard one's parents as if they were no different to passersby, but still admitting that the order when loving one's parents and passersby provisionally begins with loving one's parents. What is this if it is not having two roots?" He also said: "One root will naturally have distinctions within it. But between two roots, since they stand equally, there is no distinction. This is what Mozi affirmed".⁷

From the explanations of Zhao Qi and Zhu Xi quoted above, the difference between upholding "one root" or "two roots" seems to point to the distinction between two different ethical principles. Confucianism advocates a principle of "humane love", of "love with distinctions", thus giving parents a special status above strangers, while Mohism advocates a principle of "impartial love" of "love without distinctions", refusing to give parents some kind of priority. In the universalistic view of the Mohists, people should adopt an objective standpoint of "impartiality" in ethical behavior, so that no person has higher value than another and everyone is equal.⁸ On the other hand, Confucianism, which advocates "differentialism", believes that objective differences in ethical practice cannot and should not be erased. Therefore, when Mencius criticizes the Mohists for the "denial of one's parents" (3B) he is criticizing the Mohists for forsaking blood ties, that is, for forsaking the diverseness in personal relations and ethical practices, forcing themselves to deal with the fundamentally different relationships with relatives and strangers, with those close and those distant, in the same way, which not only goes against the objective "inequality" among "the myriad of things born by the heavens" (according to the *Mencius*, "for things to be unequal is their natural tendency") but also goes against the natural emotions and psychology of human beings. It is also in this sense that Zhu Xi, as a Confucian, once criticized the Mohist statement of "thousands of passersby", while Yi Zhi regarded his parents as "indistinguishable from these thousands of passersby". Zhu Xi even ridiculed this, saying: "this 'love without distinctions', it doesn't stop at having two roots! It contains tens of millions".⁹

Zhao Qi and Zhu Xi's interpretation of "one root" and "two roots" as "love with distinctions" and "love without distinctions" have had a far-reaching influence. But this in-

terpretation, while influential, is not without controversy. An obvious problem is that this explanation does not arrive to a reasonable reading of the word “root” (*ben* 本). Evidently, from Zhao Qi’s explanation, he seems to understand “root” as a “source” or as a “principle” in the cosmological sense. However, if we examine the ancient books of the pre-Qin period, in the pre-Qin texts, it is actually not common to find “root” used in a cosmological sense. In other words, interpreting “root” as “principle” probably does not conform to the original meaning of the *Mencius*. Then, how should we interpret the “root” of “one root” and “two roots”?

In fact, out of dissatisfaction with the existing explanations of the concept of “root”, there has always been another interpretation of “one root” and “two roots” in the international Sinology research field. For example, in David S. Nivison’s view, “it seems entirely possible that he is talking about the basis of Yi Zhi’s moral system, which he is criticizing as being double, insisting that, morally considered, a human as one of Heaven’s creatures has just one ‘root’. And that root for him has to be, of course, the ‘heart’ in its different aspects as dispositional ‘hearts’ ... Yi Zhi’s trouble, then, would be that he has gotten into a mess by accepting guidance both from his ‘heart’ and from a set of doctrines that are unconnected with the ‘heart’”.¹⁰ Nivison believes that Yi Zhi is drawn by two forces, the natural emotion from the “inner heart-mind” and the guidance of the “doctrines” that “run contrary to the heart-mind”, so he has fallen into a certain dilemma or conflict, a sort of “schizophrenia”. Clearly, Nivison explained the “root” of “one root” and “two roots” as “the basis or source of moral principles”. In his view, Mencius takes the “heart-mind” (*xin* 心) as the basis of his ethical system (it is “heart-mind-based”), but Mozi accepts the guidance of a set of doctrines that run contrary to the “heart-mind”. So, what do these so-called “doctrines that are unconnected with the ‘heart’”, that is, the other “root” that Yi Zhi embraces, refer to? Li Wei made some complementary observations to Nivison’s explanation. In Li Wei’s view, the “other root” accepted by Yi Zhi refers to the “self-interested” human nature mentioned by the *Mencius* in 4B26: “those in the world who speak about human nature only consider its original state and take its original state to be fundamentally self-interested”;¹¹ that is, the Mohists actually founded their entire ethical system on the common nature of human beings of hoping for and pursuing their self-interest. But in the eyes of Confucianism, this is actually a combination of two completely different and incompatible things, “morality” and “self-interest”, so it falls into the dilemma of “a theory with two roots”.¹²

Nivison’s and Li Wei’s explanation obviously represent a clear advance, because they not only explain the differences between upholding “one root” and “two roots”, but also expand on the source of this discrepancy. As far as “root” is interpreted as “the basis of the ethical system or principles”, Nivison’s explanation is evidently more in line with the original meaning of the *Mencius*. Just as the *Mencius* criticizes that most of “those in the world who speak about human nature” “take its original state to be fundamentally self-interested” (Mohism is precisely one of the targets of Mencius’s criticism), in the Mohist’s view, human nature consists of “seeking advantages” and “avoiding disadvantages”; the commonality or the intrinsic quality of human beings is that they are “self-interest-loving” creatures. People love others only for their self-interest, and more widely promote other people’s interest only for earning “self-interested rewards”. Therefore, Mohism advocates a kind of “undifferentiated” and “impartial” love (also translated as “universal love”) for the purpose of “mutual advantage”, that is, the maximization of the general interests of mankind. But Mencius thinks otherwise. Mencius does not believe that the intrinsic quality of human life consists in being a “self-interested” creature, nor does he advocate the establishment of ethical principles on the basis of “maximizing benefits”; he therefore opposes that ethical practices should take the natural manifestations of the “heart-mind” and advocates the distinction between relatives and strangers or those close and those distant (“humane love”) into consideration.

If this view is correct, then the discrepancy between Mencius and Mohists is not only a difference between two ethical principles, but also a difference regarding the source, foundation or inner basis of two different kinds of religions. It involves a more fundamental

and primary disagreement: different answers to the questions “what is the fundamental similarity of human beings?” and “what is the intrinsic quality and commonality of human nature?” Most ethical theories on the history of religions, be it ancient or modern, have always been based on a conception of human nature, and a theory of human nature cannot be separated from an inquiry of “what is common” in “human nature”, that is, the discussion of the innate “commonality” of human beings or the most fundamental “similarity” of human nature. The answers to the questions “what is the commonality of human nature”, “what is the fundamental similarity between human beings” and “what constitutes the intrinsic quality of humankind as such, differentiating it from other ‘kinds’” not only determine the basic characteristics and the direction of any religious ethical theory, but also whether the theory can be effectively proven and the basis for how it is proven.

Based on this, if we want to truly understand the difference between Confucianism and Mohism, we must first investigate how Mencius and Mohists understood and answered the question “what is the fundamental similarity of human beings”. We will analyze them one by one below.

3. What Is the Fundamental “Similarity” of Humankind?

Let us first take the relevant propositions of Mozi and Mencius as an example to see the differences in their understanding of the fundamental “similarity” of human beings, and what theoretical assumptions they are based on.

Mozi does not explicitly discuss what the fundamental “similarity” of human beings is, but this does not mean that we cannot make conclusions based on Mozi’s general statements. In the *Mozi*, it is mentioned several times: “And it is the case that all the members of the family will wish to obtain the rewards and praise of their superiors and avoid their censure and punishment”,¹³ “And it is the case that everywhere the people of the state all wish to get the rewards and praise of their leaders and avoid their censure and punishment”. In Mozi’s view, human beings are selfish and self-interested creatures, and people will gather together for their own interests (“seek advantages”), and will also consciously avoid unfavorable and harmful things (“avoid disadvantages”). Everyone is concerned about their self-interests, so when people differ or clash with each other, conflict and infringement of interests is inevitable. For Mozi, the chaos and disorder of real political society was to a large extent the result of this conflict of interests. Because different groups of people cared about their own interests and society lacked an effective rule to mediate their conflicts, it naturally led to a situation of “competing with one another for profit”; everyone infringed on the interests of others out of self-interest, so that even if society had surplus goods, people were unable to share them, and even if it had strength to spare, people were unable to help each other in their work; thus, good doctrines were hidden and obscured and not used for mutual teaching, and “so the world was in a state of disorder comparable to that amongst birds and beasts” (*Mozi*, 11.1).

Clearly, Mozi attributes the fundamental “similarity” of human nature to the field of “self-interest”. Of course, this does not mean that Mozi denies that human beings can be “similar” in the field of “having a sense of right and wrong” (otherwise “exalting unity” would be meaningless), but for this “similarity” to be constitutive, it has to be based on “interests” being “similar”. A typical support for this argument is found in *Mozi*, 12.11: “(Master Mozi said:) therefore, the sage kings of ancient times, because they were able to carefully select people who exalted unity and make them leaders of government, [ensured that] the feelings of those above and below were in harmony. If those above had any matters that had not been planned or benefits that had not been initiated, those below learned of these and benefited [from] them. If those below had any stored-up resentments or accumulated harms, those above learned of these and eliminated them”. For Mozi, establishing “leaders of government” and implementing “rewards and punishments” are the basic means to realize “exalting unity under a single principle”, because if the “interests” of those above and those below are inconsistent, then the “leaders of government” and “rewards and punishments” will not be effective, and the unity of a “sense of right and

wrong” will not be achieved. On the contrary, only when those below “learn ... from and benefit” those above, and those above get rid of “stored up resentments or accumulated harms” for those below, it can be guaranteed that “the feelings of those above and below [are] in harmony”. In this regard, Mozi also repeatedly emphasizes that “One must lead them with riches and honor from the front, and pursue them with clearly understood punishments from behind. If I were to conduct government like this, even if I wished there not to be unity with me, I would not be able to achieve this”. (13.11) To realize “exalting unity” through “riches and honor” and “clearly understood punishments” is precisely to make use of the common human instinct of seeking “advantages” and avoiding “disadvantages”, because everyone wants to “get the rewards and praise of their leaders and avoid their censure and punishment”. Political rule can be achieved by controlling people’s fundamental “similarity”. In this sense, Mozi is presumably a precursor of the Warring States Legalists.¹⁴ He even put forward an incipient form of the theory of “whistleblowing” and “collective punishment”.¹⁵

On the other hand, Mencius has a different view. We find a noteworthy passage in *Mencius* 6A7:

Things of the same kind are thus like one another (*ju xiangsi* 舉相似). Why is it that we should doubt this only when it comes to human beings? The sage and we are the same in kind ... Therefore I say mouths find savor in the same flavors; ears find satisfaction in the same sounds; eyes find pleasure in the same beauty. When it comes to our minds (*xin* 心), could they alone have nothing in common? And what is it that our minds have in common? It is order (*li* 理) and rightness (*yi* 義) The sage is just the first to apprehend what our minds have in common. Thus order and rightness please our minds in the same way that meat pleases our mouths.

“Things of the same kind are thus like one another” is the premise of the argument in this passage. Since all things of the “same kind” have certain things that are like one another, then people, as they are of the “same kind”, also must have certain things that are “like one another”. According to Mencius, the similarity of humankind is manifested in the agreement of everyone’s sensory desires, such as the “same flavors” in the mouth, the “same sounds” in the ears and the “same beauty” in the eyes, etc., but the more fundamental similarity is the agreement of the “heart-minds”. For Mencius, everyone, as long as they are human beings, must have an innate desire and aspiration for “order” and “rightness”. This kind of “inclination towards order and rightness” that “our minds have in common” was first attained by Yao and Shun and other sages, but it is not unique to them.¹⁶ Since Yao and Shun are of the same kind, if it was possible for Yao and Shun, it is possible for everyone.

Noticeably, unlike Mozi, Mencius attributes the fundamental “similarity” of human beings to the field of the “heart-mind”. Everyone is born with the “same” “heart-mind” with an “inclination towards order and rightness”. This innate moral endowment is also called the “original heart-mind” by Mencius. Everyone has an “original heart-mind” but, in real life, sages (*shengren* 聖人) and noble persons (*junzi* 君子) can keep this heart-mind, while ordinary people often forget it or lose it. But forgetting or losing it does not mean that they did not have this heart-mind in the first place. In fact, the term “original heart-mind” points to the inherent nature of humaneness (*ren* 仁) and rightness in everyone. Therefore, in 4B32 it also says: “Chuzi said, ‘The king sent someone to spy on the Master to see whether he was different from other people’. Mencius said, ‘How should I be different from other people? Yao and Shun were the same as other people’”. Mencius proves Chuzi’s suspicion of Mencius being “different from other people” wrong. For Mencius, the “original heart-mind” is open to everyone, just like the sages (Yao and Shun) are. And it is this “heart-mind of order and rightness” that everyone possesses that also constitutes the nature of human beings: “From this it may be seen that one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance

would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human. The mind's feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humaneness (*ren* 仁); the mind's feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness (*yi* 義); the mind's feeling of modesty and compliance is the sprout of propriety (*li* 禮); and the mind's sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom (*zhi* 智). Human beings have these four sprouts just as they have four limbs". The formula "one who lacks a mind that ... would not be human" of 2A6 means that to have a heart-mind that has a sense of "right and wrong", "pity and compassion", "shame and aversion" and "modesty and compliance" is just like everyone having four limbs. Once people forget or let go of these, they become deprived of the true form of life, and also lose the intrinsic quality of being human ("he will be at scant remove from the animals").

It is worth noting that Mencius certainly does not deny the actual differences between people, but, according to him, these differences cannot affect the original heart-mind being "the same" for all. In other words, Mencius is in fact very clear about the demarcation and division between the scopes of "the same" and "the different". "The same", for Mencius, is more of a "sameness" of moral potential, while "the different" refers to the "differences" in the actual existential situations of people; that is, people's "heart-minds" are similar with regards to their "sprouting" but are different with regards to their state of "cultivation". For this reason, Mencius also specifically emphasizes: "This is not a matter of a difference in the native capacities sent down by Heaven but rather of what overwhelms their minds", "It is not exemplary persons alone who have this mind; all human beings have it. It is only that the exemplary ones are able to avoid losing it; that is all". (6A10) What is interesting is that, although Confucianism never denies differences in actual practice (just as Xunzi also emphasized "the difference between the noble and the small person" and Confucius said "Only the highest among the wise and the lowest among the stupid never change"¹⁷), in general, Confucianism never abstracts this distinction into an absolute thing or considers people to be naturally born as "noble persons" or "small persons". In Confucianism, the difference between a noble person and a small person is in fact, in terms of actual practice, just like the distinction between a sage and everyone else; but from the perspective of human morality and potential, everyone can become a "sage", and everyone is equal with regard to their moral character.

Mencius explains the meaning of humans being one of a "kind" (*lei* 类) in terms of a moral endowment (the "heart-mind of order and rightness"). This explanation targets Mozi's belief in a unity based on everyone being "self-interested". However, if Mencius wants to successfully "distance from Mohism", there is still a problem that requires urgent attention: In order to complete the argument, it is necessary not only to explain why the "heart-mind" can become the fundamental "similarity" of human beings but also to further explain why "self-interest" cannot. That is to say, why is it that the most fundamental "similarity" of human beings can *only* exist in the field of "heart-mind" but *not* in the field of "self-interest"?

Mencius's first argument towards the claim that the fundamental "similarity" of human beings cannot lie in "self-interest" is firstly based on the difference between humans and beasts. Of course, Mencius does not deny that human beings all coincide in being "self-interested", but this "coinciding" does not constitute the fundamental "similarity" of human beings. Therefore, it is not a sign that can distinguish human beings from other animals and it cannot constitute the "intrinsic quality of the kind". In a debate with Gaozi, Mencius mentions:

Gaozi said, "Life is what is called nature". Mencius said, "When you say that 'life is what is called nature,' is this like saying that 'white is what is called white?'" "Yes". "Is the whiteness of a white feather like the whiteness of snow, and the whiteness of snow like the whiteness of white jade?" "Yes". "Then is the nature of a dog like the nature of an ox, and the nature of an ox like the nature of a human being?" (6A3)

Mencius rebuts Gao Zi's claim that "life is what is called nature" (*sheng zhiwei xing* 生之谓性), that is, the claim that all things we are born with (such as "seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages", "desire for food and sex" and other sensory desires) should be regarded as "nature". According to Mencius, this general understanding of nature cannot distinguish human beings from other beings; just like you cannot tell apart white feathers, white snow and white jade if white is their nature, if "life is what is called nature", it is impossible to differentiate dogs, cattle and humans. In other words, those qualities that are common to animals, even if they are innate, cannot be regarded as the fundamental "similarity" of humankind, because the intrinsic quality of human beings should be something unique to them, and also a sign of their ability to establish their own uniqueness and subjectivity. And only the "heart-mind" can fulfill this requirement. In this regard, Mencius repeatedly mentions: "That wherein human beings differ from the birds and beasts is but slight. The majority of people relinquish this, while the noble person retains it" (4B19) and "When Shun was living deep in the mountains, dwelling together with trees and rocks and wandering together with deer and swine, the difference between him and the rustic people who dwelled deep in the mountains was quite small. But when he heard a single good word or observed a single good action, it was like a river in flood or a spring flowing forth—nothing could contain it". (7A16) Although the difference between humans and beasts is very small ("slight"), it is this bit of moral endowment that distinguishes humans from beasts, because although dogs, cattle, etc. have the same "need for food and sex" as humans, they will never have the "kindheartedness (*liangxin* 良心)" that is unique to human beings. Therefore, only at the level of the "heart-mind" can the distinction between sages and normal people cease to be important, while the distinction between humans and beasts becomes notorious, because the latter can better demonstrate the particularity of being human and can better illustrate an awareness of human dignity.

Secondly, there is another reason why "self-interest" cannot be regarded as the fundamental "similarity" of humankind, which is that "seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages" appeals to human sensory desires, and sensory desires are unstable, involuntary and do not have the capacity of reflection, so they are easily moved by external objects. When faced with Gongduzi's doubts, Mencius replies:

Mencius said, "Those who follow the part of themselves that is great become great persons, while those who follow the part that is small become small persons". Gongduzi said, "Since all are equally persons, why is it that some follow the part of themselves that is great while others follow the part that is small?" Mencius said, "The faculties of hearing and sight do not think and are obscured by things. When one thing comes into contact with another, it is led astray. The faculty of the mind is to think. By thinking, it apprehends; by not thinking, it fails to apprehend. This is what Heaven has given to us. If we first establish the greater part of ourselves, then the smaller part is unable to steal it away. It is simply this that makes the great person". (6A15)

The so-called "great part" refers to the "heart-mind", and the "small part" refers to the organs such as the ears, the eyes, the mouth and the stomach. The "great part" is valued and the "small part" is disregarded, and the roles and status of the two should not be confused. For Mencius, although human beings also have similarities and commonalities in the field of their sensory desires, these similarities cannot be regarded as the fundamental oneness of human beings, let alone the most noble meaning and value of life. This is mainly because people's natural desires do not have the ability of reflective thinking ("the faculties of hearing and sight do not think"), and they are always blindly drawn by external objects ("obscured by things", "led astray"), and of course the immoderate pursuit of self-interest will easily lead to conflicts of interest, making it impossible to reach some kind of moral agreement and consensus. It is precisely because self-interest is beyond the control of human beings that it is difficult to achieve a certain unity in "morality" and in "having a sense of right and wrong" based on the similarity or convergence between people's "interests" and "desires". But the "heart-mind" is different. The heart-mind is

a dominant and autonomous existence that can avoid being attracted to external objects, and thus self-preserved in a world of material desires. More importantly, the heart-mind also has a certain ability of reflection (*si* 思, thinking), and it is this ability of “thinking” that enables this form of life to distinguish itself from others:

In their desire to be honored, human beings are of like mind. And all human beings have in themselves what is honorable. It is only that they do not think about it; that is all. The honor that derives from men is not the original, good honor. Whom Zhao Meng honors, Zhao Meng can also debase. (6A17)

The so-called “honor” that arises from “seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages” is conferred by “nobility”, that is, it is bestowed by others, and of course others can also deprive us of them; but the “good honor” of the “heart-mind” is different; it is the intrinsic quality of life bestowed by Heaven on humankind (“nobility of Heaven”), and thus it has long-lasting and unfailing value. Through the “thinking” of the heart-mind, people can confirm that there are certain things inherent in themselves, and it is these inherent things (“order and rightness”) that constitute the dignity and foundation of life.

It can be said that it is in the comparison between “humans” and “beasts”, “noble” and “base”, “great” and “small”, “nobility of Heaven” and “human nobility”, etc., that Mencius demonstrates the fundamental value and significance that the “moral heart-mind” (with “humaneness and rightness” at its core) has for humans, and thus refuses to acknowledge human beings as “self-interested creatures”, showing the priority and uniqueness of human beings as “moral lives”. It is in this practice of “resisting Mohism” that a fundamental discrepancy between the ethical theories of Mencius and Mozi takes shape.

4. “Self-Interest” or “Heart-Mind” as the Root of Ethics

The further question is, why did Mencius and Mohism discuss the fundamental similarities of humankind? We know that during the fragmented era after the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, with “different policies among the feudal lords” (*zhuhou yizheng* 諸侯異政) and “different theories among the hundred schools of thought” (*baijia yishuo* 百家異說), facing the chaos and breakdown of the original unified social form and value beliefs, both Mencius and Mohism intended to reconstruct a universal ethical consensus or norm. However, the establishment of such a consensus must be based on some “similarities” among humankind. It is precisely because they disagree on what makes humans “similar” that Mencius and Mohists have different understandings of how ethical consensus is possible. Let us take a look at Mozi first.

In *Mozi*, 15.7, we find this very thought-provoking passage:

Now things like eating little, poor quality clothes, and sacrificing one’s life for the sake of fame are all things that the ordinary people of the world find difficult. But, if the ruler takes pleasure in them, then the multitude are able to do them. By comparison, universal mutual love and exchange of mutual benefit are quite different from these things. If a person loves others, then others, as a result, also love that person. If a person benefits others, then others, as a result, also benefit that person. If a person hates others, then others, as a result, also hate that person. If a person harms others, then others, as a result, also harm that person.

As one of Mozi’s “ten doctrines”, “universal” or “impartial love” (*jian ai* 兼愛) is an ethical guideline, but Mozi’s justification of it is not grounded on a deontological premise, but it sets off from the utilitarian principle of “mutual advantage”. That is to say, assuming the compensation principle that claims that “those who love others must themselves be loved, and those who hate others must themselves be hated”, it can be inferred that if you love other people, their families and their nations as you love yourself, your family and your nation, then it will be a “win–win” situation; if everyone hates other people, their families and their nations, it will be a “lose–lose” situation. Only when people realize that each other’s “interests” in “impartial love” are generally consistent (or fundamentally “similar”), then “impartial love” is feasible.

Indeed, for Mozi, the establishment of ethical principles must be grounded on the fundamental “similarity” of people in the field of “self-interest”. Of course, this does not mean that humankind cannot be “similar” in terms of their “sense of right and wrong”, but this “similarity” is constitutive when based on the “similarity” regarding “self-interest”. It is precisely because human nature always seeks advantages and avoids disadvantages (“wish[es] to obtain the rewards and praise of their superiors and avoid their censure”) and people are driven and compelled by this common human nature, that they will reach a general consensus for their own self-interest, and consequently for the interests of their families, their nations and the whole world (“exalting unity under a single principle”). From this perspective, Mozi seems to be achieving the unity of the “sense of right and wrong” through the convergence of “interests”; or, in other words, by channeling people’s most secret and inner “interest”-related associations, he aims and strives for a common “goodness” or “efficacy” (*shan* 善) and justice. Therefore, Mozi also said: “Thus the people of the world were all fearful, agitated and awe-struck, and did not dare act in a depraved or evil manner, saying that the Son of Heaven’s sight and hearing were those of a god. [But] the former kings’ words said: ‘He is not a god. It is only that he is able to use the ears and eyes of the people to help his own sight and hearing, to use the lips of the people to help his own speech, to use the minds of the people to help his own plans, and to use the limbs of the people to help his own actions’”. (12.11) The ruler uses the mechanism of “rewards and punishments” to mobilize and handle his people, who, for their own self-interest, actively accept their guidance and regulation. When such an effective social incentive and stimulation mechanism is established and implemented smoothly, the ruler can further integrate diverse individuals into a unified collective without any gaps, that is, he can gather forces for his own use.¹⁸

Mozi’s approach to morality involves a form of “state consequentialism” (whereby the ruler should enact policies that increase the wealth, population and order of the state so as to maximize the overall benefits of society). A typical example can be found in *Mozi*, 12.9, which points out:

Thus, in ancient times, the establishment of government leaders was intended to bring order to the people. It may be compared to silk threads being gathered into a skein, or a fishing net having a main rope, in that they were used to draw together the depraved and cruel [people] of the world and cause them to have unity of principles ... so they could act for the ten thousand people, promoting benefit and eliminating harm. It was so they could enrich the poor and make numerous the few, bring peace where there was danger, and order where there was disorder.

For Mozi, “seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages” is not only the fundamental “similarity” of human nature, but also the ultimate goal and purpose of human social development (“for the ten thousand people, promoting benefit and eliminating harm”); to achieve this social goal, it is necessary to maintain a strict consistency of people’s interests, of their sense of right and wrong and their actions, without any differences nor particular or disharmonious factors. Only if everyone has the same view and everyone works hard for the same common goal (“unity of principles”), they will not argue with each other due to their different opinions, and people’s words and deeds will have a unified standard and an orderly performance (just like “silk threads” have a skein and a “fishing net” has a main rope); on the contrary, if differences and dissensions are allowed to exist, it will inevitably cause an infringement and jeopardizing of interests:

Because there is mutual harm between superiors and inferiors. Why is this so? Because principles are not uniform. If principles are not uniform, there are factions. For example, if those above consider someone to be good they will reward him. If, although this person gets a reward from above, he nevertheless cannot escape vilification by the common people, his doing of good is certainly not encouraged by there being rewards. [Conversely], if those above consider some-

one to be bad they will punish him. If, although this person is punished by those above, he nonetheless is comforted by the praise of the common people, his being bad certainly cannot be prevented by there being punishment. (*Mozi*, 13.1)

When superiors and inferiors do not have a consensus, or they dissent (“there is mutual harm”), the maximizing of benefits and happiness cannot be achieved. If those “good” or “efficacious” behaviors that the ruler believes should be rewarded do not agree with what is advantageous for the people, even if the people know that they will be rewarded, they will not feel encouraged to act them out; similarly, although the ruler punishes what he considers “not good” (“not efficacious”) or “evil” behaviors, if these behaviors are in line with the self-interest of the people and the commoners, even if the people know that they will be punished, they will not stop their unruly conduct. In other words, when everyone is partial to their own interests, and mutual interests cannot reach an effective consensus, then the state governing organ and the violent machine of the “rewards and punishments” mechanism will become useless, “rewards and punishments” will not be effective in “encouraging good and discouraging evil” and the “leaders of government” will not be able to mobilize their people (“employ the people”); if everyone is serving their own interests, they will not accept the orders and guidance of their superiors, and the state apparatus will not be able to function effectively, thus making society fall apart.

Clearly, for Mozi, moral consensus must be achieved through a total “unity” and rejection of all “distinctions”. A good order must not allow any difference and pluralism, because a pluralist society will only bring about conflict and disunion between the people, while the opposite consistency and unity can allow for the operation of the state machine. Only when the family, the nation and ultimately the whole world reach a general consistency of interests and of the sense of right and wrong can the initiative of each individual be fully mobilized and stimulated, and people will pursue and create greater “goodness” and justice. If all members of society exert their mental and physical efforts to the fullest, the resulting social capacity and benefits will be the greatest. To a large extent, this is indeed very close to the ethical principles of utilitarianism, that is, that the most ideal principles of morality and justice must be accomplished by achieving “the greatest amount of profit and happiness for the greatest number of people” as its ultimate means and criterion.

It should be noted that Mozi’s advocacy for the consistency of interests is not solely for the benefit of political power and rulers, but also for the overall effectiveness and vitality of society. One of the criticisms raised by previous researchers about the “self-interest” of Mozi is that it is linked to the “rewards and punishments” enforced by the state as a powerful institution, thus considered a form of monarchical autocracy similar to that of the Legalists. This is actually a great misunderstanding of “rewards and punishments”. In fact, Mozi never believed that “rewards and punishments” serve the interests of the monarch alone, nor are they “tactics” or “governing techniques” used by the monarch to achieve their own interests. “Rewards and punishments” are not the end goal in themselves; their purpose is to “encourage goodness and prevent violence”, that is, to pursue greater “goodness” and benefits. For Mozi, what is important is not the reward or punishment that comes after an act of good or evil, but how to use this “encouragement” mechanism of rewards and punishments to promote good actions and prevent evil ones. Mozi believed that only when the dissuasion mechanism of “rewards and punishments” operates and functions effectively (“encouraging goodness and preventing violence”) can the enthusiasm of each individual be fully mobilized and stimulated, and will people pursue and create greater “goodness” and justice, thereby bringing vitality and effectiveness to the entire society.

While Mozi allegedly establishes his ethical principle in the field of the “convergence of interests” of humankind, Mencius’ approach goes in a completely opposite direction. In one passage, Mencius bluntly criticizes:

Those in the world who speak about human nature only consider its original state and take its original state to be fundamentally self-interested. (4B26)

For Mencius, the principle of ethics cannot be grounded in “self-interest”, because this in itself would invalidate the independence of the “sense of right and wrong”. Ethical behavior should not be judged or determined by the motivation of external advantages, but morality itself should be the goal of behavior; behavior should not be at the service of other utilitarian purposes. For Mencius, “self-interest” and “morality” are clearly two different things. Therefore, when Mencius criticizes Yi Zhi for upholding “two roots”, he is accusing him of confusing two different kinds of moral ground, or, in other words, for mixing a “love” based on the “convergence of interests” with a “love” based on “unity in the sense of right and wrong”, putting together an ethic based on “self-interest” and an ethic based on the “original heart-mind”. Forcibly integrating two things that are incompatible with each other will naturally lead to some kind of basic theoretical dilemma or contradiction.

If ethical principles cannot be bundled together with “self-interest”, where do they lie? Mencius provides an answer completely different from the Mohists in 7A4:

All the ten thousand things are complete in me. To turn within to examine oneself and find that one is sincere—there is no greater joy than this. To dedicate oneself in all earnestness to reciprocity—there can be no closer approach to humaneness.

The formula “examine oneself and find that one is sincere” means to awaken and activate the universal rationality shared by all by exerting and cultivating the reflective function of the heart-mind. Mencius believes that when everyone recognizes their innate moral heart-mind and endowment, when the heart-mind has a sense of rightness and restraint of desire, people can develop from a kind of “germinating” “heart-mind of order and rightness” into a “cultivated” state of “order and rightness”, and once people have established a moral consensus, they will have a general capacity to abide by ethical standards.

Evidently, unlike Mozi, Mencius grounds his ethical principles on the basis of “what our minds have in common”. For Mencius, since the fundamental similarity of human beings lies in the “heart-mind” rather than in “self-interest”, a universal ethical code can only be found inwardly, not outwardly. For this reason, Mencius also repeatedly emphasizes: “Shun was a human being; I, too, am a human being. Shun was a model for the world, one that could be transmitted to later generations. If I am nothing more than a villager, this is something to be anxious about’. And what kind of anxiety is it? Simply to be like Shun; that is all”. (4B28), and also says: “Cao Jiao asked, ‘Is it true that all human beings are capable of becoming a Yao or a Shun?’ Mencius said, ‘It is true’”. (6B2) The fundamental “similarity” of humankind in their “sense of right and wrong” presupposes that everyone is able to become a Yao and a Shun, and it also presupposes that people can reach a general consensus and establish a common world of human relations. It is precisely because humankind’s nature and heart-mind have a certain commonality (a “heart-mind of order and rightness”), and precisely because people can recognize this commonality and consciously follow a moral life, that a universalist ethical principle is possible.

More importantly, the universality of people’s heart-mind (“what they have in common”) also implies that ethical consensus must be based on people’s genuine inner acknowledgement and conscious compliance, rather than being realized through external “rewards and punishments” or coercion. Mencius objects to establishing ethical standards based on certain associations of “interests”, because he believes that consensus based on the association of interests is not firm and durable. People may reach a consensus by sharing the same interests, but differences in interests might as well generate divisions (“those above and those below will compete with one another for profit”). What is more, even if people forcibly acknowledge or reach a certain consensus due to interest factors, this consensus will not be built upon the manifestations of real emotions or internal motivations because it has no inner support of the heart-mind or of emotions; thus, even if such a consensus is to be reached, it can only be temporary rather than lasting and stable.

So far, we can make the following conclusions: Confronted with the pressing issue of “rebuilding consensus”, both Mencius and Mohists attempt to establish a general consensus or standard, but the establishment of this “consensus” is necessarily based on certain “similarities” of humankind. In Mozi’s view, the fundamental “sameness” of humankind

lies in the field of “self-interest”. Therefore, a general ethical consensus needs to be established on the basis of people’s “convergence of interests”; the “unity in their sense of right and wrong” can only be achieved through “rewards and punishments” and the consistency of interests (“exchange of mutual benefit”). On the other hand, Mencius believes that the fundamental “similarity” of humankind can only exist in the field of the “heart-mind” rather than in that of “self-interest”. Therefore, people can only look for the source of consensus within rather than without, and the achievement of ethical consensus must also be based on people’s sincere approval and internal motivations, rather than by means of external incentives and penalties or the coercive effect of rewards and punishments.

5. “Will of Heaven” or “Mandate of Heaven”: Different Paths to the Highest Faith

Also, it is because of the differences in understanding what constitutes the fundamental “similarity” of humanity, Mencius and Mozi ultimately diverge in their approach to the highest faith (which they call “Heaven”, *Tian* 天).

Undoubtedly, both pre-Qin Confucianism and Mohism share a supreme faith, referred to as “Tian” – Mohists call it the “Will of Heaven” (*tian zhi* 天志), while Confucianism refers to it as the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming* 天命).¹⁹ However, whether it is the “Will of Heaven” or the “Mandate of Heaven”, the concept of “Tian” discussed by Mozi and Mencius extends beyond the natural world in an objective sense. They believe that Tian intervenes in human affairs through observation and admonition, and that only by practicing morality and justice can humans obtain Heaven’s protection and blessings. In acknowledging “Tian” as moral and just and believing in the union of Heaven and humanity, there is no significant difference between Mozi and Mencius.²⁰ The crucial question lies in how to reach this highest faith, or how to gain Heaven’s favor and grace? In terms of achieving this, there are distinct differences between the two approaches.

Mozi introduces a unique concept called the “Will of Heaven”, which, as the name suggests, refers to Tian’s will or desire. But what exactly is Tian’s will or desire? In one of the “Ten Doctrines” of Mozi, Mozi provides a clear explanation:

Then what does Heaven desire and what does it abhor? Heaven desires righteousness and abhors unrighteousness. ... How do I know that Heaven desires righteousness and abhors unrighteousness? I say that when the world is righteous, it lives, and when it is not righteous, it dies. When it is righteous, it is rich. When it is not righteous, it is poor. When it is righteous, it is well ordered. When it is not righteous, it is disordered. So then, Heaven desires its (the world’s) life and abhors its death. It desires its wealth and abhors its poverty. It desires its order and abhors its disorder. This is how I know that Heaven desires righteousness and abhors unrighteousness. (*Mozi*, 26.2)

According to Mozi, “Tian” exhibits a clear preference: it favors “rightness” (*yi* 義) and dislikes “unrightness”. It is worth noting that the “rightness” Mozi refers to is not purely moral virtue and righteousness but more accurately implies “interests”. Why is this so? In the subsequent text, Mozi clearly explains that “when the world is righteous, it ‘lives’, and when it is not righteous, it ‘dies’: “When it is righteous, it is rich. When it is not righteous, it is poor. When it is righteous, it is well ordered. When it is not righteous, it is disordered”. Evidently, “rightness” here is associated with external achievements and benefits such as “life and death”, “wealth and poverty” and “order and chaos”. In this regard, Mozi further states:

Therefore, the Son of Heaven is the world’s most honored and wealthy person. And one who is wealthy and honored rightly cannot do otherwise than comply with Heaven’s intention. Further, one who complies with Heaven’s intention, and who practices universal mutual love and exchange of mutual benefit is certainly rewarded [whereas] one who opposes Heaven’s intention, who practices discriminatory mutual dislike and exchange of mutual harm is certainly punished. (*Mozi*, 26.4)

Heaven's intention is not to want great states to attack small states, or great houses to bring disorder to small houses, or the strong to oppress the weak, or the many to tyrannize the few, or the cunning to deceive the gullible, or the noble to be arrogant towards the lowly. These are the things that Heaven's intention does not want. But it does not stop at this ... If the state is well ordered and materials for use are sufficient then, within, there is the means to make pure the sweet wine and millet for sacrifices to Heaven and ghosts and, without, there are the several jade emblems for relationships with neighboring states. When grievances among the feudal lords do not arise, then warfare on the borders does not occur. When, within, there is food for the hungry and rest for the weary, and there is support and care for their ten thousand people, then rulers and ministers, and superiors and inferiors are kind and loyal, and fathers and sons, and older and younger brothers are compassionate and filial. Therefore, only when there is clear compliance with Heaven's intention, and obedience to Heaven's intention is widely practiced in the world, will the administration be well ordered, the ten thousand people harmonious, the country wealthy, materials for use sufficient, and the ordinary people all obtain warm clothes and enough food so they will be at peace and free from anxiety. (Mozi, 27.3)

Clearly, Mozi's "Will of Heaven" is closely tied to "interest" or "benefit". Of course, this "benefit" does not refer to personal gain, but rather the common good of all, the greater benefit, or the most widespread and shared interests of society. Mozi's focus on "benefit" as the core of the "Will of Heaven" is a natural extension of his view that "self-interest" is the fundamental and universal aspect of human similarity. Since every individual prefers benefit and avoids harm, "Tian", as the embodiment of justice, naturally aligns with the most basic and universal desires of the people. And whether or not "common benefit" is achieved becomes the criterion for judging the legitimacy of human rulership. Therefore, Mozi repeatedly emphasizes that rulers must take it as their responsibility to maximize social benefits and production. They must provide for the people, supply food, promote production, relieve disasters and help the poor, and use sufficient production materials to prepare sacrifices for worshipping "Tian" and ancestors. Only by targeting the actual benefits and needs of the people can a ruler obtain rewards from "Tian"; conversely, failure to do so will result in disaster:

The Son of Heaven ... cannot do otherwise than comply with Heaven's intention. Further, one who complies with Heaven's intention, and who practices universal mutual love (*jian xiang ai* 兼相愛) and exchange of mutual benefit (*jiao xiang li* 交相利) is certainly rewarded, [whereas] one who opposes Heaven's intention, who practices discriminatory mutual dislike (*bie xiang wu* 別相惡) and exchange of mutual harm (*jiao xiang ze* 交相賊) is certainly punished ... Formerly, there were the sage kings of the Three Dynasties, Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu. These were men who complied with Heaven's intention and were rewarded. Formerly, there were the tyrannical kings of the Three Dynasties, Jie, Zhou, You and Li. These were men who opposed Heaven's intention and were punished. (Mozi, 26.4)

... In the upper realm, this must be of benefit to Heaven. In the middle realm, this is of benefit to the ghosts. In the lower realm, this is of benefit to the people. With these three benefits, there is nothing that is not benefited. Therefore, [in the case of a ruler], the highest reputation of the world is given to him and he is called a sage king. Rule by force is different from this. ... In the upper realm, this is not of benefit to Heaven. In the middle realm, this is not of benefit to ghosts. In the lower realm, this is not of benefit to the people. When these three benefits are absent, there is nothing that is benefited. Therefore, [in the case of a ruler], the most abhorred name in the world is given to him and he is called a tyrannical king. (Mozi, 26.7)

This is why the sage kings of the Three Dynasties, Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu, in their wish for Heaven to bring correctness to the Son of Heaven, made it perfectly clear to the ordinary people of the world that none should fail to prepare fodder for oxen and sheep, feed grain to dogs and pigs, and make pure the offerings of grain and wine in order to sacrifice to the Supreme Lord, ghosts and spirits, and seek and pray for good fortune from Heaven. (*Mozi*, 26.3)

The ancient saints and kings such as Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu were able to obtain the mandate of Heaven and wield the highest power precisely because they could “promote Heaven’s benefits and eliminate Heaven’s harms”. To “promote Heaven’s benefits” means to provide for the people, prioritize production and ensure abundant harvests of grains and livestock, thus maintaining harmony between *yin* and *yang*, ensuring smooth seasonal transitions, preventing diseases, disasters, plagues and famine. Following such practices is considered obeying the Will of Heaven, and those who obey the Will of Heaven are said to possess the “Heaven’s virtue” (*tian de* 天德). Achieving the “Heaven’s virtue” brings “Heaven’s Reward” (*tian shang* 天賞). Conversely, those who only seek their own interests while disregarding the welfare of all (such as the tyrannical kings Jie, Zhou, You and Li of the past) bully the weak, wage wars, squander wealth and cause chaos in the world. This is considered violating the Will of Heaven, and those who violate it are called “Heaven’s harm” (*tian zei* 天賊). Harming Heaven inevitably leads to “Heaven’s Punishment” (*tian fa* 天罰):

Therefore, in ancient times, the sage kings were clear in their knowledge of what Heaven and ghosts gave their blessings to, and avoided what Heaven and ghosts detested. In this way, they sought to promote Heaven’s benefits and eliminate Heaven’s harms. And so Heaven made cold and heat moderate, the four seasons blend, the yin and yang interchange, rain and dew timely, the five grains ripen, the six animals thrive, and sickness, disaster, pestilence and famine not occur. (*Mozi*, 27.4)

Who were those who loved people and benefited people, who complied with Heaven’s intention, and who got Heaven’s rewards? I say they were men such as the sage kings of the Three Dynasties in former times—Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu. ... If there are these three benefits then there is nothing that is not benefited. This is called “Heaven’s virtue” (*tian de* 天德) ... It allows us to know of those who loved people and benefited people, who complied with Heaven’s intention, and who got Heaven’s rewards (*tian shang* 天賞). ... Who were those who hated and harmed people, who opposed Heaven’s intention, and who got Heaven’s punishments. I say that men like the evil kings of the Three Dynasties in former times—Jie, Zhou, You and Li—were such people. ... If there are not these three benefits then there is nothing that is benefited. This is called “Heaven’s harm” (*tian zei* 天賊). It allows us to know of those who hated people and harmed people, who opposed Heaven’s intention, and who got Heaven’s punishments (*tian fa* 天罰). (*Mozi*, 27.8–27.9)

Clearly in Mozi’s framework, “Tian” is portrayed as the embodiment of justice through its ability to “reward goodness and punish evil”. The criteria for Tian’s “rewards” and “punishments” are specifically limited to the scope of “interests”. In other words, whether or not there is “interest” is seen as the core criterion for judging “good and evil”. Therefore, rulers can only obey and serve Tian by “promoting benefits”. Only with sufficient social resources and materials can they truly and fully worship Tian in a pure manner. Even the act of “worship” or “sacrifice” itself carries the implication of “great benefit for all”:

What do I say constitutes compliance with Heaven’s intention? I say it is universal love for the people of the world. How do I know [that Heaven] is universal in its love for the people of the world? Because it is universal in providing food for them. How do I know that it is universal in providing food for them? From

ancient times to the present, no matter how distant or remote states are, they all provide nourishment for their cattle and sheep, dogs and pigs, and clean and purify the millet and sweet wine in order to honor and offer sacrifices to the Supreme Lord and the ghosts and spirits of the mountains and rivers. It is from this we know that [Heaven] is universal in its providing food for them (i.e., the people of the world). If it is universal in providing food for them, then it must be universal in loving them. For example, consider the rulers of Chu and Yue. Now the Chu king provides food for those within the four boundaries of Chu, therefore he loves the people of Chu. The Yue king provides food for those within the four boundaries of Yue, therefore he loves the people of Yue. Now Heaven is universal in providing food in the world. This is how I know that it is universal in its love for the people of the world. (*Mozi*, 28.5)

The above passage from *Mozi* is quite interesting. It seems to demonstrate that the act of “worship” and “sacrifice” might not only serve as a communication between heaven and humans, or as a service to God. In a sense, “worship” itself is a testament to the peace and prosperity of the world. Unlike most religions (including Confucianism) that view “worship” solely as a ritualized act to serve or even please the divine, the Mohists finds another level of legitimacy for “worship” from the perspective of “interests”. Because if people in even the most remote and secluded regions can raise cattle, sheep, dogs and pigs, cleanly prepare libations and grain offerings and calmly worship the mountains, rivers, gods and ancestors, it is inherently a reflection of the country’s abundant social wealth and peaceful governance. The fact that the divine can fully enjoy the offerings seems more like a response and appreciation from the divine itself to the ruler’s promotion of benefits for all, as well as a demonstration of care and grace for the overall interests of the people and all living beings. Therefore, *Mozi* concludes:

Thus it was that in ancient times the sage kings had a clear understanding of what Heaven and ghosts wished for and avoided what Heaven and ghosts detested. So they sought to promote the world’s benefits and eliminate the world’s harms. This is why they led the ten thousand people of the world by fasting and bathing, and purifying the sweet wine and millet to offer sacrifice to Heaven and the ghosts. And in their serving of ghosts and spirits, they dared not have sweet wine and millet that were not clean and pure. They dared not have sacrificial animals that were not sleek and fat; they dared not have jade tablets and silk offerings that did not conform to standard measurements; and in the spring and autumn sacrifices, they dared not miss the proper time. In hearing lawsuits, they did not dare to be unfair; in distributing wealth, they did not dare to be inequitable; and, in their ordinary dwellings, they did not dare to be disrespectful. I say that their being administrative leaders like this was the reason Heaven and the ghosts above were beneficent towards them in their conduct of government, and the ten thousand people below were of benefit to them in their conduct of government. Since Heaven and ghosts were profoundly beneficent and they could be resolute in carrying out their business, then the blessings of Heaven and ghosts could be obtained. Since the ten thousand people were of benefit to them and they could be resolute in carrying out their business, then the love of the ten thousand people could be obtained. Their conducting government like this was why their plans were realized and the business they undertook was successful. In defense, they were secure. In attack, they were victorious. What was the reason for this? I say it was just that they were able to use exalting unity in the conduct of government. Therefore, in ancient times, the sage kings conducted government like this. (*Mozi*, 12.7)

They attained their desires yet still complied with what benefited Heaven, ghosts and ordinary people. ... The people they benefited were many and their achievements were, as a consequence, great. This was why Heaven rewarded them, the

ghosts enriched them, and the people praised them. So they were honored as Sons of Heaven, they were enriched with all under Heaven, and their fame was established in Heaven and on earth and has continued undimmed to the present day. (Mozi, 19.2)

Mozi repeatedly admonishes his rulers to promote public benefits that transcend the small self and fulfill the greater self. The personal rights and interests of the monarch need to give way to the interests of the collective and the people. Even the emperor who holds the highest power must align with the collective interest (“promote the world’s benefits and eliminate the world’s harms”) rather than just pursuing personal gain. Only when the emperor satisfies the universal “great benefit” from the heavens and ghosts above to the common people below, can he gain the recognition of the heavens and ghosts. His power can then receive support and assistance from both “sacred authority” and “secular public opinion”. Only with the support and assistance of the “sacred authority” and “secular public opinion” can the monarch succeed in his endeavors, achieve victory in war and defense and ensure the long-term stability of the state power. Only in the common interest and universal agreement of heaven, earth and humans, can the maximization of social benefits and universal win-win situations (“mutual benefit” *jiao xiang li* 交相利) be achieved, and every individual benefit from it.

Mozi sees “interest” or “public benefit” as the fundamental path to the highest belief “Tian”, but Mencius holds a different view. In the “Explanation” (*shuo* 《說》) section of the Mawangdui Silk Manuscript *Wuxing*, which is considered a work of Mencius²¹, there is a very intriguing passage:

“Heaven watches from above, and destiny is already sealed”. This means that Heaven watches over us and determines our destiny. If we follow the nature of plants, we see that they have life but no concept of good or evil. If we follow the nature of animals, we find that they have preferences but no understanding of propriety or rightness. However, if we follow human nature, we clearly see a profound appreciation for benevolence and rightness. This is not because of some predetermined fate, but rather because we choose to follow these virtues. By comparing the nature of all things, we understand that only humans possess benevolence and rightness; this is our progress. “King Wen reigns supreme, shining bright in Heaven’s eyes,” as the saying goes. King Wen understood people’s desires based on their natural instincts: their love for beautiful sounds and sights through their ears and eyes, their appreciation for fragrances and flavors through their noses and mouths, their preference for comfort and pleasure through their hands and feet, and their deep-seated love for benevolence and rightness through their hearts. By embracing and never abandoning these virtues, King Wen stood out prominently in Heaven’s eyes and was renowned throughout the world. There is no other reason for this than his alignment with benevolence and rightness. (From the Mawangdui Silk Manuscript *Wuxing Explanation* section 馬王堆帛書《五行》“說”) (Zhongguo Guojia Wenwuju Guwenxian Yanjiushi 中國國家文物局古文獻研究室 [Ancient Documents Research Office of the National Cultural Heritage Administration of China] 1980)

The poem quoted in this passage is from “Da Ya—Da Ming” and “Da Ya—Wen Wang” in the Book of Songs. The line “Heaven watches from above, and destiny is already sealed” is interpreted by Zheng Xuan as follows: “Heaven monitors good and evil below, and its mandate will rely on something. It will bless and assist King Wen beforehand, giving birth to a suitable person who will recognize and match him with a person of talent and virtue in a place of influence. This refers to the birth of Tai Si”. This reflects the early Confucian concept of the “Mandate of Heaven”, typically found in the Book of Songs. However, the interpretation of this line in *Wuxing* seems to add some new elements. According to *Wuxing*, Tian’s “mandate” on human affairs is not only manifested as an external intervention but also presents an inherent generative relationship. That is, through its generative

role, Tian implants moral laws into people's heart-mind. By "comparing the nature of all things" (*mou zhen*), people can recognize a human inherent "nature of benevolence and rightness" (*renyi zhi xing* 仁義之性) originating from "Tian". In this sense, *Wuxing* points out that King Wen was able to "match Tian" precisely because he could consciously recognize and grasp this inherent benevolence and rightness in the human heart-mind, and externally implement and present it. Therefore, King Wen could "stand out" and be seen by Tian ("match Tian") and obtain the blessing and mandate from Tian, as well as the political position and power that come with it.

If we compare the passage from *Wuxing* mentioned above with the sections referring to King Wen in *Mozi*, we can intuitively see that there is a direct disagreement between Mencius and Mozi in explaining the legitimacy of King Wen's obtaining of the Mandate of Heaven. Unlike Mozi's view that King Wen (and other ancient saint kings) gained Tian's favor by promoting the greater good of all, Mencius focuses more on King Wen's moral motivation. In Mencius's view, Tian granted its mandate to King Wen not only because of his external achievements but also because he possessed the "nature of the heart-mind" that "favors benevolence and righteousness". In this redefined understanding of the "Mandate of Heaven", Tian's intervention in human affairs is no longer just an external reward or punishment. Instead, it internalizes morality into human nature through an inherent generative process, presenting it as an order of the human heart-mind. In other words, the human heart-mind contains an inherent moral order and motivation, and it is this motivation that fulfills the "mandate" granted by Tian. Therefore, one only needs to seek their moral motivation within, bringing out their inner moral consciousness through the function of the "heart-mind" to "match Tian with virtue" (*yide peitian* 以德配天). Although we cannot see concepts such as "heart-mind" and "nature" in the original text of the Book of Songs, Mencius consciously introduces these factors to define the content of the "Mandate of Heaven", thus establishing a more inherent and close connection between the "Mandate of Heaven" and "Human Virtue".

Mencius sees the "heart-mind" as the necessary foundation for reaching the highest beliefs, both because he views the "heart-mind" as the fundamental similarity among humans and because of the new challenges he faced in his era. We know that early Confucianism believed in the consistency between morality and destiny (*de ming yizhi* 德命一致), but this concept faced severe challenges during Mencius's time. With significant social changes, many social realities and phenomena that contradicted the traditional belief in the consistency between morality and destiny began to emerge. For Confucianism, one of the first puzzling questions was the following: if those with great morality are destined to receive Tian's favor, why did Confucius, a virtuous man, not receive such favor? We know that during Confucius's travels to various states, he not only failed to achieve his political ideals but also faced severe threats to his life (such as "being driven out of Lu, his tree being cut down in Song, his traces being erased in Wei, being stranded in Shang and Zhou, and being surrounded in Chen and Cai"). The experiences of Confucius and the realities of society made the ideological tradition and values inherited and maintained by Confucianism face a crisis of meaning. If having morality does not necessarily lead to receiving Tian's favor, then why should people cultivate their morality? Or, if no matter how hard one tries, destiny may not favor them, does this mean that people should just leave everything to fate, and studying and cultivating morality is meaningless? Faced with such a dilemma, Mencius had to provide further answers.

Mencius uses the concepts of "heart-mind" and "nature" to embrace the content of "Heaven's Mandate", which can be seen as a complement and explanation to the "necessity" of why those with morality are destined to receive Tian's favor. Since Tian internalizes its mandate into human moral nature through a generative process, humans fulfilling their moral conscience and practicing moral behaviors complete the mission entrusted by Tian and thus receive the blessings and fortune granted by Tian. From a practical perspective, Mencius believes that good behavioral motivations are more likely to yield better results. A person who possesses a proactive moral consciousness and mindset and

good moral motivations, and is willing to exercise the initiative of his “heart-mind”, is more likely to attain good fortune and rewards. This is precisely what is stated in *Wuxing*: “Happiness precedes morality, and morality precedes the prosperity of the country. When the country prospers, it speaks of the promotion of benevolence and righteousness in the world, indicating happiness. ‘Wen Wang is above, shining brightly under Heaven’. This is what it means, indicating the completion of great morality”. Because King Wen harmonized virtues such as “benevolence”, “righteousness”, “propriety” and “happiness” within his heart-mind, transforming “moral conduct” into inherent “moral nature”, he was able to realize the fulfillment of his own value and complete his innate mission in the harmony and fulfillment of his heart-mind. The inner consciousness, state and function of the heart are the basis and guarantee for why Wen Wang was “necessarily” destined to receive Heaven’s Mandate. In the intellectual background of the establishment and expansion of the inherent dimension of morality in the mid-Warring States period, Mencius incorporated the perspectives of “heart-mind” and “nature” into his reinterpretation and reconstruction of the relationship between “morality” and “destiny”. This makes moral behaviors with inner foundations and good motivations the inherent basis and guarantee for virtuous people to be destined to receive Heaven’s Mandate, or for morality and destiny to be necessarily consistent. Such explanation is even more evident in the book *Mencius*:

What happens without anyone’s causing it is owing to Heaven; what comes about without anyone’s accomplishing it is the Mandate. (5A6)

Formerly, when King Tai dwelled in Bin, the Di people invaded it, and he left and went to dwell at the foot of Mount Qi. It was not that he chose to do this; he had no alternative. If you do good there will surely be among your descendants one who is a true king. The noble person creates a legacy and hands down a beginning that may be carried on. When it comes to achieving success—that is determined by Heaven. What can you do about Qi? Devote all your strength to being good, that is all. (1B14)

Mencius acknowledges the existence of an external and objective factor that cannot be controlled by human effort, which he calls “without anyone’s causing” or “without anyone’s accomplishing an uninducible factor” (*mo zhi wei, mo zhi zhi* 莫之為, 莫之致). However, acknowledging this objective force does not mean that humans can only passively wait for fate. Mencius still believes that “Tian” is the embodiment of justice (unlike Xunzi’s pure “natural Heaven”), believes that heaven and humans can interact with each other and believes that humans can understand the will of Tian and gain its favor and attention through their own moral cultivation. Regarding this, Mencius also made a special distinction:

If through seeking I get it while through neglect I lose it, such seeking is conducive to getting, for what I seek lies within myself. If, though my seeking is in accordance with the Way, yet getting depends on destiny, such seeking is not conducive to getting, for what I seek lies outside myself. (7A3)

The responses of the mouth to favors, of the eye to colors, of the ear to sounds, of the nose to fragrances, and of the four limbs to comfort are our nature. But there is destiny in them, and the noble person does not call them “nature”. Humanness between parent and child, rightness between ruler and minister, propriety between guest and host, wisdom for the worthy, and the Way of Heaven for the sage are destiny. But our nature is in them, and the noble person does not call them “destiny”. (7B24)

Mencius distinguishes between two types of factors that determine the outcome of events: external uncertain factors, which he calls “seek lies outside myself” (*qiu zaiwai zhe* 求在外者), and factors that can be controlled by humans, which he refers to as “seek lies within myself” (*qiu zaiwo zhe* 求在我者). “Seek lies outside myself” primarily refers to external benefits or material conditions, whose acquisition can be influenced by chance or

fortune. However, “seek lies within myself” pertains to personal moral cultivation, which can be achieved through individual effort and depends only on oneself.

Mencius believes that the pursuit of interests, even if it is just sensory physiological needs, is not fundamentally within human control in terms of whether it can be satisfied (“seeking is not conducive to getting”). However, the “heart-mind” is different. The heart-mind is a dominant and autonomous existence that can avoid being attracted by external objects, thus maintaining itself in a world of material desires. Therefore, Mencius repeatedly emphasizes: “By fully developing one’s mind (*jin qi xin* 盡其心), one knows one’s nature (*zhi qi xing* 知其性). Knowing one’s nature, one knows Heaven (*zhi tian* 知天). It is through preserving one’s mind and nourishing one’s nature that one may serve Heaven (*shi tian* 事天). It is through cultivating oneself in an attitude of expectancy, allowing neither the brevity nor the length of one’s life span to cause any ambivalence, that one is able to establish one’s destiny (*li ming* 立命)”. (7A1) He believes that the role of the human heart-mind or the exertion of subjective moral consciousness can influence and even change the final destiny. Regarding this, Mencius further says:

There is the nobility of Heaven (*tianjue* 天爵) and the nobility of man (*renjue* 人爵). Humaneness, rightness, loyalty, and truthfulness—and taking pleasure in doing good, without ever wearying of it—this is the nobility of Heaven. The ranks of duke, minister, or high official—this is the nobility of man. Men of antiquity cultivated the nobility of Heaven and the nobility of man followed after it. Men of the present day cultivate Heavenly nobility out of a desire for the nobility of man, and once having obtained the nobility of man, they cast away the nobility of Heaven. Their delusion is extreme, and, in the end, they must lose everything. (6A16)

The so-called “nobility of man” refers to the nobility conferred by others, such as power, salary, status, wealth and other material benefits. Since it is given by others, it can of course be taken away by them. Therefore, in the realm of interests, fate can never achieve certain stability. However, “the nobility of Heaven” is different. “The nobility of Heaven” is the inherent value of the “heart-mind” given by Tian, the essential nature of human life endowed by Tian. Therefore, it is certain, just, inevitable, stable and permanent. Through moral cultivation of the soul (that is, the effort of “reflection”), humans can affirm their inherent “benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom”, which constitute the foundation of life. If we say that Mencius’ division of “the nobility of man” may be a criticism of the Mohist emphasis on “interests”, then his proposal of “the nobility of Heaven” re-establishes that morality is still the fundamental force that determines a good or bad fate, and reaffirms that morality, especially moral consciousness, is the inevitable path to the highest faith.

Thus, Mencius and Mozi ultimately lead to different endpoints. Mozi views “the pursuit of interests” as the fundamental similarity among people, emphasizing the acquisition of Heaven’s favor through external achievements and sacrificial offerings. On the other hand, Mencius views the “heart-mind” as the essential attribute of humans, advocating that we connect with the heavenly part within us when we follow the guidance of the heart-mind. It is precisely because of their differing understandings of the essence of the “human”—what makes a person human and what are the similarities among people—that they diverge in their interpretations of the attributes of “Tian”—whether it favors interests or morality, the relationship between Heaven and humans and how humans can connect with Heaven.

Of course, this does not mean that in the belief systems of Mencius and Mozi, only one aspect exists without the other. Nor does it suggest that “achievements” and “cultivation” are mutually exclusive. While Mohism pursues external achievements, it also strives for inner development. Similarly, while Mencius emphasizes internal cultivation, it also values external achievements. These two differ primarily in their focus. This divergence might explain why Confucius said, “In rites, it is better to be frugal than extravagant; in mourning, it is better to feel genuine sorrow than to make a show” (from “*The Analects*”)

and why Xunzi repeatedly emphasized, “The superior man regards them as ornamental, but the common people regard them as divine” (from Xunzi’s “*Tian Lun*”). These statements could be seen as criticisms and responses to Mohism’s emphasis on achievements and sacrificial offerings (where a greater number of sacrifices reflects a larger interest).

The distinction between “interest” and “heart-mind” has also had a profound impact on the development of both Confucianism and Mohism in later generations. This may explain why subsequent Confucianism emphasized “physical and mental cultivation”, “Confucian nature theory” and “inward transcendence”, gradually evolving into “mind–nature Confucianism” and “Neo-Confucianism”. On the other hand, Mohism increasingly integrated with traditional folk beliefs, sacrifices, and the “chivalrous spirit” of charity, heroism, and robbing the rich to help the poor (from this perspective, Mohism may not have disappeared after the Qin and Han dynasties; it simply integrated into folk beliefs and shifted down to the underworld). In a sense, the different belief systems and outcomes of the two religious forms in early China originated from their starting points themselves—the divergence in answering the fundamental question of what constitutes human essence.

6. Conclusions and Insights

Through the above discussion, we finally arrive to the following conclusions. Facing the chaotic disintegration of values and beliefs, both Mencius and Mohists attempted to establish a universalist consensus of belief to deal with social chaos and disunity, but they held basically divergent views on the question of the fundamental universality of humankind and on how to realize this universality. Mozi believed that the fundamental “similarity” of humankind lies in the field of “self-interest”, so he advocated a unity through the convergence of “interests”. On the other hand, in Mencius’ view, the fundamental “similarity” of human beings can only lie in the “heart-mind”, rather than in “self-interest”, and thus, ethical principles need to be established on the basis of “what our minds have in common” and establish a consensus by awakening the inner motivations of the heart-mind. Furthermore, Mozi views “the pursuit of interests” as the foundation for reaching a consensus, emphasizing the acquisition of Heaven’s Will through external achievements and sacrificial offerings. On the other hand, Mencius views the “heart-mind” as the essential attribute of humans, advocating that we connect with the heavenly part within us when we follow the guidance of the heart-mind. It is precisely because of their differing understandings of the essence of the “human”—what makes a person human and what are the similarities among people—that they diverge in their interpretations of “Heaven”—whether it favors interests or morality, the relationship between Heaven and humans and how humans can connect with Heaven. The differences in their belief systems and outcomes of the two religious forms in early China stemmed from these very starting points.

In any case, the above research provides a typical case for us to reinterpret the two forms or developmental directions of early Chinese religions. As the most important representatives of Warring States Mohism and Confucianism, concerning Mozi and Mencius, one focuses on external rituals and achievements, while the other emphasizes inner morality and cultivation, which have become the two original sources of the later development of Chinese local religions. This may also explain why later Confucianism particularly emphasized “physical and mental cultivation” and “inward transcendence”, gradually evolving into “mind–nature Confucianism” and “Neo-Confucianism”. On the other hand, Mohism increasingly integrated with the folk beliefs and rituals of the “little tradition”, as well as the “chivalrous spirit” of being charitable, upholding righteousness and robbing the rich to help the poor.

Certainly, from the perspective of Mencius, which dominates the mainstream and “big tradition” of Chinese culture, Mencius undoubtedly provided a new way of considering and leading to the highest faith. It is precisely because of his different understanding of the “intrinsic quality” of humankind as such and his criticism and dissatisfaction regarding the Mohists’ theory of “self-interest as a root” that Mencius tried to propose another

source of belief consensus which took the “heart-mind” as a root. It prompts people to turn their eyes inwardly and start looking within rather than to external rituals or sacrificial rites. More importantly, it reminds us that only moral motivations based on genuine inner acknowledgement can determine a person’s fate and fortune. Mencius’s attempt to establish a consensus of faith on the basis of people’s inner nature is undoubtedly a reversal of the utilitarian conception of achieving normative consensus through a win–win situation of the convergence of interests, such as Mozi was the first to suggest. The *Wu Xing Pian* 五行篇 also points out that virtuosity “takes shape within”, emphasizing that a genuine moral belief in fact implies actions that originate innerly and have universal results. As Professor Tu Weiming pointed out, early Confucian scholars all aim to promote the infinite development of personality by reflecting on various levels of the body, mind, spirit and soul, and to inspire people to continuously strive for excellence and realize the inner driving force for illuminating the value of life in the real world. Early Confucianism not only does not exclude religion, but actually has profound religious connotations and ultimate beliefs, but at the same time can be concretely implemented in the daily ethics, external governance and self-cultivation of the real world. This religious ethics system has a strong religious significance, but this “religiousness” of Confucianism is not based on the mystical atmosphere of a personal God, but rather expresses the solemnity, transcendence and infinite nature of personal character development.²²

The preceding discussion has also offered us creatively inspiring insights for our contemporary society. In today’s utilitarian and technological society, why do people still adhere to moral and ethical beliefs? Mencius’s perspectives undeniably provide crucial guidance. As rational beings and beings with expectations, human beings always aspire to see their virtuous actions yield positive benefits and outcomes. Similarly, those who pursue morality and self-improvement seek societal acknowledgment and corresponding well-being for their efforts, embodying the notion of “virtuous deeds yielding positive returns” (a concept fervently endorsed by Mozi and Mencius). This appears to be a reasonable expectation. However, in reality, numerous examples and experiences do not consistently align with these desired outcomes, often resulting in unforeseen consequences. The prevalence of randomness, uncertainty, chance, change, unexpected events, luck, disorder and chaos in daily life prompts a perplexing question: Is an individual’s fate accidental or predetermined? Does it correlate with rational choices? Does being a virtuous person inevitably lead to positive outcomes? Will a person of moral integrity consistently experience benefits or happiness? If the answer is negative, why should people still believe in Heaven? And why should we insist on practicing morality and ethics?

In an effort to restore confidence in Heaven, Mencius attributes the inevitability of “a good man rewarded” to the “heart-mind” rather than mere “self-interest”. From a pragmatic standpoint, it becomes apparent that virtuous motives and rational behavior tend to yield favorable outcomes. A person who possesses a proactive awareness of morality, a positive mindset and virtuous motives and is willing to exert the agency of the “heart-mind” is inherently more likely to achieve a positive destiny and reap rewards. Crucially, if morality is pursued for intrinsic reasons rather than external utility, a true gentleman, whether actively engaged or leading a more secluded life, acts guided solely by moral considerations. Morality, in this context, is an end in itself, not a means to attain blessings. Consequently, a person’s virtue remains unaltered by external changes in fate. In adopting this stance of moral autonomy and consistency, Mencius successfully achieves a meaningful transformation.²³ It disengages from the debate of whether virtue invariably brings blessings or if virtue and blessings are inherently consistent, decisively severing the connection between virtue and blessings, reflecting a resolute commitment to maintaining a moral stance. Acknowledging that virtue does not necessarily guarantee a favorable fate, Mencius suggests a separation of a person’s moral practice from other expectations. A true gentleman refrains from seeking fame, wealth or rewards, focusing instead on upholding moral consciousness and self-discipline. The self-sufficiency of morality becomes its own reward. Whether ultimate benefits materialize or not is not forcefully demanded; the ar-

rival of happiness or benefits seems more like a consequence or a form of psychological comfort after embracing morality. This prompts a reflection: Faced with the uncertainty of fate and outcomes, navigating an increasingly uncertain era and life, why must individuals adhere to morality? Why must they stay true to their conscience, even if it may not guarantee happiness, and even if uncertainties persist? In advocating for a “heart-mind as the root of morality” rather than “self-interest as the root of morality” position, Mencius encourages us to recognize that only through the “autonomy” and “self-sufficiency” of morality—the self-sufficiency of the mind—can humanity transcend and liberate itself from the constraints of uncertainty and ultimately reach a consensus on faith.

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Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that there has been an ongoing academic debate about whether Confucianism is a religion or not. In this article, I adopt Professor Tu Weiming’s viewpoint that pre-Qin Confucianism focused on various levels of the body, mind, spirit, soul, fate, heaven and relationship between heaven and humanity. Early Confucianism not only does not exclude religion but actually possesses profound religious connotations and ultimate beliefs. Their aim was to inspire people to continuously strive for excellence and realize the inner driving force that illuminates the value of life in the real world. So Early Confucianism certainly has a strong religious significance or “religiousness”. See Tu (1989). Also, when it comes to Mohism, it goes without saying that Mohism has a strong religious aspect. Mozi was known for his belief in the existence of ghosts and gods. He proposed the concepts of “Heaven’s Intention” (*Tian Zhi* 天志) and “Percipient Ghosts” (*Ming Gui* 明鬼), emphasizing the worship of heaven, earth, mountains, rivers and ancestors. This is certainly a form or embryo of early Chinese religion.
- 2 From the chapter “Celebrated Schools” of *Han Feizi*.
- 3 For more on this issue see Fung (1997), Benjamin (1985), Graham (1989), Hansen (1992), Yao (2000), Shun and Wong (2004), Lao (2005), Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2005), Liu (2006), Van Norden (2011), Fraser (2020) and others.
- 4 All translated quotes of the *Mencius* are taken from Bloom (2009).
- 5 For further research on the debate between Mencius and Yi Zhi, see Li (2009), Yang (2019) and Xie (2020).
- 6 See Jiao (1987, p. 404).
- 7 See Zhu (1983, pp. 262–72) and Zhu (2001, p. 444).
- 8 See Xie (2020).
- 9 See Li (1986, p. 1320).
- 10 For example, Graham believes that the two roots of Yi Zhi refer to loving all people without distinctions and at the same time favoring one’s relatives. He also points out that these two roots are regarded by Mencius as contradictory principles. It should be noted that Graham does not dwell on the traditional issue of whether love is with or without distinctions, but brings into play the Western philosophical tradition, paying attention to logical analysis and pointing out that Yi Zhi cannot pursue two different ethical directions at the same time. He also thinks that this problem is not only Yi Zhi’s, but of the entire Mohist school. See Graham (1989, pp. 156–60).
- 11 See Li (2012, p. 44).
- 12 For Nivison, Yi Zhi is drawn by two forces; one is the natural emotion from the “inner heart-mind”, and the other is the guidance of the “doctrines” that “run contrary to the heart-mind”, so he falls into a certain dilemma or conflict, a sort of schizophrenia. See Nivison (1996, p. 103).
- 13 All translated quotes of the *Mozi* are taken from Johnston (2010).
- 14 Even so, we should pay attention to a difference between Mozi and the Legalists: the ultimate goal of “exalting unity” may not necessarily be “establishing the rule of absolute authority”, because the “ten theses”, including “exalting unity” itself, are all focused on the realization of “rightness” (*yi* 義), and “rightness” is the ultimate standard that both the “divine authority” and the “secular authority” must follow. See Lao (2005, p. 224).
- 15 In Mozi’s view, if a ruler wants to hit the mark regarding what people “desire” and “avoid”, he must “understand the feelings (conditions) of those below him” and have “a clear understanding of what is good and bad among the people” (*Mozi*, 13.1). However, the “effective rule” alone is not strong enough to do this, and it is required that “whenever you hear or see something good, you must inform your superior. Whenever you hear or see something bad, you must also inform your superior” (12.3). Moreover, according to the discussion in 13.5 (“Why not try getting the leaders of houses to issue a proclamation to their families

... the family chief will learn of the good people and reward them”), the reward for divulging good deeds and doing good deeds is the same, and the punishment for concealing evil deeds and doing evil deeds is the same. Is not this notion of controlling the rudimentary form of the Legalist theory of “whistleblowing” and “collective punishment”?

- 16 It should be noted that there is no contradiction or conflict between Mencius’s assertion that morality is “innate” and the status of Yao and Shun as “attained” sages. For Mencius, human moral nature is indeed “innate”, but this does not mean that morality is “completed” for every person in reality. That is to say, Mencius only presupposes that everyone has an innate moral nature, but this does not mean that everyone will ultimately become a moral person. Being born with this nature only means having the potential for goodness, but to ultimately become a sage or virtuous person, one still needs to cultivate and nourish their mind, and may even require some external environment and fortune (what Mencius calls “oportunity (shi时)”). This is true not only for ordinary people but also for sages and virtuous individuals.
- 17 Taken from Slingerland (2003).
- 18 In fact, there are two different directions in the relationship between human “self-interest” and “Heaven”: (1) A positive relationship: On the one hand, human nature is profit-driven, and Heaven adapts to and utilizes this profit-driven nature. The Son of Heaven, through “rewards,” persuades or induces the people to abide by moral principles. (2) A reverse relationship: On the other hand, human nature cannot be overly profit-driven, so Heaven must also restrain and discipline humanity’s profit-seeking nature. The Son of Heaven, through “punishment,” avoids or prohibits the people from excessively pursuing profits and falling into a situation of “contention for profit”. But whether it is a positive or negative relationship, both prove that Mozi established his moral system based on humans’ nature of “pursuing advantages and avoiding disadvantages”.
- 19 It is worth noting that Mozi explicitly opposed the Confucian concept of “Tian Ming”(天命 the Mandate of Heaven) and proposed the idea of “Fei Ming” (非命, denying fate). However, upon closer examination of the text in Mozi, it becomes apparent that Mozi’s “Fei Ming” only opposes the predetermined fate theory, rather than opposing the concept of Tian Ming itself. Furthermore, while advocating “Fei Ming”, Mozi also proposed the theory of “Tian Zhi” (天志 the Will of Heaven). As Fung Yu-lan once said, “According to Mozi’s theory of Tian Zhi, the success achieved through human effort is also a reward from ‘Heaven’. Heaven favors those who strive, thus ensuring their success. ... His ‘Fei Ming’ theory is essentially another form of fatalism”. See Fung (1998, p. 167). Evidently, in their understanding of “Tian” itself, especially when viewing “Tian” as a just and righteous deity that rewards good and punishes evil, there is no significant difference between the viewpoints of Mozi and Mencius.
- 20 The definition of “Heaven” by Mencius is currently a subject of controversy in academic circles. For further discussion, please refer to Pang Pu’s article on tianren 天人 in his *Liu jia qianshuo* 六家淺說 and Jim Behuniak’s chapter on human nature in his *John Dewey and Confucian Thought*.
- 21 There is currently a controversy in academic circles regarding whether the “Shuo” part of the silk manuscript “Wuxing” should be attributed to Mencius or generally regarded as a work of the “Si-Meng school”. See Chen (2009, pp. 96–109).
- 22 See Tu (1989).
- 23 It is worth noting that Mencius’ view actually had its initial signs in the thought of Confucius, who frequently emphasized that one’s external achievements are largely out of one’s control, so that what matters is the cultivation of character and the focus on morality independent of external conditions like wealth and status. For example, in the “Qiong Da Yi Shi” 窮達以時 section of the Guodian Chu bamboo slips, there is a passage recorded from Confucius, who said: “Action is not for the sake of success, so one remains uncomplaining in adversity. Concealment is not for the sake of fame, so one does not grudge when unrecognized ... Success or failure depends on time, but virtue remains constant. Whether praised or criticized by others, listen to it and reflect deeply ... Therefore, a virtuous person diligently examines himself”. That might be worth noting.

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