Ambivalence of Family and Disunity of Virtues in Mencius' Political Philosophy

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Abstract

This essay argues that although family plays an important role in Mencius' moral philosophy, its place in his *political* philosophy and the relationship between the familial and the political are much more complicated and ambiguous than commonly assumed. We examine two related assumptions about Mencius' philosophy, one concerning the role of family and the other the unity of virtues, by revisiting the "two-sources" (or "two-roots") problem identified by David Nivison, offering a different interpretation and reaching a different conclusion. We argue that there are indeed two roots in Mencius' philosophy, the family root and the general sympathy root. These two are sometimes in conflict within his framework, exposing a deep tension therein. To make the case, we distinguish two distinct strands in Mencius' thought, the "extensionist," which has been regarded as normative, and the "sacrificialist," which is more radical and less appreciated. While the extensionist Mencius operates on the assumption of congruity between the personal, the familial, and the political domains, the sacrificialist Mencius recognizes the ultimate incommensurability between the familial and the political and embraces the necessity for self-sacrifice in order to protect the familial. The hero of the sacrificialist Mencius is none other than the legendary sage-king, Shun 舜.

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Few thinkers in history can rival the impact on Confucian and East Asian thought than Mencius. As Philip J. Ivanhoe remarks (2016, 2) inspired by Alfred North Whitehead's famous observation about the place of Plato in the history of European philosophy, "The safest general characterization of the Confucian philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Mengzi (Mencius)." However, our contemporary understanding of Mencius' thought is inevitably shaped by what has become the orthodox Confucian ideology, precisely due to the prominence of Mencius in the construction of that orthodoxy. As a result, it is quite a challenge to shake off many of the interpretative assumptions that are widely shared among scholars of Chinese philosophy when engaging Mencius' thought through the text that bears his name.

In this article, we will look into two particular assumptions about Mencius' moral-political philosophy that are widely shared among scholars and the two are related. One of them concerns the role of family in his moral-political philosophy and the other has to do with the unity of virtues in the Mencian moral universe. First, there is a broad consensus among interpreters of Mencius that family is central to his political philosophy. However, if we sift through the *Mencius* without that assumption in mind, we find that family describes a rather problematic area of human life for Mencius. More specifically, in a significant portion of the *Mencius*, Mencius actually devotes much of his effort to insulating family from the political domain, instead of treating family as a crucial node in the Confucian project that links personhood, family, and the state as depicted in the accepted orthodox Confucian account. Second, scholars have generally adopted a tacit, though seldom explicitly argued, position when interpreting Mencius' thought, namely the unity of virtues in Mencius' moral philosophy. This essay challenges such an assumption by offering a new perspective into the complex relationship among different virtues in the Mencian moral universe.[1] In so doing, we will reexamine the "two-sources" (or "two-roots") problem in Mencius' thought identified

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[1] An anonymous reviewer criticizes my approach as one that pushes those virtues to their extreme only to support my argument. As should become clear in the essay, it is precisely those so-called "extreme" cases that provide us with invaluable clues to the fault lines in the moral universes occupied by Mencius and others. Mencius' philosophy, like any philosophical system, must handle extreme cases as well as easy ones and it is often when exploring the former that philosophical reasoning becomes most interesting.

by David S. Nivison but offer a different interpretation and reach a different conclusion about the problem as a result of the discussion. We will see that, despite Mencius' criticism of the Mohists for harboring a two-roots view on morality, there are indeed two roots in Mencius' own moral-political philosophy. However, instead of one being formal, public, and "outside" with the other being "inside" ourselves as Nivison (1996, 102) puts it, I will argue that both roots in Mencius' thought can more fruitfully be understood as referring to aspects within ourselves: the family root and the general sympathy root. Furthermore, these two sources of morality are not so easily reconciled in Mencius' thought. As I hope to demonstrate in this essay, instead of diminishing the power of Mencius' thought as some have argued, the two-roots problem actually makes his philosophy more compelling.

In order to make my case, I will present what can be discerned as two distinct strands in Mencian thought, namely, what I shall call the "extensionist" strand, which has been treated as normative, and the "sacrificialist" strand, which is much more radical and whose radical nature has not been investigated or appreciated in relation to the normative, extensionist strand. Based on this observation, I will argue that while the extensionist Mencius operates on the assumption, normative within Confucianism, of congruity between the personal, the familial, and the political domains, the sacrificialist Mencius recognizes the ultimate incommensurability between the familial and the political. Furthermore, the sacrificialist Mencius radically separates the familial from the political and ultimately prioritizes the former over the latter, by embracing the necessity for sacrifice as a way that, at times, is required to save the familial. These two strands of thought are at times, though not always by any means, in conflict within Mencian moral-political philosophy, demonstrating a deep tension at the heart of the Mencian system. In this respect, we will see that although family plays an important role in Mencius' moral philosophy, its place in Mencius' political philosophy and the relationship between the familial and the political in his thought are much more complicated and ambiguous than have been commonly assumed. The hero of the sacrificialist Mencius is none other than the legendary sage king, Shun 舜. Let us start with the normative, extensionist, Mencius.

1. Normative Mencius: the Extensionist

1.1. The Extensionist Interpretation of Mencius

As is well known, the normative Confucian moral-political paradigm envisions a smooth transition from the personal, to the familial, to the political. Much of Mencian thought embraces this vision, as evidenced in the following passage:

> Mengzi said, "People have a common saying: 'The world, the state, the family.' The root of the world lies in the state; the root of the state lies in the family; the root of the family lies in oneself." (*Mengzi* 4A5)[2]

Such a view can be found throughout the *Mencius*. The most famous elaboration of this vision can be found in the *Great Learning*:

> When things are investigated, knowledge is reached; when knowledge is reached, the intention is fulfilled; when the intention is fulfilled, the heartmind[3] is aligned; when the heartmind is aligned, the person is cultivated; when the person is cultivated, the family is regulated; when the family is regulated, the state is put in order; and when the state is put in order, there is peace under the Heaven. (author's translation)

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[2] Unless noted otherwise, all translations adopted in this article are from Bryan van Norden's (2008).

[3] I will translate the Chinese word *xin* 心 in the classical texts as heartmind, instead of heart, mind, heart-and-mind or heart-mind as adopted by other translators. Heartmind is obviously not an English word, but a neologism trying to capture the widely-shared scholarly consensus that ancient Chinese do not differentiate between heart and mind the way they are used in contemporary English since we are dealing with classical Chinese texts that are translated into contemporary English for contemporary Western readership in this context. For me, the attraction of heartmind as a single term is precisely its ambiguity, much like *xin* in different texts and contexts. It runs the gamut of the emotive, cognitive, evaluative, calculative, voluntary and whatever other functions *xin* performs, with different texts leaning toward different aspects. In other words, the fact that pre-modern Chinese thinkers allow *xin* to perform such a wide range of roles (without feeling the need to clarify which one) suggests the underlying assumption of the singularity of heartmind. Heartmind has the advantage of being both familiar and strange, not unlike *xin* in all its complexity and ambiguity in various Chinese texts through the ages.

This is the cultivation-regulation-governance-pacification (*xiuqi-zhiping* 修齊治平, hereafter *XQZP*) model of Confucian moral culti-vation, familial regulation, political governance, and bringing peace and justice to all in the world. The Great Learning is generally con-sidered a text in the Mencian "School." In this respect, Mencius echoes other early Confucians who see a natural progression of ethical transformation from the personal, the familial, to the political, so that everybody can live in a harmonious, just, and ethically fulfilling world. This is an extraordinary accomplishment that results from a moral agent's transformation of the domains of the personal, the familial, and the political by extending the fruits of moral cultivation from oneself to ultimately encompassing the entire world. It posits a seamless transition among these domains in that personal virtues can bring about a harmonious family, which in turn can lead to a well-governed state, and eventually bring about a peaceful and just world. This is a clear example of what I call the extensionist vision, long celebrated and enshrined as normative in classical Confucian moral-political philosophy.

One of the most famous and celebrated passages in the *Mencius* (1A7) has the master using the example of a king's pity toward an ox on its way to being sacrificed to show that if the king is capable of benevolence toward an ox he is certainly able to extend that benevo-lence (*tui en* 推恩) toward the people under his rule. David S. Nivison connects the use of *tui* in the *Mencius* to Mohist sources:

> The expression *tui en*, literally "pushing out compassion," has a limited use among later Confucians, but the word *tui* 推 alone is an important technical term for the later Mohist dialecticians, and there can be little doubt that Mencius here is consciously appropriating that use. It is defined in chapter 45 of the *Mozi*: Extending (*tui*) is getting someone to grant what that person has not accepted when it is the same as something that that person does accept. (Nivison 1996, 96)

Within normative Confucian political philosophy, family has almost always been treated as a necessary domain in the concentric[4] circle of extension, from the self, to the family, to the state, and eventually to the entire world. The *Mencius* contains many other passages that adopt such an approach. Mencius advocates the idea that the familial virtues of reverence toward one's parents and elders cultivated at home can be developed into the political virtues of *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義 by extending the familial virtues to encompassing all in the world. In the commentary on *Mengzi* 7A15 accompanying his translation, Bryan Van Norden observes:

> This is Mengzi's philosophy of ethical cultivation in a nutshell. We are born with incipient tendencies toward benevolence and righteousness, which we must "extend" so that they reach all other relevantly similar cases. That is, we must feel compassion not only for our own parents but also for the parents of others. We must revere not only the elders of our family but also the elders of others. (Van Norden 2008, 175)

Indeed, this has been the dominant interpretation of the Mencian, and the broader Confucian, moral-political project which connects Mencius' ideas of human nature, family relationships, and political governance grounded in the ruler's benevolence (*renzheng* 仁政).

However, Mencius's thought is a lot more complex–some might say more strained–than what Confucian orthodoxy has portrayed. More specifically, according to the Confucian *XQZP* ideal, the familial domain constitutes the necessary link between the personal and the political domains; but if this were indeed the case, it is rather curious that Mencius rarely appeals to the familial virtues of filial piety and brotherly deference in his conversations with various kings in his effort to promote the idea of benevolent governance. Rather, what is being extended to the world is the sympathy shown

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4 Interestingly, as Ivanhoe points out to me in our correspondence, "While widely invoked there is no example of 'concentric circles' in the early Confucian tradition (though one does find this metaphor in ancient Greece)," even though the metaphor of concentric circles does seem to fit the Chinese case.

to an animal about to be sacrificed or an unknown child in danger, *without* necessarily going through the familial route, in his celebrated discussions on human nature with several rulers. In other words, the seed of benevolence in Mencius' thought is most prominently represented by the king's sympathy toward a sacrificial ox or our instinctive sense of compassion toward a vulnerable child who is a stranger to us (*burenzhixin* 不忍之心), instead of our familial sentiments toward parents and siblings (*xiaoti* 孝悌).

If so, this means that the role of familial virtues in Mencian political philosophy is rather ambiguous in that it does not necessarily occupy a central role in it as has been almost universally assumed. Chad Hansen might be onto something when he points out that

> Mencius. . . does give lip service to filial piety. He shows his awareness that filial piety is a core virtue in the *dao* of the sage-kings. Still, filial piety plays no central theoretical role for Mencius. (Hansen 1992, 169)

Indeed, the role of familial virtues in Mencius' thought is not quite as straightforward as portrayed in the Confucian orthodoxy. This explains Hansen's dismissiveness of a central theoretical role filial piety plays in Mencius' thought. However, such dismissiveness does not do justice to the theoretical agony Mencius finds himself in. Hansen is right to problematize the role of filial piety in Mencius' thought against the prevailing scholarly interpretations, but I do not agree with his conclusion. What Hansen should have concluded from his observation is that filial piety does not play a central role in Mencius' *political* thought, but it does not necessarily mean that filial piety plays no central role in Mencius' overall moral project. As we will see in the following, despite his own denial, Mengzi's philosophy does operate on the premise of two roots when it comes to the source of moral perfection, but this two-roots problem in Mencius' thought is different from Nivison's analysis. The two roots are family-based virtues and natural sympathy.

1.2. Two Moral Roots: **Buren** 不忍， **Qin** 親 *and Their Relationships with* **Ren** 仁

In his famous article, "Motivation and Moral Action in Mencius," Nivison presents a highly nuanced analysis of Mencius' philosophy concerning the source(s) of morality.[5] In this paper, Nivison approaches the problem of the source(s) of morality from the perspective of moral motivation in Mencius' philosophy. He sets out to answer this question: "Is the theory of extending basic dispositions compatible with any moral code that anyone may think up?" (Nivison 1996, 101). In other words, "how is the moral 'deep structure' of self-revealing affections and motivations articulated into the 'surface structure' of developed morality" (1996, 101)? To address the tension between the two domains, Nivison argues that "we would have to think of morality as having two sources, one formal and public, set out in words and doctrines, which one would have to learn; and the other motivational but relatively amorphous, 'inside' ourselves so to speak, or we might say in our 'hearts'" (1996, 102). Even though Nivison takes very seriously Mencius' own rejection of two-roots view he accuses the Mohists of harboring, Nivison seems unconvinced Mencius' single-root position can be defended.[6] In the following, I will offer a somewhat different interpretation of the two-roots problem which can hopefully better capture the theoretical conundrum Mencius is in. However, unlike Nivison I will not approach this problem from the perspective of moral motivation. Rather, my focus will be on the very structure of Mencius' moral-political philosophy, specifically the relationship between the familial and the political.

Mencius is known to draw a hard line separating what is morally required within the family from what is morally required outside of

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[5] Nivison's article "Two Roots or One," initially delivered as the Presidential Address before the 54th Annual Pacific Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in San Francisco, California, on March 28, 1980, does not quite address the problem in a way that is relevant to this article, despite its title.

[6] See Nivison (1996, 295n26). Kim (2018) critiques Nivison's perceived defense of Mencius' one-source position, although I think Nivison's position is more nuanced than characterized by Kim.

it. When he talks about the familial, more often than not, his focus seems to be on its limitations rather than its universalizability. Mencius devotes a great deal of effort to defending familial sentiments and virtues precisely because of their limited nature, not in spite of it. This is especially noteworthy in 3A5 where Mencius criticizes a Mohist, Yi Zhi 夷之, who makes lavish funeral arrangements for his own parents despite the Mohist teaching of impartial care as well as its teaching against lavish burial practices. Yi Zhi tries to defend what he did by appealing to a Confucian teaching:

> Yi Zhi said, "According to the Way of the Confucians, the ancients treated the people 'like caring for a baby.' What does this saying mean? I take it to mean that love is without differentiations, but it is bestowed beginning with one's parents." (*Mengzi* 3A5)

Mencius calls him out on a blatant inconsistency in Yi Zhi's behavior and his interpretation of Mohist teachings. That is, when it comes to the treatment of his own family, Yi Zhi appeals to the Confucian teaching despite his Mohist commitment. For Mencius, the Mohists posit a moral ideal they themselves cannot practically commit to. Furthermore, as Mencius muses, "Does Yi Zhi truly hold that one's affection for one's own nephew is like one's affection for a neighbor's baby?" (*Mengzi* 3A5). Here Mencius seems rather incredulous that anybody can seriously commit to a position that blurs the boundary between the familial and the nonfamilial. He is drawing a sharp line separating the two domains, implying that what the Mohists advocate is inhuman as it crosses that very line.

Mencius 3A5 has been commented on by many contemporary scholars, due to the fact that it is one of few cases we can find a direct (or almost direct) engagement between Mencius and a Mohist wherein the line between Confucianism and Mohism is sharply drawn, by a Confucian in this case. However, there has also been a good deal of ambiguity as to what exactly transpires in this engagement, especially pertaining to the discussion about moral roots in the following key sentence: "Heaven, in giving birth to things, causes them to have one source, but Yi Zhi gives them two sources" (天之生物也, 使之一本, 而夷子

二本故也. *Mengzi* 3A5). The prevailing interpretation, represented by Nivison, argues that Mencius is making a case for the one source of love that can be extended to encompassing others, with natural gradations of intensity of love,[7] although Nivison is also ambivalent about this as we have seen previously. In the following, I will sketch out a somewhat different interpretation of the two-roots problem, making the case that Mencius' operative position can be understood to be more two-rooted than he himself might have realized, if the roots can be understood in light of the familial and political domains within which moral sentiments are expressed.

As Mencius sees it, what distinguishes the familial from the non-familial is their different underlying sentiments. In this connection, Mencius differentiates two kinds of sentiments, namely *buren* 不忍 and *qin* 親, and connects both with the virtue of *ren* 仁 in intriguingly

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[7] Kwong-loi Shun's interpretation of Mencius is also premised on this one-root assumption (Shun 1997, 129). Jeffrey Riegel (2015) challenges such an interpretation by examining the language and structure of the passage. He observes:

> The grammar of the sentence is such that *yiben* 一本 and *erben* 二本 must be understood as verbal predicates with the pivotal pronoun *zhi* 之 and the proper name Yizi 夷子 (Master Yi) as their respective subjects. One cannot, as is often done, ignore the grammatical parallelism of the two phrases *zhiyiben*, "they are single-rooted," and *zhiyiben*, "Master Yi is dual-rooted," and render *erben* as some sort of transitive verb; or insert other verbs into the text in an effort to make Heaven and Yizi parallel subjects and, as a result, render *yiben* and *erben*, translated as "one root" and "two roots," or something similar, as if they were the objects of those verbs. (Riegel 2015, 47)

Riegel's conclusion is the following:

> Being "dual-rooted" means dividing this love in two, providing care equally to one's parents and the parents of others. It further means that Yi Zhi has made "dual" by dividing in two something that in its original, innate, or "Heavenly" form is undivided—i.e., we should understand *yiben* "single-rooted" not to refer to a root that is unique, or one root as opposed to two, but rather a root that is "whole" and "entire." Also involved in Mengzi's conception of this root that is undivided is the idea that it, unlike Yi Zhi's divided root, consists of a love that is extended, amplified in stages or grades, to reach others who are ever more distant from the self and hence occupy a lower status and lesser importance vis-à-vis the self than those to whom one is closely related. (Riegel 2015, 48–49)

This conclusion does not really change the parameters of the philosophical discussions surrounding *Mengzi* 3A5 among contemporary scholars.

different ways. *Buren*, translated as "cannot bear," is a universal senti-
ment celebrated in the *Mencius* that is directed indiscriminately
toward any person or even an animal that is in imminent danger or is
suffering. There are two famous instances of *buren* in the text: one
appears when Mencius describes a king's sympathetic response to an
ox that is about to be sacrificed (1A7) and the other has to do with our
spontaneous response to a baby who is on the verge of falling into a
well (2A6). Both are connected with Mencius' discussion of moral
inclinations, or moral sprouts (*duan* 端), that are constitutive of hu-
man nature (*xing* 性). In such cases, Mencius connects the sprout of
buren with the virtue of benevolence, *ren*, regarding the latter as the
result of extending the former to encompassing all (*Mencius* 1A7, 2B6,
7B31, etc.).

On the other hand, benevolence also has a distinctly familial
dimension, *qin. Qin* usually means parents (as in *shiqin* 事親) or filial-
ity toward parents (as in *qinqin* 親親) in the *Mencius*, but it also refers
to familial affection on several occasions. In fact, Mencius considers
treating one's parents as parents as a case of benevolence (親親, 仁也.
Mengzi 7A15). In another passage, Mencius says:

> The core of benevolence is serving one's parents. The core of righte-
> ousness is obeying one's elder brother. The core of wisdom is knowing
> these two and not abandoning them. The core of ritual propriety is
> the adornment of these two. The core of music is to delight in these
> two. (*Mengzi* 4A27)

What is especially interesting about 4A27 is that the foundational
Mencian virtues of benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, and
wisdom (with the appreciation of music added to the list) are ad-
dressed entirely within the familial context, which is different from
the universalist perspective discussed earlier. In fact, here the familial
dimension is treated as the core of the virtue of benevolence and
others. This means that Mencius sees two dimensions in the mani-
festation of cardinal virtues of benevolence, righteousness, ritual
propriety, and wisdom, namely the universal and the familial. For
example, *ren* can be understood in terms of both the extension of

the universalist *buren* to all (人皆有所不忍, 達之於其所忍, 仁也. *Mengzi* 7B31) and of serving one's parents (仁之實, 事親是也. *Mengzi* 4A27; 親親, 仁也. *Mengzi* 7A15). However, 7A15 actually presents some exegetical problem for our purpose here in a way that might not be immediately obvious:

> Treating one's parents as parents is benevolence (*ren*). Revering one's elders is righteousness. There is nothing else to do but extend these to the world. (*Mengzi* 7A15)

On its face, Mencius seems to be saying that a sage-king should extend the practice of treating parents as parents and treating elders as elders to all under the Heaven, but it is unclear what is exactly being extended. Many within the Confucian tradition treat filial piety and political loyalty as transferrable, making family the training/nurturing ground for political virtues. We can see this interpretation very clearly in Zhu Xi's commentary on *Mengzi* 4A19:

> If one serves one's parents with filiality, then one's devotion can be transferred to one's ruler, and one's agreeableness can be transferred to one's elders. If one's self is correct, then one's family will be ordered, one's state will be well-ruled, and the world will be at peace. (Van Norden 2008, 98-99)

However, Mencius is actually conflicted about the connection between the familial virtue of filial piety and the political virtue of benevolence. In the text, Mencius often uses the term *qin* 親 to demarcate the familial domain from the rest of the social world. As the following passage clearly demonstrates, *qin* is reserved for kin, it is not appropriate to express *qin* to anyone else:

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

Here Mencius is drawing a line between benevolence (*ren*) and familial/kinship affection (*qin*). If we juxtapose 7A45 with 7A15, we can make a case that the extension in 7A15 should refer to promotion of the universal practice of filiality (treating one's parents as parents, treating one's elders as elders), rather than the sage-king or the gentleman treating everybody as family members. In other words, the practice and promotion of filiality is itself benevolence.

To recap, Mencius' moral philosophy operates on the premise of two distinct but related domains: the familial and the political. This is uncontroversial. However, what might be controversial is that the relationship between the two is a lot more complicated and strained than what has been commonly assumed. On the one hand, every human being has a heartmind that cannot bear the suffering of others. *Buren* is a universal moral sentiment that all humans are born with, even though we risk losing it with repeated violations of our humanity, as implied in the famous ox mountain allegory (*Mengzi* 6A8). *Buren* is the sprout of the virtue of benevolence (*ren*) in Mencius' thought. On the other hand, however, Mencius posits another source for *ren*, namely the familial source. In the following passage we find Mencius saying, "Among babes in arms there are none that do not know to love their parents (*aiqiqin* 愛其親)" (*Mengzi* 7A15). This seems to suggest that filial sentiment is an inborn quality of all human beings. In the same passage, Mencius says, "treating one's parents as parents (*qinqin* 親親) is benevolence (*ren*)" (*Mengzi* 7A15). That is, Mencius is pointing out that loving parents is an inborn quality whereas properly serving parents is a developed quality of a cultivated human person. The relationship between those two is actually similar in structure to that between *buren* 不忍 and *ren* 仁. Interestingly, in 7A15 Mencius seems to equate filiality (*qinqin*) with *ren*, meaning that *ren* has a distinct familial dimension, in addition to its political dimension. This suggests that the political and the familial are *co-equal dimensions* in constituting the virtue of benevolence.

Importantly, *ren* should never be allowed to eclipse and transcend our filial attachment. In 1A1, Mencius says, "Never have the benevolent left their parents behind" (未有仁而遺其親者也). Given the

familial dimension in *ren* just observed, Mencius' sentiment here is not surprising. However, since *ren* also has a strong political dimension, the ability of a person of *ren* to navigate the relationship between the familial and the political is much trickier. Even though the cited passage in 1A1 can simply mean that a benevolent person will always be filial—especially when there is no conflict between the two, e.g., if one is blessed with a great family such that a politically benevolent person can also be filial without having to sacrifice major principles in either domain—when there is conflict between the political and the familial, a decision has to be made whether to sacrifice the political or the familial. In this regard, Mencius is clearly on the side of sacrificing the political in order to save the familial.

For Mencius the familial domain is a special category in and of itself that cannot be subsumed under the political. This interpretation is in line with Mencius' vigorous, and at times strenuous, attempt to draw a line between the familial and the nonfamilial domains. Indeed, we find the *Mencius* devoting a significant amount of effort to defending the special treatment of family members, usually framed as a critique of the Mohists who famously advocate impartial care for all without privileging family members.

In this connection it is rather curious that Mencius does not treat *qin* as one of the moral sprouts in the way *buren* is treated. Moreover, neither filial piety (*xiao*) nor brotherly deference (*ti*) is included in the four cardinal virtues of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*) (hereafter *RYLZ*) that grow out of those four moral sprouts. If *RYLZ* and their respective sprouts indeed represent the foundation of the Mencian moral-political project as it often has been taken to be, where does that leave familial virtues like *xiao*, *ti*, and *qin* within such a picture?

In the following I will offer an alternative framework that can better accommodate these competing elements in Mencian thought between the familial and the political domains in order to have a more nuanced understanding of the Mencian project. The view I will defend argues that Mencius regards the familial and the political as two distinct domains, or two roots, such that virtues in one domain do not *necessarily* translate into the other. I will do this through a

close examination of the Shun narrative in the *Mencius*. The story of Shun presents the most illuminating example in the text for revealing the theoretical struggle Mencius is in, especially the problematic status of the familial domain in his political thought. In fact, nowhere is the tension between the familial and the political more poignantly portrayed than in Mencius' depiction of Shun, due to the prominent but deeply problematic role family plays in this narrative. We will see that the Shun narrative holds an important inflection point in the Mencian moral-political project.

2. The Case of Shun

Shun is one of the ancient sage-kings revered in the Confucian tradition and serves as a paradigmatic figure in the *Mencius*. If Confucius finds his kindred spirits in King Wen and the Duke of Zhou among the ancient sages, Mencius feels more connected with Yao and Shun, especially Shun evidenced in the prominence of the narratives about Shun featured in the text (e.g., 5A1-4). However, the narrative about Shun presents some major interpretative difficulties for Mencius. One difficulty is this: on the one hand, Shun is considered the embodiment of moral perfection in the Mencian moral-political universe, with impeccable personal virtues and supreme political accomplishments; on the other hand, Shun's struggle with his family members presents many challenges for the Mencian political project, given the centrality of Shun's dysfunctional family in his narrative and the foundational role given to familial relationships and filial virtues in the normative Confucian paradigm. A closer examination of this tension in the Shun narrative will offer a unique, perhaps under-appreciated, window into the Mencian view on the role of family in his political philosophy.

The *Mencius* gives an elaborate account of the story of Shun, including his difficult relationships with his father and half-brother as well as his benevolent rule. Historical legend[8] has it that Shun's

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[8] For a more detailed account of the Shun stories, see Sima Qian, *Shiji*, "Basic Annals" 1, in Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, vol. 1, 8–16.

father had only one eye (nicknamed "blind man"), his stepmother mistreated him and favored her own son, Xiang 象. In the *Mencius*, Shun is depicted as a filial son despite being mistreated by his parents and half-brother who even schemed to kill him by setting the barn on fire while he was working on the roof and trying to bury him in a well he was helping to dig. Shun allegedly craved love from his parents, despite his marriage to the daughters of the sage-king Yao 堯 and Yao's abdicating the throne to him. Shun demonstrated his love for his half-brother Xiang by enfeoffing him (while forbidding him from managing the affairs of his domain by installing capable officials around him) despite the latter's cruelty toward him. Furthermore, when presented with a hypothetical case in which Shun's father murdered somebody and Shun, as the ruler, has to decide whether to prosecute his father or not, Mencius suggests that Shun would give up his throne and carry his father to a faraway place and hide with him there, with no hesitation or regret whatsoever about losing the empire.

The tension between one's filial piety and political obligations/ loyalty, echoing the dilemma in Upright Gong story in *Analects* 13.18, presents a serious challenge to the normative Confucian ideal of *XQZP*. Both Confucius and Mencius have to confront this challenge. In the case of Confucius, he tries to smooth over the tension between the two by making the familial virtue of filial piety and brotherly love the foundation of the political virtue of *ren*, and this represents the Confucian norm codified as the *XQZP* paradigm. But as the Upright Gong story exhibits, ultimately Confucius fails to reconcile the conflict between filial piety and political obligations. Nevertheless, the tension between the two in the *Analects* is not featured nearly as prominently and dramatically as the one in the *Mencius* since such a tension occurred in the person of an ideal Confucian sage-king in the *Mencius*, instead of a virtually unknown figure in the *Analects*. This suggests that the tension is much more central to Mencius' project than to Confucius'. Due to the way family is framed differently between Confucius' and Mencius' thought, Mencius' deliberations of the issue deserve being treated separately, instead of being subsumed under the assumed normative Confucian paradigm.

Much of the traditional commentary and contemporary scholarship have focused on Shun's demonstration of supreme filial piety in order to shield his father from being prosecuted by giving up his throne and escaping with his father to a faraway land with no regret or the skillful nature of Shun's action in harmonizing various moral demands.[9] However, we should note that when Mencius talks about the familial, his focus often appears to be on its limits rather than its universalizability. The familial in the *Mencius* is the critical domain wherein our moral sprouts can be cultivated into virtues, but it can also be disruptive when a moral agent is engaged in a political project. This is the case with Shun. Mencius seems to believe that Shun was eventually able to transform his father, *after* he took the throne:

> Mengzi said, "Only Shun could have the world delight in and turn toward him yet look upon this as if it were straw. When he could not please his parents, he considered himself a failure as a human. When he could not get along with his parents, he considered himself a failure as a son. Shun fathomed the Way of serving one's parents, and his father, the 'Blind Man,' became pleased. The Blind Man was pleased, and the world was transformed. The Blind Man was pleased, and in the world the roles of father and son were settled. This is what is called great filiality." (*Mengzi* 4A28)

Interestingly, such an ending is not recorded in the *Shiji* 史記. Even if we were to accept Mencius' version of the Shun legend regarding the eventual transformation of his father, however implausible it might be, this would at least imply that it was not *just* Shun's virtues that transform his father but that Shun's position as the ruler of the world might have helped as well.

In this regard, Mencius is rather unique among the classical moral thinkers in that he confronts, instead of glossing over, a hard and intractable philosophical problem that is central to the Confucian moral-political project and shared by many other philosophical and

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9 Erin Cline's comment on this aspect of the Shun narrative in her *Families of Virtue: Confucian and Western Views on Childhood Development*, represents the most recent effort in this line of interpretation (Cline 2015, 28-30).

religious traditions in the world, namely the negotiation of conflicts between the personal, the familial, and the political. The fact that Shun's struggle with his birth family is featured so prominently in the text suggests that Mencius takes the tension between the familial and the political much more seriously than other early Confucians.

There is a fascinating debate recently among contemporary scholars in China about how to properly interpret Mencius' Shun narrative pertaining to the Confucian ideals of filial piety and benevolent politics.[10] Among the parties of the debate, Liu Qingping represents a view that is critical of Mencius whereas Guo Qiyong a view more defensive of Mencius. In his article, "Confucianism and Corruption: An Analysis of Shun's Two Actions Described by *Mencius*," Liu argues that there is a distinct spirit of Confucianism, what he calls the "consanguineous affection" (*xueqin qingli* 血親情理) (2007, 3). He lists two essential elements in this spirit:

> First, . . . Confucianism always puts special emphasis on the primary importance of kinship bonds, such as filial piety and brotherly respect, as the ultimate foundation of human life. . . . Second, in order to stress the significance of consanguineous affection as the ultimate foundation, Confucius and Mencius further consider it to be the highest value of human life. They always place filial piety and brotherly duty above any other principles of human behavior, including such principal Confucian virtues as humaneness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and truthfulness; they even demand that one should abandon anything else for the sake of consolidating kinship love in cases of conflict. (Liu 2007, 3)

Guo, in his article, "Is Confucian Ethics a 'Consanguinism'?" counters Liu's characterization of the Confucian-Mencian moral project as "consanguinism" by appealing to Mencius' theory of human nature that begins with four moral sprouts (2007, 21–22). Guo invokes Men-

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[10] Many of the important articles in that debate are collected in a volume edited by Guo (2005). *Dao* runs several special issues covering the debate, using Liu and Guo as its key representatives with various Western scholars weighing in on that debate. My summary of the debate is based on the coverage in *Dao*.

cius' position against two-roots as a way to reject Liu's characterization of Mencius as embracing another source of morality, namely the familial source, as opposed to the widely-accepted Mencian position about the universal source of human nature and the single moral heartmind that starts with the four sprouts (23). In so doing, Guo discounts the supreme importance of familial virtues accorded in Liu's reading of Mencius (24) and instead considers "humanity, not 'blood affection,' as the fundamental basis for all moral behavior" (26).

My approach to Mencius in this article should make it clear that I am more sympathetic to Liu's interpretation of Mencius' thought, although he still underappreciates the tension between the political and the familial in Mencius' framework. Guo's defense of Mencius, on the other hand, significantly downplays the tension in the Mencian philosophy as he seems to dismiss the existence of such a tension. An interesting solution to the tension is offered by Stephen Angle. In his short essay commenting on the Liu-Guo debate, "No Supreme Principle: Confucianism's Harmonization of Multiple Values," which is based on a broader discussion in his book *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford 2009), Angle appeals to the Confucian ideal of harmony, especially in the way Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi formulate it, in order to reconcile the competing demands of moral ideals. However, as seductive as his solution might appear, Angle (and the Neo-Confucians) might be too optimistic about the possibility of a harmonious solution to all problematic situations.

Values do not harmonize themselves. The Confucian appeal to a sage-king's harmonization of different values in navigating a given situation is clearly indicative of potential tensions among core values such that the embracing of one might require the sacrifice of another. Indeed, such tensions will be the focus of the next section. In the following, we will examine what I call the sacrificialist strand of Mencian thought by exploring its more radical thread that foregrounds the incommensurability between the familial and the political in a way that does not fit neatly into the normative extensionist interpretations of Mencius.

3. Radical Mencius: The Sacrificialist

3.1. Incommensurability of Desirable Goods

Among classical thinkers, Mencius is probably the one with the keenest sense of tension among values and their incommensurability (不可得兼).[11] One of the most famous and celebrated passages in the Mencius clearly lays this out:

> Fish is something I desire; bear's paw is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake fish and select bear's paw. Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness. Life is something I desire, but there is something I desire more than life. Hence, I will not do just anything to obtain it. Death is something I hate, but there is something I hate more than death. Hence, there are calamities I do not avoid. (*Mengzi* 6A10)

In traditional Chinese cuisine, bear's paw is a delicacy of greater value than fish. Hence faced with a choice, one would be expected to choose the more valuable one. However, for Mencius, righteousness is of a higher value than life. Therefore, when there is a conflict between life and righteousness, a cultivated moral agent would choose righteousness over life. Such a sentiment is grounded in Mencius' observation of an interesting phenomenon that some people are willing to give up their lives in order to defend their personal dignity, e.g., at a moment of outrage when humiliated (*Mengzi* 6A10). While some might see such a moment as a destructive outburst of anger, Mencius sees in it a nobler impulse of righteousness. It is rather significant that Mencius sets up a binary between righteousness and life in the above passage. This points to the particular way righteousness is used in the text.

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[11] As Ivanhoe points out to me in our private correspondence, "Only when it is a choice between moral and nonmoral values. There are no quandary cases or tragic choices." This article is trying to make the case that when there is a conflict between the political and the familial, one's choice is no longer between moral and nonmoral values, but between competing moral values. Those cases are the quandary ones and can indeed be understood as tragic choices.

Another important occurrence of righteousness appears at the very beginning of the *Mencius* (1A1). There we find Mencius forcefully arguing that a ruler should be concerned with righteousness, instead of benefits (*li* 利), in governing the state. In so doing, Mencius sets up righteousness as one of the cardinal principles in his political philosophy. He rebuts the Mohists who supposedly prioritize benefits over virtues in their moral-political thinking. For Mencius, a benefits-based governing philosophy would lead to people doing what benefits themselves and their own families the most over others, inadvertently compromising the interest of the ruler and threatening the ruler's survival.

Righteousness is actually a key moral principle in Mohist political thought as well. The Mohists do not see any problem in maintaining both righteousness and material benefits in politics whereas Mencius seems to regard the two as polar opposite here (even though Mencius is *not* against profit *per se* as we will see shortly). However, we should note a rather curious point that Mencius would consider material benefits so antithetical to righteousness (*yi*), especially considering the fact that he regards desires for sex, wealth, and music as commensurable with benevolent (*ren*) governance (*Mengzi* 1B1-5). I would make the case that the peculiar nature of righteousness in the *Mencius* reveals, in addition to being an ideological swipe at the Mohists, an important tension within the Mencian moral-political philosophy. This has to do with the relationship between benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*).

The relationship between *ren* and *yi* in Mencius' thought is rather intriguing. Tellingly, in 1A1 Mencius is not invoking *ren* to repudiate the concern for benefits in politics. Rather it is *yi* that is invoked as the opposite of benefits. This is rather surprising, given the centrality of *ren* in his ideal of benevolent governance (*renzheng*). Since *Mencius* clearly does not reject benefits *per se*, as evidenced in his discussion of the politics of *ren*, he seems to be drawing a distinction between *ren* and *yi*.[12]

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[12] One anonymous reviewer helpfully points out, "*Yi* is much more self-regarding compared to other-regarding *ren*," echoing a similar observation made famous by Kwong-loi Shun (1997, 63). However, this characterization does not quite explain the way *yi* is used in 1A1 when *yi* is set up as the polar opposite of profit (*li*). This suggests that the prevailing approach to understanding the relationship between *ren* and *yi* in

Indeed, as I will argue here, this is the *yi*-based radical Mencius that is often in tension with the *ren*-based extensionist Mencius. This radical Mencius demands sacrifice in service to moral ideals, in contrast with the extensionist Mencius who maintains that all desirable goods and values can be accommodated through extension and sharing. Let us call this more radical strand of Mencius' thought the sacrificialist Mencius, in contrast with the extensionist Mencius.

3.2. Yi *and the Imperative of Sacrifice in Mencius' Thought*

The sacrificialist Mencius is captured in the following passage wherein he articulates the ideal of choosing moral commitments over one's life in 7A42: "孟子曰, '天下有道, 以道殉身; 天下無道, 以身殉道. 未聞以道殉乎人者也.'" Translations of this passage vary rather widely.[13] Such differences in the translations echo the divisions within the traditional commentaries. The key division is how to translate the word *xun* 殉. The origi-

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Mencius' thought is not necessarily the only way to interpret their relationship. My article offers an alternative framework.

[13] For example, Irene Bloom translates the passage as follows:

> Mencius said, "When the Way exists in the world, the Way must follow one's person. When the Way does not exist in the world, one's person must follow the Way. I have never heard of the Way following other people."

But it is unclear what it means by "the Way must follow one's person" when the Way exists in the world.

D.C. Lau translates *xun* in a familiar fashion:

> Mencius said, "When the Way prevails in the Empire, it goes where one's person goes; when the Way is eclipsed, one's person goes where the Way has gone. I have never heard of making the Way go where other people are going." In this translation, the locale of the Way is clearly in a cultivated moral agent. This echoes the sentiment expressed in the *Analects* 15.29 wherein Confucius famously says, "Human beings can broaden the Way—it is not the Way that broadens human beings."

Van Norden translates it in this way,

> Mengzi said, "When the world has the Way, the Way stays with you to the grave. When the world lacks the Way, you stay with the Way to the grave. But I have never heard of the Way staying with you while you follow others."

This translation brings out the element of being buried with the dead in the original meaning of *xun* by rendering it as "stay with something to the grave," but Van Norden does not provide the reason for rendering 以道殉乎人 as "the Way staying with you while you follow others."

nal meaning of *xun* is the practice of burying living humans to accompany the dead in the tomb.[14] It comes to mean sacrifice more broadly. However, many translators have followed Eastern Han commentator Zhao Qi's 赵岐 (which is the basis of Qing 清 commentator Jiao Xun's 焦循 *Mengzi Zhengyi* 孟子正義) glossing *xun* 殉 as "to follow" (*cong* 從).[15] *Mengzi Zhengyi* also cites an interpretation in the *Annotations of Chu Ci* (*Shi Wen* 釋文) that glosses *xun* as to sacrifice oneself in order to follow something (殺身從之曰殉) (Jiao 1987, 946). Zhu Xi (1983, 362) glosses *xun* as being buried with the dead, referring to objects that accompany the dead (殉, 如殉葬之殉, 以死隨物之名也). Zhu Xi extends such a gloss to mean that one should follow the Way unto death and not depart from it when the Way is corrupted in the world (道屈則身在必退, 以死相從而不離也). Part of the challenge here has to do with the three occurrences of *xun* in the passage with somewhat different semantic range such that if we are to insist on using the same word, either "to follow" or "to sacrifice," to translate the word, various parts of the sentence becomes incomprehensible. Therefore, I will translate *xun* as "to follow" or "to accompany" in the first instance and "to follow to the grave" or simply "to sacrifice" in the latter two cases:

> Mencius said, "When the Way prevails in the world, the Way accompanies the gentleman (in all of his conducts). When the Way does not prevail in the world, the gentleman follows the Way to the grave (or sacrifices himself for the Way). But I have never heard of the Way following other people to the grave (or sacrificing the Way for other people)." (*Mencius* 7A42, author's translation)

The ideal Mencian gentleman portrayed here is someone who is morally uncompromising and willing to sacrifice his life in order to follow the Way. This echoes a similar sentiment in the *Analects*:

> No scholar-officials with noble vocations or persons of *ren* would harm *ren* when trying to preserve their lives, but they could very

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14 《康熙字典》:《玉篇》用人送死也.

15 《康熙字典》: 又凡以身從物皆曰殉.《莊子·駢拇篇》小人則以身殉利, 士則以身殉名, 天下盡殉也. 彼所殉仁義也, 則俗謂之君子. 所殉貨財也, 則俗謂之小人.

well sacrifice themselves in accomplishing the ideal of *ren*. (*Analects*
15.9, author's translation)

This is the sacrificialist Mencius speaking. Whereas Confucius con-
nects sacrifice with *ren* (humaneness), Mencius associates sacrifice
with *yi* (righteousness), which points to the evolution of the meanings
of *ren* and *yi* between Confucius and Mencius. Indeed, the distinction
between the two can even be framed in terms of the tension between
the two cardinal virtues of *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness) in
the Mencian moral universe. *Ren* emphasizes the continuity between
various domains such that moral sentiments cultivated from one
domain can be extended to another, from the close-by to the far-away,
which is the basic premise of benevolent politics, whereas *yi* highlights
discontinuity between domains which is clearly at play in Mencius'
juxtaposition of righteousness against profit/benefit or even life.

So, what is *yi*? Van Norden cites *Zhong Yong*'s 中庸 parsing of *yi* 義 as
appropriateness (*yi* 宜) (2002, 48) as its baseline meaning (or "thin
definition" in Van Norden's words). Like *ren*, *yi*, commonly translated
as righteousness, has two dimensions in the *Mencius*: familial and
political. In the familial domain, it is considered the equivalent of *ti*,
deference to elder brother (義之實, 從兄是也, 4A27) or one's elders (敬長,
義也, 7A15); in the political arena, it refers to the virtue of a minister to
be fiercely loyal to his lord (未有義而後其君者也, 1A1).[16] A. C. Graham
synthesizes these references of *yi* into a more general explanation
when he defines the term as "the conduct fitting to one's role or sta-
tus, for example as father or son, ruler or minister" (Graham 1989, 11).

In the famous four-sprouts passage (2A6), Mencius regards the
heartmind of shame as the sprout of *yi* (羞惡之心, 義之端也). We can see
an elaboration of the sprout of righteousness in the *Mencius* 6A10:

A basket of food and a bowl of soup—if one gets them, then one
will live; if one doesn't get them, then one will die. But if they're
given with contempt, then even a homeless person will not accept

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[16] In 4A4, *yi* is listed as the ethical norm that specifically governs the relationship
between lord and his ministers: "between ruler and ministers there is righteousness"
(君臣有義).

them. If they're trampled upon, then even a beggar won't take them. However, when it comes to a salary of ten thousand bushels of grain, then one doesn't notice propriety and righteousness and accepts them. (*Mengzi* 6A10)

According to Van Norden,

> Mencius makes the psychological claim that no human would allow himself or herself to be disgraced, even if that were necessary for survival. If this is true, then it follows that all humans have the sprout of righteousness, since the disposition that drives us to avoid disgrace, even at the cost of our lives, is precisely this sprout. . . . For the purposes of demonstrating that there is a sprout of righteousness, Mencius only needs one claim to be true: for every human there are some things that he or she avoids doing because he or she believes they are shameful. (Van Norden 2002, 49)

Indeed, this is exactly what Mencius appears to be doing in 7B31 wherein *yi* is characterized as nontransgression, the violation of which brings about shame to oneself:

> People all have things that they will not do. To extend this reaction to that which they will do is righteousness (*yi*). . . . If people can fill out the heart that will not trespass, their righteousness (*yi*) will be inexhaustible." (*Mengzi* 7B31)

The relationship between *ren* and *yi* in the text is characterized as such that *ren* is a moral agent's abode whereas *yi* is the path toward such a state. For example, in 7A33, Mencius elaborates on the virtues of an ideal moral agent:

> Where does he dwell? Benevolence. Where is his path? Righteousness. If he dwells in benevolence and follows righteousness, the task of a great person is complete. (*Mengzi* 7A33)[17]

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17 In 4A10, the relationship between *ren* and *yi* is put simply as the following: "Benevolence is people's peaceful abode. Righteousness is people's proper path." (*Mengzi* 4A10)

In Kwong-loi Shun's interpretation, Mencius means that "while *ren* has to do with one's affective concern for others, *yi* has to do with the propriety of one's conduct" (Shun 2015, 185). Shun glosses *yi* as self-commitment:

> *yi* involves an element of reflectivity in that it presupposes one's having a conception of certain ethical standards to which one's way of life should conform. Furthermore, one is motivated by that conception, and is firmly committed not to allow oneself to fall below such standards. (Shun 2015, 185)

Shun's observation here echoes Peter Boodberg's comment about the virtue of *yi*, comparing it to the Latin *proprius*, "covering the connotations 'not common with others' (that is, *our* own), 'personal,' 'characteristic,' 'appropriate,' 'constant'" (Boodberg 1953, 331). Indeed, *yi* as a virtue with sacrificial import carries a strong sense of personal integrity and an uncompromisingly clear boundary about what is right that can come into conflict with other virtues.[18]

What is unique about the sacrificialist Mencius is that this Mencius is acutely aware of the incommensurability between different desirable goods, i.e., fish and bear paws, life and righteousness, and between different domains, i.e., the familial versus the political. In fact, a significant portion of Mencius' moral philosophy is built on such incommensurability. This Mencius highlights two kinds of conflicts: the conflict among desirable goods (e.g., life vs. righteousness) and that between the familial and the political (e.g., *xiao* vs. *ren*). When confronted with such a dilemma, this radical Mencius does *not* try to reconcile the intractable conflict between desirable goods and domains. Rather, he chooses righteousness over life, familial attachment over political obligation. In this connection, two kinds of sacrifices are highlighted in the text: one is to sacrifice one's life in order to uphold what is right (*shesheng quyi* 舍生取義 or *yishen xundao* 以身殉道) as we have discussed above, and the other is to give up one's

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18 Shun insightfully discerns a problematic redirection of one's attention toward oneself in an ethical context as "ethical self-indulgence." (2015, 191ff)

personal ambition ("to give up the world" *qitianxia* 棄天下) to save family, prominently featured in the hypothetical case of Shun, when there is a conflict between the familial and the political obligations.

4. Mencius: the Extensionist vs. the Sacrificialist

The extensionist and the sacrificialist strands of the Mencian thought are often at variance with each other. The extensionist focuses on the cultivation of one's moral inclinations and the extension of such moral sentiments to encompassing all in the world. It highlights a process and organic view of moral cultivation, with ubiquitous agricultural metaphors, and emphasizes the intrinsic connection between a moral agent and those around them. The extensionist Mencius promotes two methods of cultivation, namely extension and sharing: a person cultivates one's virtues by extending one's heartmind that cannot bear the suffering of others to the benevolent care of others and by sharing what one enjoys with others.

Importantly, the extensionist Mencius sees congruity between the familial and the political through the practices of extension and sharing, on the assumption of harmony among desirable goods. Indeed, this Mencius believes that all the desirable goods can be retained and shared without any loss. He maintains a compatibilist position when it comes to desirable goods, material as well as moral. The extensionist Mencius does not foreground conflicts among moral goods and seems to take those moral goods to be a harmonious and organic whole. The famous Mencian expression of oneness with the world (2A2)—an almost mystical experience of being carried over by the flood-like moral energy—and knowing Heaven through one's heartmind within that oneness (7A1) is the ultimate expression of the extensionist Mencius that is all-encompassing.

This extensionist Mencius is in line with the normative Confucian paradigm that sees a smooth transition from the personal, the familial, to the political famously laid out in the *Great Learning* as we have seen earlier. This paradigm assumes a seamless transition among these domains in that personal virtues can bring about a harmonious

family, which in turn can lead to a well-governed state, and eventually a peaceful and just world. Such a paradigm is operative in Mencius' message to various kings. That is, even though the rulers are not yet sage-kings their naturally-endowed moral sentiments can still allow them to govern benevolently.

However, the Shun narrative in the text challenges the assumption of contiguity and continuum among the personal, the familial, and the political domains. The tension between the two Mencius is most palpable in the hypothetical case of Shun's handling of his father's crime. This is where the tension between the familial virtue of filial piety and the political virtue of benevolence is on most dramatic display. The two kinds of virtues are clearly not aligned in such a way that both can be retained in an ideal course of action. In Mencius' mind, when faced with the scenario that his father commits a crime, Shun would not use his power as a ruler to obstruct the prosecution of his father. Nor would he simply surrender his father to the authority. Instead, Shun would choose to abdicate his throne and take his father to a faraway place in order to save the latter from being prosecuted. That is, the radical Mencius embraces the necessity for sacrifice rather than arguing for the retention of all the goods as his conversations with various rulers demonstrate.[19]

In so doing, Mencius seems to suggest that there is no automatic transferability of virtues between the personal, the familial, and the political in that one's personal virtue does not necessarily lead to a harmonious family relationship and that the familial disharmony of the ruler does not have to translate into political chaos. Rather, what is required when there is a rupture between those domains is sacrifice, personal and/or political. This is very much contrary to the *XQZP* paradigm which enshrines a compatibilist optimism among desirable goods and values.

In light of our discussion of the two Menciuses, we can see more clearly that the Mencian critique of the Mohist view is conducted

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[19] As Ivanhoe and an anonymous reviewer point out to me, Shun's abdication in order to save his father is only a hypothetical case, not a real one. However, the role it plays in Mencius' thought is not much different from a "real" case.

from the perspective of the radical Mencius. From such a perspective, the familial virtue of filial piety and the political virtue of impartial care are ultimately incommensurable when there is a conflict of obligations to the family and to the state. It is from this perspective that Mencius criticizes the Mohists who do not adequately acknowledge the tension between the familial and the political. In fact, the Mohist might not even recognize the private-public distinction so cherished by Mencius in the latter's effort to shield the familial from the encroachment of the political.

The extensionist Mencius is primarily the one who carries out conversations with various rulers in order to convince them to adopt the ideal of benevolent governance.[20] The emphasis in those conversations is that the king already has what it takes to be a benevolent ruler *without having to make any sacrifice.* Given his audience, i.e., the king himself, the extensionist approach makes perfect sense. This has been treated as the normative Mencius. By contrast, the sacrificialist Mencius is aiming at the ideal of moral perfection when conflicts arise between moral goods. His audience in the second case is committed Confucian followers who devote their lives to the cause of righteousness through self-sacrifice if necessary.

5. The Ambivalence of the Familial in the Mencian Political Thought

One way to look at Mencius' struggle is to point out that he is never really able to reconcile the conflict between the familial and the political when push comes to shove and that this renders his project hopelessly incoherent due to the apparent tension involved.[21] However, I would like present what I consider a more charitable and accommodating interpretation Mencius' moral-political philosophy concerning

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[20] The notable exception is *Mencius* 1A1 wherein Mencius warns the king of the dire consequences of obsessing over benefit or profit in governing a state and argues that the king should reorient himself to the perspective of what is right.

[21] Hansen is a famous representative of such a stance.

the tension between the familial and the political. My argument is this: first, the familial virtues should not be regarded only as the means to the cultivation of political virtues, and as such, the familial domain is not just the link between the personal and the political in Mencius' thought. Rather, the familial domain is an end in itself that parallels, or can even eclipse, the political. Second, in order to deal with the often irreconcilable tension between the two, Mencius, in significant parts–but not all–of his thought, decides to insulate the familial domain from the *political* discourse while trying to preserve a special space for the familial in his moral discourse. This means that Mencius has a rather clear-eyed view of the complicated role family plays in our moral and political lives. Unlike Confucius who thinks that the familial is itself political when he famously claims that "in being a filial son and good brother one is already participating in government" (*Analects* 2.21), Mencius sees a profound dis-analogy, or even incommensurability, between the two domains.

5.1. Dis-analogy between the Familial and the Political

If the Mencian project is indeed grounded in his articulation of human nature, as has been the scholarly consensus, it is worth pointing out that human nature encompasses the familial and the political dimensions but that the relationship between the two aspects are rather complicated in Mencius' thought. Mencius is not willing to give up either dimension, which would be tantamount to losing our humanity, conflicted as it is. This means that Mencius regards both the familial and the political as ends in themselves, following their own norms and dynamics, instead of treating the former only as a training ground for the latter. For Mencius, the relationship between the familial virtues and the political virtues is not a matter of simply extending the former to accomplish the latter. That is, in Mencius' mind, the familial is at least as much, quite often more, of an end in one's moral cultivation than the political. Consequently, one's filial sentiment can never be fully extended to other people's kin and we would, and should, never treat other people's children the same way we treat our own.

The special status of the father, distinct from the monarch, is clearly demonstrated in the different ways Mencius addresses the abuse by the father versus that by the ruler. Mencius would never tolerate the killing of one's father, however abusive the father might be toward his own children, evident in the narrative about Shun. This is in sharp contrast with his discussion about the killing of a tyrannical ruler (1B8). That is, Mencius allows the killing of a tyrannical king by dismissing the king as unworthy of the title king, but he would never entertain a similar justification in the killing of one's father. This means that there is fundamental dis-analogy between the familial and the political domains, unlike Confucius for whom a father is not a father if he does not provide for his children and educate them. Shun's story demonstrates that for Mencius a father is always a father no matter how abusive he is. Apparently, rectification of names only applies to the political domain, not to the familial domain, in Mencian thought, unlike in the *Analects*. For Mencius, filial piety is absolute whereas the political obligation to one's ruler is conditional such that the killing of a tyrant can be justified in a way the killing of a father can never be. The Shun narrative is key to the Mencian absolutist position on filial piety.

Significantly, Mencius elevates familial virtues as the potential rival of political virtues with the former playing a potentially disruptive role in the demonstration of the latter within the Mencian project. For Mencius, the familial domain is where the seed of humanity is nurtured and expressed, but its political relevance and impact are rather ambivalent and should be carefully managed. Therefore, Mencius insists that one's familial attachment is never and should never be outgrown as it defines us as humans and preserves our very humanity while, on the other hand, one's familial relationship is not necessarily indicative of the state of affairs of a polity under one's rule. Both aspects are clearly demonstrated in the case of Shun. That is, according to Mencius, familial attachment is one of the core expressions that define us as humans; on the other hand, the universalist sentiments that transcend familial boundary, like the heartmind that cannot bear the suffering of others, etc., also define us as humans. Although these two kinds of sentiment often align with each

other, they can also come into conflict as the Shun narrative power-
fully demonstrates.

5.2. Conflict among Virtues

Therefore, contrary to our established understanding of Mencius,
the picture of what is a virtuous human being portrayed by Mencius
is actually a conflicted one. In his attempt to solve, or at least alle-
viate, the tension involved, Mencius seeks to reserve a space for the
familial realm in the political discourse, sometimes at the expense of
the political. This is the price Mencius is willing to pay for maintain-
ing our humanity, conflicted as it is. This means that, for Mencius, at
the core of our humanity there is an irreconcilable conflict between
familial attachments and universal justice. Familial attachment,
however problematic under certain circumstances, should never
been abandoned or transcended, or we would lose an essential part
of being human.

   Being human for Mencius is irreducibly familial *and* political at
the same time. Familial sentiments can never be explained away or
substituted in understanding what constitutes the human. The virtue
that is required when the political and the familial virtues are in con-
flict is personal sacrifice. The imperative of personal sacrifice points to
the fissure between the familial and the political domains, in sharp
contrast with the smooth transition between them painted in the
XQZP ideal.

   Mencius reserves a special place for the familial domain in his
political project by making familial sentiments categorically different
from political virtues. That is, family is not just the medium between
the personal and the political in Mencius' thought, but rather an end
in itself. This means that for Mencius the familial is self-justifying and
self-justified, and that its value in defining us as humans does not lie
in its relevance to the political. This also suggests that if we allow the
political to overwhelm the familial, we run the risk of losing our
humanity, as Mencius' accusation of the Mohist ideal of impartial
care as unfilial points to. Indeed, Mencius' criticism of Mohists being
unfilial can be more fruitfully interpreted as Mencius' rejection of the

latter's *judgement call*, not their arguments with which Mencius actually agrees. What lies at the heart of the Mencian judgement, distinct from the Mohist and Yangist ones, is that Mencius has a keen sense of the *limit* of *universalist* arguments, a conflict he is not keen to resolve.

In *this* respect, Mencius might even be understood as joining the Mohists and the Yangists in questioning the relevance of the familial, to the political discourse, even though the familial is featured much more prominently in Mencius' thought than in the other two. The Mohist, Yangist, and Mencian debate can be summarized in terms of their respective defenses of the realms of the personal, the familial, and the political, with the Mohists exclusively for the political, the Yangists exclusively for the personal, and the Mencians trying to accommodate all three. However, for Mencius the familial and the political are categorically different and neither can subsume the other under it. The insight of Mencian thought is precisely his willingness to dwell in that ambiguity of universalism and partiality, neither of which he is willing to give up in his moral deliberations on what is human. In his political project, Mencius is determined to accommodate both sets of sentiments, regarding them as equally valuable if ultimately incommensurable.

This keen sense of a deep conflict at the root of what it means to be human is in sharp contrast with the Mohists and the Yangists whose positions might be more conceptually coherent but both fail to accommodate the complexity of the human condition, at least from a Mencian perspective. Seen this way, the tension in Mencius' thought in this particular aspect is actually a feature, rather than a flaw, in the Mencian moral-political project.

6. Conclusion: a Mencian Question

In this article, I provide an alternative framework to make better sense of conflicting elements in Mencius' philosophy, especially the tension between the familial and the political virtues. I argue that there are two strands operative in Mencius' philosophy, the extensionist and the sacrificalist. The extensionist Mencius operates on the assumption of congruity among desirable goods, whether mate-

rial or moral, whereas the sacrificalist Mencius is much more clear-eyed about the tension involved among desirable goods as well as that between the familial and the political domains. The article is an attempt to draw our attention to the more radical strand of the Mencian thought that is premised upon sacrificialist virtue of *yi*, as opposed to the extensionist virtue of *ren*. My conclusion is that Mencius considers the familial and the political as connected but ultimately separate and at times incommensurable ends in themselves, revealing a deep-rooted conflict at the seat of humanity Mencius is not willing to explain away. In so doing, Mencius, the sacrificialist, subtly diverges from the Confucian orthodoxy that takes for granted a congruent relationship between familial and political virtues, implying that extending kinship-based sentiments to the political realm can be much more challenging, and often impossible, than normally assumed within the Confucian tradition.

We can now see that at the core of Mencius' project is the following implicit question: if we can abandon even the most sacred and intimate relationship in our lives, i.e., the relationship with our parents, what can possibly constrain us from becoming monsters? This is a Mencian question that defies an easy answer. Mencius's answer is clearly no. If we find it unsatisfying, we need to find other sources within an essentially sentimentalist framework such that it allows for the care of particular humans (or sentient beings more broadly) without falling into the trap of banal universality.

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