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Emotional Attachment and Its Limits: Mengzi, Gaozi and the Guodian Discussions

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Abstract Mengzi maintained that both benevolence (*ren* 仁) and rightness (*yi* 義) are naturally-given in human nature. This view has occupied a dominant place in Confucian intellectual history. In *Mencius* 6A, Mengzi’s interlocutor, Gaozi, contests this view, arguing that rightness is determined by (doing what is fitting, in line with) external circumstances. I discuss here some passages from the excavated Guodian texts, which lend weight to Gaozi’s view. The texts reveal nuanced considerations of relational proximity and its limits, setting up requirements for moral action in scenarios where relational ties do not play a motivational role. I set out *yi*’s complexity in these discussions, highlighting its implications for (i) the *nei-wai* debate; (ii) the notion of *yi* as “rightness,” or doing the right thing; and (iii) how we can understand the connection between virtue and right action in these early Confucian debates. This material from the excavated texts not only provides new perspectives on a longstanding investigation of human nature and morality, it also challenges prevailing views on Warring States Confucian intellectual history.

Keywords Confucian philosophy, Mengzi, Mencius, human nature, Gaozi, Guodian, cultivation, emotions, rightness, *yi* and *ren*

In the well-known debate between Mengzi and Gaozi in *Mencius* 6A, Mengzi maintained that both *ren* and *yi* are naturally-given¹ in human nature. The figure

¹ To say that *ren* and *yi* are naturally-given is not to say that they are fully-developed from the start. I use the phrase “naturally-given” throughout the paper to indicate *where* a particular capacity or resource (*ren* or *yi*) may be found, rather than its final polished state.

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Gaozi² in the *Mencius* presents an opposing view, contending that *ren* is “inner” (*nei* 內) whereas *yi* is “outer” (*wai* 外). On the basis of this distinction (and other considerations in the text), it seems that Mengzi’s conception of *yi* is more appropriately described as “righteousness”—resembling the idea of moral conscience—whereas Gaozi’s *yi* is better understood as “rightness.” In the *Mencius*, Gaozi is not given space to elaborate on or justify his views. However, it seems that nuanced meanings of *yi*, resembling Gaozi’s *nei-wai* characterisation, are expressed in some of the texts in the Guodian collection. For example, *yi* is distinguished from genuine (*qing* 情; or that which is genuine); *yi* is aligned with non-familial relationships and *ren* with familial ones; and *yi* is described as uncompromising (in contrast to *ren*, which is flexible and cohesive). I investigate *yi*’s complexity in these discussions by highlighting three observations. First, the Guodian material provides more support for Gaozi’s view of *yi*, allocating it to the “outer.”³ This points us to the likelihood that Gaozi’s view was more widely shared than its mention in the *Mencius* leads us to believe. For, in the *Mencius*, Gaozi’s views function primarily as a foil, and are used to establish the soundness of Mengzi’s views on human nature. Moreover, the Guodian documents articulate views not represented through the lenses of the *Mencius*’ authors, thus providing a less one-sided picture of the *nei-wai* debates among Mengzi and his contemporaries. Secondly, the Guodian characterisations of *yi* indicate that some of the pre-Qin thinkers were mindful of the limits of emotional attachment in moral motivation. It seems that some of these thinkers appealed to *yi* in cases where affection was deemed insufficient to motivate appropriate other-regarding action. Indeed, some of them viewed it *necessary* to apply *yi* in various domains of interaction, especially with non-specific others, as a counterbalance to *ren*, which operates in relationships with specific others, especially within the family domain. Finally, I reflect on how these

² Little is known of Gaozi’s (ca. 420–350 BCE) background and associations. Kwong-Loi Shun discusses a number of these regarding his philosophical affiliations (Shun 1997, 123ff.). Shun presents a detailed analysis of Mengzi’s discussions with Gaozi (Shu 1997, 87–94).

Graham suggests that a more accurate reading of Gaozi’s position (as we know of Gaozi’s views on human nature primarily via the description of his opponent, Mengzi) may also be gleaned from the “Jie” chapter of the *Guanzi*, a syncretic, Legalist compilation of positions from the late Warring States period through to the early Han (Graham 1967, 15–18). In its 26th chapter, “Jie” 戒, the point is made that “benevolence emerges from the centre, rightness is forged from the outside” (*ren cong zhong chu, yi cong wai zuo* 仁從中出，義從外作) (Trans. by author, from *Guanzi*, “Jie,” 1927, chapter 26). For a translation of the “Jie” chapter, refer to Rickett, 1985, vol. 1, 378–88).

³ These manuscripts, believed to have been composed around the period of the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*, were unearthed in 1993 from a tomb in Guodian, in Hubei Province. The manuscripts, dated to around 300 BCE, include versions of the *Laozi* (Allan and Williams 2000) as well as previously unknown Confucian texts (Cook 2012).

considerations impact on our understanding of relational roles in Confucian philosophy. I suggest that the Guodian discussions are fascinating not least because they demonstrate levels of complexity in Warring States thought about the relevance and place of emotions in a person's interactions with others.

1 Mengzi and Gaozi

In the *Mencius*, Mengzi and Gaozi disagree on a number of issues. Two of their disagreements are: (a) Is moral goodness a naturally-given aspect of human nature (and, if so, how) (*Mencius* 6A1–2)? (b) Is moral rightness (*yi*)⁴ a naturally-given aspect of human nature (*Mencius* 6A4)? In dealing with the first question, the dialogue draws two analogies. The first analogy, allegedly set up by Gaozi himself, is as follows: cups and bowls may be fashioned from willow though cups and bowls are not naturally-given in the willow's existence. Analogously, both benevolence (*ren*) and moral rightness (*yi*) are what human beings *develop into* and are not inherent in human nature. In this argument, Gaozi and Mengzi share the view that *ren* and *yi* are constitutive of human goodness, even though they disagree about the *source* of each of them. Mengzi dismisses this analogy, noting that, if Gaozi were correct, we would need to violate human nature in order to shape it into what is morally pleasing, given that these features are not part of human nature to begin with. Mengzi says:

Can you make it into cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow tree? Can you only make it into cups and bowls by violating and robbing the willow tree? If you must violate and rob the willow tree in order to make it into cups and bowls, must you also violate and rob people in order to make them benevolent and righteous? (Van Norden 2008, 143–44)

孟子曰：“子能順杞柳之性而以爲柶棬乎？將戕賊杞柳而後以爲柶棬也？如將戕賊杞柳而以爲柶棬，則亦將戕賊人以爲仁義與？”

The *Mencius* then presents a second analogy to capture Gaozi's view: human nature is like flowing water, which can be channelled east or west. Mengzi shows

⁴ *Yi* is often translated as “righteousness” or “duty.” Here, I use the word “rightness” for *yi*, which pertains to a sense of doing the right thing. We see in the conversation between Mengzi and Gaozi, for example, that *yi* applies to respect for an older person. For Gaozi, such respect pertains to *any* older person I happen to meet (that is, from circumstances), and does not arise from within the self. “Duty” helps to capture the deontological dimension of *yi* but “rightness” alludes to the notion of right in the clarification by W. D. Ross (2002), which also includes a sense of fit and appropriateness.

his dissatisfaction with this analogy by extending it. He claims that water has a *tendency* to flow downwards:

Now, by striking water and making it leap up, you can cause it to go past your forehead. If you guide it by damming it, you can cause it to remain on a mountaintop. But is this the nature of water?! [No,] it is that way because of the circumstances. That humans can be caused to not be good is due to their natures also being like this. (Van Norden 2008, 144)

今夫水，搏而躍之，可使過顙；激而行之，可使在山。是豈水之性哉？其勢則然也。人之可使爲不善，其性亦猶是也。

Hence, even though human actions and decisions may be influenced by conditions external to the self—that is, like water that is channelled—they are *naturally inclined* towards goodness, and moral cultivation consists in developing these incipient tendencies.⁵ This is a key tenet in Mengzi’s conception of human nature, one that applies universally to all humanity.

As the conversation proceeds, Gaozi isolates various elements of human behaviour, attributing some aspects to human nature (*xing* 性), and then contrasting *yi* with *ren*: “Eating and sex are *xing*. *Ren* is internal, not external. *Yi* is external, not internal” (Nivison 1996, 153–56).⁶ When Mengzi questions him about the contrast between *ren* and *yi*, Gaozi replies with the case of how we are to respond to elders. Gaozi’s reply says, literally,

This (he) is *zhang* thus I *zhang* this (him), (it is) not the case that *zhang* comes from within me (translated by author).

曰：“彼長而我長之，非有長於我也。”

Unpacking this meaningfully, Gaozi’s remark in the same passage may be interpreted as follows:

He is (an) elder and thus I treat him as elder. It is not that elder arises from

⁵ Shun suggests that the *Mencius* might have misinterpreted Gaozi’s position: whereas Gaozi intends both the willow and water analogies to capture how *ren* and *yi* grow out of *xing*, Mengzi (mis)interprets Gaozi’s position. According to Shun, Mengzi understands the willow and the water as analogous to human beings, and holds the *xing* of the willow and the *xing* of the water as analogies for (human) *xing*. This mismatch in their conversation contributes to the tension in their views and has significant impact on how we understand their respective positions (Shun 1997, 87–91).

⁶ 告子曰：“食色，性也。仁，內也，非外也；義，外也，非內也。”

within me.⁷

Gaozi locates the moral imperative—treating the elder *as* elder—as arising from a source external to the self, that is, from the age difference, not the relationship, between the elder and oneself. I interpret this to mean that respect for an elder is required simply because it is the right thing to do and not because the disposition or capacity or desire arises from within an individual.⁸ We presume that Gaozi presents the case of “elder” as an example of *yi*. If this is so, then *yi* might approximate to the idea of doing the right thing, whereby *zhang* is a case of doing the right thing by an elder—*any* elder one happens to meet. Yet, there is lack of clarity on a number of fronts. Is *zhang* just an example, or a paradigmatic instantiation, of *yi*? This question is important as we wonder whether, in Gaozi’s scheme, *zhang* is the only instance of doing the right thing, or whether there are other instances of *yi*. For example, is a person’s response to an official of a higher, or a lower, status also an example of *yi*? Clarity on these issues would enable a fuller understanding of *yi*. As we will see below, some of the Guodian passages provide more nuances on the nature of *yi* in the Warring States period.

As the conversation continues in the *Mencius*, Mengzi asks specifically about the relation between *yi* and *zhang*, focusing on whether *yi* relates to action, or to agency:

Moreover, do you say that to *zhang* is *yi*, or that he who *zhang-s* someone is *yi*? (trans. by author; see the translation by Nivison 1996, 157, following Graham).

且謂長者義乎?長之者義乎?

In other words, does the *act* of *zhang* constitute *yi*, or do we call the *person* who carries out *zhang*-acts, *yi*? Is *zhang* about (right) action or (virtuous) agency?

⁷ There are three occurrences of *zhang* in Gaozi’s response, all of them syntactically and semantically distinct. The first refers to “elder” in nominal form, as in “This is an elder.” The second *zhang* is a verb, capturing my interactions with the elder: “I *treat* (X) as elder.” The third is the most interesting use of *zhang*, and it could potentially be interpreted in two ways. First, Gaozi says, “It is not that *zhang* arises from (within) me.” *Zhang* may be understood as a predicate, as in “an *older* person.” Secondly and alternatively, *zhang* may be treated as a disposition (which would indicate Gaozi’s agreement with Mencius on this point). Whether as predicate or disposition, for Gaozi, *neither* arises from within himself. The moral force of *zhang* arises by virtue of the *circumstances* where, in this particular case, the other person just happens to be older than Gaozi. Even if *zhang* were interpreted as a disposition, it is one that arises in response to external circumstances (that is, encounter with *any* older person). From Gaozi’s point of view, this circumstantial feature nevertheless has normative implications.

⁸ Gaozi in the *Mencius* does not fill out his picture of which elements of morality might arise from within him (*yi wo* 於我). I list these possibilities but they are not exhaustive.

The issue here for Mengzi concerns where the standard of *yi*, rightness, is located: the act, or the actor.⁹ In a passage elsewhere in the *Mencius*, Mengzi points out that the sage, Shun, acted *from ren-yi*; he did not (have to) bring his actions in line with *ren-yi* (*Mencius* 4B19).¹⁰ This passage suggests that the *Mencius* prioritises agency rather than action in the cases of both *ren* and *yi*. If we follow this line of reasoning, does Gaozi apply the agency-act distinction to *ren* and *yi*? That is, does he view *ren* as a moral notion applicable to agency, with *yi* applying to action? These questions about Mencius and Gaozi on action and agency are too complex to resolve in a determinate way here. However, Gaozi's response to Mengzi below suggests that such a distinction is possible. Gaozi brings in another example, that of love for one's brother, to demonstrate how *zhang* arises from a source external to the self. Gaozi says,

This is my younger brother, hence I love him. [That is] the Qin person's younger brother, hence it is not the case that I love him.

It is from me that there is enjoyment (of loving my brother), therefore I say it is from the inside (*nei*).

(With regard to) The elder from Chu, as well as the elder from (among) my people, it is from their (being) elder [or my treating them as elder] from which I derive pleasure. Therefore, I say this is from the outside (*wai*). (translated by author)

曰：“吾弟則愛之，秦人之弟則不愛也，是以我為悅者也故謂之內。

長楚人之長，亦長吾之長，是以長為悅者也，故謂之外也。”

Gaozi appeals to feelings *qua* the source of his enjoyment (*yue* 悅), to answer Mengzi's question. One way to understand Gaozi's distinction between *nei* and *wai* is that, in the case of *zhang* (aligned with *wai*), there is no joy that springs from the person himself in carrying out these tasks or roles. Hence, the correct measure of rightness for treating an elder *as an elder* is determined by the circumstances, not least by the fact that the agent is younger than the recipient, and unrelated to him or her. In other words, Gaozi accepts that the term elder, *zhang*, denotes a relation between two people. However, he also emphasises that this relation is not a relationship but rather is circumstantial: no matter which elder, whether from my village or the next, I ought to treat him with respect due

⁹ In his translation of this passage in the *Mencius*, Nivison discusses this ambiguity in *yi* (Nivison 1996, 53). Refer also to Robert Eno's articulation of this point, accessed at <http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Mengzi.pdf>

¹⁰ 孟子曰：“...舜明於庶物，察於人倫，由仁義行，非行仁義也。”

to elders. In doing so, he appeals to standards that are not located within human nature, a point which the *Mencius* implicitly rejects by challenging Gaozi's position. For Gaozi, the enjoyment in taking right action (in relation to *yi*-type actions) arises from an external source.^{11, 12} Here, in this discussion, we have a preliminary distinction of *nei*- and *wai*-type relationships made on the basis of (a) the nature of the relationship, and (b) the source of a person's enjoyment in undertaking the task, or (in being) the type of person who undertakes such a task.

The significance of the standoff between Gaozi and Mengzi extends beyond the debate in the *Mencius*: debates in the course of Chinese intellectual history have predominantly taken the side of Mengzi, especially in light of his views on human nature and its resources for moral goodness. Prior to the unearthed Guodian texts, the dominant view in scholarly literature was to take Gaozi's view as an interesting but minority position.¹³ However, the texts reveal rich and

¹¹ The conversation in the *Mencius* in fact continues, with two different actors, Meng Jizi (a disciple of Gaozi) and Gongduzi (Mengzi's follower). Gongduzi defends Mengzi's view that *yi* is internal, claiming that *yi* is (internally) motivated by a sense of respect (*jing* 敬). Meng Jizi launches a counter-example to this scenario, arguing that one should serve wine first to a(n older) villager. That we should do so, he argues, draws not on respect but on *zhang*. That is, there must be something else, *external*, that requires one to serve the villager first (See Robert Eno <http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Mengzi.pdf>)

As the debate continues, Gongduzi manages to manipulate Meng Jizi, ultimately getting him to agree that almost all human feelings, desires and preferences are "external." Gongduzi says, "In winter we drink things hot, in summer we drink things cold; and so, on your principle, eating and drinking also depend on what is external!" Mengjizi's view is that, ordinarily, standards may be subject to situational fluctuations. But, in doing so, he agrees to the suggestion that *even jing* is external: sure, respect *may* be determined by the timing or situation.

This leads to a problem then for the position held by Meng Jizi and Gaozi: What, then, is left "internally"? Recall that for Gaozi, *ren* is internal and *yi* external. This is effectively a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Yet, in fact, this impasse discredits not just Gaozi's position. The conversation assumes that the brother deserves greater respect, but that the villager should be served first. However, the agreement seems to be driven by intuitions based on judgment on a case-by-case basis, an assumption that the *Mencius* needs to justify, but has not done so, hence begging the question about the original goodness of humanity.

¹² Kim-Chong Chong challenges the widely held view that this is the key difference between Mengzi and Gaozi on *nei* and *wai*. Chong argues that Mengzi did not succeed in refuting Gaozi, for Mengzi's discussion on internality was focused on the human potential for developing the (positive) possibilities of relationships. By contrast, Gaozi sees the assumption of inherent human goodness as a "sociocultural construct" (Chong 2002, 120).

¹³ This tendency unfortunately fails to locate the *nei-wai* debate more fully in its intellectual context. For example, Wang Bo notes that the *Guanzi* holds a view that aligns closely with that expressed by Gaozi (see note 2). The Mohist *Canons* ("Jing Xia" 经下, "Jing Shuo Xia" 经说下) also cover the topic of *ren-yi* in relation to the *nei-wai* matter, even if its discussion is vague (2004, 29–34).

fascinating details on how the notion *yi* stands in relation to *ren*. Discussions in some of these texts draw out different ways in which particular moral standards apply within kinship domains and outside the family, particularly in consideration of whether there were blood ties. Some of these discussions touch on the limits of emotional attachment, proposing that *yi*, rightness, should apply where feelings for others do not have a role in moral motivation. We now turn to examine passages from some of these texts.

2 Guodian Discussions of Yi

The Guodian texts incorporate views that span the traditional Confucianist-Daoist divisions. Additionally, they express previously unknown views, articulating nuances and fine distinctions while complicating existing debates on thinkers, lineages and extant texts. In relation to the understanding of *yi* discussed so far, some take the side of the view expressed by Mengzi: the *Cheng Zhi* 成之, for example, discusses how the cultivated person (*junzi*) looks within himself for moral resources.¹⁴ However, other texts in the collection express views that seem to be more closely aligned with those of Gaozi, and Mengzi's other significant opponent on human nature, Xunzi.¹⁵ These latter views are the primary focus in this section.

¹⁴ The phrase “求諸己” (*qiu zhu ji*) is found in strips 7–18 of the *Cheng zhi*, as well as in *Mencius* 4A4 and *Analects* 15.21. Another Guodian text, the *Wu xing*, also holds that moral conduct ensues from benevolence (*ren*) which originates from “within”—a theme that is characteristically Mencian (Cook 2012, 469–78).

Strips 7–18: “Thus it is deeply that the noble man seeks it within himself. If one does not seek something in its roots but merely tackles it in its branches, he will not attain it” (Strips 7–18, Cook 2012, 602–03; 615–21).

See also Strips 1–3: “Therefore, in establishing the people, the noble man goes before them, having first embraced goodness. He is conscientious and careful, abiding by wisdom; these are internal” (trans. by author).

(故)君子之立(蒞)民也,身(服)善以先之,敬(慎)以(守)知,其所(在)者內(矣). Another translation of this passage, by Scott Cook, reads as follows: “Thus in overseeing the people, the noble man presides before them having first submitted to goodness himself, and looks after them with diligence and conscientiousness; the locus of his [virtue] is internal” (Cook 2012, 616–17).

¹⁵ Although he drew on Confucian themes including *yi*, *li* (ritual) and *zhi* (knowledge, understanding), Xunzi opposed Mengzi on the issue of what was available for cultivating oneself. More closely aligned to the views of Gaozi (but yet noticeably different from the latter), Xunzi argued that the resources for moral cultivation lay outside of human nature, hence warranting socio-political institutions that could enhance human motivations and practices.

Xing Zi Ming Chu 性自命出. The *Xing Zi Ming Chu* makes a clear distinction between what is internal and what external (*nei-wai*), making the case that *yi* stands in contrast with what is genuine:

Those who know (what is) genuine have the ability to bring them forth (from within); those who know *yi* have the ability to bring it within. (Strips 1–5, my translation)

(知)(情)者能出之，(知)(義)者能內之。¹⁶

The term *qing* 情, translated “genuine” here, may also have the meaning of “feelings.” In the Warring States debates, both senses of the term may be conflated.^{17, 18} This has the effect of suggesting that feelings are a “genuine” or natural part of human nature. Interestingly, the *Xing Zi Ming Chu* holds the view that feelings are a genuine part of human nature; there are variations across the Guodian corpus concerning which emotions are constitutive of *qing* (Chen 2010, 38–39).

Whichever way we understand *qing* in this *Xing Zi Ming Chu* passage, *yi* stands in contrast to it. Unlike what is genuine, or unlike the case of feelings, *yi* has to be brought in from without. The emphasis on the ability (*neng* 能) of a person to bring *yi* within (*nei*) sits in contrast to the ability to bring forth what is genuine, or one’s feelings. These views on applying one’s abilities in order to shape the moral self in view of particular social, cultural and political aims carry the hallmarks of texts classified as “Confucian.” The *Xing Zi Ming Chu* discussions articulate, in particular, the implementation of external measures to further develop and “complete” human nature, providing details on what

¹⁶ Alternative translation: “Those who know the affections can bring it forth, while those who know propriety can instill it” (Cook 2002, 699–700).

¹⁷ For example, in *Mencius* 6A6, *qing* provides the impetus for a person to practise what is good (*shan* 善). Here are two translations, the first that translates *qing* as “feeling,” and the second as “genuine.”

“From the feelings [*qing*] proper to it, [human nature] is constituted for the practice of what is good” (Legge 1991, 402; annotations by author). “乃若其情，則可以為善矣，乃所謂善也。”

If we understand *qing* as “genuine,” *Mencius* 6A.6 may be translated as: “As for what they are[,] inherently, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good” (Van Norden 2008, 149; annotation by author).

¹⁸ Angus Graham explains the sense of *qing* as “genuine” in relation to Aristotle’s essence: “The *qing* of X is what makes it a genuine X, what every X has and without which would not be an X; in this usage *qing* is surprisingly close to the Aristotelian ‘essence’” (Graham 1967, 262). Shun Kwong-Loi proposes an account of *qing* that is more sensitive to the *Mencius* as it avoids the appeal to Aristotelian essence. Shun proposes that *qing* is “the way things really are, [referring to] certain characteristic tendencies of a class of things that obtain of each individual member of that class and reveal what things of that class are really like” (Shun 1997, 215).

motivates, modifies and sharpens it.¹⁹

In addition to the idea of *yi* being brought “within,” Strips 18–22 make an explicit connection between *yi* and ritual propriety (*li*), emphasising that, although they are grounded in feelings, the Latter operate on the basis of *appropriateness*:

Propriety arises from (what is) genuine, yet it also elevates (what is) genuine. In undertaking matters, propriety is tailored according to what is proper for each occasion.

As for the prioritising of first and last, this is the way of rightness. That which lends rhythm to this prioritising is refined patterning. (Author’s translation).²⁰

(禮)(作)於(情)，(又)(與)之也。(當)事因方而(制)之。

其先後之(敘/序)，則(義)(道)也。或(敘/序)爲之(節)，則(文)也。

In these bamboo strips, a line is drawn between propriety and rightness and, together with what is expressed in Strips 1–5 (above), we see how *yi*, from

¹⁹ Other strips in the *Xing Zi Ming Chu* express the methods of cultivation in rich detail:

“What moves [human] nature are [external] things.

What runs contrary to human nature is pleasure (gratification).

What tempers human nature is tradition.

What sharpens human nature is *yi*.

Human nature is brought forth by skill/art; it is cultivated through practice, and it grows through (following/taking) [proper] ways” (Strips 10–12; author’s translation).

反(動)(性)者，(物)也；(逆)(性)者，(悅)也；室(砥/節)(性)者，(故)也；(礪)(性)者，(義)也；出(性)者，(藝)也；(養)(性)者，(習)也；長(性)者，(道)也。

Alternative translation: “In general, [external] things are what motivate [human] nature, gratification is what receives human nature, traditions are what temper human nature, propriety is what sharpens human nature, cultivation is what brings human nature forth, practices are what nurture human nature, and [proper] ways (*dao*) are what give human nature growth” (Cook 2012, 705–06).

In this set of strips, the strategies for cultivating human nature, *xing*, are varied. The strips discuss details of what motivates, runs against and sharpens *xing*. Interestingly, in these passages, *yi* is used to shape *xing*. The idea that *xing* should be shaped sounds very similar to one element of Gaozi’s view, that is, that cultivation is analogous to shaping willow into cups and bowls (*Mencius* 6A1). Mengzi rebuts this view by pointing out that it sounds counter-intuitive to violate the nature (*xing*) of the willow in order to cultivate it. From this angle, the *Xing Zi Ming Chu*’s idea of using *yi* to shape *xing* could just as well be a target of Mengzi’s criticism of cultivation, (perhaps wrongly) conceived as the violation of one’s original nature (see the discussion in note 5).

²⁰ Alternative translation: “Ritual arises from the affections, but also elevates them. It is tailored in accordance with what is proper for each occasion. As for its prioritizing of first and last, this is the way of propriety. There is that which lends rhythm to this prioritizing, and this is refined patterning” (Cook 2012, 712–15).

without, plays an important role in human action.²¹ However, unlike the conversation in the *Mencius*, the contrast in these strips is not between *ren* and *yi* but between *li* (propriety) and *yi*. Importantly, the passage here also espouses a Confucian aesthetic whereby right practice of ritual has an indispensable place in human relationality.

Liu De 六德. The language in the *Liu de* is crisp, though seemingly simplistic in the way it characterises the distinction between *ren* and *yi*, in terms of the “internal” and the “external,” respectively:

Ren is internal. *Yi* is external. Ritual and music are common to both.

Internal positions are: father, son, husband. External positions are ruler, minister, wife.

Within the gates, order is based on kindness holding check over *yi*. Outside the gates, order is based on *yi* censoring kindness.

(The characteristic of) *ren* is gentle and cohesive; (the characteristic of) *yi* is firm and binding.

Ren is flexible and receptive, *yi* is strong, uncompromising and straightforward.²²

(仁), 內也。(義), 外也。禮樂, 共也。內(位), 父、子、夫也; 外(位), 君、臣、婦也。

門內之(治)(恩)(弇)(義), 門外之(治)(義)斬(恩)。

(仁)(類)(柔)而(束), (義)(類)(持)而(絕); (仁)(柔)而(納), (義)強(剛)而(簡)。(Strips 26–33; translated by author)

Ren operates within domestic contexts, defined by the key relationships of father, son and husband. Selection of which role-relationships qualify as “inner” is based on socio-cultural norms and not strictly on blood ties. Lacking in parity is the role of wife (as contrasted with that of husband), which is characterised as “external.” Together with ruler and minister role-relationships, a man’s interactions with his wife are guided by *yi*. As the standard that holds for interactions with others “outside the gate,” *yi* is described as unyielding and straightforward. Although the positions of “husband” and “wife” may be

²¹ The prioritisation of first and last figures in a significant way in the conversation between Meng Jizi and Gongduzi, in their discussion of whom should be served wine first. Refer to the discussion in note 11.

²² Alternative translation: “Humanity is [a matter of the] internal, propriety is [a matter of the] external, and ritual and music are [matters] in common [to both]. The internal positions are father, son and husband; the external positions are ruler, minister, and wife.

In the order within the [family] gates, goodwill holds check over propriety; in the order beyond the [family] gates, propriety cuts short goodwill. The manner of humanity is flexible and cohesive; the manner of propriety is steadfast and uncompromising. Humanity is flexible and harbors lenience; propriety is resolute and straightforward” (Cook 2012, 786–92).

understood in terms of role differentiation, the differential treatment recommended by *ren* and *yi* casts a poor light on Confucian patriarchy.

The *ren-yi* dichotomy in the *Liu de* is based not on motivational elements (for example, moral feelings toward particular others) as expressed in Gaozi's view and in the *Xing Zi Ming Chu*. The lines are drawn here strictly on the basis of relational roles, using the metaphor of the gates to distinguish *nei* from *wai*. This move imbues particular relationships with moral content, which means that these relationships *in themselves* carry the grounds for appropriate action. We should note that the *Mencius* also sets out different relationships as the justification for different moral standards: "between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity" (3A4; trans. Legge).²³ In the final section, I will explore in greater detail how Mengzi draws the lines between different types of relationships. Suffice to note for now, however, that the *Liu de* specifically sets up mutual exclusivity between *ren* and *yi*, a view which is contrary to Mengzi's.²⁴

Yucong 1 語叢一. Among the sections of the Guodian texts considered here, the *Yucong* is especially interesting as some of its phrases seem to align closely with views represented as Gaozi's (in the *Mencius*).²⁵ One of the phrases in *Yucong* 1 makes an explicit distinction between *ren* and *yi*:

Ren is born from humanity, *yi* is born from *dao*. One is born from the internal, the other is born from without. (Strips 22–23)

(仁)生於人, (義)生於道。或生於內, 或生於外。²⁶

While drawing a dichotomy between *ren* and *yi*, this statement is fairly consistent with the views expressed in the *Xing zi ming chu* and the *Liu de*. Yet, there is an important difference: *Yucong* 1, like the *Mencius*' Gaozi, makes a distinction

²³ 父子有親, 君臣有義, 夫婦有別, 長幼有序, 朋友有信。

²⁴ Scott Cook suggests in light of these sentiments in the *Liu de* that Gaozi is a straw person for Mengzi. He argues that, in fact, the *nei-wai* distinction for Gaozi is specifically characterised by the blood ties elaborated on here, in the *Liu de*: "Nonetheless, it is also clear that Gaozi is serving here primarily as a straw man for Mengzi's own arguments, and that—as Paul Goldin has noted—his true position on the statement that the latter attributes to him may very well have been much closer to, if not identical with, the type of distinction between internal and external relations discussed in 'Liu de'" (Cook 2012, 761). See also Goldin 2000, 139.

²⁵ Paul Goldin proposes that some parts of the Guodian manuscripts, such as the *Yucong*, were written by those associated with Gaozi or who were sympathetic to his views (Goldin 2000, 139).

²⁶ Alternative translation: "Humanity [*ren*] is born from mankind; propriety [*yi*] is born from the Way. One is born from within; the other is born from without" (Cook 2012, 825).

between *ren* and *yi* on the basis of *nei-wai*. On the other hand, however, it claims that *yi* arises from *dao*. This prompts us to ask the question: Are there two *independent* moral grounds, one arising from within humanity and the other from outside of it? Does the passage mean to suggest a “*dao*” independent of humanity? Also in this same text, we get in granular detail views of relational proximity among men:

The father is both held close and honoured. Between brothers, there is a proper (way of) closeness. Friends, ruler and minister have no (such) closeness. (Strips 78, 80, 81)

...父, (有)(親)又(有)(尊)。長弟, (親)道也。(友)君臣, (無)(親)也。²⁷

Relational bonds are distinguished on the basis of affection, that is, familial ties (*qin* 親) or the lack thereof. Recall that some of the relationships specified in the *Liu de* are the same as these: father and son as “internal” or “familial” and ruler and minister as “external” or “without familial bonds.” Here, too, friendship belongs “outside.” Yet, while the *Liu de* places the wife as “external” in contrast to the husband as “internal,” in the *Yucong* 1, relationships with or between females are conspicuously absent.

Additionally, in the *Yucong* 1, there is a fascinating aspect of relational ties which is rare, or perhaps even not mentioned, in extant texts:

Ruler and minister and friends are matters in which one can choose. (Strip 87)
君臣、朋友, 其(擇)者也。²⁸

This statement, intriguingly, presents the notion of *choice* in certain relationships. A person may select his friends but, clearly, not his blood ties. Specific relational emotions undergird particular relationships and, furthermore, one cannot opt out of them. If we bring together the logic of these statements in the *Yucong* 1, do we arrive at a view of *ren* and *yi* as two distinct sources of moral justification, one grounded in humanity and the other in doctrine (*dao*)? And, may we align the relationships marked by familial affection (ones from which a person may not seek relief from) with *ren*, and non-familial relationships, with *yi*? Are we seeing the differentiation of relationships on the basis of (appropriate) feelings? Is the *Yucong* 1 *recognising* that there are limits to human feelings for specific others? Does this also mean that, for

²⁷ Alternative translation: “... the father is both held close and honored. Elder and younger brothers [represent] the way of affinity (/closeness). Friends, ruler, and minister have no [such] affinity” (Cook 2012, 826).

²⁸ Alternative translation: “Ruler and minister and friends are matters in which one has a choice” (Cook 2012, 826).

the author(s) of *Yucong* 1, a view such as Mengzi's, that the sources of morality are based entirely on what sprouts from within human nature, is too naïve?

These sample passages from the Guodian texts present a varied picture of moral standards that apply inside and outside of specific relational contexts. A quick overview suggests that they are keenly aware of particular relationships based on some consideration of blood and familial ties or roles and their associated (moral) feelings. These considerations delineate appropriate feelings and actions according to relational proximity. Boundaries are drawn at relationships with particular others and, in the case of generalised relationships (with a superior or with an elder), a different standard, *yi*, from an *external* source, seems to be the guiding principle. What do these investigations amount to? In the final three sections of this paper, I consider the implications of these practicalities raised in some of the Guodian texts for (i) the Gaozi-Mengzi debate; (ii) the question of moral resources; and (iii) early Confucian debates on relationships and doing the right thing.

3 *Yi* in the Guodian Passages, and the Gaozi-Mengzi Debate

The debate between Gaozi and Mengzi highlights different views on *ren* and *yi*. Mengzi holds both as naturally-given in human nature, which for him also means that they both “arise” from within humanity. From the discussions in *Mencius* 2A6, it seems that, together with *li* (propriety) and *zhi* (understanding), both *ren* and *yi* have their sources in human nature (*xing*), even though they need to be developed through life. How do Gaozi's views differ? Gaozi maintains a fundamental distinction between relationships that involve particular others (e.g. father, son) and those that involve non-specific others (e.g. elder). That standards for interactions with non-specific others do not necessarily fall within the ambit of close emotional ties seems to be a fairly popular view during the Warring States period (Chen 2017; Luo 1999).²⁹ To some extent, the *Mencius* distinguishes between *ren* and *yi* but nevertheless maintains that they arise from the *one* source (see, for example, 7A15). For Gaozi and some of the Guodian authors, the *moral standards or principles for relating to* non-specific others are determined by circumstance (for example, whether this visitor happens to be an elder). The Guodian texts examined here stand with Gaozi, but they also provide glimpses into the complexity of *nei-wai* discussions during the Warring States period. They diversify the lines of argument in the Confucian debates on human nature. On one understanding of the Mengzi-Gaozi

²⁹ The interpretation I offer here is different from that offered by Luo (1999). Luo argues that the Guodian discussions on *ren-yi* broaden our conceptions of the Confucian debate. The way this happens, Luo argues, is that we might now see *ren* and *yi* as working cooperatively with each other, with *yi* curtailing (*cai duan* 裁斷) *ren* where necessary (Luo 1999, 28).

debate, in the *Mencius*, Gaozi holds the defensive line, with his view serving primarily as the background against which Mengzi establishes his thesis. However, having seen that some of the Guodian texts align more closely with the views of Gaozi, could it be that *Mencius* 6A6 was holding a defensive position? Was the *Mencius* having to justify its minority position—that what springs from humanity is, with nurturing, sufficient for moral life?

The nuanced views in the Guodian also yield a deeper understanding of what the *Mencius* might have meant by “*yi*” and why it was important for this Confucian text that both *ren* and *yi* are thought to be naturally-given. Here, it is important to note that the *Mencius* never characterises Mengzi’s own views in terms of “*nei*” and “*wai*.” Could this signify that the *Mencius* never saw its own view as being part of the *nei-wai* debate? And could it be that *yi* in the *Mencius* has a different meaning from *yi* in the Guodian sections? In contemporary discussions, *yi* in the *Mencius* has been interpreted in a number of ways, including as the motivation to do the right thing, or a person’s dispositions (in a general sense), or dispositions that are closely intertwined with (moral) knowledge, whereby knowledge of *yi* arises from the activity of the heart-mind (Shun 1997, 94–112). Given that Mengzi views *yi* as internal to humanity, the term “righteousness” perhaps aptly captures his idea of an “inner” moral sense, one that functions in the same way as conscience does. Correspondingly, the Gaozi-Guodian notion of *yi* as arising from a source “external” to the self may be more appropriately translated as “rightness.” To serve wine to an elder first—any elder—is, after all, the right thing to do.

4 Wherein Do Our Moral Resources Lie?

What is the significance of some of the observations in the previous section? As indicated, some contemporary research has focused in particular on the role of motivation in Mengzi’s philosophy as well as the place of the human heart-mind (*xin*) in the ongoing development of a person’s moral life. As I have also suggested, it is a common presupposition within the literature that the *point* of the Gaozi-Mengzi debate in the *Mencius* serves primarily to refine and reiterate Mengzi’s view that “human nature is (originally) good.” Consequently, the Gaozi-Mengzi debate is used to weigh in on discussions of classical Confucian views of human nature, addressing tensions between the *Mencius*’s position and Xunzi’s views on human nature. These debates often focus on the contrast between *conceptions* of human nature and their place within the Confucian intellectual tradition. However, the Guodian passages bring to light more that might have been at stake in the Warring States discussions among the Confucians, and between the Confucians and their opponents.

The Guodian passages provide a sense that there were some shared

expectations about relational norms as well as attempts to set out criteria for appropriate interactions in different relationships. While the Mengzi-Xunzi disagreements might have ostensibly focused on the moral quality of human nature (*xing*), the Gaozi-Mengzi-Guodian discussions suggest that one primary concern that drove the debates was the issue of the moral resources that are, so to speak, to hand—naturally-given in human nature—and those that are not. For example, what kinds of *affect* might spring from the self (*yu wo* 於我)? Are these *sufficient* for motivating appropriate moral behaviours? Gaozi deems there are limitations to love (*ai* 愛) in that it does not extend to those with whom we are not intimately bound in familial relationships. The same is articulated in *Yucong* 1, spelling out the domain within which familial affection (*qin* 親) operates. Importantly, the *Xing zi ming chu* asserts that *ren* does not prioritise first and last (*xian hou* 先後), a task which rightly belongs to the domain of *yi*. Interestingly, *yi* also holds check over kindness (*en* 恩) in interactions “beyond the gate,” the *Liu de* informs us. These delineations are important because they tell us where we might *look* for motivational emotions, and for standards for proper behaviours, in our interactions with others. Indeed, with these views to enrich our understanding of the Gaozi-Mengzi debate, we begin to see that the early Confucian discussions transcended mere quibbles about “original” human nature.³⁰ We begin to see pieces of a more meaningful conversation among thinkers of the time, that effectively amounted to an “enquiry into ethical resources” (Heng 2002, 158) and where to find them.³¹

³⁰ Luo Xinhui proposes that the Guodian *ren-yi* discussions should be understood as part of a Confucian discourse, beginning with the Confucian *Analects* (which placed almost exclusive emphasis on *ren* in contrast to its emphasis on *yi*), the *Mencius* (which gave place to both *ren* and *yi* but which prioritised the former), and the Guodian and other Warring States texts such as the *Mozi*, which opened up the discussion further about *ren* and *yi*, giving each its own place in moral life (1999).

³¹ In *Mencius* 2A2, Mengzi says of Gaozi’s views:

Gaozi said “What you do not get from doctrines do not seek for in your heart. What you do not get from your heart, do not seek for in the *qi*.”

To which Mengzi replied:

“What you do not get from your heart, do not seek for in the *qi*,” is acceptable. “What you do not get from doctrines, do not seek for in your heart,” is unacceptable (*Mencius* 2A2; Van Norden 2008, 37).

There are two related assertions in this statement concerning sources of moral guidance. The first claims that if guidance cannot be found in doctrines, it likewise cannot be found “within” human nature (or within any of its “given” capacities). The second states that if guidance is not found in the heart-mind, it will not be found in *qi* (vitality, energies) either. Mengzi disagrees with the first claim. For Mengzi, guidance *can* be found in the original, naturally-given heart-mind. However, he agrees with the second assertion because he holds that the heart-mind should nurture and command *qi*. Alan Chan offers a fine account of *qi* in different texts of a contemporaneous period. *Qi* in the *Mencius* includes both mental and physical well-being. One’s words and eyes reflect one’s *qi* and a person’s environment can shape his or her *qi*. The place of *qi* in Mengzi’s philosophy and the nuances of different interpretations of this view are meticulously spelt out in Chan 2002, esp. 50–55.

The Guodian classifications draw from lived experience and are unwieldy. They use a range of criteria for drawing distinctions: moral feelings and their functions, and relational proximity and blood ties more specifically, as well as role-based morality. We see no evidence of moral principles being drawn but, rather, discussions about the *criteria* that could inform moral principles. Yet, even with the small sample of views examined in this paper, we are now more attuned to the importance of the *nei-wai* debate about what kinds of moral resources are available to us, and *how* they are available to us (i.e. what kinds of emotions motivate appropriate behaviour toward particular others and whether they might need to be kept in check in interactions with non-specific others, for example).

5 Relationships, Roles, and Doing the Right Thing

Gaozi and the Guodian's authors might be right that there are different sources of motivation, and different standards, to guide our interactions with manifold others. Perhaps, in thinking empirically, they have demonstrated to a certain extent that the *Mencius* is too naïve in assuming that humanity—each individual human being—is him- or herself a sufficient source of moral goodness, waiting to be nurtured. What is the picture we have so far, of these particularities? The Guodian sections articulate varied meanings of *yi*—rightness rather than righteousness—defined on the basis of: fitting responses to others (e.g. *zhang*); role-determined interactions (e.g. minister, friends); and discretion in domain-based interactions (e.g. straightforwardness vs flexibility). As noted previously, these discussions reveal their views on the limits of affection as sources of moral motivation. In the Guodian, in those non-specific relationships where affection is not applicable, moral obligation must be justified *on other, non-self-generated* grounds. On the one hand, like these texts, the *Mencius* recognises that different affect and proprieties hold sway over different relational bonds (*Mencius* 2B2, 3A4). On the other hand, it diverges from these Guodian passages we have seen, in its affirmation that the sources of morality are, at least initially, from within the human person. For Mengzi, these endowed moral resources are *sufficient*, meaning that each person needs look no further to develop morally. By contrast, Gaozi and others are not convinced that what is genuine and given, even if they are altruistic and other-regarding, are adequate sources of moral motivation. For Gaozi, when one encounters an elder, it is the fact of the *elder* that serves as the standard for moral action. The idea of *wai*—external—has two important meanings here. First, doing the right thing by the elder does not derive from personal pleasure or delight. It does not arise from within the self. Secondly, the *obligatoriness* of *zhang* in treating an elder is

justified by the circumstances *external to the self*, in terms of a relationship between *any two people*, one younger in age than the other.

Additionally, the *Liu de*'s specification of being uncompromising and straightforward in interactions outside the (family) gates is particularly striking, as is the *Yucong* 1's mention of choice in relationships. Do these debates not also imply a distinction between relational roles, on the one hand (as the Confucians viewed them), and right action, on the other? The explicit mention of choice in the *Yucong* 1 reminds us of the inescapability of how a self is defined through particular relationships, even though it might be possible to sever dysfunctional relational ties later on in life.

How do the issues raised here impact on two key questions in morality, "How should I live?" and "What ought I to do?" In contemporary discussions in Virtue Ethics, these two questions can direct our gaze in quite different, and sometimes incompatible, directions. Sometimes, good people do the wrong thing and bad people do the right thing, prompting us to ask, in the context of virtue ethics, whether virtue can reliably motivate right action. It seems that a similar question arises in the Mengzi-Confucian conception of ethical life and ethical action: the question "How should I live?" in Confucian philosophy is intimately intertwined with the quality of close personal relationships a person has and how these ultimately play into a flourishing life. The *Mencius*, in particular, has sometimes been understood as suggesting that ethical action follows straightforwardly from how a person conducts his life in handling personal relationships (*Mencius* 1A7).³² In the discussion here, we have encountered some views that stand in contrast to this. Gaozi and some Guodian authors are concerned that the resources and standards required for close personal interactions *will not suffice* for relationships that primarily have a different structure. They recognise that *ren*, a central aspect of close personal relationships, cannot reliably produce right action when relating to non-specific others. Are these thinkers correct in situating at least some moral standards, or resources, external to the self? Perhaps they were more realistic than Mengzi, the paradigmatic Confucian virtue ethicist.

The investigations in this paper raise more questions about the Warring States interchanges than they can possibly resolve—and there is even more to explore in the Guodian. Nevertheless, these reflections have important implications for the Confucian notion of selfhood and morality in comparative philosophical debates, especially for those who seek to defend virtue-ethical accounts of a good life and the place of right action within it. It seems that the Guodian thinkers and Gaozi were less optimistic about human motivations and about affect, in particular, as a general source of moral motivation, than Mengzi was. As such, they seem to have hedged their bets both ways, relying partly on emotion and

³² For discussions on this issue, refer to Wong 2002, Hutton 2002, and McRae 2011.

partly on right action. If we accept this, we would have a more complicated (and more sophisticated) Warring States account of moral life than what we have seen to date in the extant texts.

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