

The Relativity of *Ren* (Humaneness): Re-examining 2A6 and 6A6 of the *Mengzi* from the Perspective of Self-Introspection in Experience

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Abstract

A textual difference exists between 2A6 and 6A6 of the *Mengzi*: In 2A6, the heart-mind of *ceyin* (compassion), *xiuwu* (shame), *cirang* (courtesy and modesty), and *shifei* (moral judgement) are said to be the four “*duan*” (germs) of *ren* (humaneness), *yi* (optimal appropriateness), *li* (observance of the rites), and *zhi* (wisdom), whereas in 6A6, the term “*duan*” is not found. For this reason, some scholars today criticize the interpretation that translates “*duan*” as “starting point”, which implies a substantial difference between the four germs and *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* that apparently does not exist in 6A6. Instead, these scholars prefer another interpretation that takes “*duan*” as an indication of the essential sameness between the four germs and *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* that are originally possessed by a morally perfect heart-mind. This essay re-evaluates these two interpretations. First, it argues that compared to the first, the second interpretation’s argument for a morally perfect heart-mind is less compatible with the nature of Mengzi’s moral philosophy as a teaching that focuses on self-introspection and moral cultivation in experience. Second, this essay reinforces the first interpretation by demonstrating the existence of two different senses of *ren* (as well as *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*) in the *Mengzi*, thus allowing it to coherently suggest that the heart-mind possessing the four germs as innate moral feelings is the same as the “relatively antecedent” *ren*, which is, at the same time, the starting point for developing the “relatively consequent” *ren* that is substantially different from the former.

Keywords: *Mengzi* (*Mencius*), 2A6, 6A6, *xin* (heart/heart-mind), *ren* (humaneness), moral cultivation

Relativnost pojma *ren* (človečnost): ponovna raziskava odsekov 2A6 in 6A6 knjige *Mencij* s perspektive izkušenske samointrospekcije

Izvleček

Med odsekoma 2A6 in 6A6 knjige *Mencij* je naslednja tekstualna razlika: V odseku 2A6 je srce-razum, ki goji *ceyin* (sočutje), *xiuwu* (sram), *cirang* (vljudnost in zmernost) in *shifei* (moralno presojo), obravnavan kot štiri »*duan*« (kali) vrlin, tj. *ren* (človečnost), *yi*

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(optimalna primernost), *li* (upoštevanje obredov) in *zhi* (modrost). V odseku 6A6 pa pojma »*duan*« ni mogoče najti. Zato danes nekateri strokovnjaki kritizirajo interpretacijo, v kateri je pojem »*duan*« preveden kot »izhodišče«, kar implicira bistveno razliko med štirimi kalni ter *ren*, *yi*, *li* in *zhi*, ki pa v 6A6 očitno ne obstaja. Namesto tega so ti strokovnjaki veliko bolj naklonjeni razlagi, po kateri je »*duan*« označba za bistveno enakost štirih kali ter *ren*, *yi*, *li* in *zhi*, ki jih izvorno poseduje moralno izpopolnjen srce-razum. Ta esej ponovno ovrednoti ti dve interpretaciji. Prvič, članek zagovarja stališče, da je v primerjavi s prvo argument druge razlage za moralno popoln srce-razum manj skladen z naravo Mencijeve moralne filozofije kot nauka, ki se osredotoča na izkušensko samointrospekcijo in moralno kultivacijo. Drugič, ta esej podpre drugo razlago s ponazoritvijo obstoja dveh različnih pomenov pojma *ren* (kot tudi *yi*, *li* in *zhi*) v delu *Mencij*. S tem pa dopušča, da ta koherentno kaže, da je srce-razum, ki poseduje štiri kali kot ponotranjena moralna občutja, enak »relativno predhodni« vrlini *ren* in je hkrati izhodiščna točka razvoja »relativno posledične« *ren*, ki pa se občutno razlikuje od prejšnje.

Ključne besede: *Mengzi* (*Mencij*), 2A6, 6A6, *xin* (srce/srce-razum), *ren* (človečnost), moralna kultivacija

Introduction

In 2A6 of the book of *Mengzi* (*Mencius*), the early Confucian master Mengzi 孟子 (ca. 372–ca. 289 BCE) says:

The [heart-mind] of compassion is the germ of [humaneness]; the [heart-mind] of shame, of [optimal appropriateness]; the [heart-mind] of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the [heart-mind] of [moral judgement], of wisdom. Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs ... If a man is able to develop all these four germs that he possesses, it will be like a fire starting up or a spring coming through. When these are fully developed, he can tend the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if he fails to develop them, he will not be able even to serve his parents.¹

This passage has been analysed by almost every Confucian commentator and philosopher in history, but instead of examining these ancient analyses, I would like to focus on two prevailing interpretations among contemporary philosophers that

1 惻隱之心，仁之端也；羞惡之心，義之端也；辭讓之心，禮之端也；是非之心，智之端也...凡是四端於我者，知皆擴而充之矣，若火之始燃，泉之始達。苟能充之，足以保四海；苟不充之，不足以事父母。The translations of the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*) and *Mengzi* are from D. C. Lau (with my occasional modifications). For the rest of the Chinese texts, the translations are my own.

have been circulating since the time of New Confucianism (*xin rujia* 新儒家) in the 20th century.²

The first was proposed by Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1908–1979):

The heart-mind and nature of human beings are first seen in humans' possession of the heart-mind of four germs of compassion, shame, courtesy and modesty, and moral judgement. This heart-mind of four germs can be said to be the *starting point* [emphasis added] of the four virtues of humaneness, optimal appropriateness, observance of the rites, and wisdom, but it is not yet sufficient to be regarded as the complete virtues of humaneness, optimal appropriateness, observance of the rites, and wisdom. ... This manifestation of the heart-mind of compassion and shame and of four germs that Mengzi speaks of, at the beginning, just represents a person's psychological state or activity, which is a kind of internal feeling of disturbance, unbearableness, and carelessness that is still insufficient for moral practices ... It is only the purely subjective and passive feeling of disturbance and unbearableness. (Tang 1986, 221)³

In other words, Tang understands the term “*duan* 端” (germ) in the sense of “*duanshi* 端始” (starting point), which suggests that the four germs possessed by our *xin* 心 (heart/heart-mind) are instantaneous reactions that are yet to be developed and thus are substantially different from *ren* 仁 (humaneness), *yi* 義 (optimal appropriateness), *li* 禮 (observance of the rites), and *zhi* 智 (wisdom) as fully developed “complete virtues” (*quande* 全德).⁴

More recently, and deeply influenced by Tang, Roger Ames comes close to this interpretation when he argues that the heart-mind of human beings contains an

2 This certainly does not mean that these two modern interpretations are completely new and without any historical background. On the contrary, we can find the ancient versions of both interpretations, and some of the scholars mentioned in this essay, regardless of which interpretation they prefer, occasionally draw support from the ancient Confucian commentators and philosophers, especially from those belonging to the school of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism (*song ming lixue* 宋明理學). However, given the limited space, I will leave problems associated with the historical background of the two interpretations aside and instead treat them as originally proposed by the contemporary scholars.

3 此人之心性，初見於人之有惻隱、羞惡、辭讓、是非之四端之心。此四端之心，可說為人之仁義禮智之四德之端始，然尚不足稱為仁義禮智之全德……此孟子所說之惻隱羞惡之四端之心之表現，又初只是一人之心靈或生命，一種內在的不安、不忍、不屑之情，尚未及於實際之愛人之行為者……只是純主觀之消極的不安、不忍之感情。

4 In another place, Tang also argues that compared to *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* as the complete virtues, the undeveloped heart-mind of four germs is “tiny and weak” (*xiao qie wei* 小且微), emphasizing their difference (Tang 1989, 48–49).

“ethical sensorium” as a generalization of its primal and morality-related conditions, such as the four germs. However, this sensorium needs to be “articulated across the particular narrative of a distinctly human life as a collaboration between person and world” in order to grow into *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* (Ames 2011, 142–43). Fu Peirong 傅佩榮 explicitly defends the interpretation that the term “*duan*” tells us that the four germs are “sprouts but not completion” that require “protection, nourishment, and extension” (Fu 2010, 75).⁵ Similarly, Philip Ivanhoe argues that the four germs are “weak and fragile” as “the beginning of morality”, and “require a period of growth in order to reach maturity” (Ivanhoe 1990, 30–31). Furthermore, Shun Kwong-loi 信廣來 takes *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* as “four aspects of the ethical ideal”, suggesting that “the four germs (*tuan* [*duan*])” should be regarded as the “predispositions” that constitute “the starting point for ethical development”, directing us toward the ethical ideal, just like a sprout is the starting point from where a mature plant grows (Shun 1997, 48, 138).

On the other hand, some scholars (Cai 1990, 43–46; Li 1994, 113–14; Li 2018, 76; Ng 2014, 104–6; Yang 1992, 58–63) challenge this interpretation by emphasizing that in 6A6, Mengzi says:

The [heart-mind] of compassion [is humaneness], the [heart-mind] of shame [is optimal appropriateness], the [heart-mind] of respect [is] the observance of the rites, and the [heart-mind] of [moral judgement is] wisdom. [Humaneness], [optimal appropriateness], observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from outside; they are in me originally.⁶

This time, the term “*duan*” disappears, and Mengzi does not mention that the four germs need to be further nourished in order to become *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*, which all seems to imply that they are substantially the same and are all originally possessed by human beings, in contrast to what is suggested by Tang and others. For this reason, these scholars prefer an interpretation made by Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), which, in short, claims that the “*duan*” in 2A6 should be interpreted as a sort of “*duanni* 端倪” (indication) or “*duanxu* 端緒” (inkling) that can reflect this substantial sameness between the four germs and *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* in 6A6.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on Mou’s interpretation in more detail to see how it is supposed to solve the problem faced by the first interpretation proposed by Tang and others (Section 2). I will then evaluate Mou’s interpretation

5 它表示萌芽而非滿全。這個心善之「端」需要護持、存養與擴充。

6 惻隱之心，仁也；羞惡之心，義也；恭敬之心，禮也；是非之心，智也。仁義禮智，非由外鑠我也，我固有之也。

by examining whether it is compatible with a general thesis regarding the nature of Mengzi's moral philosophy that is identified and accepted by both Tang and Mou, which suggests that this philosophy should be understood as a teaching on self-introspection and moral cultivation in experience without presupposing any first moral substance and principle. Examined from this perspective, Mou's interpretation turns out to be less adequate than that of Tang, as it barely fits within this general thesis (Section 3). Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, the question as to how we can rely on Tang's interpretation to bridge the textual difference between 2A6 and 6A6 has not yet been properly addressed. Therefore, I will reinforce this interpretation by virtue of demonstrating the existence of two different senses of *ren* (as well as *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*) in the *Mengzi*.⁷ More specifically, I will argue that the *ren* in 6A6 is a "relatively antecedent" *ren* that is defined on a different basis from the "relatively consequent" *ren* in 2A6. Therefore, it is consistent to claim that the original heart-mind containing the four germs as innate moral feelings is substantially the same as the relatively antecedent *ren*, which at the same time is the germ, or starting point, from where the relatively consequent *ren* can be developed (Section 4). Finally, this essay will end with a short conclusion.

Mou Zongsan's Interpretation of 2A6

As Mengzi points out in 2A6, the heart-mind of compassion arises when a person suddenly sees a young child on the verge of falling into a well. In such a case, the person feels compassion "not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the [child's] parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, not yet because he disliked the cry of the child".⁸ Rather, compassion will spontaneously arise in the person's heart-mind as long as the person is a human being. According to Mou Zongsan, this spontaneous feeling of compassion

7 According to Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), there are two ways to understand the relationships between *ren* and *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*: "*Ren*, if it is taken as a undistinguished whole, then this whole forms one unified atmosphere of life; *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* are all included within *ren*. If it is taken comparatively, then *ren* and *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* are on a par" (仁，混淪言，則混淪都是一個生意，義禮智都是仁；對言，則仁與義禮智一般) (Zhu 1986, vol. 1, 107). Both Tang and Mou understand the relationship in the first way (Tang 1986, 73; Mou 2013, 229), but apparently, at least in the case of 2A6 and 6A6, Mengzi treats *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* on an equal basis, as indicated by the structure of his argument. Even so, in order to avoid verbosity, I will only use *ren* for elaboration on most occasions, and what will be argued to hold true for *ren* will also hold true for *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* on an equal basis. Since the primary concern of this essay is to show that there are multiple senses of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*, the second-order question regarding on what basis these virtues can be further distinguished from each other goes beyond its scope.

8 非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。

is evidence that the essence of the heart-mind shared by all people that gives rise to this compassion is in fact no less morally perfect than the heart-mind of *ren* (*renxin* 仁心) of a moral sage, for a sage and a morally ordinary person will have exactly the same spontaneous reaction driven by their heart-mind under such a scenario. Furthermore, Mou asserts, in addition to compassion, this heart-mind of *ren* can also reveal itself in different circumstances as unbearableness (*buren* 不忍), disturbance (*buan* 不安), and other “moral” feelings that are not blind but involve some kind of normative judgements. Accordingly, all of the moral feelings that both Kongzi (Confucius) 孔子 (551–479 BCE.) and Mengzi have discussed in their dialogues are nothing but different manifestations of the same heart-mind of *ren* (Mou 2013, vol. 3, 220, 229).

Although it is beyond doubt that “the entirety of the heart-mind of *ren*” (*renxin quanti* 仁心全體) is originally possessed by all humans, Mou emphasizes that this heart-mind can reveal its practical significance only when it manifests itself as a “limited appearance” (*juxian xiang* 局限相) in experience, that is, in some specific circumstances such as seeing a child in danger (*ibid.*, 221). From here, Mou argues that a morally ordinary person differs from a sage as the former is ignorant about the fact that,

The specific heart-mind of compassion that manifests in correspondence to a particular occasion seems to be limited by the particular occasion and manifests as a limited appearance, but it is in fact the flow of the entirety of the universal substance on this particular occasion; the inkling [the heart-mind of compassion] and the substance of *ren* will not become two essentially different things simply because of this limited appearance. (*ibid.*)⁹

Consequently, unlike a sage, a morally ordinary person does not realize that they already possess the heart-mind of *ren* (in the appearance of the heart-mind of

9 而對應一特殊事機而呈現之具體的惻隱之心雖儼若為特殊事機所拘而顯一局限相，然而其實即是那普遍之體之全部流注於此，不因有此局限相，端緒與仁體即成為異質之兩物也。Mou’s discussion of the ignorance of morally ordinary people and the need to make them become self-aware of their morally perfect heart-mind can also be found in Mou, *Cong Lu Xiangshan dao Liu Jishan* 從陸象山到劉戡山 (From Lu Xiangshan to Liu Jishan) (1979, 335–45). It should also be noticed that for Mou, the ignorance of morally ordinary people does not refer to their heart-mind, i.e., it does not mean that their heart-mind itself is ignorant and morally impaired, for this would suggest that the heart-mind of ordinary people is morally inferior to the heart-mind of sages, thus contradicting with the thesis that everyone’s heart-mind is morally perfect as such. Rather, Mou thinks that the ignorance is caused by the natural desires associated with other sense organs that cover up the heart-mind and impede the morally perfect heart-mind from freely manifesting itself (*ibid.*, 230–31).

compassion) and is unable to apply it to other occasions that also require them to be compassionate.

Following this line of thought, Mou believes that what Mengzi says in 2A6 regarding the development of the heart-mind of compassion does not refer to a process of moral cultivation that develops and transforms the heart-mind of compassion into the heart-mind of *ren* since they are already substantially the same; instead, it is a moral cultivation that enables us to “be compassionate on one occasion and also be compassionate on every other occasion” (ibid.).¹⁰ With regard to this kind of moral cultivation, Mou acknowledges that the heart-mind containing the different moral feelings can be taken as the starting point from where the extensions of these feelings to more occasions take place, but we should always keep in mind that these kinds of extensions just increase the number of times the heart-mind manifests itself, while the quality of the heart-mind is already morally perfect in itself and does not require further improvement. Therefore, the term “*duan*” in 2A6 should rather be interpreted as “*duanni*” (indication) or “*duanxu*” (inkling), which designates the heart-mind of four germs as an indication of our originally possessed *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* revealing themselves and requiring extensions to more occasions in daily life (Li 1994, 113–14; Mou 2013, vol. 3, 220).

Under this interpretation, Mou and those who follow him believe that it is consistent for Mengzi on the one hand to claim that “the heart-mind of compassion is *ren*”, emphasizing their essential sameness, while on the other hand also claiming that “the heart-mind of compassion is the germ of *ren*”, emphasizing the manifestation of the heart-mind of *ren* and its need for extension in experience. The apparent difficulty faced by the interpretation proposed by Tang Junyi and others regarding this textual difference between 2A6 and 6A6 is therefore solved.

Re-examining Mou’s Interpretation under the General Background of Mengzi’s Moral Philosophy

From the above analysis, we can see that Mou Zongsan attributes to Mengzi the view of a morally perfect heart-mind that can actively manifest itself as various moral feelings in experience. This somehow addresses the interpretive issue associated with the textual difference between 2A6 and 6A6, but it is another question as to whether the existence of such a heart-mind is compatible with the general background of Mengzi’s moral philosophy.

10 一處惻隱，處處惻隱。

What is this general background? By this, I refer to an overarching thesis regarding the nature of Mengzi's moral philosophy that Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan agree on despite their different opinions on how to interpret 2A6. Tang thinks that Mengzi does not presuppose any first moral substance and principle (Tang 1989, 21–24),¹¹ and that the central aim of his teaching is to “uplift every human being's heart-mind and will, raise them from below, and set them up towards the top” (Tang 1986, 214).¹² This is achieved by encouraging people to keep “self-introspecting” (*fanxing* 反省) in experience and become more and more “self-conscious” or “self-aware” (*zijue* 自覺) of the fact that they are human beings, which are different in nature from brute animals and capable of becoming morally more excellent (*ibid.*, 218). Likewise, Mou believes that the philosophy of Mengzi—and Confucianism in general—should be appreciated as a “study of sageliness within” (*neisheng zhi xue* 內聖之學) and “teaching of becoming virtuous” (*chengde zhi jiao* 成德之教) (Mou 2013, vol. 1, 9). The primary concern of this teaching relates to moral cultivation, and “as to the problem of ontology, the understanding of it is an outcome of self-introspection in the midst of performing moral practices self-consciously” (*ibid.*, 11).¹³

Indeed, nowhere in the book does Mengzi propose any moral substance at first, nor does his moral reasoning rely on a top-down model starting with some universal moral principles. In fact, Mengzi explicitly opposes the idea of “holding to an inflexible oneness” (*zhiyi* 執一), which is a position he attributes to three of his major academic opponents at that time (*Mengzi* 7A26). As to Mengzi's own position, we can see that in the case of *ren*, the term is associated with different moral feelings, and some of these feelings, such as compassion in the case of seeing a child in danger, are obviously different in content from others, such as the love one feels toward one's parents (*qingqin* 親親) (*Mengzi* 4A27, 7A15), and the grudges that occasionally arise from loving one's parents (*qingqin zhi yuan* 親親之怨) (*Mengzi* 5A1, 6B3), suggesting that none of these feelings alone can be used to define the property of *ren* without the danger of overlooking other qualitatively different *ren*-related feelings. Additionally, in 6B6, Mengzi describes three historical figures with very different and even contrary characters that he considers as the exemplars of *ren*, and then states that “All that is to be expected of a [morally exemplary person] is [humaneness]. Why must he be exactly the same as other [morally exemplary persons]?”¹⁴ This again points to the fact that *ren* is not something fixed and universal that can be given beforehand to guide our behaviour.

11 This is a general thesis that Tang attributes to all major branches of Chinese philosophy and not just to Mengzi.

12 興起一切人之心志，以自下升高，而向上植立之道。

13 至于本體問題則是由自覺地作道德實踐而反省澈至者。

14 君子亦仁而已矣，何必同？

Instead, Mengzi often urges us to think about questions such as why, when both are humans with the same initial conditions, a sage can “set an example for the Empire worthy of being handed down to posterity” while we are so ordinary (*Mengzi* 4B28).¹⁵ To find the answer to this, we must “seek it within ourselves” (*fan qiu zhu ji* 反求諸己) (*Mengzi* 2A7). This self-examination certainly does not refer to the kind of meditation that can be practiced silently in a room on our own, since without presupposing any first substance and principle, it is doubtful whether such a meditation can even take place in a meaningful manner. On the contrary, the properties of our “selves” that we can reflect upon will become available to us only when we constantly interact with the external world. In this sense, such self-introspection is an inward examination that is inseparable from outer experiences.¹⁶ This point is highlighted when Mengzi’s statement “There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am true to myself” is connected with “Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to [humaneness]” (*Mengzi* 7A4);¹⁷ when Mengzi points out that the sage king Shun needs to “hear a single good word and see a single good deed” and only then can he fully realize the propensities toward goodness that distinguishes him from animal-like savages (*Mengzi* 7A16);¹⁸ and when Mengzi attempts to ask King Xuan of Qi to look inward to his own heart-mind of unbearableness and take it as the basis for moral practice, the very possibility of such self-introspection and moral cultivation is based upon the king’s past experience of feeling unbearable toward an ox (*Mengzi* 1A7).

It is reasonable, therefore, to follow Tang and Mou and read Mengzi’s moral philosophy primarily as a teaching that focuses on self-introspection and moral cultivation in experience without any presupposition. By taking this general thesis into account, I think the problem regarding the compatibility of Mou’s interpretation of 2A6 and 6A6 can be rephrased into a question: Can we realize, at some point of such self-introspection and cultivation in experience, that we have a heart-mind that is morally perfect, as Mou suggests?

15 舜人也，我亦人也。舜為法於天下，可傳於後世，我由未免為鄉人也。

16 Roger Ames makes a similar point and coins the alternative term “intra-spection” in place of “introspection” in order to emphasize this inner-outer aspect of the self-introspection suggested by Mengzi and other Confucian masters (Ames 2016, 50). I agree with Ames that Mengzi’s self-introspection cannot be accomplished by focusing entirely on the internal, but I will not adopt his term “intra-spection” as this may introduce other implications of Ames’s philosophy that I do not agree with, such as his overemphasis on the importance of familial and social relations at the expense of innate moral feelings.

17 反身而誠，樂莫大焉。強恕而行，求仁莫近焉。

18 及其聞一善言，見一善行。

As Tang points out, the very first step of self-introspection starts with reflecting on the distinction between human beings and brute animals (Tang 1986, 217). Needless to say, biological differences exist between humans and non-human animals, but these apparent external differences are not what Mengzi is concerned about. Rather, what concerns Mengzi is the “slight” (*jixi* 幾希) difference that can really distinguish humans from brutes when both share the same desires for living and reproduction (*Mengzi* 4B19). Mengzi believes that it is not difficult to realize that, in experience, there are some moral feelings that can naturally arise in our heart-minds, such as those mentioned in 2A6 and 6A6, that pertain to human beings alone. In 2A6, Mengzi states that “whoever is devoid of” the heart-mind of compassion, shame, courtesy and modesty, and moral judgement “is not human”,¹⁹ while the same is outlined in a more positive tone in 6A6, which proposes that these feelings are “possessed by all men alike”.²⁰ For Mengzi, these innate moral feelings are what really highlight the uniqueness of humans and distinguish them from other animals.

At this point, regarding the characteristics of our heart-mind, I think we can know this much: It is an active entity that possesses and gives rise to various moral feelings in experience. However, whether it is already morally perfect remains unclear and needs further investigation as the self-introspection proceeds to the next step, which is to reflect on the difference between morally ordinary people and moral sages. There are several occasions where Mengzi emphasizes the fact that sages are humans just like others, which implies that through proper moral cultivation it is possible for anyone to become a sage (*Mengzi* 1A7, 3A1, 4B28, 4B32, 6A7). Nevertheless, just as we say in everyday life that “a good guy is different from a bad guy”, there must be some difference between a morally noble and an ordinary or deficient fellow. From here, Tang and Mou, and those who support either of them, will have different considerations: In theory, it could be that the difference lies in the development of the initial heart-mind that the sages have achieved as the result of their moral practices, as Tang suggests. Alternatively, it is equally possible that the initial conditions remain exactly the same between sages and morally ordinary people; rather, their difference is marked by the fact that sages can make full use of their initial conditions in the sense that they can let their heart-mind manifest whenever and wherever it is required, whereas ordinary people cannot, as Mou suggests. Without presupposing any first substance and principle, this puzzle cannot be resolved unless one commences moral practices in experience and then self-introspects afterwards.

19 無惻隱之心，非人也；無羞惡之心，非人也；無辭讓之心，非人也；無是非之心，非人也。

20 惻隱之心，人皆有之；羞惡之心，人皆有之；恭敬之心，人皆有之；是非之心，人皆有之。

Let us consider 1A7, in which Mengzi instructs King Xuan of Qi on moral cultivation. The passage begins with the king asking Mengzi whether he is capable of becoming a true king who can always care for his people. Mengzi assures the king that he can, because Mengzi once heard that the king spared an ox from being sacrificed upon seeing the innocent animal tremble in fear. Mengzi tells the king that this very heart-mind of unbearableness is evidence of his capability to become a true king and thus that his “failure to become a true king is due to a refusal to act, not to an inability to act”.²¹ What the king needs to do is to extend this heart-mind of unbearableness to his people and relieve them from suffering in the same way as he relieved the ox.

Suppose that after some kind of moral training, the king successfully extends his heart-mind of unbearableness to his people. If we just look at the consequence of this extension, it is simply that the king’s heart-mind of unbearableness has arisen on one more occasion, which seems to support Mou’s thesis, but David Wong makes the point that the quality of the heart-mind, together with its feeling of unbearableness toward the people after moral cultivation, is unlikely to be the same as the original heart-mind and its feeling of unbearableness toward the ox, because the original unbearableness is just a spontaneous reaction that does not necessarily contain a clear reason for action, and the original heart-mind is not yet developed so as to be able to reflect on such reactions and refine them into action-guiding feelings (Wong 2002, 191–92).

It is true that upon seeing the ox and feeling unbearable, the king does act to spare it from suffering, just like in the case of 2A6 when, upon seeing the child about to fall into a well and feeling compassionate, the person will be driven by an urge to save the child. However, these examples tell us nothing more than this: With the original heart-mind and its innate moral feelings, we can act morally in situations where we are directly exposed to the moral patients in such a way that causes moral feelings to spontaneously arise; this does not suggest that in other cases, where we either do not have such direct experiences or are in touch with the patients under circumstances that make them appear to be (but not in fact) less deserving of help—cases in which the feelings that immediately arise are not those purely moral ones—we can still rely on the original heart-mind to carry out appropriate actions. That is, when Mengzi asks the king to merely think about his poor people or, as Wong suggests, when the king, say, comes across a homeless person in the street who approaches and begs him for money, it is most likely that the feeling that spontaneously arises in the king’s heart-mind this time will be an indescribable and vague one, which may be a blend of various different feelings instead

21 故王之不王，不為也，非不能也。

of pure unbearableness (Wong 2002, 193). Despite the king being intellectually aware (after Mengzi reminding him) that he should respond to his people with the same feeling and action that he once had toward the ox, without moral cultivation the king is unable to refine his vague feeling into an unbearableness that can provide him with the reason and motivation to help his people.

In other words, what the moral cultivation Mengzi has in mind aims to achieve is to extend the king's heart-mind of unbearableness to cases where the moral feeling will not spontaneously arise—where the spontaneous feeling (as an unreflected reaction) instead arises cannot be simply identified as unbearableness. This will require the king to be trained so that his heart-mind becomes morally sensitive enough to crystallize and refine those spontaneous but vague feelings into clear moral feelings that can guide his actions. Consequently, these newly extended moral feelings will be substantially different from the original ones as they are the result of careful reflections that are always practically efficacious, whereas the original ones are merely moral reactions that are, in terms of their spontaneity, not different from other natural reactions; although they can lead to moral actions on some occasions, as natural reactions, it is hard to tell whether these are driven by determined reasons or just psychological urges (ibid., 195–96).²² This is also why, I think by following Wong, that Mengzi says at the end of 2A6 that if one fails to develop the heart-mind of four germs, one cannot even serve one's parents with the original heart-mind containing these unreflected moral reactions. Furthermore, in 6A14 and 6A15, Mengzi answers his student by stating that a morally exemplary person differs from a morally ordinary person precisely because the former's heart-mind gets nourished and can *si* 思 (think/reflect). According to the current interpretation, this reflection is directed to the innate moral feelings, and supplies these with the originally lacking “action-guiding content” (ibid., 191).

Unfortunately, it appears that in the end King Xuan of Qi did not set forth to achieve moral cultivation. However, supposing that he had done so and had self-introspected during or after such cultivation, it would be reasonable to posit that the king would have realized that he was becoming more morally sensitive and trustworthy, and his heart-mind was becoming sharper and more primed for manifestation. In this sense, the king would have realized that he was becoming a better king with a kinder heart-mind. This realization of “becoming better” simultaneously negates Mou's thesis that there is a basis to propose that the heart-mind is morally perfect in itself and does not require further

22 Exactly how this kind of moral cultivation should be carried out is beyond the scope of the current discussion. Basically, Wong thinks that it requires the interaction between the heart-mind and *qi* 氣 (vital energy) and what he calls “analogical reasoning” (ibid., 193–94, 197–204).

improvement.²³ In comparison, the interpretation proposed by Tang Junyi and others, which admits that the original heart-mind of four germs can and needs to be further developed, works more effectively in such a context.²⁴

Ren in a Relative Sense: A Reinforcement of the First Interpretation

Let us now turn to consider how the textual difference between 2A6 and 6A6 can be possibly addressed under Tang Junyi's more adequate interpretation of "*duan*".

To my knowledge, many of those who support Tang's interpretation did not spend too much effort on bridging this textual difference; the way by which they deal with it is simply to read 6A6 as if the term "*duan*" is still implied there despite its apparent disappearance (Ames 2011, 140; Fu 2010, 75, 172; Shun 1997, 189). That is, according to them, in 6A6, when Mengzi says the heart-mind of compassion, shame, respect, and moral judgement are *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*, and *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* are "in me originally", we should understand Mengzi as if he still means that these four moral feelings are the *germs* of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*, and it is these four germs, not *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*, that are originally possessed by the heart-mind.

This solution, however, is not ideal in my opinion. The main reason for those scholars to add "*duan*" in 6A6 is presumably because they believe that this will make 6A6 become more consistent with the general background of Mengzi's

23 Surely, one could still argue that everything about the heart-mind that one realizes during moral practices has originally been possessed by the heart-mind. In other words, what one discovers is nothing more than what was already there in the heart-mind. However, without presupposing any first substance, on what basis can this argument be established? Perhaps we can still postulate an all-inclusive and morally perfect heart-mind, but such a postulation will not in turn have any practical significance and is definitely not what Mou and those who support his interpretation have in mind, for Mou strongly opposes the idea of treating the heart-mind as a merely abstract, static, and metaphysical postulation (Mou 2013, vol. 3, 214–15).

24 In his analysis of Wong's account of moral cultivation, Ng Kai-chiu 吳啟超 believes that Wong's argument will actually support Mou's interpretation of 2A6 (Ng 2014, 95–102). Based on the above discussion, it should become clear now that this is a misreading of Wong. As noted, although the end result of the moral cultivation in 1A7 will be the heart-mind of unbearableness arising on one more occasion, which seems to conform to Mou's idea that one should "be compassionate on one occasion and also be compassionate on every other occasion", the crucial difference is that Wong thinks that the extended heart-mind of unbearableness will be substantially different (morally more developed) than the original heart-mind of unbearableness, whereas Mou believes that the heart-mind is already morally perfect and will remain constant during the moral cultivation. Given his belief in a morally perfect heart-mind and his praise of Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472–1529) reading of the *Mengzi*, Mou agrees with Wang that the main task of moral cultivation is to recover the originally perfect heart-mind by virtue of gradually removing the obstructions (the turbid *qi*) from it so that the innate moral feelings can more freely manifest themselves (Mou 1978, 15; 1979, 335–45). This is the type of moral cultivation that Wong openly opposes (Wong 2002, 191).

moral philosophy as one that emphasizes moral cultivation and development. However, this to some extent also brings the uncharitable implication that if we do not add “*duan*” then 6A6 as it is will not appear to be entirely consistent with the general context of the *Mengzi*, which also indicates that the *Mengzi* lacks an overall consistency due to the disappearance of “*duan*” in 6A6.²⁵ This kind of thinking gets expressed when, for example, Chen Daqi 陳大齊 (1886–1983), who also supports Tang’s interpretation that the heart-mind originally only possesses the germs of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*, argues that “To say ‘the heart-mind of moral judgment is the germ of wisdom’ is acceptable, to say ‘the heart-mind is the wisdom’, however, is overstated. ... To say the heart-mind of compassion and of the other feelings is the germ of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* is acceptable, but to say it is the same as *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* is not” (Chen 1953, 19).²⁶ Similarly, Fu Peirong comments that by “examining them [2A6 and 6A6] as a whole, the teaching of ‘good germ’ [in 2A6] is more comprehensive, and reading it in comparison with Mengzi’s other phrases, it is also more consistent” (Fu 2010, 172).²⁷ For this reason, in order to make 6A6 become as consistent as 2A6 and achieve an overall consistency, “*duan*” has to be read into it.

This certainly does not mean that a more adequate solution to the textual issue cannot be found if one adopts Tang’s interpretation. On the contrary, it appears to me that some of these scholars could do better because the appropriate solution to this problem is already implicitly embedded in some of their works; what we need to do is to dig it out, develop it, and use it to reinforce Tang’s interpretation by

25 One may find an excuse for such lack of overall consistency by appealing to the fact that the *Mengzi* is an ancient text that had been edited and recompiled many times by different writers and commentators throughout the history, not to mention the difficulties associated with preserving it (for the history of the development of the *Mengzi*, see Zhao and Sun 1999, 3–11). This suggests that the *Mengzi* we read today may indeed lack an overall consistency, but we should not expect the text to be as consistent as a modern academic work anyway. Therefore, in the case of 6A6, we can accept that the missing of “*duan*” breaks the overall consistency of the *Mengzi* without blaming ourselves for being uncharitable interpreters. I will not take such defence into serious consideration for the following reasons: First, instead of being an argument based on textual support, it is more like an assumption whose validity cannot be proved or disproved with the texts that we have at the moment. Second, I feel that such defence has the danger of being abused, for it can be employed whenever one finds a particular passage or sentence in the *Mengzi* does not match one’s overall interpretation of the text. The attitude toward the *Mengzi* that I find more beneficial to take is to treat it as a work that strives for overall consistency, and not to overlook any small textual difference and apparent inconsistencies. As I will show, in this case, the more effort one spends on carefully considering the one-word difference between 2A6 and 6A6 will not go in vain, for through such deliberation one will get to discover an important characteristic of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*.

26 謂「是非之心，智之端也」，則可，謂「是非之心，智也」，則不免推斷過當……謂惻隱等心是仁義禮智之端，則可，為惻隱等心即是仁義禮智，則有未可。

27 合而觀之，善端之說較為周全，並且配合孟子其他語句來看，也較為相洽。

reflecting more deeply on the question of what the writer or editor of the *Mengzi* is really trying to suggest at 6A6 with the missing character “*duan*”, without assuming that it might just be due to an inconsistency.

Let us stay with *ren* for a demonstration of this. In the previous section, we have already seen that for Mengzi the property of *ren* cannot be fully reflected by a single feeling or action—it is something flexible but not fixed. One can also get the feeling that there may be multiple senses of *ren* being invoked in the *Mengzi* by noticing that, on the one hand, being *ren* sometimes simply means being a man or loving and serving one’s parents (*Mengzi* 4A27, 7A15, 7B16), while on the other hand Mengzi, just like Kongzi, is reluctant to acknowledge himself as an exemplar of *ren*, indicating that achieving *ren* is indeed not an easy matter (*Mengzi* 2A2). In addition, he also states that “With [humaneness], the point, too, lies in seeing to its being ripe” (*Mengzi* 6A19),²⁸ which seems to suggest that we already possess a kind of raw and immature *ren*, and what we need to do is to nourish it further.

Tang Junyi argues that since Mengzi’s self-introspection takes place in experience without presupposing anything at first, and experience itself is always “changeable without fixed directions” (*bianhua wu fang* 變化無方), the outcomes of this self-introspection—our views such as what properties we originally possess, what their characteristics are, how they can be further developed, and what the newly developed properties look like—will also be changeable and revisable as we proceed with our moral practices, encounter new circumstances, and gain new materials for self-introspection (Tang 1989, 24). Fu Peirong likewise argues that for Mengzi, humans are lively creatures that have the ability to freely develop themselves while interacting with the world. Therefore, when we look at the internal human conditions, we should be aware that these are also dynamic and embrace change (Fu 2010, 186–87). Following the same line of argument, Roger Ames goes one step further to claim that “*Ren* is both antecedent and an outcome” (Ames 2011, 182). That is, *ren* is the starting as well as end point of moral cultivation; it is a developmental and transformative virtue, and as it develops, it will carry different connotations depending on the context of its usage.

This kind of thought can be textually supported. Consider 7A15, where Mengzi tells us on what basis he calls something *ren* (and *yi*):

What a man is able to do without having to learn it is what he can truly do; what he knows without having to reflect on it is what he truly knows. There are no young children who do not naturally love their parents, and when they grow up will not [naturally] respect their elder brothers.

28 夫仁，亦在乎熟之而已矣。

Loving one's parents is [humaneness]; respecting one's elders is [optimal appropriateness].²⁹

This highlights that loving one's parents is regarded as *ren* solely on the basis that it is a sensibility that people are born with without the need for learning and reflection, and apparently, just like feelings such as compassion and unbearableness, the love that one feels toward one's parents is also a moral feeling that pertains to human beings alone.³⁰ On this ground, we can use *ren* to designate our initial moral state, which is represented by the manifestations of the innate moral feelings of the original heart-mind.

The passage above continues with the last sentence: “*Wu ta, da zhi tianxia ye*”,³¹ which has been understood and translated differently by various commentators. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (1909–1992), for example, take it as another explanation of why loving one's parents is *ren*. For them, the phrase means that loving one's parents is *ren* for no other reason than the fact that everyone in the whole Empire can feel the same, emphasizing once more that it is called *ren* because it represents the initial moral condition shared by all people (Yang Bojun 1960, 284; Zhu 2011, 331). On the other hand, Zhao Qi 趙岐 (ca. 108–201) and Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1802) believe that the phrase means that since *ren* is already possessed by humans, there is nothing left to be done except for extending it to the whole Empire (Jiao 2017, 744; Zhao and Sun 1999, 359); this is also the interpretation adopted by D. C. Lau (1921–2010) in his English translation of the passage: “What is left to be done is simply the extension of these [loving one's parents as *ren* and respecting one's elder brothers as *yi*] to the whole Empire” (Lau 2003, 293).

It is not my concern here to examine which of these two interpretations is philosophically more accurate. Rather, what I would like to emphasize is that in order for either of them to be contextually coherent, a different sense of *ren* needs to be acknowledged. To see why, consider the following from 7B31:

For every man there are things he cannot bear. To extend this to what he can bear is [humaneness].³²

29 人之所不學而能者，其良能也；所不慮而知者，其良知也。孩提之童，無不知愛其親者；及其長也，無不知敬其兄也。親親，仁也；敬長，義也。

30 Arguably, we love our parents in some particular ways and with some particular feelings that are different from brutes, just like Zhu Xi points out that “The reason why humans are different (from brutes) is because they have *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*, so that when they are sons, they show filial piety; when they are brothers, they show respect to their elder brothers; how can brutes be able to show these!” (人所以異者，以其有仁義禮智，若為子則孝，為弟則悌，禽獸豈能之哉！) (Zhu 1986, vol. 4, 1347).

31 無他，達之天下也。

32 人皆有所不忍，達之於其所忍，仁也。

Now, if one follows Zhu Xi and Yang Bojun's interpretation of the last sentence of 7A15, without acknowledging a different sense of *ren*, it would be difficult to understand why the extended heart-mind of unbearableness, which has been shown in the previous section to be substantially different from the original one, is also regarded by Mengzi as *ren* in 7B31. Similarly, if one follows Zhao Qi and Jiao Xun's interpretation of 7A15 while adhering to a single sense of *ren*, then the question we can ask is: What will the extension of the *ren* in 7A15 be called? 7B31 tells us that it will still be called *ren*, but then an immediate problem arises as it is inappropriate to use the same term in exactly the same sense to refer to two substantially different virtues that represent different moral states. It is therefore more consistent to read 7A15 and 7B31 as describing two different senses of *ren* that carry different connotations; specifically, the one in 7A15 refers to the original heart-mind of moral feelings that designates the same initial moral state shared by all human beings, and the one in 7B31 refers to its extension that designates a more advanced moral state that is achieved by virtue of moral cultivation.

Support for this reading of *ren* also comes from 1A7. After King Xuan of Qi spared the ox from sacrifice, Mengzi assured him that "The [heart-mind] behind your action is sufficient to enable you to become a true king" and "[the action driven by the heart-mind] is the way of a [*humane*] [emphasis added] man",³³ which again points to the sense of *ren* that represents the king's original heart-mind of moral feelings. However, as discussed above, Mengzi still urges the king to cultivate and extend this kind of *ren* so that he can

Treat the aged of your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families; treat your own young in a manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families, and you can roll the Empire on your palm. ... In other words, all you have to do is take this very [heart-mind] here and apply it to what is over there. Hence one who extends his bounty can tend those within the Four Seas; one who does not cannot tend even his own family. There is just one thing in which the ancients greatly surpassed others, and that is the way they extended what they did.³⁴

This is what Mengzi thinks a true sage king will practice, which is a kind of governance generally considered by Confucians as the "governance by *ren*" (*renzheng* 仁政). However, the content of this kind of *ren* obviously differs from the one that

33 是心足以王矣。是乃仁術也。

34 老吾老，以及人之老；幼吾幼，以及人之幼。天下可運於掌……言舉斯心加諸彼而已。故推恩足以保四海，不推恩無以保妻子。古之人所以大過人者，無他焉，善推其所為而已矣。

King Xuan of Qi already has; it corresponds to the *ren* illustrated in 7B31, which can be obtained only by extending one's original heart-mind of moral feelings through moral cultivation.

Some may suspect that if we allow the extended and developed heart-mind of moral feelings to represent another sense of *ren*, then this will cause problems for also continuing to regard the original heart-mind and its innate moral feelings as *ren*, since the latter appears to be less qualified compared to the former. As far as I am concerned, this does not pose a problem because there is no textual evidence suggesting that these two senses of *ren* are mutually incompatible. In both 1A7 and 7B31, Mengzi just says that the extension of the original heart-mind is *ren* but does not suggest in any way that because of this the original heart-mind itself can no longer be regarded as *ren*. More importantly, given that Mengzi's self-introspection starts in experience without presuppositions, we will not realize the sense of *ren* described in 7B31 until we firmly cultivate our initial moral conditions. In other words, at the beginning, at the very first stage that we realize we are different from brutes, we only have the original heart-mind possessing those unreflected, innate moral feelings that can be referred to as *ren*. This *ren* provides us with the basis for revision, and it is only in relation to the revision of this *ren* that the heart-mind of moral feelings that is later developed and extended through moral practices can be referred to as *ren* in a "relatively consequent" sense. Correspondingly, when we look back from this later stage of moral cultivation, the original state from where we depart can be taken as *ren* in a "relatively antecedent" sense.

Another point that needs to be noticed is that the innate moral feelings that spontaneously arise from the original, undeveloped heart-mind in given situations surely constitute the starting point of moral cultivation for everyone, but I think we should not for this reason call the *ren* that is used to designate this initial moral state an "absolutely antecedent" *ren*, because once the moral cultivation begins, it is a continuous and endless progress in practice, and so the *ren* that is realized in the midst of this moral cultivation will also be continuously developed and revised so that one cannot get its "absolutely consequent" sense. For example, the life of Kongzi vividly displays a constant process of moral development without a predetermined end (*Analects* 2: 4), which is also reflected by his disciple Zengzi 曾子 (505–435 BCE) when he says: "[A morally exemplary person] takes [humaneness] as his burden. Is that not heavy? Only with death does the road come to an end. Is that not long?" (*Analects* 8: 7).³⁵ Death indeed brings an end to one's worldly life, but the sense of *ren* realized at some point during one's lifetime

35 仁以為己任，不亦重乎？死而後已，不亦遠乎？

is always at the same time consequent to the one that preceded it and is antecedent in relation to the one that will follow, so the *ren* that one finally realizes at the time of one's death can also be taken as relatively antecedent and immature compared to the next, more consequent *ren* that one would potentially realize if one could live longer. As humans with limited lifespans, the only thing we can do is to proceed along the endless path of moral cultivation as far as possible, and as we proceed, there will always be a more consequent *ren* waiting ahead of us. To avoid using terms such as “absolute” or “absolutely” and use “relative” or “relatively” instead is precisely to capture this aspect of moral development.

Finally, equipped with this understanding of *ren*, we can now hold to Tang Junyi's interpretation of 2A6 while explaining why “*duan*” exists in 2A6 but disappears in 6A6. It should become clear that the *ren* in 6A6 is used in the relatively antecedent sense, which represents the original heart-mind of compassion as people's initial moral condition. However, in 2A6, Mengzi emphasizes the need for moral cultivation, so the same heart-mind of compassion becomes the “*duan*”, or starting point, of the relatively consequent *ren*, which points to the state that one achieves after some moral practice, in which one's heart-mind will become morally more sensitive and capable, and the moral feeling will also be different from the innate one as it is no longer a psychological urge but contains in itself a clear reason for action. Therefore, it is consistent to claim that the heart-mind of compassion is the same as the relatively antecedent *ren*, which is simultaneously the starting point from where the relatively consequent *ren* can be developed. Since *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* are spoken of on an equal basis in 2A6 and 6A6, what holds true for the heart-mind of compassion and *ren* also applies to the other three feelings and *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*. Overall, we can say that the heart-mind of the four germs is substantially the same as the relatively antecedent *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* and is the starting point from where the relatively consequent *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* can be developed.

Conclusion

The discussions in this essay have hopefully made it clear how the textual difference between 2A6 and 6A6 of the *Mengzi* should be handled. In my opinion, compared to the interpretation arguing for the existence of a morally perfect heart-mind, the interpretation of 2A6 proposed by Tang Junyi and others, which takes the term “*duan*” as the “starting point” that indicates the need for further improvement of the original heart-mind, is more consistent with the general background of Mengzi's moral philosophy as a teaching on self-introspection and moral cultivation in experience without presupposing any first moral substance

and principle. Furthermore, this interpretation will not be invalidated by the missing of “*duan*” in 6A6, for under this interpretation, *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* in the *Mengzi* can all be understood as developmental virtues that have different meanings depending on the context of their usage—a point that can be firmly supported by the original text. By explicitly demonstrating the existence of different senses of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* in the *Mengzi*, we are able to take the heart-mind of the four germs to be the same as the relatively antecedent and sprout-like *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* described in 6A6, which at the same time constitute the starting points for developing the relatively consequent and ripe *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* described in 2A6. In this way, we can well explain the textual difference between 2A6 and 6A6 while maintaining the more adequate interpretation of 2A6.

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