

# The Nature and Force of Normativity in Dài Zhèn

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## I. Introduction

Among the prominent features of Dài Zhèn's ethical thought is his naturalistic account of ethical normativity. In this essay, I will try to reconstruct this account, explore its implications, and briefly consider its strengths and weaknesses. The discussion will be based on Dài's principal philosophical work, his *Evidential Commentary on Meanings of Terms in Mèngzǐ* (*Mèngzǐ Ziyì Shūzhèng* 孟子字義疏證).

A core interpretive hypothesis I will work from is that when Dài refers to what is *bìrán* 必然, he is referring to ethical normativity. His use of the phrase *bìrán* is distinct from the modern use, which is typically interpreted as “necessary.” In logical contexts, the modern *bìrán* refers to logical necessity, while in empirical contexts it refers to causal necessity. By contrast, I suggest that Dài uses the phrase to refer to what normatively ought to be the case or ought to be done. I will interpret *bìrán* as the “should-be-so” (that is, how things should be), which I suggest is Dài's term of art for the normative.

Dài's term for norms themselves is *zé* 則, and his explanation of why certain norms indeed have the status of norms is that they conform to or express *lǐ* 理, “pattern.” “Pattern” in effect refers to patterns, structures, relations, and modes of conduct that constitute *dào* 道, the ethically apt way of life. Dài famously contends that pattern and *dào* are inherent in concrete objects and everyday life, to be found in everyday activities such as “dwelling, eating and drinking, talking and acting” (33/200).<sup>1</sup> Taken in a descriptive, empirical sense, “pattern” simply refers to the patterns by which things in the concrete, everyday world are organized and function. Taken in a normative sense, it refers to the patterns, structures, relations, and conduct by which human life proceeds most effectively and appropriately, given its ends as understood according to pattern in a descriptive sense.

A central tenet in Dài's thought is that the normative, or *bìrán*, can be identified through examination of spontaneous, naturally arising features of human life, such as basic wants or needs, which he calls the “so-of-itself” (*zìrán* 自然). Norms are in effect guidelines to how various features of life—including basic wants and feelings—are most effectively fulfilled. Dai's elaboration of this

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<sup>1</sup> Citations to Dài's work give section numbers in the *Mèngzǐ Ziyì Shūzhèng* 孟子字義疏證 followed by page numbers in Yang Yingjin 杨应芹 and Zhu Weiqi 诸伟奇, eds., *戴震全書* (修訂版) [*Collected Works of Dài Zhèn*], rev. ed., vol. 6 (Hefei: Huangshan Publishing House, 2010).

tenet yields a non-reductive naturalistic account of the nature, content, and role of ethical norms in human life.

Any satisfactory account of normativity must explain what sort of thing norms are and how they impose an action-guiding “force” on agents. This essay will attempt to clarify exactly what ethical norms are, according to Dài, and what it is about them he thinks gives us decisive grounds to follow them. I will contend that Dài’s approach points toward a plausible way to understand norms, albeit one that is incomplete and less determinate than he seems to think.

## 2. Norms and Normativity

Dài’s account of the nature of norms and normativity revolves around four core concepts: *dào* 道 (the way), *lǐ* 理 (“pattern”), *zé* 則 (norms), and *bìrán* 必然 (the normative or “should-be-so”). The following subsections explore these concepts and the interrelations between them. The aim is to explain Dài’s view of the structure and basis of ethical normativity.

### 2.1 *Dào*

For Dài Zhèn, ethical norms are grounded in and explained by the content of *dào* 道, or “the way,” and *lǐ* 理, or “pattern.” This section presents an interpretation of these two concepts as Dài uses them.

Dài holds a naturalistic view of both *dào* and pattern. *Dào* is not an abstract, ideal, or mysterious creative source or cosmic process. It is constituted simply by the concrete processes and relations by which everyday material things are organized and operate. The *dào* of nature is the continuing flow of natural phenomena, by which everything is generated and transforms. The *dào* of humanity comprises both the natural processes of life and human relations, activities, and conduct.

人道，人倫日用身之所行皆是也。在天地，則氣化流行，生生不息，是謂道；在人物，則凡生生所有事，亦如氣化之不可已，是謂道。

The *dào* of humanity—human relations, daily activity, and everything we do are all part of it. As to Heaven and Earth, the transformation and flow of *qi* are generated over and over without cease—this is what we call “*dào*.” As to people and things, all matters related to the generation of life, such as the unending transformation of *qi*—this is what we call “*dào*.”  
(32/197)

Accordingly, all aspects of our lives are part of *dào*.

出於身者，無非道也… 道者，居處、飲食、言動，自身而周於身之所親，無不該焉也。

None of what issues from one's person fails to be *dào*. . . . Dwelling, eating and drinking, speaking and moving, our person and everything we see around us—all of this is appropriately regarded as *dào*. (33/200)

As explicated in these quotations, *dào* is a descriptive concept referring to natural processes or activities. But we can also speak of *dào* as normative, as the proper path to follow. Dài himself observes that *dào* has both descriptive and normative uses. He explains that referring to daily activity as *dào* is to “distinguish things from [their corresponding] norms” and thus to refer descriptively to *dào* as an actual path of conduct or how things in fact happen to be done. On the other hand, to refer to some norm or ideal as *dào* is to “combine things with norms” and so use *dào* prescriptively, to express a view about how things should be done.

專以人倫日用，舉凡出於身者謂之道，故曰「修身以道，修道以仁」，分物與則言之也；中節之為達道，中庸之為道，合物與則言也。

If we focus on human relations and daily activity, anything that issues from one's person can be called [descriptive] “*dào*,” and so [*Zhōng Yōng*] says, “Cultivate oneself through *dào*; cultivate *dào* with benevolence”—this is speaking of it by distinguishing things from norms. [To say that] conforming to good measure is attaining *dào* and centered constancy is *dào*—this is speaking of it by joining together things and the corresponding norms. (34/201)

In the first, descriptive use, *dào* is the course of conduct we happen to follow. Our actual course of conduct may fail to be benevolent, and so we apply the norms of benevolence to cultivate and improve it. In the second, prescriptive use, *dào* refers directly to normatively proper conduct, such as conduct that conforms to good measure or to “centered constancy.”

Dài's strategy for connecting the descriptive and the normative dimensions of *dào* is to propose that in any activity characteristic of human life, we can find regularities that best fulfill the inherent ends of that activity. He calls these “norms that cannot be exchanged” or “unexchangeable norms” (不易之則), insofar as they cannot be replaced by other ways of performing the activity that are more effective or appropriate in fulfilling its ends. These unexchangeable norms constitute the normative *dào*. The idea, then, is that whatever norms most effectively lead to a flourishing human life, as judged by ends that come naturally to all people, are the *dào*.

遂己之欲者，廣之能遂人之欲；達己之情者，廣之能達人之情。道德之盛，使人之欲無不遂，人之情無不達，斯已矣。

One can expand the process of fulfilling one's wants to also fulfill others' wants, and one can expand the process of satisfying one's feelings to also

satisfy others' feelings. The flourishing of *dào* and virtue (*dé*) is simply for none of people's wants to go unfulfilled and none of their feelings to go unsatisfied. (30/195)

As these remarks make clear, Dài's view is that the ends of the normative *dào* are universal: it fulfills the wants and feelings of all persons, not only those of the individual agent. Just what norms will satisfy these ends he takes to be something we can discover through sympathetic reflection—discussed below—and presumably by trial and error. So for Dài the *dào* is not abstract or transcendent but something we can investigate through inquiry. This inquiry is directed at identifying the patterns (*lǐ* 理) by which human activity collectively proceeds most smoothly and effectively.

## 2.2 Pattern

Unlike what he takes to be the views of some of his Sòng- and Míng-era predecessors, Dài does not treat pattern (*lǐ* 理) as a distinct, abstract entity that combines with *qì* 氣 (energy-stuff) to form concrete objects, that possesses causal powers, or that functions as a source or origin of things. Nor does he see it as a latent, ethically ideal aspect of our character that we seek to manifest. Dài contends that such views of pattern inevitably slide into a pernicious dualism which renders the relation between pattern and the concrete, material world inexplicable. Instead, he contends that “pattern” is simply a term for how things are differentiated and therefore for the manner in which they are organized and function. The root use of “pattern” is as a name for the details that distinguish things.

理者，察之而幾微必區以別之名也。

Pattern is a name for details that when examined must be distinguished in order to differentiate things. (1/149)

天理云者，言乎自然之分理也。

“Patterns of nature” refer to distinguishing patterns that reflect how things are so-of-themselves. (2/150)

This descriptive use of “pattern” in turn yields a normative use: activity that conforms to pattern in the descriptive sense can be considered normatively appropriate insofar as it responds to how things actually work and so tends to yield fulfilling or successful outcomes. Dài expresses the normative use in glosses such as this:

以各如其區分曰理。

Each according with the appropriate distinction is called “pattern.” (3/151)

Dài explicitly ties pattern to human wants and feelings. We identify pattern in human relations by examining our emotional responses and adjusting our conduct until we achieve “balance” or “levelness” between our feelings and others’, which means the likes and dislikes on which we act are properly regulated.

自然之分理，以我之情繫人之情，而無不得其平是也。

Taking our feelings to measure others’ feelings, such that nothing is out of balance, is an example of a distinguishing pattern that reflects how things are so-of-themselves (*zírán*). (2/150)

情得其平，是為好惡之節，是為依乎天理。

The feelings achieving balance—this is regulation of the likes and dislikes, this is complying with patterns of nature. (2/150)

Dài holds that the normative patterns to follow in human relations—and thus the *dào*—are actually partly constituted by shared wants and feelings. Whatever norms or practices best fulfill the wants of all people—“all the world”—count as pattern.

人倫日用，聖人以通天下之情，遂天下之欲，權之而分理不爽，是謂理。

As to human relations and daily activity, the sages apply their comprehension of all the world’s feelings to fulfill all the world’s wants; weighing these such that there are no errors in the differentiating patterns—this is called “pattern.” (40/209)

The role of feelings (*qíng*) here is to indicate people’s basic wants or needs (*yù*). Dài uses both “feelings” and “wants/desires” in a special, technical sense, according to which the feelings and wants he refers to here are general, shared by everyone. Extending this point, he claims that pattern is not one or another person’s individual view about what fulfills people’s wants but a consensus among all persons.

心之所同然始謂之理，謂之義；則未至於同然，存乎其人之意見，非理也，非義也。

Only when all minds indeed are the same in affirming something to be so can we call it “pattern” or “duty”; as to things that aren’t yet affirmed the same by all but are instead among one’s personal views (*yìjiàn*), these are neither pattern nor duty. (4/151)

Dài also uses “pattern” to refer to “unexchangeable” norms that the things

we differentiate follow. He holds that different sorts of things, according to their differentiating details, or “pattern” in a descriptive sense, have certain regularities they follow, which are the most fulfilling or successful for things of that kind. These norms or regularities are also “pattern,” in a normative sense.

分之，各有其不易之則，名曰理。

Dividing things, each has its unexchangeable norms, which are named “pattern.” (4/151)

Unlike the *Dàoxué* thinkers, Dài holds that becoming morally virtuous is not a matter of realizing some mysterious, latent pattern within us, which brings us into alignment with the patterns of the world. It is to conform to the most appropriate or justified norms for handling human relations and daily activities—norms that are shaped by wants and feelings.

盡乎人之理非他，人倫日用盡乎其必然而已矣。

Thoroughly fulfilling the pattern of humanity is nothing other than thoroughly fulfilling what should-be-so (*birán*, the normative) in human relations and daily activity. (13/162)

In its descriptive use, then, pattern refers to the concrete distinguishing features in things by which they are differentiated. In its normative use, it refers to the appropriate norms or regularities by which to respond to, handle, or organize various things, according to how they are differentiated. In both uses, it refers simply to ways that material things—and thus *qi* 氣—are organized or operate. Consistent with Dài’s systematic monism, pattern is not separate from material things in any respect.

The connection between the descriptive and normative uses of “pattern” is the core of Dài’s account of normativity, so let’s now examine more closely how he links the two.

### 2.3 The “So-of-Itself” and the “Should-be-So”

One of Dài’s signature doctrines is that from facts about what is “so-of-itself” (*zìrán* 自然) of things, we can discover norms of conduct, which constitute normative patterns (*lǐ* 理) or a normative *dào*. The “so-of-itself” I interpret as referring to what comes naturally for creatures or things—how they are or behave in and of themselves, without outside influence. Dài’s master idea is that the “so-of-itself” allows us to identify conditions under which things flourish, by their own standards, and these conditions determine the content of ethical norms. A simple example he uses repeatedly is that it is “so-of-itself” for people to have wants for food, drink, and sexual relationships (飲食男女). Patterns of conduct that enable all people to fulfill these wants in a healthy,

sustainable way constitute norms.

A pivotal passage in which Dài links what is “so-of-itself” to what “should-be-so” and thus to normative patterns is the following:

由血氣之自然，而審察之以知其必然，是之謂理義。自然之與必然，非二事也。就其自然，明之盡而無幾微之失焉，是其必然也。如是而後無憾，如是而後安，是乃自然之極則。…故歸於必然，適完其自然。

If we examine what comes so-of-itself (*zìrán*) for the *xiěqì* in order to discover what should-be-so (*bìrán*), [the result] is what we call “pattern and duty.” The relation of the so-of-itself to the should-be-so is not that of two separate matters. With respect to what is so-of-itself for things, to fully understand them such that there isn’t the slightest error—this reveals what should-be-so. If, attaining this, there is peace, without regrets, then this is the ultimate norm for what is so-of-itself for things.... Thus by turning toward what should-be-so (*bìrán*), what is so-of-itself (*zìrán*) is brought to completion. (15/169)

As I interpret this passage, Dài proposes that if we thoroughly understand what is “so-of-itself” (*zìrán*) for the *xiěqì* (“blood-and-breath”)—that is, the inherent propensities arising from aspects of the human person that produce basic wants and feelings—we can identify conditions that best fulfill these propensities and so, presumably, produce a state of well-being. These conditions can be taken to determine what is ethically normative, which he dubs the “should-be-so” (*bìrán*) and equates with “pattern and duty.” As he says, then, how things are—the “so-of-itself”—and how they should be—the “should-be-so”—are inherently interrelated: they are not “two separate matters.” To turn to ethical norms is to “fulfill” the “so-of-itself” or “bring it to completion.” A sign that we have identified the “should-be-so” correctly is that people are at peace, without regrets, presumably because distress or regrets would indicate that norms with different content would better fulfill the “so-of-itself.” In this passage, Dài does not explicitly indicate whether the state of being “at peace” and “without regrets” is that of the individual agent following the norms or of the social group to whom the norms apply collectively. Other passages—such as section 40, translated earlier—provide reasons to think he expects this state to cover everyone affected by a candidate norm, because he takes intersubjective convergence in feelings to indicate correct identification of norms.

The best justified norms will be those that fulfill what comes so-of-itself for humanity so well that they cannot be improved on. These are norms that are “unexchangeable” or “cannot be exchanged” for alternative norms that better fulfill their purpose.

盡乎人之理非他，人倫日用盡乎其必然而已矣。推而極於不可易之為

必然。

Thoroughly fulfilling the pattern of humanity is nothing other than thoroughly fulfilling what should-be-so (*birán*) in human relations and daily activity. What should-be-so is [found by] extending [a potential norm] until it reaches a limit in what cannot be exchanged [for anything else]. (13/162–63)

Such norms identify pattern (*lǐ*). But whether a norm indeed “cannot be exchanged” for a better one is not a matter of any individual agent’s subjective judgment. If it genuinely corresponds to pattern, then everyone who uses their *xīnzhī* properly will agree that it is the “should-be-so.”

是為得理，是為心之所同然。

This is to attain pattern; this is what all minds are the same in holding to be so. (13/162)

The “should-be-so” norms that fulfill these criteria provide the concrete content of the normative *dào*, which Dài envisions as fulfilling the “so-of-itself” for all creatures. In his view, this *dào* is in effect the *dào* of nature itself, or, in his words, “the *dào* of Heaven and Earth, people and things.” It is both natural and normative.

歸於必然，適完其自然，此之謂自然之極致，天地人物之道於是乎盡。

By turning toward what should-be-so (*birán*), one brings what is so-of-itself (*zìrán*) to completion. This is called the ultimate fulfillment of what is so-of-itself (*zìrán*). In this way, the *dào* of Heaven and Earth, of people and things, is completely fulfilled. (32/199)

This passage reflects how Dài makes the move from the “so-of-itself” to the “should-be-so,” as well as how, on his view, ethical norms are ultimately justified and how the sphere of the normative fits into the broader scheme of things. Like many thinkers in the Chinese tradition, I suggest, Dài employs the notions of *dào* and pattern (*lǐ*) as primitive concepts, requiring no explanation in terms of other, more basic concepts. He considers human life to be inherently “patterned” in such a way that we pursue certain ends or values and follow a certain direction or path—that is, *dào*. These ends, values, and direction are part of the “so-of-itself.” Indeed, if asked, Dài would probably argue that insofar as human values exist at all, they must arise from the “so-of-itself”—from the inherent capacities, functioning, and ends nature bestows on us—as there is simply no other source of value. Such values are in effect part of “the *dào* of Heaven and Earth, people and things.” Whatever norms best fulfill them—for all of us, since we are all equally a part of nature—are inherently justified, as



they most effectively carry out our inherent *dào*, the *dào* of nature itself. This stance is naturalistic, assuming nothing more than the natural conditions of human life. It posits the existence of value as a natural phenomenon, insofar as it holds—defensibly, in my view—that human life has an inherent direction to it, minimally one of seeking material survival and overall well-being.

Although the step from the “so-of-itself” to the “should-be-so” may seem to be a step from “is” to “ought,” or from fact to value, then, I suggest that actually it is not. Instead, it assumes that values are inherently part of what is “so-of-itself” about human life and draws on these values to propose an account of normative patterns and *dào*. In effect, Dài is proposing a conception of the normative *dào* of human life grounded in a set of pretheoretical, basic values or ends that he takes to be a fundamental part of the human condition. Insofar as human beings are always already committed to proceeding by some pattern or other and to following some *dào* or other, the question for Dài is not how to ground the normative in the non-normative but how, from among various ways individuals and society do and could conduct themselves, to identify the most relevant or effective patterns and thus the most appropriate *dào* to follow. Given this way of framing his project, his central concern in treating ethical norms is not the metaethical issue of explaining their existence. It is to address the conceptual issue of explaining what norms are and the epistemic issue of identifying their content.

Still, Dài’s metaethical stance concerning the basis for ethical norms does shape his understanding of the form and content that any plausible norms must have. As the passages from the *Evidential Commentary* cited so far reflect, he holds that justified norms will have universal scope and in practice will fulfill the material and psychological welfare of all. In his words, the “should-be-so” will realize “the *dào* of Heaven and Earth, people and things” (32/199), such that “none of people’s wants go unfulfilled” (30/195). To support these claims, Dài could argue that the very notion of norms or patterns incorporates regularity, and so any defensible norm will apply similarly to all creatures and situations of the same kind. Given that it is a “so-of-itself” pattern that all creatures seek their own flourishing, he could contend that the only plausible candidates for normative patterns covering all creatures would be those by which all can flourish. (It is unclear to what extent he takes such norms to cover the welfare of nonhuman creatures.) He could further contend that such norms are the only candidates that can pass the test he proposes for identifying normative patterns, namely, *shù* 恕, or sympathetic consideration of others’ responses. Our next task, then, is to look more closely at Dài’s account of that test. Since his approach draws heavily on details of his moral psychology, however, we first need to sketch how he understands people’s psychological constitution.

### 3. Dài's Psychology

To elucidate Dài Zhèn's account of normativity, the content of norms, and the force they exert on human agents, we need to understand his picture of people's psychological makeup. The following is a brief overview.

According to Dài, human psychology has two aspects, with distinct but interrelated functions: the *xiěqì* 血氣 (“blood-and-breath”) and *xīnzhī* 心知 (“the understanding”). Both are integral parts of the person, jointly forming the “actualized object” or the “substance” (實體) of people's *xìng* 性, or inherent nature (16/173). The *xiěqì* refers to fluid- or vapor-like substances that circulate throughout the body and sustain our health, physiological functioning, and aspects of our psychology. The *xīnzhī* is the heart/mind's capacity for awareness, cognition, and judgment.

The *xiěqì* produces *yù* 欲, or “bodily wants” (8/156, 30/195). *Yù* is often interpreted as “desire,” but for Dài it has a narrower scope. You can have a desire to be a doctor or a desire that your favorite soccer team win the world cup, but to Dài these attitudes are not *yù*. (I conjecture he would say they are *xīn* 心, “mind-attitudes”; *zhì* 志, “intents”; or *yì* 意, “thoughts.”) In his psychology, *yù* refers only to craving (愛) or avoiding (畏) sounds, colours, smells, and tastes and to cherishing life and fearing death (懷生畏死, 21/179, 30/195). To reflect Dài's specialized conception of *yù*, I will interpret them as “wants” rather than as “desires.”

The *xiěqì* also produces *qíng* 情, or “feelings,” which arise in response to our interactions with things. Feelings are states such as joy, anger, sorrow, and delight (喜怒哀樂), which lead to misery or comfort (慘舒) (30/195). Craving food when you are hungry is a want (*yù*); feeling delighted when you get the food is a feeling (*qíng*). All people have similar wants and feelings, according to Dài, and these attitudes do not involve the *xīnzhī*. By contrast, in Dài's framework, the alarm and sympathy Mencius claims we have on seeing a child in danger are not “feelings” (*qíng*) but a “mind” (*xīn* 心), which we might interpret as an attitude, an inclination, or a concern. This sort of attitude or concern requires *xīnzhī*.

The *xīnzhī* possesses the capacity for perception and cognition, for aesthetic and normative judgment (美醜是非), and so for forming likes and dislikes (好惡). Through the *xīnzhī*, we grasp patterns, wants, emotions, norms such as propriety (*lǐ* 禮) and duty (*yì* 義), human relations, and so on. Moral attitudes such as sympathy, shame-and-loathing, respect, and approval-or-disapproval have a cognitive component, which arises from the *xīnzhī*. This cognitive component involves seeing an analogy between one's own wants and feelings and those of others, which triggers the moral attitude. The result, according to Dài, is that if we had no wants and feelings ourselves, we would be unable to have moral reactions such as sympathy to the situation of other people.

To feel the sympathetic concern associated with benevolence (*rén* 仁), then, we need to have wants (primarily, cherishing life and fearing death), which prompt us to have feelings such as delight in life and sorrow over death. To these states produced by our *xiěqì*, we apply our cognitive capacities—the *xīnzhī*—to grasp the importance of life to us and, by analogy, to everyone.

孟子言「今人乍見孺子將入井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心」，然則所謂惻隱、所謂仁者，非心知之外別「如有物焉藏於心」也，已知懷生而畏死，故怵惕於孺子之危，惻隱於孺子之死。

Mencius said, “If people were to suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they would all have a mind of alarm and compassion.” That being so, what’s called “compassion” or “benevolence” is not some distinct thing concealed in the mind, apart from the *xīnzhī*. We ourselves know [what it is] to cherish life and fear death, so we are alarmed at the danger to the child and compassionate about the child’s [risk of] death. (21/182)

We have already seen that Dài conceives of ethical norms as fulfilling people’s wants and feelings. Here we can see that, in his framework, our capacity to have moral attitudes—and, as we will see, to grasp ethical norms and values—is partly grounded in the wants of the *xiěqì*, which the *xīnzhī* recognizes and applies to evaluate and guide action. Sages act on the basis of their wants, applying them to pursue a *dào* that provides for the welfare of all.

聖人順其血氣之欲，則為相生養之道。

The sages follow the wants of their *xiěqì*, undertaking the *dào* of mutual growth and nurture. (15/169)

Indeed, Dài claims that the cardinal virtues stem from the wants and are integrally related to the *xiěqì* and the *xīnzhī*.

古賢聖所謂仁義禮智，不求於所謂欲之外，不離乎血氣心知。

What the ancient worthies and sages called “benevolence,” “right,” “propriety,” and “wisdom” they did not seek outside of what they called “wants” and was not separate from the *xiěqì* and the *xīnzhī*. (21/182)

For Dài, without wants and feelings, we would lose our capacity for moral agency, because we would be unable to refer to our own wants and feelings as a benchmark by which to understand the well-being of other persons.

#### 4. The Content of Norms

So how do we identify pattern and thus the norms we should follow? Recall that Dài conceives of normative pattern—the “should-be-so”—as fulfilling the wants of all the world (40/209). So conduct that conforms to pattern will guide

us in attaining and preserving a basic state of well-being for all, one that satisfies shared wants. Rather than directly specifying the content of the relevant norms, however, Dài's approach is to present a method by which to identify them in various contexts. In practice, Dài seems to regard the appropriate norms as largely reflected in familiar cardinal virtues such as benevolence, duty, and propriety (see, e.g., 15/169).

Dài's proposal is that we can identify norms through a process of measuring others' feelings by reference to our own, employing *shù* 恕, the sympathetic, reflective consideration associated with the “negative golden rule” of *Analects* 15:24.<sup>2</sup> This reflective process covers both “treatment” (施), or what we do to others, and “responsibilities” (責), or what we demand from them. Treatment and responsibilities that, on reflection, we find that we ourselves could accept conform to proper pattern; those we could not accept diverge from pattern.

凡有所施於人，反躬而靜思之：「人以此施於我，能受之乎？」凡有所責於人，反躬而靜思之：「人以此責於我，能盡之乎？」以我絜之人，則理明。

Any time you do something to others, reflect and quietly consider: “If others did this to me, could I accept it?” Any time you hold others responsible for something, reflect and quietly consider, “If others held me responsible for this, could I fulfill the responsibility?” If we use ourselves [as a benchmark] to measure [whether things are suitable] for others, pattern becomes clear. (2/150)

In conducting this reflection, the indicator of whether we could or could not accept the treatment we are considering is our “feelings” (*qíng*)—specifically, according to Dài's moral psychology, the misery or comfort (慘舒) we feel in response to the joy, anger, sorrow, or delight (喜怒哀樂) incited by our interactions with things. Only because we have wants do we have feelings, and feelings are the basic data we work from to discover pattern.

反躬者，以人之逞其欲，思身受之之情也。

Reflection is a matter of considering what feelings we would have if others were to indulge their wants and we were on the receiving end. (2/150)

以情絜情而無爽失，於行事誠得其理矣。

Using our feelings to measure others' feelings without error, in conducting affairs we can indeed attain their patterns. (3/151)

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<sup>2</sup> In *Analects* 15:24, Zǐgòng asks Confucius for a single maxim that we can practice our entire lives, and Confucius responds “Isn't it *shù*! What you yourself do not want, do not do to others” (其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人).

Dài contends that we identify pattern when we find that, were we on the receiving end of some conduct, our feelings would be such that we could accept that conduct. Our feelings then achieve “balance” or “equilibrium” (*píng* 平) with others.<sup>3</sup> This balance represents moderation or regulation of the likes and dislikes, the action-guiding attitudes of the *xīnzhī*, which probably arise in response to miserable or comfortable (慘舒) feelings.

情得其平，是為好惡之節，是為依乎天理。

The feelings achieving balance—this is regulation of the likes and dislikes, this is complying with the patterns of nature. (2/150)

天理云者，言乎自然之分理也；自然之分理，以我之情繫人之情，而無不得其平是也。

“Patterns of nature” refer to a distinguishing pattern that reflects how things are so-of-themselves. Taking our feelings to measure others’ feelings, such that nothing is out of balance, is just this. (2/150)

When our feelings accurately correspond to others’, they reflect pattern (*lǐ*), or the correct norms. This is the point of Dài’s famous remark that pattern is not erring in regard to feelings (理也者，情之不喪失也, 2/150). We must measure others’ feelings accurately; pattern then lies in conduct that fits the feelings, with neither excess nor deficiency.

無過情無不及情之謂理。

Neither exceeding the feelings nor falling short of them is called “pattern.” (3/151)

As these passages make clear, Dài’s version of *shù* 恕 is distinct from that in the *Analects*. As explicated in the *Analects*, *shù* is a process of taking one’s own aversions as a model for what to avoid in our treatment of others. Dài’s proposal to measure others’ feelings with our own is not primarily aimed at using ourself as a model for our treatment of others. Rather, he is attempting to use (purportedly) shared responses of the *xiěqì* as a way to identify what tends to satisfy everyone’s wants and feelings—what fulfills the “so-of-itself” for human life, considered collectively, and thus constitutes pattern.

Why does Dài focus on feelings (*qíng*), which issue from the *xiěqì*, rather than the attitudes of our *xīnzhī*? One reason may be that his main concern is with basic material and psychological welfare, which he sees as directly reflected in the responses of the *xiěqì*. But the pivotal reason is that, in his view,

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<sup>3</sup> This interpretation is a preliminary hypothesis about Dài’s conception of *píng* 平, which requires further examination.

unlike the “personal views” (*yìjiàn* 意見) of the *xīnzhī*, which may vary from person to person, many or all of people’s wants (*yù*) and feelings (*qíng*) are “regular” or “constant” (*cháng* 常) across all persons. Thus our individual responses may indeed be representative of feelings shared by all, and by reflecting on our responses we may be able to identify regular, constant patterns that are not merely our personal opinions.

曰「所不欲」，曰「所惡」，不過人之常情...。惟以情繫情，故其於事也，非心出一意見以處之。

“What you do not want” and “what you dislike” are simply people’s constant or regular feelings....Because one measures feelings with feelings, in approaching affairs, one doesn’t handle them by personal views issuing from one’s mind. (5/153)

Dài’s aim is to offer a procedure for discovering “norms that cannot be exchanged” (不易之則) for anything more suitable, which conform to the objective content of pattern. One condition for such norms is that all persons affirm them. If different agents “measure” others’ feelings accurately, they can be expected to converge in what they take to be the apt norms.

心之所同然始謂之理，謂之義……凡一人以為然，天下萬世皆曰「是不可易也」，此之謂同然。

Only when all minds indeed are the same in affirming something to be so can we call it “pattern” or “duty.”...When all persons affirm something and a myriad generations in the world all say, “this cannot be exchanged [for anything else],” this is called “[all being] the same in affirming it to be so.” (4/151)

Unlike in the *Analects*, then, Dài’s use of *shù* and self-reflection is not intended only as a way of evaluating our own conduct by putting ourselves in others’ place. It is a procedure for identifying candidates for norms that everyone will affirm, on the grounds that they fulfill what comes “so-of-itself” for all of us, according to our shared, “constant” (常) wants and feelings.

## 5. Normative Force

Suppose that, through what we take to be meticulous, sympathetic application of *shù* 恕, we tentatively identify norms to follow. In Dài Zhèn’s framework, what is it about these norms and our relation to them that pushes or guides us to follow them?

One aspect of their normative force may arise directly from the claim that norms bring what is “so-of-itself” to fulfillment. If Dài is correct in contending that the “so-in-itself” of human life is always already directed toward certain wants, and if shared observance of norms is indeed the path toward fulfilling

those wants—a controversial but not implausible premise—then the norms may already have a grip on us, insofar as they may be the path of least resistance toward fulfilling our preexisting ends. A critic might argue, however, that any motivational or justificatory force that arises from our wants in this way is only instrumental, not ethical. We might be following the norms only because doing so is prudential or expedient, not because it is ethically right.

Drawing on Mencian themes, Dài proposes a separate, considerably stronger account. *Mencius* 6A:7 famously claims that because all humans are the “same kind” (同類) of creature, our mouths, ears, and eyes delight in the same flavors, sounds, and appearances. An analogous generalization, the text contends, holds for the relation of the *xīn* 心 (heart-mind) to pattern and duty (理義): “pattern and duty delight our *xīn* just as fine meats delight our mouths.” The text implies that this relation to pattern and duty is a feature of people’s shared *xìng* 性 (inherent dispositions), which distinguishes us from other creatures, such as dogs and horses.

Dài develops these ideas into an outlook on which the constitution of the human heart-mind is such that ethical norms have an inherent pull on us. What is distinctive of human agency, he asserts, is precisely our responsiveness to normativity.

夫人之異於物者，人能明於必然，百物之生各遂其自然也。

Now the difference between people and other creatures is that people can understand what should-be-so (*bìrán*), while the lives of the hundred creatures lie in each pursuing what is so-of-itself (*zìrán*) for them. (15/167)

Echoing the *Mencius*, Dài claims that just as our sense organs can discern flavors, sounds, and sights and delight in those that are beautiful, the mind can discern pattern and duty in the details of affairs and delight in them because they are ethically right.

血氣心知，有自具之能：口能辨味，耳能辨聲，目能辨色，心能辨夫理義。味與聲色，在物不在我，接於我之血氣，能辨之而悅之；其悅者，必其尤美者也。理義在事情之條分縷析，接於我之心知，能辨之而悅之；其悅者，必其至是者也。(6/153–54)

The *xiěqì* and the *xīnzhī* are equipped with their own capacities: the mouth can distinguish flavors, the ears can distinguish sounds, the eyes can distinguish appearances, the mind can distinguish pattern and duty. Flavors, sounds, and appearances lie in the objects, not in us, but when they contact our *xiěqì*, it can distinguish and delight in them. That our *xiěqì* delights in them is surely because of their special beauty. Pattern and duty lie in the details and particulars of affairs, but when they contact our *xīnzhī*, it can distinguish and delight in them. That it delights in them is surely because they are most right. (6/153–54)

Dài claims that it is so-of-itself (*zìrán*) for the *xīnzhī* to be satisfied by conformity to pattern and duty (15/169). Indeed, our so-in-itself fondness for virtue, he suggests, is the basis for the Mencian claim that people's *xìng* 性 is good (15/169). Accordingly, conducting ourselves by ethical norms fulfills what comes so-of-itself for us. By our *xìng*, we tend to be satisfied by conformity to pattern and duty, or moral norms, and distressed by violating them.

凡人行一事，有當於理義，其心氣必暢然自得；悖於理義，心氣必沮喪自失，以此見心之於理義，一同乎血氣之於嗜欲，皆性使然耳。

Any time someone carries out some matter, if it accords with pattern and duty, the temper of their *xīn* is surely delightedly self-fulfilled; if it conflicts with pattern and duty, the temper of their *xīn* is surely dejected and frustrated. This shows that the *xīn*'s relation to pattern and duty is identical to that of the *xiěqì* to preferences and wants—both are simply a matter of *xìng* making them so. (8/156)

Just as the *xiěqì* is inherently driven to pursue the satisfaction of our wants, such as food, drink, and sexual relations, the *xīnzhī* is driven to act in accordance with pattern and duty. Insofar as we apply the *xīnzhī* correctly, aptly judging what is permissible or not (可否) according to the norms associated with various contexts (8/156), we are inherently predisposed to follow proper pattern. Doing so satisfies the *xīnzhī* because it is right. Inappropriate conduct is due to a failure to fully grasp pattern and conform to duty (15/169).

## 6. Critical Reflections

Dài's discussion yields a picture of the flourishing or fulfilled human life as inherently guided by normative relations. We understand our actions as responding to patterns that have normative implications, and we seek to act in ways we consider to align with these patterns. At first blush, this picture may seem naively optimistic about human moral psychology, but I suggest that Dài's core contention is actually quite plausible: he is claiming that human psychology is inherently responsive to norms, such that we attain a form of fulfillment when we conduct ourselves according to them and thus according to pattern and *dào*. To some extent, Dài is underscoring aspects of human psychology identified by the Mohists two millennia before him and easily observable today. Part of what it is to be human is to care about and be responsive to norms—as the Mohists put it, to draw and act on *shì-fēi* 是非 distinctions reflecting our commitment to some conception of *yì* 義, the normative or the moral. To adapt Wilfrid Sellars's famous figure of speech, much of human life falls within various games of giving and asking for reasons, and we care about playing these games well and so being able to justify our opinions and conduct, both to ourselves and to others. Sociopaths aside, even people who carry out abhorrent actions are typically concerned to reassure



themselves and others that their conduct is actually justified. The problem is not that they are unresponsive to ethical normativity in itself. It is that their understanding and application of ethical norms are horribly misguided. Explaining our responsiveness to normative “force” is not difficult: it is baked into our character as members of human communities, caught up in, as Dài would say, “the *dào* of Heaven and Earth, people and things.” The ethical and philosophical challenge is to explain how we can justifiably hold that we are getting the norms right. Might we derive what Dài calls “delighted self-fulfillment” (暢然自得) from conduct that to us seems normatively appropriate but actually is pernicious and abhorrent?

Dài himself is alert to this worry. He stresses that guiding action aptly is not simply a matter of the *xīn* issuing an opinion about what is or is not permissible but of conforming to the norms actually associated with things. As he says, referring to a passage in *Mencius* 6A:6 that quotes Confucius commenting on a poem, “for any thing, surely there is [a corresponding] norm” (8/156, see too 3/151). Indeed, a pillar of Dài’s thought is that conduct must be assessable by external criteria, not merely by the agent’s subjective convictions about pattern. He specifically warns against the risk of acting merely on one’s “personal views” (*yijiàn*) rather than pattern:

即其人廉潔自持，心無私慝，而至於處斷一事，責詰一人，憑在己之意見，是其所是而非其所非…往往人受其禍，己且終身不寤。

Even if people are honest and conscientious and their mind has no hidden vices, when it comes to judging some affair or reproaching someone, if they rely on their personal views (*yijiàn*), deeming right what they affirm as right and wrong what they affirm as wrong...[then] again and again they will harm others, reaching the end of their lives without awakening. (5/152)

A critical question to ask, then, is whether Dài’s proposed method for identifying norms can indeed reliably guide agents to act according to appropriate patterns rather than merely by their own personal views. On this point, I am sceptical that his approach can succeed without extensive revision. To be sure, his conception of pattern as “balancing” (平) the feelings—or, broadening his idea somewhat, the standpoint—of all sides affected by our conduct is plausible. “Balancing” the evaluative responses of different agents seems an attractive proposal for moving from the fact that human life inevitably has a so-of-itself direction embodying certain values to a defensible conception of an interpersonal, shared, impartial *dào*. But Dài’s method remains vulnerable to a standard objection to “golden rule” approaches to impartiality or ethical justification: perhaps our own feelings (*qíng*) are not a reliable indicator of what others will find acceptable or of what is fair or just, pattern (*lǐ*) or *dào*. Dài attempts to sidestep this problem by assuming that everyone’s feelings are the

same, because they issue from the basic wants of our similar *xiěqì* (blood-and-breath). But his approach faces at least two difficulties. One is that although fulfilling the wants of the *xiěqì* is surely among the proper patterns of the human *dào*, there are good reasons to think that other goods, and thus other patterns, are also relevant. One obvious example of such a good is the fulfillment of the *xīnzhī* (understanding). After all, Dài himself appeals to fulfillment of what is so-in-itself for the *xīnzhī* to explain the grip of normativity on us. But since different persons' *xīnzhī* have different aptitudes and interests, what fulfills the so-in-itself for the *xīnzhī* is likely to vary for different persons. If we incorporate fulfillment of the *xīnzhī* into the scope of the relevant patterns, then, it is unlikely that reflection on our *qíng* can still reliably serve as an accurate measure of others' standpoint, well-being, or fulfillment.

The second, more pressing difficulty is that *qíng* are probably not independent of the functioning of the *xīnzhī*, and thus of the effects of our personal *yìjiàn*, in the way Dài needs for the method of “using feelings to measure feelings” to avoid potential bias arising from our *yìjiàn*. As a number of passages in the *Zhuāngzǐ* emphasize, the *qíng* we experience will inevitably be affected by our interpretation of the significance of our actions and circumstances, which is at least partly determined by the operations of the *xīnzhī*. Moreover, our hypothetical projection of the impact of our actions on others will inevitably draw on our understanding of their circumstances and our own, as construed by the *xīnzhī*. There is an ineliminable risk of unreliable *yìjiàn* affecting our evaluation of our own and others' *qíng*. A more reliable way of attaining balance across different agents' standpoints would probably be to consult them directly, rather than only projecting our *qíng* onto them, since no matter how sympathetically we conduct such projection, it remains subjective and potentially biased. Ultimately, like the tendencies he criticizes in his *Dàoxué* predecessors, Dài's approach remains too focused on the subjective psychology of the individual agent rather than on discovering pattern through practical engagement with one's circumstances, including the demands and agency of other persons. If pattern is indeed what everyone affirms, why not seek to identify it through public discussion of our treatment of and responsibilities toward each other?

Dài offers a *prima facie* attractive construal of pattern as norms that fulfill or complete what is so-of-itself for humanity and thus promote human flourishing. As with any ethical approach that grounds norms in a conception of flourishing, however, Dài owes us an explanation of exactly what fulfillment or flourishing is, and it is difficult to see how he could discharge this requirement in a way that would yield determinate, “unexchangeable” norms. The *Evidential Study* leaves the content of the “so-of-itself” and its fulfillment largely unspecified, beyond core wants associated with basic welfare. Given the variety of people's talents and interests and the vast range of activities through which they seem to flourish, however, one cannot plausibly argue that the “so-

of-itself” for humanity comprises only basic welfare and nothing more. The problem for Dài’s stance is that as we expand the scope of what we consider “so-in-itself” aspects of human life, the likelihood that fulfilling the “so-in-itself” for everyone will converge on some determinate set of “unexchangeable” norms shrinks proportionately. The plurality of ways in which people might fulfill what comes “so-of-itself” for them tends to support a picture on which there could be a plurality of different, perhaps evolving norms. Moreover, beyond basic well-being, activities that come “so-in-itself” for human beings may have no fixed or determinate ends that best fulfill them. Perhaps what is distinctive of human life is that the “so-of-itself” for us is open-ended and variable. Some aspects of life that come naturally to us—career directions and leisure pursuits, for example—may not have ends specific enough for us to settle on particular norms by which they should be conducted. Even shared, spontaneously arising wants that do have relatively determinate ends—such as Dài’s example of food, drink, and sexual relationships (飲食男女)—might be fulfilled through a variety of norms. No doubt norms concerning diet and sexuality have changed significantly between Dài’s own time and our own.

I doubt, then, that Dài’s proposal to identify unexchangeable norms by applying feelings to measure feelings can succeed. In practice, there may be no unexchangeable norms, but only vague, variable, evolving guidelines. Still, a strength of Dài’s approach is his conception of such guidelines as identifiable through a reciprocal “balance” between what comes “so-of-itself” for different agents, resulting in a state of “peace,” “without regrets” (15/169). As Dài suggests, our ability to discover and abide by such guidelines may indeed be the highest fulfillment of humanity’s inherent responsiveness to pattern and *dào*.