

# The Nature and Force of Normativity in DAI Zhen

Chris Fraser

Hon-Yin and Suet-Fong Chan Professor

University of Hong Kong

## 1. Introduction

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

A core interpretive hypothesis I will work from is that when DAI refers to what is *biran* 必然, he is referring to ethical normativity. His use of the phrase *biran* is distinct from uses in which this term refers to exceptionless or lawlike necessity. In logical contexts today, for example, *biran* often refers to logical necessity, while in empirical contexts it may refer to causal necessity. By contrast, I suggest that DAI uses the phrase to refer to what normatively ought to be the case or should be done. I will interpret *biran* as the “imperative” or “must-be-so” (that is, how things must, should, or ought to be), which I suggest is DAI's term of art for the normative.

DAI's term for norms themselves is *ze* 則, and his explanation of why certain forms of conduct or character traits indeed have the status of norms is that they conform to or express *li* 理, “orderly pattern.” “*Li*” in effect refers to patterns, relations, and modes of conduct that constitute *dao* 道, the ethically apt way of life. DAI famously contends that pattern and *dao* 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, for DAI, *li* 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, relations, and conduct by which human life—and natural processes—proceeds most effectively and appropriately, given human ends as understood according to pattern in a descriptive sense.

A central tenet in DAI's thought is that the normative, or *biran*, for humanity can be identified through examination of spontaneous, naturally arising features of human life, such as basic wants or needs, which he calls the “self-so” or “so-of-

---

<sup>1</sup> Citations to DAI's work give section numbers in the *Mengzi Ziyi Shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證 followed by page numbers in DAI (2010).

itself” (*ziran* 自然). The “self-so” plays a pivotal role in DAI’s approach to normativity, as we will explore in detail below. Norms are in effect guidelines to how various self-so features of life—primarily basic wants and feelings—are most effectively fulfilled. Intriguingly, DAI contends that what is self-so for human life can be wholly fulfilled only when we knowingly conform to appropriate norms of conduct. DAI’s elaboration of these ideas, I will argue, 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 chapter attempts to clarify exactly what ethical norms are, according to DAI, and what it is about them he thinks gives us decisive grounds to follow them. I will contend that DAI’s account points toward a plausible way to understand norms, albeit one that is too narrow and less determinate than he seems to think. To furnish a more convincing treatment of normativity, DAI’s approach probably needs to be expanded and construed as a basis for public discussion, rather than only personal moral reflection.

## 2. Norms and Normativity

DAI’s account of the nature of norms and normativity revolves around four core concepts: *dao* 道 (the way), *li* 理 (pattern), *ze* 則 (norms), and *biran* 必然 (the normative or imperative). The following subsections explore these concepts and the interrelations between them. The aim is to explain DAI’s view of the structure and basis of ethical normativity.

### 2.1 *Dao*

For DAI Zhen, ethical norms are grounded in and explained by the content of *dao* 道, or “the way,” and *li* 理, or “pattern.” This and the following subsection present an interpretation of these two concepts as DAI uses them.

DAI holds a naturalistic view of both *dao* and pattern. *Dao* 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 *dao* of nature is the continuing flow of natural phenomena, by which everything is generated and transforms. Like many thinkers in the Ruist tradition, DAI conceives of natural processes as constituted by the orderly flow of shifting and transforming *qi* 氣 (vital breath or stuff), yielding what was referred to as *sheng sheng* 生生, the proliferating generation of things through natural processes of birth and growth.

道，猶行也。氣化流行，生生不息，是故謂之道。

The *dao* is like a process/journey. The transformation and flow of *qi* generates generation (*sheng sheng*) without cease, and thus it is called “*dao*.” (16/173)

The *dao* 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 *dao* of humanity—human relations, daily activity, and our personal conduct are all part of it. As to heaven and earth, the transformation and flow of *qi* generates generation without cease—this is what we call “*dao*.” As to people and other creatures, all matters related to generating generation, which like the transformations of *qi* also go on without end—this is what we call “*dao*.” (32/197)

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

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 *dao*. . . . Dwelling, eating and drinking, speaking and moving, our person and everything we see around us—all of this is appropriately regarded as *dao*. (33/200)

As explicated in these quotations, *dao* is a descriptive concept referring to natural processes or activities. But we can also speak of *dao* as normative, as the proper path to follow. DAI himself observes that *dao* has both descriptive and normative uses. He explains that referring to daily activity as *dao* is to “distinguish things from [their corresponding] norms” and thus to refer descriptively to *dao* 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 *dao* is to “combine things with norms” and so use *dao* prescriptively, expressing a view about the normatively proper way to do things.

人倫日用，其物也；曰仁，曰義，曰禮，其則也。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。

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

In the first, descriptive use, *dao* 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, *dao* refers directly to normatively proper conduct, such as conduct that conforms to good measure or to “centered constancy.”<sup>2</sup>

DAI’s strategy for connecting the descriptive and the normative dimensions of *dao* 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 “unchanging norms” or “norms that cannot be exchanged” (不易之則). I suggest that the specific import here of the term *yi* 易 (“change,” “exchange”) is not to assert that these norms are absolute or invariable. (Because DAI endorses the Mencian concept of *quan* 權, or contextual discretion, he probably allows that in some circumstances, an “unchanging” norm may be defeasible.<sup>3</sup>) The point is to suggest that, in various contexts, we will find certain norms cannot be “exchanged” for other norms that more effectively fulfill the ends of people’s activity. These “unchanging” norms constitute the normative *dao*. 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 *dao*.

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 *dao* and virtue (*de*) 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, DAI’s view is that the ends of the normative *dao* are universal: it fulfills the wants and feelings of all persons, not only those of the individual agent.<sup>4</sup> Just what norms will satisfy these ends he takes to be something we can discover through sympathetic reflection—discussed in section 4—and

---

<sup>2</sup> My interpretation here thus diverges from Angle’s (2025), according to which DAI uses “*dao*” only normatively, not both normatively and descriptively. Angle suggests that “DAI’s point is not to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive, but rather to emphasize that the way is not an abstract thing apart from our actual, daily functioning.” I agree that DAI is concerned to emphasize that *dao* is not a “thing” or an “object” (*wu* 物) apart from “human relations and daily activity.” As I read him, however, DAI’s explanatory strategy is to clarify that “*dao*” can be used both descriptively, to refer to actual conduct, and prescriptively, to refer to normatively correct conduct, without thereby reifying *dao* into a separate “object” distinct from conduct. As DAI says, ethical terms such as benevolence or duty refer to “standards” (*zhun ze* 準則) by which to evaluate whether the actual performance of *dao* in “human relations and daily activity” is “without fault,” not objects that are somehow “added to” the performance of *dao* (33/200).

<sup>3</sup> On this point, see also the discussion of *quan* in CHONG (2025).

<sup>4</sup> As SHUN (2002: 221) remarks, “the goal is...that everyone’s *yu* is appropriately satisfied and *qing* appropriately attained.”

presumably confirm by trial and error. So for DAI the normative *dao* is not abstract or transcendent but something practical we can investigate through inquiry. This inquiry is directed at identifying the patterns (*li* 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 Song- and Ming-era predecessors, DAI does not treat *li* 理 (orderly pattern) as a distinct, abstract entity that combines with *qi* 氣 (vital breath, dynamic 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. DAI contends that such views of pattern (*li*) inevitably slide into a pernicious dualism that renders the relation between pattern and the concrete, material world inexplicable.<sup>5</sup> Instead, he contends that “*li* 理” is simply a term for how things are properly differentiated and therefore for the manner in which they are organized and function.<sup>6</sup>

The root use of “pattern” (*li*) 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 self-so distinguishing patterns. (2/150)

Of course, as these remarks reflect, not just any way of differentiating things counts as pattern. Pattern refers to “self-so” features that “must” be distinguished in order to understand the correct, orderly organization of things. Observers can be mistaken in their grasp of pattern.

The descriptive use of “pattern” (*li*) in turn yields a normative use: activity that conforms to orderly 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. DAI expresses this normative use of pattern in glosses such as this:

---

<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of *li*, see Angle (2025). The extent to which DAI is accurate or fair in his critical evaluation of his predecessors on these issues is controversial. For recent detailed discussions of these points, see SHUN (2002), Tiwald (2010a), ZHENG (2015), and CHOI (2019).

<sup>6</sup> LEE summarizes these aspects of *li* by suggesting the term is a general label for “causal laws, moral principles, and the like” (1991: 406). He thus takes *li* to have both descriptive (including causal) and prescriptive uses, as I do below. Angle (2025) proposes that *li* is “an emergent property that operates at a higher level than” mere causality. I suggest that the concept of *li* could designate causal relations in some contexts and normative relations in others, these normative relations likely presupposing certain causal relations about how people or things flourish.

以各如其區分曰理。

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

DAI ties pattern to human wants and feelings. We identify orderly pattern in human relations by examining our emotional responses and adjusting our conduct until we achieve “balance” or “equilibrium” (*ping* 平) between our feelings and others’. This balance indicates that 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 a self-so distinguishing pattern. (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)

Indeed, the normative patterns (*li*) to follow in human relations—and thus the *dao*—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。

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

In this passage we see DAI tying together the descriptive use of pattern to refer to the differentiating features of things with the normative use to refer to the orderly or correct pattern of human conduct. Normatively appropriate pattern is attained when the sages fulfill human wants in a manner that addresses “without error” the “differentiating patterns” (*fen li* 分理) involved in human relations and daily activity. Feelings (*qing*) indicate people’s basic wants or needs (*yu*). As section 3 will explain, DAI uses both “feelings” and “wants” in a restricted, technical sense, according to which the content of our feelings and wants is general, common to everyone.

A complementary claim is that pattern is not identified merely through one or another person’s individual opinion about what fulfills people’s wants and feelings. Only the object of a consensus among all persons can qualify as pattern.

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 what all minds similarly affirm to be so can be called “pattern” or “duty”; what isn’t similarly affirmed to be so but instead falls among people’s personal opinions (*yijian*) is neither pattern nor duty. (4/151)

DAI extends the normative use of “pattern” (*li* 理) to refer to “unchanging” 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。

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

Among these unchanging norms are presumably the patterns by which the multitude of things in nature are produced and develop. Recall DAI’s view that *dao* is the endless process in which everything in nature is produced and proliferates—the “production of life” or the “generating of generation” (*sheng sheng*), as I rendered it above. This process proceeds according to inherent, self-so patterns, which constitute a descriptive *dao*. Insofar as we take the flourishing of life to be a basic end, which orients the direction of the *dao* we follow, these patterns also constitute a normative *dao*.

由其生生，有自然之條理。……惟條理，是以生生；條理苟失，則生生之道絕。

From the generating of generation, there are self-so (*ziran*) orderly patterns....Only by virtue of the patterns is there the generating of generation; if [things] deviate from the patterns, the *dao* of generating generation is broken off. (36/204)

Unlike the *Daoxue* thinkers, DAI 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 is imperative (*biran*, the normative) in human relations and daily activity. (13/162)

In its descriptive use, then, *li* 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 DAI’s systematic monism, pattern is not separate from material things in any respect.

The connection between the descriptive and normative uses of pattern (*li*) is the core of DAI’s account of normativity, so let’s now examine more closely how he links the two.

### 2.3 The Self-So and the Imperative

One of DAI’s signature doctrines is that from facts about what is “self-so” (*ziran* 自然) of things, we can discover norms of conduct, which constitute normative patterns (*li* 理) or a normative *dao*. The concept of the self-so refers to how creatures or things are, behave, or proceed in and of themselves, without interference, deliberate direction, or outside influence. The notion of the self-so is commonly associated with the Daoist tradition of thought, in which it plays a prominent role. For example, passages in the *Daodejing* 道德經 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 treat what is self-so as instantiating or indicative of the apt *dao*,<sup>7</sup> and the fourth-century CE Daoist thinker Guo Xiang 郭象 seems to equate the self-so with *dao*, commenting that “when the self-so is manifested, things fulfill their *dao*” (自然既明則物得其道也) (Guo 1961: 471). Such claims express the underlying view that the normatively appropriate *dao* aligns with the natural, inherent propensities of things, presumably because both are purportedly grounded in the patterns of nature. Although much less prominent in the Ruist tradition, the concept of the self-so is not entirely absent. For instance, Zhu Xi 朱熹 seems to imply that *ziran* is a constituent feature of full ethical virtue, as he remarks that the master virtue of “sincerity” (*cheng* 誠) can be wholly fulfilled only when manifested in daily life with the “self-so-ness of a natural pattern” (天理之自然) (Li 1994: 1563). Insofar as Zhu or other Ruist thinkers associate the self-so with “natural pattern” (*tian li*) and “natural pattern” with what is normatively right, they may implicitly acknowledge a conceptual connection between what is self-so and ethical norms. DAI Zhen goes far beyond merely suggesting such a conceptual association, however. His distinctive, original contribution is to propose an explanation of the normative—*biran*, the “imperative” or what “must-be-so”—in terms of the self-so. To DAI, the link between the two bolsters his contention that all aspects of human life—including

<sup>7</sup> For example, *Daodejing* section 25 famously states that *dao* follows what is self-so as a model (道法自然). Book 5 of the *Zhuangzi* describes the sage as someone who “always goes by what is self-so without trying to add to life” (常因自然而不益生也) (GUO 1961: 221).

self-so wants for physiological satisfaction, for example—are incorporated into the normative *dao* (15/168–70).

DAI draws a clear distinction between the imperative (*biran*) as a normative or evaluative concept and the self-so (*ziran*). The latter refers to descriptive features of how things are or behave, as reflected in their *xing*, or inherent nature.

善者，稱其純粹中正之名；性者，指其實體實事之名。……善，其必然也；性，其自然也。

“Good” is a term designating what is pure and correct; “*xing*” is a term indicating actual, material conditions or facts....Good is what is imperative; *xing* is what is self-so. (32/199)

DAI’s master idea is that the self-so allows us to identify conditions under which things flourish, by their own inherent standards, and these conditions determine the content of ethical norms. A simple example he uses repeatedly is that it is self-so for people to have wants for food, drink, and sexual relationships. Patterns of conduct that enable all people to fulfill these wants in a healthy, sustainable way constitute norms.<sup>8</sup>

A pivotal passage in which DAI links what is self-so to what is imperative and thus to normative patterns is the following:<sup>9</sup>

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 is self-so (*ziran*) for the *xieqi* in order to discover what is imperative (*biran*) for it, [the result] is what we call “pattern and duty.” The self-so and the imperative are not two separate matters. With respect to the self-so, to fully understand it without the slightest error reveals what is imperative for it. Only in this way can one be at peace, without regrets; this is the ultimate norm for the self-so....Thus by turning toward what is imperative (*biran*), we bring the self-so (*ziran*) to completion. (15/169)

As I interpret this passage, DAI proposes that if we thoroughly understand what is self-so (*ziran*) for the *xieqi* (“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

<sup>8</sup> For a complementary, more detailed treatment of DAI’s conception of ethical norms, see the discussion of “life-fulfillment” and “order” in Tiwald (2025). The place of self-interested desires in the “self-so” is what enables DAI to affirm that some self-interested desires are consistent with moral virtue, as Tiwald argues (2010a: 418; 2011: 33). Compare too the discussion of the “should-be-so” and the “self-so” in SHUN (2002: 230). See also CHONG (2021, 2025) on the relation between *ziran* and *biran*, which he proposes shapes an ethics in which health is the basic good.

<sup>9</sup> I owe my awareness of this crucial passage to CHONG (2021: 33–35). CHONG expands his treatment of the relation between *ziran* and *biran* in CHONG (2025).

so, presumably, produce a state of well-being. (DAI's understanding of the *xieqi* will be described in more detail in section 3.) These conditions can be taken to determine what is ethically normative, which he dubs what is "imperative" (*biran*) and equates with orderly pattern and duty. As he says, then, how things are—the self-so—and how they ought to be—the imperative—are inherently interrelated: they are not "two separate matters." To turn to ethical norms is to "fulfill" the self-so or "bring it to completion." A sign that we have successfully conformed to what is imperative is that people are at peace, without regrets, presumably because distress or regrets would indicate that by following alternative norms, with different content, we could better fulfill the self-so. In this passage, DAI does not specify 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 self-so for humanity so well that they cannot be improved on. These are norms that are "unchanging" or "cannot be exchanged" for alternative norms that better suit 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 is imperative (*biran*) in human relations and daily activity. The imperative is [constituted by] extending [a potential norm] until it reaches a limit in what cannot be exchanged [for anything more suitable]. (13/162–63)

Such norms align with pattern (*li*). But whether a norm indeed cannot be exchanged for a better one is not a matter of any individual agent's subjective judgment. If a candidate norm genuinely corresponds to pattern, then everyone who uses their *xinzhi* properly will agree that it constitutes what is imperative.

是為得理，是為心之所同然。

This is to attain pattern; this is what all minds similarly affirm to be so. (13/162)

Norms that fulfill these criteria provide the concrete content of the normative *dao*, which DAI envisions as fulfilling the self-so for all creatures. In his view, this *dao* is in effect the *dao* of nature itself, or, in his words, "the *dao* of Heaven and Earth, people and other creatures." 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 is imperative (*biran*), one brings what is self-so (*ziran*) to completion. This is called the ultimate fulfillment of what is self-so (*ziran*). In this way, the *dao* of heaven and earth, of people and other creatures, is completely fulfilled. (32/199)

This passage reflects how DAI makes the move from the self-so to the imperative 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, DAI employs the notions of *dao* (way) and pattern (*li*) as primitive concepts, requiring no explanation in terms of other, more basic concepts. It is simply a brute fact that our activity is organized around some conception of *dao* and pattern. That is, DAI considers human life to be inherently “patterned” or “organized” in such a way that we pursue certain ends or values and follow a certain direction or path—that is, *dao*. These ends, values, and direction are part of what is self-so for us. Indeed, if asked, DAI would probably argue that insofar as human values exist at all, they must arise from the self-so—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 *dao* of Heaven and Earth, people and creatures.” 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 *dao*, the *dao* of nature itself. This stance, I suggest, amounts to a form of non-reductive naturalism. It is naturalistic insofar as it presupposes only the natural conditions of human life, including the patterns (*li*) manifested in them. It is non-reductive in that it does not attempt to reduce values or norms to something else. In particular, it does not reduce the normative to the descriptive or non-normative. Instead, 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.<sup>10</sup> The correct ethical norms are explained in terms of how they fulfill the direction or values that are self-so to human life.

Although the step from the self-so to the imperative may seem to be a step from “is” to “ought,” or from fact to value, then, I suggest that actually it is not.

---

<sup>10</sup> Since a conception of well-being or flourishing features prominently DAI’s ethical thought, some scholars have interpreted his ethics as a form of utilitarianism or as sharing characteristics of utilitarianism. See HU (1996: 70–71), ZHENG (2015: 438), and Carleo (2025). For a critical discussion of such interpretations, see Tiwald (2025). I suggest that DAI’s ethics is fundamentally unlike utilitarianism. It does not explain ethical rightness or correctness by appeal to maximizing a basic good but by relations between a cluster of core concepts, including *dao* (way), *li* (pattern), *tian* (nature), *shengsheng* (life-generation), *ziran* (self-so), *biran* (the imperative), and *ping* (balance). Since for DAI the patterns of the *dao* of nature inherently function to sustain life-generation, superficially the norms of Dai’s ethics may partly overlap those of a utilitarian ethics. However, the justification of these norms and the explanatory structure of the ethical theory are distinct from utilitarianism.

Instead, it assumes that values are inherently part of what is self-so about human life and draws on these values to propose an account of normative pattern and *dao*. In effect, DAI is proposing a conception of the normative *dao* of human life grounded in a set of pretheoretical, basic values or ends that he takes to be a fundamental feature of the human condition. Insofar as human beings are always already committed to proceeding by some pattern (*li*) or other and to following some *dao* or other, the question for DAI is not how to ground the normative in the non-normative but how, from among various ways individuals and societies do and could conduct themselves, to identify the most relevant or effective patterns and thus the most appropriate *dao* to follow. Given this way of framing his project, his central concern in treating ethical norms is not the metaethical issue of explaining how they exist. Rather, he seeks to address the conceptual issue of explaining what norms are and the epistemic issue of identifying their content.

To be sure, DAI'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 imperative will realize "the *dao* of Heaven and Earth, people and creatures" (32/199), such that "none of people's wants go unfulfilled" (30/195). To support these claims, DAI 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 self-so 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.<sup>11</sup> He could further contend that such norms are the only candidates that can pass the test he proposes for identifying normative patterns, namely, *shu* 恕, or reflective consideration of how we ourselves would respond to the conduct we direct toward others. Our next task, then, is to look more closely at DAI'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. DAI's Psychology

To elucidate DAI Zhen'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.<sup>12</sup>

According to DAI, human psychology has two aspects, with distinct but

---

<sup>11</sup> The extent to which DAI sees such norms as requiring that humanity show concern for the welfare of nonhuman animals remains an open question. His phrasing at 32/199 suggests that the normative *dao* covers the flourishing of both humanity and nonhuman animals, but further research is needed to clarify the implications of his views for our treatment of nonhuman creatures.

<sup>12</sup> This section is based on the seminal discussion in CHONG (2021: 22–33). See too SHUN (2002: 223–25) and especially SHUN (2015: 6–8).

interrelated functions: the *xieqi* 血氣 (“blood-and-breath”) and *xinzhi* 心知 (“the understanding”). Both are integral parts of the person, jointly forming the “actualized object” or the “realized substance” (實體) of people’s *xing* 性, or inherent nature (16/173). The *xieqi* refers to fluid- or vapor-like substances that circulate throughout the body and sustain our health, physiological functioning, and aspects of our psychology. The *xinzhi* is the heart/mind’s capacity for awareness, cognition or understanding, and judgment.

The *xieqi* produces *yu* 欲, or “bodily wants” (8/156, 30/195). *Yu* is often interpreted as “desire,” but for DAI it seems to have a narrower scope.<sup>13</sup> One can have a desire to be a doctor or a desire that a favorite soccer team win the world cup, but to DAI these attitudes are not *yu*. (I conjecture he would say they are *xin* 心, “mind-attitudes”; *zhi* 志, “intents”; or *yi* 意, “thoughts.”) In his psychology, *yu* 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 DAI’s specialized, narrow conception of *yu*, I will interpret them as “wants” rather than as “desires.”

The *xieqi* also produces *qing* 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 (*yu*); feeling delighted when you get the food is a feeling (*qing*). Since wants and feelings issue from the *xieqi*, which functions similarly in everyone, DAI holds that all persons have similar wants and feelings. By contrast, in DAI’s framework, the alarm and sympathy Mencius claims we have on seeing a child in danger are not “feelings” (*qing*) but a “mind” (*xin* 心), which we might interpret as an attitude, an inclination, or a concern. This sort of attitude, inclination, or concern involves the functioning of the *xinzhi* and so may vary from person to person.

The *xinzhi* 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 *xinzhi*, we grasp patterns, wants, emotions, norms such as propriety (*li* 禮) and duty or righteousness (*yi* 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 *xinzhi*. 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 DAI, is that if we had no wants and feelings ourselves, we would be unable to have moral reactions such as sympathy regarding the situation of other persons.

To feel the sympathetic concern associated with benevolence (*ren* 仁), then, we need to have wants (primarily, cherishing life and fearing death), which

<sup>13</sup> Here I follow the account sketched by CHONG (2021). For an alternative interpretation of *yu* and *qing*, which merges the functions and states here differentiated between the *xieqi* and *xinzhi*, see SHUN (2015: 8–9).

prompt us to have feelings such as delight in life and sorrow over death. To these states produced by our *xieqi*, we apply our cognitive capacities—the *xinzhi*—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，己知懷生而畏死，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 *xinzhi*. 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 DAI 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 *xieqi*, which the *xinzhi* recognizes and applies to evaluate and guide action. Sages act on the basis of their wants, applying them to pursue a *dao* 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 *xieqi*, undertaking the *dao* of mutual growth and nurture. (15/169)

Indeed, DAI claims that the cardinal virtues stem from the wants and are integrally related to the *xieqi* and the *xinzhi*.

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,” “duty,” “propriety,” and “wisdom” they did not seek outside of what they called “wants” and was not separate from the *xieqi* and the *xinzhi*. (21/182)

For DAI, 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.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. The Content of Norms

So how do we identify pattern and thus the norms we should follow? Recall that DAI conceives of normative pattern—the imperative—as fulfilling the wants of all the world (40/209). So conduct that conforms to pattern will guide us in attaining

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed exploration of these points, see Tiwald (2010b: 80–83).

and preserving a basic state of well-being for all, one that satisfies shared wants. Instead of directly specifying the content of the relevant norms, however, DAI's approach is to propose a moral epistemological method by which to identify them in various contexts. In practice, DAI seems to regard the appropriate norms as embodied in familiar cardinal virtues such as benevolence, duty, and propriety. As he says, one can discover ritual propriety (*li* 禮), duty or righteousness (*yi* 義), and benevolence (*ren* 仁) by observing the self-so, orderly patterns manifested in the “ceaseless generation of life” issuing from “the transformation and flow of *qi*” (36/204).<sup>15</sup> Rather than being tied to any particular traditional specification of these virtues, however, agents or communities can apply the method he proposes to revise and update the content of these norms and virtues in response to changing circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

DAI's methodological proposal is that we can identify norms through a process of measuring others' feelings (*qing*) by reference to our own, employing *shu* 恕, the sympathetic, reflective consideration associated with the “negative golden rule” of *Analects* 15:24.<sup>17</sup> This reflective process covers both “treatment” (*shi* 施), or what we do to others, and “responsibilities” (*ze* 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？」以我繫之人，則理明。

Whenever you do something to others, reflect and calmly consider: “If others did this to me, could I accept it?” Whenever you hold others responsible for something, reflect and calmly 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” (*qing*)—specifically, according to DAI'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.

<sup>15</sup> 由其生生，有自然之條理，觀於條理之秩然有序，可以知禮矣。觀於條理之截然不可亂，可以知義矣。在天為氣化之生生，在人為其生生之心，是乃仁之為德也。

<sup>16</sup> As ZHENG (2015: 448) points out, a key feature of DAI's approach is that it allows “conventionally fixed rules” to be subjected to critical discussion and reform.

<sup>17</sup> In *Analects* 15:24, Zīgòng 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). For further discussion of DAI's approach to identifying pattern, see CHONG (2025).

反躬者，以人之逞其欲，思身受之之情也。

Self-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 grasp their patterns. (3/151)

DAI 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” (*ping* 平) with others'.<sup>18</sup> This balance represents moderation or regulation of the likes and dislikes, the action-guiding attitudes of the *xinzhi*, which probably arise in response to miserable or comfortable 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，以我之情絜人之情，而無不得其平是也。

“Patterns of nature” refer to self-so, distinguishing patterns. Taking our feelings to measure others' feelings, such that nothing is out of balance, is just this. (2/150)

When our feelings accurately “balance” others', they indicate pattern (*li*), or the correct norms. This balance, I suggest, is the point of DAI's famous remark that pattern is not erring in regard to feelings (理也者，情之不爽失也, 2/150). We must measure others' feelings without error; pattern then lies in conduct that fits these 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” (*li*). (3/151)

Acting according to such patterns entails moderating (*jie* 節) the satisfaction of our own desires (*yu*) and fulfillment of our feelings (*qing*) in such a way that we

---

<sup>18</sup> This interpretation is a preliminary hypothesis about DAI's conception of *ping* 平, a pivotal notion that in my view requires further examination. One question is to what extent DAI is referring to a subjective psychological equilibrium within the individual agent and to what extent an intersubjective balance between the attitudes of different agents.

conform to the “patterns of nature” (依乎天理) and follow “the *dao* of mutually nurturing life” (相生養之道) for all (11/160).<sup>19</sup>

As these passages make clear, DAI’s version of *shu* 恕 is distinct from that in the *Analects*. As explicated in the *Analects*, *shu* is a process of taking one’s own aversions as a model for what to avoid in our treatment of others. DAI’s proposal to measure others’ feelings by comparison 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 *xieqi* as a way to identify what tends to satisfy everyone’s wants and feelings—what fulfills the self-so for human life, considered collectively, and thus constitutes pattern.

Why does DAI focus on feelings (*qing*), which issue from the *xieqi*, rather than the attitudes of our *xinzhi*? 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 *xieqi*. But the pivotal reason is that, in his view, unlike the “personal opinions” (*yijian* 意見) of the *xinzhi*, which may vary from person to person, many or all of people’s wants (*yu*) and feelings (*qing*) are “regular” or “constant” (*chang* 常) across all persons. This claim may seem implausible, since obviously it is common for different persons to desire or enjoy different things. However, DAI’s stance becomes more defensible when we recognize that in his psychology, as explained in section 3, “wants” (*yu*) and “feelings” (*qing*) are effectively technical terms for a restricted set of basic attitudes and emotions, such as wants for material sustenance and delight at satisfying one’s hunger or thirst.<sup>20</sup> With respect to such core or basic feelings, our individual responses may indeed be roughly representative of feelings shared by all. DAI’s claim is that by reflecting on such responses we may identify regular, constant patterns that are not merely our individual, personal opinions.

曰「所不欲」，曰「所惡」，不過人之常情...。惟以情絜情，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 opinions issuing from one’s mind. (5/153)

DAI’s aim is to offer a procedure for discovering “unchanging norms” or “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.

<sup>19</sup> Here my interpretation converges with that of SHUN (2002: 222).

<sup>20</sup> On this point, see also Tiwald’s discussion of DAI’s notion of “ordinary” or “constant” desires (2010a: 408–09).

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 what all minds similarly affirm to be so can be called “pattern” or “duty.”... Whenever each person affirms something and a myriad generations in the world all say, “this cannot be exchanged [for anything more apt],” this is called “similarly affirming to be so.” (4/151)

Unlike in the *Analects*, then, DAI’s use of *shu* 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 self-so 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 *shu* 恕, we tentatively identify norms to follow. In DAI Zhen’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 self-so to fulfillment. If DAI is correct in contending that the self-so 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, DAI 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 looks. An analogous generalization, the text contends, holds for the relation of the *xin* 心 (heart-mind) to pattern and duty (*li yi* 理義): “pattern and duty delight our *xin* just as fine meats delight our mouths.” The text implies that this relation to pattern and duty is a feature of people’s shared *xing* 性 (inherent dispositions), which distinguishes us from other creatures, such as dogs and horses.<sup>21</sup>

DAI 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. Our responsiveness to normativity, he asserts, is a distinctive feature of human agency.

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion of this point, see SHUN (2015: 10). See too the detailed discussion of DAI’s use of *Mencius* 6A:7 in Angle (2025).

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 is imperative (*biran*), while the lives of the hundred creatures lie in each pursuing what is self-so (*ziran*) for them. (15/167)

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

DAI claims that it is self-so for the *xinzhi* to be delighted by conformity to pattern and duty (15/169).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, our self-so fondness for virtue, he suggests, is the basis for the Mencian claim that people's *xing* is good (15/169).<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, conducting ourselves by ethical norms while recognizing that we are doing so fulfills what is self-so for us. By our *xing*, 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 *xin* is surely delightedly self-fulfilled; if it conflicts with pattern and duty, the temper of their *xin* is surely dejected and frustrated. This shows that the *xin*'s relation to pattern and duty is identical to that of the *xieqi* to preferences and wants—both are simply a matter of

<sup>22</sup> 其好是懿德也，心知之自然……心知之自然，未有不悅理義者 (15/169). On this crucial point, see too the extensive discussion in CHONG (2025). An implication of CHONG's treatment is that fulfilling our commitment to conform to what we perceive as pattern (*li*) may be a crucial part of mental health.

<sup>23</sup> SHUN (2002: 230) also highlights this connection.

*xing* making them so. (8/156)

Just as the *xieqi* is inherently driven to pursue the satisfaction of our wants, such as food, drink, and sexual relations, the *xinzhi* is driven to act in accordance with pattern and duty. Insofar as we apply the *xinzhi* well, correctly judging what is permissible or not according to the norms associated with various contexts (8/156), we are inherently predisposed to follow proper pattern. Doing so satisfies—and fulfills what is self-so for—the *xinzhi* because it is right. Inappropriate conduct is due to a failure to fully grasp pattern and conform to duty (15/169). According to DAI, the explanation of such failure is that, even though the *xinzhi* is fulfilled by conforming to proper pattern, the agent’s knowledge is “obstructed” (*bi* 蔽), biased by personal opinions (*yijian*) (10/158).<sup>24</sup>

## 6. Conclusion: Critical Reflections

DAI’s discussion yields a picture of the flourishing or fulfilled human life as inherently guided by normative relations. An agent living such a life understands their actions as responding to patterns that have normative implications and so seeks to act in ways that align with these patterns. At first blush, this picture may seem naively optimistic about human moral psychology, but I suggest that DAI’s core contention is in fact highly 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 (*li* 理) and the way (*dao* 道). To some extent, DAI 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 *shi-fei* 是非 (right/this vs. wrong/not) distinctions reflecting our commitment to some conception of *yi* 義, the normative or the moral.<sup>25</sup> 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 misguided—sometimes monstrously so. Explaining our responsiveness to normative “force” is not difficult: it is baked into our character as members of human communities, caught

<sup>24</sup> As SHUN explains, DAI’s core explanation of ethically deficient conduct is that it reflects an “obscuration of knowledge” (2015: 12).

<sup>25</sup> On the Mohist view of people’s commitment to their conception of *yi*, see, for example, the depiction of conflict arising over individuals’ different views of *yi* in *Mozi* sections 11.1 and 12.1 and the implicit assumption, in section 17.2, that only those confident they have conformed to *yi* would be willing to publicize their deeds. (Section numbers refer to Fraser 2020.) For a detailed discussion, see Fraser (2016: 198–99).

up in, as DAI would say, “the *dao* of Heaven and Earth, people and creatures.” The ethical and philosophical challenge is to explain how we can justifiably hold that we are getting the norms right. For perhaps we might derive what DAI calls “delighted self-fulfillment” from conduct that to us seems normatively appropriate but is in fact pernicious and abhorrent. To frame the issue in DAI’s terms, to fulfill what is self-so for the *xin* we must conform to what is *actually* orderly pattern and duty, not merely our “personal opinions” (*yijian*) about pattern and duty.

DAI himself is alert to this worry. He stresses that guiding action aptly is not simply a matter of the *xin* 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 an ode, “for any thing, surely there is [a corresponding] norm” (8/156, see too 3/151). A pillar of DAI’s thought is that conduct must be assessable by external criteria, not merely by the agent’s subjective convictions about what does or does not conform to orderly pattern (*li*). He specifically warns against the risk of acting merely on one’s “personal opinions” 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 opinions (*yijian*), 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)

Two major critical questions to ask about DAI’s account of normativity, then, are (1) whether his account of the basis for the content of norms is persuasive and (2) whether the approach he describes is adequate for agents to identify norms that are correct or justified rather than only fallible personal opinions. In regard to this pair of questions, I suggest that DAI’s proposals provide a promising starting point, but substantial revision and extension would be needed to yield a compelling account of an appropriate set of norms and of how agents can reliably identify their content.

To be sure, DAI’s conception of pattern (*li*) as “balancing” (*ping* 平) the feelings—or, if we broaden his idea somewhat, the standpoint—of all sides affected by our conduct seems plausible. “Balancing” the evaluative responses of different agents—perhaps by examining positive or negative feelings, as DAI proposes—many be an attractive proposal for moving from the fact that human life inevitably has a self-so direction embodying certain values to a defensible conception of an interpersonal, shared, impartial *dao*. The plausibility of this proposal is bolstered by DAI’s conviction that only what all persons similarly affirm can qualify as pattern (*li*). Although DAI himself does not use the terminology of “justification,” his stance is tantamount to the credible suggestion

that the content of norms must be impartially justified by considering the standpoint of all those subject to them.

Also plausible is DAI's proposal that the normative *dao* for humanity will in some way manifest or fulfill self-so values shared by all persons. Moreover, insofar as all persons must fulfill certain basic needs in order to survive and flourish, it is reasonable to suppose that meeting these needs will be part of any justified human *dao*.

However, potential problems arise from DAI's account of how to fill in the content of ethical norms. DAI proposes to identify norms by finding a balance between the feelings (*qing*) of all those affected by them, including both those following the norms and those on the receiving end of their actions. To identify this balance, when considering whether some way of treating others conforms to proper pattern, we are to ask ourselves whether, were others to treat us the same way, our feelings would be such that we could accept the treatment. This proposal falls under the rubric of "golden rule" approaches to impartiality or ethical justification, in which agents take their own attitudes or views as a guide to what to do or avoid in dealing with others. A common objection to such approaches is that, since different persons may have different preferences or values, our outlook may not be a reliable indicator of what others will find acceptable or of what is fair or just, pattern (*li*) or *dao*.<sup>26</sup> DAI's theory is structured so as to preempt this objection. Instead of invoking personal opinions (*yijian*), which may vary from person to person, it appeals only to people's basic, "constant" or "regular" feelings (*chang qing* 常情), which DAI claims are the same for all, because they issue from the shared wants of our similar *xieqi*.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, DAI contends that, with respect to a limited, core set of feelings arising from our *xing*, such as misery or comfort arising from the frustration or satisfaction of basic wants, our own feelings can reliably "measure" those others are likely to have, and these shared feelings provide an objective, common basis for identifying norms.

A critic might argue that even if the test of sympathetic reflection focuses on such "constant" feelings, it remains liable to bias from personal opinions. The complex cognitive tasks involved in identifying the consequences of our actions for others, projecting similar consequences back on ourselves, and imagining the feelings they would induce surely draw on the *xinzhi* and so could be biased by our opinions. Indeed, a critic might reasonably be sceptical of DAI's claim that feelings arising from the *xieqi* are unaffected by the *xinzhi*. The feelings we

---

<sup>26</sup> For example, LAO (2021: 823) presses a version of this objection, contending that since our personal wants or feelings could be misguided or idiosyncratic, we cannot defensibly take them as a basis for judging how to treat others. A plausible response—although not DAI's—may be to apply the reflective test at a more general or abstract level. We may not desire exactly the same foods as others, for instance, but both sides probably share a desire for a healthy diet that suits a range of tastes. For a detailed discussion of related issues, see Tiwald (2010b: 79–83).

<sup>27</sup> See the passage from 5/153 translated in section 4 and the interpretation of DAI's psychology in CHONG (2021: 22–33). Tiwald (2010a: 409) also defends an interpretation on which the *qing* to which DAI appeals are "constant," "ordinary" feelings shared by all. See too SHUN (2002: 217), who interprets DAI as holding that "human beings share the same basic *qing* and *yu*."

experience inevitably depend on how we interpret our circumstances, and this interpretation is at least partly a product of the *xinzhi*.

Although this pair of criticisms indeed seem cogent, they do not necessarily undermine DAI's view that there is a distinctive, core set of feelings arising from the satisfaction or frustration of basic wants on which agents who are reasonably conscientious in applying the test of sympathetic reflection are likely to converge. Any plausible set of norms will need to ensure that people do not regularly starve, cripple, or murder each other, for example. Even allowing for potential biases, the feelings invoked by imagining ourselves on the receiving end of such treatment are probably a roughly accurate measure of others' feelings. DAI thus seems reasonably justified in arguing that the norms of *dao* will fulfill people's basic wants and feelings and that we can identify at least some of these norms through sympathetic reflection.<sup>28</sup>

A more serious challenge, I suggest, is that even if DAI's approach works at the level of the basic wants that he highlights, the scope of norms identified in this way is probably too narrow to constitute a persuasive account of *dao*. The *dao* of human flourishing surely extends beyond merely fulfilling the basic wants and feelings issuing from the *xieqi*. The motif at the heart of DAI's ethical vision is that the normative lies in what fulfills the self-so, which he seems to assume can be articulated as a coherent, relatively concrete set of patterns (*li*) of conduct that constitute human flourishing. But although the basic wants are surely part of what is self-so for human life, it is likely that other self-so dispositions and activities are crucial to *dao* as well, including what is self-so for the *xinzhi*. For example, it may be self-so for us to pursue a career, play sports, or enjoy the arts. DAI should welcome such a broadened, enriched conception of *dao*, since he already affirms the value of at least one self-so feature of the *xinzhi*, its propensity to delight in conformity to ethical norms.

When we expand the scope of normatively relevant self-so features of life, however, two further difficulties arise. The first is that it becomes considerably harder to sustain the claim that through the method of sympathetic reflection we can be confident of measuring others' responses reliably. Once we move beyond basic wants, our different preferences, aptitudes, and interests may lead our imagined responses to various forms of treatment to diverge. The scope of treatment to be considered becomes broader, the task of specifying its effects on us becomes more difficult, and it becomes less clear how to assess whether we could accept those effects. Moreover, the *xinzhi* plays a more extensive role in interpreting and projecting the implications of candidate norms, thus opening up the risk of confusing objective judgments about pattern (*li*) with our "personal opinions."

A question for further inquiry, then, is whether DAI envisions the test of measuring others' feelings against our own as strictly a matter of personal

---

<sup>28</sup> I thank two anonymous referees for prompting me to reframe the critical discussion in this and the next several paragraphs.

reflection or whether it could be extended into a guideline for public, shared investigation of candidate *li* (patterns) and norms (*ze*). As sketched in the *Evidential Commentary*, the procedure of sympathetic reflection seems mainly a matter of subjective deliberation by the individual agent. But nothing DAI says seems to rule out adopting it as a benchmark for reference in public inquiry and discussion concerning the norms of *dao*. Were we to pursue this route, then instead of measuring others' responses to candidate norms by imagining our own responses, we could assess them directly, by asking others and discussing with them how they feel and think. Such an approach would mitigate the problems raised by potential mismatches between our feelings and others'. If pattern is indeed manifested in norms that everyone can affirm, DAI's vision might be more fully put into practice through such a public, discursive extension of his proposal for identifying norms that balance different persons' feelings. This route seems both inherently promising and consistent with the spirit of his ethics.

The second difficulty is that the norms that result from broadening our conception of *dao* to include what is self-so for the *xinshi* are likely to be rather different from those DAI envisions. DAI seems to assume that the correct, "unchanging" norms will be relatively specific and concrete, corresponding more or less to traditional mores as articulated through conceptions of benevolence (*ren* 仁), duty or righteousness (*yi* 義), and propriety (*li* 禮). But even if we attend only to fulfilling the basic wants of the *xieqi*, it is unlikely that all inquirers will converge on some unique, concrete set of norms, which would constitute the "unchanging" norms DAI posits. Even simple wants such as food, drink, and sexual relationships can probably be fulfilled through a plurality of ways of organizing social and material relations. And as we expand the scope of the self-so aspects of human life considered to contribute to human flourishing, the range of potentially justifiable norms probably expands as well. What fulfills the self-so for different persons is likely to vary considerably. The plurality of ways in which people might fulfill what comes self-so for them tends to support a picture on which different inquirers converge only on relatively general, abstract norms that work to fulfill basic needs while allowing for a plurality of more specific life paths.<sup>29</sup>

Extending this point about the plurality and indeterminacy of self-so patterns of life, let me suggest that many activities that come self-so to us may

---

<sup>29</sup> In "DAI Zhen and JIAO Xun" (in progress), Yun-chak CHONG points out that the Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1796–1820) thinker JIAO Xun 焦循, a deep admirer of DAI's work, offered a closely related criticism of DAI's and others' interpretation and application of *shu* 恕. See JIAO (2016: 2473, 2476). JIAO holds that DAI and other thinkers fell short of fully explicating and appreciating the intersubjective aspects of *shu*. As JIAO construes *shu*, one does not take the "establishment and fulfillment" of others "in all cases to issue from one's own practice" (不使天下之立、達者皆出於己之施) (2481). Allowing that people may each be different in nature (人各一性), the gentleman seeks "harmony" in pluralism rather than "uniformity" (君子和而不同) (2478–79). JIAO holds that "only by allowing for differences can one become adept at attaining commonality with others" (惟不同而後能善與人同) (2479). For a detailed discussion of JIAO's views, see Moores (2023).

have no fixed or determinate ends that best fulfill them. Perhaps what is distinctive of human life is that the self-so is open-ended and variable. Some aspects of life that come naturally to us—such as career directions and leisure pursuits—may not have ends determinate enough for us to settle on specific norms by which they should be conducted.

If, as I suggested in section 2.1, DAI in fact understands “unchanging” norms to be contextually defeasible, perhaps these points about the generality and indeterminacy of norms can be accommodated within his ethics by allowing for a plurality of general norms, which agents apply by exercising *quan* 權, or contextual discretion. DAI already has a well-developed account of *quan* that could be adapted to address plural norms.<sup>30</sup> However, adopting this course might mean giving up the project of identifying a concrete set of “unchanging” norms that fulfill the self-so. In practice, we may need to settle for a plurality of general, defeasible, open-ended guidelines. Still, a strength of DAI’s approach is his conception of such guidelines as identifiable through a reciprocal balance between what comes self-so for different agents, resulting in a state of peace, without regrets (15/169). As DAI suggests, exercising our ability to discover and abide by such guidelines may indeed be the highest fulfillment of humanity’s inherent responsiveness to pattern and *dao*.<sup>31</sup>

## References

- Angle, Stephen C. 2025. “DAI Zhen’s Metaphysics.” In *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Dai Zhen*, Zemian ZHENG, ed. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Carleo, Robert A. 2025. “DAI Zhen and John Rawls’s Public Reason.” In *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Dai Zhen*, Zemian ZHENG, ed. Dordrecht: Springer.
- CHOI, Suk Gabriel. 2019. “Dai Zhen’s Idea of *Qi* and His Critique of Neo-Confucianism.” In *The Idea of Qi/Gi: East Asian and Comparative Philosophical Perspectives*, Suk Gabriel CHOI and Jung-Yeup KIM, eds. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 39–54.
- CHONG, Yun-chak. 2021. “Dai Zhen’s Naturalistic Ethics.” PhD Dissertation. University of Hong Kong.
- CHONG, Yun-chak. 2025. “Dai Zhen’s Metaethics.” *Dao Companion to Dai Zhen*. Zemian Zheng, ed.
- CHONG, Yun-chak. In progress. “Dai Zhen and Jiao Xun.”

---

<sup>30</sup> For discussions of DAI on *quan*, see Tiwald (2010a: 409–11) and CHONG (2025).

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Justin Tiwald and CHENG Chung-yi for comments on an early draft of this work and to two anonymous referees for detailed criticisms of a later draft, which helped to improve the final version in many respects.

- DAI Zhen 戴震. 2010. *Mengzi Ziyi Shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證. In *Collected Works of Dai Zhen* 戴震全書 (修訂版), rev. ed., vol. 6, Yang Yingjin 楊應芹 and Zhu Weiqi 諸偉奇, eds. Hefei: Huangshan Publishing House.
- Fraser, Chris. 2016. *The Philosophy of the Mozi*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fraser, Chris. 2020. *The Essential Mozi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HU, Shi 胡適. 1996. *The Philosophy of Dai Dongyuan* 戴東原的哲學. Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan.
- GUO, Qingfan 郭慶藩. 1961. *Collected Explications of Zhuangzi* 莊子集釋. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- JIAO Xun 焦循. 2016. *Comprehensive Explanation of the Analects* 論語通釋, in *Complete Works of Jiao Xun* 焦循全集, Liu Jianzhen 劉建臻, ed., vol. 5. Yangzhou: Guangling Shushe.
- LAO, Siguang 勞思光. 2021. *New History of Chinese Philosophy* 新編中國哲學史, 3 vols. Taipei: Sanmin shuju.
- LEE, Jig-Chuen. 1991. "How Tai Chen Differs From the Neo-Confucianists on Li." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 18, 395–409.
- LI, Jingde 黎靖德, ed., Wang Xingxian 王星賢, rev. 1994. *Categorized Sayings of Zhu Xi* 朱子語類, vol. 4. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Moore, Seán. 2023. "Unifying Empathy over Predetermined Unity: Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820) on the 'Unifying Thread' of Confucius' Teachings." *T'oung Pao* 109, 142–80.
- SHUN, Kwong-loi. 2002. "Mencius, Xunzi, and Dai Zhen." In *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*, Alan Chan, ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 216–41.
- SHUN, Kwong-loi. 2015. "Dai Zhen on Nature (*Xing*) and Pattern (*Li*)." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41, 5–17.
- Tiwald, Justin. 2010a. "Dai Zhen on Human Nature and Moral Cultivation." In *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, John Makeham, ed. Dordrecht: Springer. 399–422.
- Tiwald, Justin. 2010b. "Dai Zhen on Sympathetic Concern." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37, 76–89.
- Tiwald, Justin. 2011. "Dai Zhen's Defense of Self-Interest." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 38, 29–45.

Tiwald, Justin. 2025. “Dai Zhen’s Normative Ethics.” In *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Dai Zhen*, Zemian ZHENG, ed. Dordrecht: Springer.

ZHENG, Zemian. 2015. “Dai Zhen’s Criticism and Misunderstanding of Zhu Xi’s Moral Theory.” *Dao* 14, 433–49.

### Terms for Index

*biran* 必然 (imperative)

*cheng* 誠 (sincerity, integrity)

*dao* 道 (way)

*Daodejing* 道德經

fact-value distinction

golden rule

Guo Xiang 郭象

is-ought distinction

*li* 理 (pattern)

normativity

*ping* 平 (balance)

*qing* 情 (feelings)

*quan* 權 (contextual discretion)

*shu* 恕 (sympathetic reflection)

*tian li* 天理 (natural patterns)

*xieqi* 血氣 (“blood-and-breath”)

*xinzhi* 心知 (mind-understanding)

*yijian* 意見 (opinions)

*yu* 欲 (wants, desires)

*ze* 則 (norms)

Zhu Xi 朱熹

*Zhuangzi* 莊子

*ziran* 自然 (self-so)