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Action and Agency in Early Chinese Thought*

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Abstract: This essay presents a broad, programmatic account of how action and agency are conceived of in pre-Qín Chinese thought, along the way drawing contrasts with conceptions of action familiar from the Western tradition. I propose that instead of a belief-desire model of action, early Chinese thinkers apply a “discrimination-and-response” model. Rather than emphasizing individual deliberation and decision-making, this model grounds agency in people’s brute ability to catch on to and become expert in norm-governed practices by developing and correcting skills and habits. Agency is seen as concerned primarily with abilities, habits, and the skill-like performance of familiar patterns of activity. Its ideal expression is reliable, virtuoso performance of the *dào* (way). This model captures certain features of real-life agency well, and it calls attention to aspects of agency that tend to be downplayed in influential treatments of action in the Western tradition. Thus early Chinese texts may provide a intriguing resource that leads us to reconsider common assumptions about agency.

Keywords: action, agency, Chinese philosophy, Confucianism, Mohism

I

This essay presents a broad, programmatic account of how action and agency are conceived of in pre-Qín Chinese thought, along the way drawing contrasts with conceptions of action familiar from the Western tradition. I also comment briefly on how this account bears on the interpretation of early Chinese texts and the relation of early Chinese thought to contemporary action theory and ethics. Among other points, I will suggest that, as a consequence of how features of the classical Chinese conception of action and agency contrast with influential Western

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conceptions, certain apparently commonsensical approaches to interpreting Chinese thought and putting it into dialogue with contemporary philosophical concerns may be misguided.¹

I will argue that the classical Chinese conception of action and agency is significantly different from prominent conceptions rooted in Greek rationalism or Enlightenment conceptualism. Such conceptions place deliberation, decision-making, and rationality at the heart of agency. They are grounded in an argument-like model of practical reasoning epitomized by the practical syllogism. Such a model also underlies the traditional belief-desire model of action, which is in effect an “argument model” of action.

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¹ Throughout the essay, I will use the phrases “early Chinese,” “classical Chinese,” and “pre-Qín” interchangeably.

In comparison with such views, the pre-Qín approach to action and agency is markedly less individualistic and less intellectualized.² Instead of individual deliberation and decision-making, it grounds agency in people's brute ability to catch on to and become expert in norm-governed practices by developing and correcting their habits and skills. Agency primarily concerns abilities, habits, and the skill-like performance of familiar, even routine patterns of activity. Its exercise lies less in decision-making than in reliable, virtuoso performance of the *dào* 道 (way). As a rough description, we can say that pre-Qín thinkers share a "performance model" of action. More precisely, as I will explain, their conception of the structure of action can be characterized as a "discrimination-and-response" model. This model is in many respects plausible, and it calls attention to aspects of agency that tend to be downplayed in the treatments of, for instance, Aristotle, Hume, or Kant. Hence early Chinese texts may provide a intriguing resource on which to draw in contributing to contemporary discourse on action and agency. This is not to suggest that the pre-Qín approach is satisfactory or complete as it stands. But parts of it capture aspects of real-life agency well, and it may lead us to reconsider common assumptions about agency inherited from influential Western thinkers.

This essay seeks to offer only a general, preliminary sketch of distinctive features of action and agency in pre-Qín thought and their potential implications for comparative philosophy. The goal is to stimulate discussion, not to build an ironclad case for the account presented. Further interpretive work is needed to fill out the specific conceptions of action and agency in different pre-Qín anthologies and

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to clarify differences of detail between them, some of which the present discussion inevitably blurs. Additional study is also required to explore more precisely the similarities and differences between early Chinese views and important Western approaches, be they those of Aristotle, Hume, or Kant—the three dominant historical figures in the philosophy of action—or the rather different approaches of, for instance, Nietzsche, Dewey, or Wittgenstein.³ An implicit premise of the discussion is that ultimately the account presented here must be fleshed out and refined in further, more fine-grained studies. However, such studies provide deeper insight when intertwined with a broad picture of the overall intellectual orientation and theoretical framework shared by thinkers in a particular discourse. Such a picture is the goal of the present essay. Its central thesis is that pre-Qín thinkers share a conception of the structure of action and the nature of agency that is intriguingly different from what we find in influential Western accounts, including those of Aristotle,

² A partial exception to this rule is the *Mencius*, which in some passages takes an individualistic position on moral improvement, emphasizing self-improvement by using the heart to apply one's inherent moral motivation. For a hypothesis concerning the grounds of this individualism, see Dan Robins, *The Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 2001), sect. 2.7.

³ To this list, I should also add "alternative" contemporary treatments such as those of Brandom or Searle. See Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) and John Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

Hume, and Kant as well as contemporary thinkers such as Donald Davidson.⁴

II

To help highlight distinctive features of the early Chinese approach to action and agency, I will begin by sketching a rough conception of action that has been influential in contemporary thought and to varying degrees is shared by major figures in the history of Western philosophy of action. For convenience, I will call this the “argument model” of action. My sketch of the model may lean toward caricature. Nevertheless, as with an actual caricature, I suggest it underscores fundamental structural features of its subject.

A tendency in many influential Western accounts of action, including those of Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, has been to focus on the process of deciding what to do in a particular situation. Accordingly, action has been understood by appeal to the structure of the reasoning involved in deliberating about and justifying discrete acts. This structure is in turn modeled on paradigms of theoretical reasoning, argument forms such as the syllogism and *modus ponens*.⁵ The traditional belief-desire

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model of action is one expression of this focus on decision and reasoning. The model descends from Aristotle’s practical syllogism and from Hume’s views on reason and motivation.⁶ It treats individual, discrete actions. These are regarded as issuing from intentional states by means of a causal relation that is structurally parallel to the relation between the premises and conclusion of a practical argument. Actions are explained and justified by appeal to rational, inferential relations between premises expressing the content of these states and a conclusion representing the action. One of the premises is a cognitive premise, which expresses the agent’s belief about the situation. The other is a motivational, or conative premise, which expresses the agent’s desire or a general pro-attitude. The desire motivates action; the belief guides or triggers it. The explanatory focus is on what Davidson calls the “rationalization” of actions—on showing how the agent’s reasons rationally justify and guide action.

Agency, on this conception, lies largely in the capacity to grasp and act on reasons—in effect, in the ability to produce pieces of practical reasoning and respond to them by acting on the conclusion. The exercise of agency is an

⁴ For Davidson’s views, see his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁵ Aristotle, for instance, expressly assimilates the process of reaching and acting on a conclusion in practical reasoning to that of drawing a conclusion in theoretical reasoning. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Terence Irwin, tr. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1147a25–31, and *Movement of Animals*, 701a8–9, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Jonathan Barnes, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁶ The belief-desire model is often attributed to Hume, on the grounds of his remarks at, e.g., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed., P. H. Nidditch, rev. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), pp. 413–18, 455–470. However, an inchoate version of the model can probably be found in Aristotle. For instance, the model is suggested by the explication of decision at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a32–33: “The origin of an action...is decision, and the origin of decision is desire together with reason that aims at some goal.” It is also suggested by, for instance, *Movement of Animals* 701a17–20, in which an agent reasons from “I want a covering” to “I must make a coat” (cf. 700b16–17).

exercise of the individual's rational capacities, typically through self-conscious justification, and thus rational control, of one's action. The paradigm of the exercise of agency is running through a practical syllogism in one's head and then acting on the conclusion.

In Kantian-inspired approaches to action, the argument model is tied closely to notions of freedom and dignity. The grounding of action in practical reasoning is part of what makes it free. An agent who merely responds automatically to the environment, letting herself be guided by her dispositions, is seen as in some sense less free than one who reasons about, justifies, and self-consciously chooses her actions. Dignity lies in the ability to choose one's actions autonomously and rationally, rather than having them determined by contingent psychological, social, or environmental factors. Genuine agency—and with it freedom and dignity—lies partly in deciding among alternatives [p. 221]

each time we act, and, in certain strands of the Judeo-Christian tradition, perhaps even partly in feeling and resisting the temptation to decide badly.

In contrast to Kantian approaches, the virtue ethics tradition emphasizes that action is often guided by dispositions, which are largely the products of habituation. To Aristotle, for instance, habituation is how one develops virtues, including the master virtue of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom). Yet Aristotle also ties *phronēsis* closely to decision (*prohairesis*),⁷ which he understands as desiring to do what deliberation, or rational inference, has shown to be required to achieve some end.⁸ *Phronēsis* thus includes an essential intellectual component. Aristotle does allow that a virtuous person sometimes acts immediately, such as in an emergency, when there is no time to deliberate before deciding what to do.⁹ But normally decision requires deliberation, which he understands as involving inferences from universal and particular premises to conclusions about how to act.¹⁰ Despite the important role Aristotle assigns to habituation, then, his account of how action originates in decision resulting from deliberation corresponds closely to what I have been calling an argument model of action.

No doubt there are situations in which the argument model roughly captures what happens when we act. These will generally be cases in which we need to make decisions about difficult or unfamiliar courses of action. Examples would include one-off, important decisions such as what university to attend, what person to marry, or where to go on a long-awaited holiday. There are also more routine examples, such as reasoning about what time we need to leave home in order to arrive promptly at a meeting.

But in terms of the exercise of agency in daily life, this model accurately describes only a small portion of our activity. Most of what we do every day, we do without deliberation or conscious decision. Indeed, much of our activity takes place with little or no thought: We simply act. This is especially the case with any sort of routine, habitual, or skilled activity, and in fact such activities account for the bulk of what we do. Much of the time we simply respond to our environment, without paying much attention to, and perhaps without any

⁷ See, e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a30–35, 1139a21–22, 1141b10–11, and 1144a13–22.

⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1113a12, 1139a32–33.

⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1117a17–22.

¹⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a22–23, 1147a25–31.

real awareness of, alternatives to what we do. This sort of immediate response is common even in explicitly intellectual activities, such as delivering a course [p. 222]

lecture or answering students' questions in class.

The argument model has other limitations as well. The sorts of explanations of action it provides have a specific, limited aim and scope. They present agents' reasons for action: They render an action intelligible or justified by showing how it follows rationally from the agent's psychological states or from moral principles. But they do not attempt to explicate the processes by which we actually carry out actions—the triggering mechanisms, the links between psychological states and physical movements, the practical abilities that enable us to execute instructions or to translate the intention to do something into performance. The model is thus of limited use in explaining habitual, routine actions and the performance of skills. We can use a belief-desire explanation to model a professional tennis player's cognitive and motivational states and thereby show that her tennis-playing is rational. But this is unhelpful in explaining her performance in returning a serve during a match. It does not touch on the actual psychophysical processes involving in hitting the ball, and no one would claim that the tennis player considers her reasons for action before hitting each shot, or even before playing each match. (Indeed, she may consciously consider them only a handful of times in her career, such as when she contemplates retiring.) An argument or belief-desire model also passes over the issue of quality of performance. Faced with the same shot in a tennis game, I could have roughly the same beliefs and desires as an expert tennis player but miss the shot while she hits it perfectly.

III

The link between prevailing models of theoretical reasoning and conceptions of action illustrated by the practical syllogism and the belief-desire model should make us expect that the classical Chinese approach to action might be interestingly different from approaches familiar from the Western tradition. For the early Chinese conception of reasoning is different in structure from either syllogistic reasoning or paradigms of sentential reasoning such as *modus ponens*. It is based on pattern recognition and analogy, not logical consequence or formal validity. I will argue that in early Chinese thought, as in mainstream Western views, there is a connection between the model used to explain reasoning and that used to explain action. But the nature of the connection is different. We might say that instead of taking a pre-existing model of reasoning as a basis for explaining action, early Chinese theorists took their conception of action as the basis for their model of reasoning.

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In early Chinese thought, what we think of as logic or reasoning corresponds roughly to what early texts call *biàn* 辯, “dialectics,” “disputation,” “distinction-drawing,” or “discrimination.” Construed narrowly, *biàn* is a matter of discriminating, with respect to some term, whether a thing

under consideration is *shì* 是 (this, right) or *fēi* 非 (not-this, wrong).¹¹ Formally, the aim of *biàn* is not to show that some sentence is true, but to discriminate what things are or are not of the same kind (*lèi* 類) and thus should be denoted by the same term. When it refers simply to discriminating what is *shì* from *fēi*, *biàn* amounts to the counterpart of judgment for early Chinese thinkers. But *biàn* can also refer more broadly to the process of considering or debating how to discriminate *shì-fēi*, in which case it corresponds to reasoning or argumentation. The reasoning involved is usually analogical: *biàn* in this sense typically takes the form of citing a precedent, analogy, paradigm, or model (*fǎ* 法) and then explaining why the case at hand should be treated similarly or not. The basic structure of such reasoning is indicated in Mohist Canon A70: “A model is what something is similar to and thereby is so.”¹² That is, to support the claim that something is *shì* (this) with respect to some term, we cite a model or exemplar of the kind of thing denoted by the term in question. If the object at hand is relevantly similar to the model, then the term predicated of it is indeed “so” (*rán* 然), and the claim stands.

The claim at stake in *biàn* is not understood as sentential in form. Rather, it is regarded as a term that is predicated of some object, event, or state of affairs. Of course, the speech act of predicating a term of something has a pragmatic significance comparable to the act of asserting a statement or proposition. For instance, the act of discriminating some animal as of the kind *ox* and predicating the term “ox” of it accordingly has a pragmatic significance comparable to that of asserting, of that animal, that it is an ox. But early Chinese theorists do not explain such speech acts as a matter of asserting a sentence or proposition. They regard them as acts in which the speaker discriminates something as part of the extension of some term.

A further important difference from a syllogistic or other sentential model of reasoning is that *biàn* is not regarded as a process of laying out premises and drawing a conclusion that is a logical consequence of them. Rather, it is a

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process of discriminating a thing as “the same as” (*tóng* 同) or different from (*yì* 異) some kind. It turns on distinguishing whether something falls within the extension of a term, not on grasping logical relations between statements of a certain form.¹³ Thus, although the process of *biàn* often involves inferences—in most instances analogical, but occasionally deductive or inductive—overall, it is concerned mainly with semantics, not logic.¹⁴

A first step toward seeing the connection between *biàn* and action is to

¹¹ The graphs *biàn* 辯, typically interpreted as “dialectics” or “disputation,” and *biàn* 辨, typically rendered “distinguish” or “discriminate,” share the same phonetic, and classical texts often use them interchangeably. They may represent what were originally two senses of a single word.

¹² See A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), p. 316.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of these and other issues in ancient Chinese semantics and logic, see my articles on “Mohism,” “Mohist Canons,” and “The School of Names” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (<http://plato.stanford.edu>).

¹⁴ *Biàn* thus pertains mainly to cognition of particulars. In this respect it is similar to the situational “perception” (*aisthēsis*) that Aristotle considers part of *phronēsis* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a20–30, 1143b5), by which a virtuous person understands morally relevant features of particulars and thus can employ appropriate minor premises in deliberation.

notice that the practical ability to discriminate kinds also plays a key role in early texts' conception of how models, rules, and instructions guide action. Agents are understood to apply such guidelines by discriminating what does or does not count as "similar" to them and then acting accordingly. For the Mohists, for instance, to discriminate whether a course of conduct is *shì* or *fěi*, and thus to be performed or avoided, we check whether it "coincides" with *fǎ* (models, which include rules). This checking is understood as analogous to discriminating, for example, whether something is square by a perceptual comparison of similarity to a square. Clearly, to follow such a guide to action correctly, agents must know how to discriminate what counts as relevant similarity to the guide. Hence the *Analects*, the *Xúnzǐ*, and *The Annals of Lǚ Bùwéi* all emphasize that agents' ability to follow instructions or rules properly depends on social training in discriminating what things fall within the extension of the words used in the instructions or rules.¹⁵ This issue motivates the distinctively Chinese concern with "rectifying names" (*zhèng míng* 正名), or training the populace to discriminate the extensions of "names"—a category that for pre-Qín thinkers includes all words—in a unified, consistent way. Such training will generally be grounded in model emulation—in observing and imitating how social superiors discriminate things—and is likely to appeal to *fǎ* (models or paradigms) to guide assessments of similarity.

In a suggestive piece of hyperbole, the *Analects* (13:3) states that if the use of "names" is not rectified, people will be left unable to act at all. A plausible explanation is that they will be paralyzed from fear of punishment for transgressing laws that they do not understand or that lack any standard interpretation. This worry is informative concerning the scope of the action-guiding norms associated with words. The *Analects* passage refers to words quite generally and to a wide range of activities, from obeying instructions to completing tasks to following the norms of ritual propriety and law. The doctrine of "rectifying names" thus suggests a picture on which words in themselves ultimately take on action-guiding force, even outside the immediate context of explicit commands or rules, by becoming associated with a network of implicit and explicit norms of conduct.¹⁶ Against the backdrop of such a network, merely by calling some person or thing "x," we invoke various norms regarding how that person should act (if "x" refers to a person) and how we should act toward that person or thing.¹⁷

I call this the "Job Title" theory of language: Words function like job

¹⁵ See *Analects* 13:3, *Xúnzǐ* Book 22, and John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, tr., *The Annals of Lǚ Bùwéi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), sect. 16.8, 17.1.

¹⁶ Chad Hansen's work in particular has emphasized the importance of the action-guiding function of language for early Chinese theorists. See, e.g., his *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p. 59.

¹⁷ Perhaps the clearest statement of this view is found in the *Zuǒ Zhuàn* (Huán Gōng 桓公 2/8/2): "Now names regulate duties; from duties issues propriety (*lǐ*); propriety embodies governance; and governance rectifies the people. In this way, when governance is complete, the people obey. Changing this produces disorder" (夫名以制義，義以出禮，禮以體政，政以正民，是以政成而民聽。易則生亂). See Yáng Bójùn 楊伯峻, 《春秋左傳注》 (Beijing: Zhōnghuá, 1981), pp. 92–93.

titles associated with roles and protocols.¹⁸ If, for instance, in the context of a university classroom, I am deemed the “teacher,” that term invokes a particular social role and associated norms of conduct. I am supposed to present the course content in a coherent, intelligible way, and not sing, dance, or chat idly. Similarly, others’ recognition of me as the “teacher”—and of themselves as “students”—invokes norms governing how they should act toward me. They should raise their hands before asking questions, for instance, and should laugh politely at my jokes. We can easily multiply examples. Think of all the norms of conduct invoked by telling a young girl to be a “lady” or a boy to be a “gentleman.” Moreover, action-guiding norms are associated not only with names for social roles, or “jobs,” but with names and descriptions of objects. For instance, consider the norms invoked by calling something “food” or “dirty.”

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The mainstream pre-Qín view of our circumstances as agents, I suggest, is an extension of the “Job Title” picture. From childhood onward we find ourselves embedded in various social roles and contexts that are associated with a network of implicit and explicit norms grounded in customs, *li* 禮 (ritual propriety), moral guidelines, laws, biological needs, and other factors, including our own intentions or commitments (*zhi* 志).¹⁹ Some of these norms may be self-imposed, but most probably come with our social circumstances. Ruist and Mohist texts indicate that the norms are all-embracing, encompassing most areas of life. Much of our activity consists in performing social roles in accordance with them. Typically, such performances consist of patterns of activity that we internalized long ago and no longer need to think about much. Ideally, by the time we are adults, we have already been so thoroughly programmed with them that we have robust, reliable dispositions to act accordingly. (I will borrow a phrase from Robert Brandom and refer to such dispositions as “reliable differential responsive dispositions,” or “RDRDs.”) Once we have developed the relevant RDRDs, we can generally perform our roles almost automatically. The exception is when we encounter exigent circumstances, such as when the standard norms do not seem to apply, two or more norms conflict, or it is unclear what sort of action counts as complying with the norms.

The implicit model by which early Chinese thinkers explain how we act according to such a network of norms closely parallels their discrimination model of judgment and reasoning. We discriminate the circumstances and objects in our environment as being of one kind or another, denoted by one “name” or another, and then respond to them according to norms associated with those kinds and names. In judgment and argumentation, we discriminate something as a certain kind of thing and then respond by predicating, or

¹⁸ This label was inspired by Donald Munro, who suggested that early Chinese thinkers associate names with job descriptions. See *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 24.

¹⁹ *Zhi* (intention, commitment) for early Chinese thinkers typically refers to the agent’s directedness toward some path or end. It is akin to the attitude of setting one’s mind or heart on something. I adopt the suggestion that an agent’s *zhi* is akin to a commitment from Stephen Angle, “Sagely Ease and Moral Perception,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 5.1 (2005), pp. 31–56. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out the convergence between my understanding of *zhi* and Angle’s.

becoming disposed to predicate, a certain term of it. The difference in the case of action concerns the scope of the response. By adopting the attitude that a certain term is correctly predicable of something, we invoke the various norms and practices associated with that term, which then govern how we act toward the thing in question. So beyond discriminating the thing as “x”—“teacher,” “student,” “food,” “dirty,” and so forth—we respond to it by acting in an

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appropriate way. We act that way because our discriminating the thing as an “x” triggers RDRDs to respond to it so. Such dispositions are grounded in our education, in practices such as *lǐ* (ritual propriety), and in our desires (*yù* 欲), evaluative attitudes (*shì-fēi*), and commitments (*zhì*).²⁰

In line with their discrimination model of thought and reasoning, then, early Chinese thinkers do not explain action by appeal to argument-like structures such as the practical syllogism or the belief-desire model. Instead, they apply a “discrimination-and-response” model. The structure of action comprises a discrimination (*biàn*) that prompts a norm-governed response (*yìng* 應) to its object.²¹ A stream of such discriminations and responses in a particular context can be regarded as a performance, so we can also think of this conception of action as a “performance” conception.²² Given this approach to action, early Chinese philosophers do not focus theoretical attention on reasoning and decisions, nor on guiding, explaining, or justifying individual actions one by one by appeal to pieces of reasoning with roughly the form of an argument. Nor does their normative evaluation of actions appeal to the notion of rationality. Rather, their concern is with reliable, masterful performance of a skill-like flow of activity comprising a succession of discriminations and responses.²³ Such performance rests primarily on abilities, habits, and dispositions, not explicit reasoning. The content of the performance is not regarded as a discrete, individual act, but an extended pattern or course of activity, denoted

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²⁰ It is worth noting that in early Chinese thought the object of intention or commitment (*zhì*) is typically a program of study or a path of life, not a single act. *Zhì* thus often specifically involves a commitment to develop certain sorts of RDRDs. (Again, I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to mention this point.)

²¹ This model corresponds roughly to the traditional Chinese notion of *gǎn yìng* 感應, or “sense and respond,” though in fact this expression was not widely used in the pre-Qín period.

²² A number of scholars—most prominently, Chad Hansen, but also including A. C. Graham, Robert Eno, David Nivison, and David Hall and Roger Ames—have articulated the “performance” conception in one respect or another. My aim here is to clarify an interpretive insight that I see as at some level shared by many scholars of pre-Qín thought. The interpretation presented here was first articulated in my dissertation, *Similarity and Standards: Language, Cognition, and Action in Chinese and Western Thought* (University of Hong Kong, 1999). It has also been influenced by Dan Robins’s dissertation, *The Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China*.

²³ It is instructive to compare the sorts of dispositions that are the focus of the Chinese model to skills, but there is an important difference between them. Both are reliable psychophysical capacities for certain types of practical performance. But a skill is something we can choose to exercise or not. RDRDs are more automatic: once fully developed, they generally function spontaneously, unless in some particular situation they are defeated by other RDRDs. In this respect they are more like habits than skills, but ideally they are more robust than habits.

by words such as *dào* (way) and *xíng* 行 (conduct).²⁴ The counterpart in this model to a reason for action is the attitude of discriminating something as a certain kind of thing. (In early texts, this attitude is typically represented by the locution *yǐ wéi* 以為, “to take something as [such-and-such].”) Like the activity they trigger, however, such attitudes are not regarded as one-time psychological events, but as part of a pattern or path that the agent follows. The fundamental normative concept, simultaneously taking the place of rationality and general moral principles, is *dào* (way). Normatively correct action lies in discriminations and responses that conform to *dào*.

Practical reasoning, on this model, is a matter of considering how to discriminate things when we do not immediately see how to do so. The main terms for practical reasoning are *lǜ* 慮 (forethought) and *quán* 權 (discretion, weighing).²⁵ Ancient texts unpack *lǜ* and *quán* by appeal to metaphors of perceiving and weighing the various features of something in order to distinguish it as *shì* or *fēi*. So practical reasoning too is understood as a process of discrimination. It is seen as an acquired skill, not an innate capacity to grasp rational relations between ideas or propositions, as it is for some Western thinkers. Most important, it occurs only in exigent circumstances, and it shares the same basic structure as the model by which early Chinese theorists explain perception and judgment. Indeed, it is in effect a self-conscious, slow-motion process of pattern recognition. This point partly explains why some early texts, such as the *Xúnzǐ*, *Zhuāngzǐ*, and *Annals of Lǚ Bùwéi*, valorize immediate, automatic, flowing action and do not associate agency with running through the premises of a practical argument in one’s head. On the pre-Qín model, for the virtuoso agent, practical reasoning ultimately reduces to or collapses into perception. The highest level of excellence in action is a form of automatic, immediate discrimination and response, as when a basketball player sees an opening in the opponents’ defense and immediately moves toward it or an emergency room doctor sees the source of a patient’s injury and imme-

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diately begins to treat it.

Acting according to *dào* thus need not involve conscious awareness of reasons (or rather, their counterpart, kind distinctions). If asked, the expert performer can give a justification for his action by identifying the discrimination that triggered his response and explaining the similarity that prompted him to discriminate things as he did. But in most normal cases, the exercise of agency may be a matter of responding to particular situations with little or no thought. Conscious deliberation and decision may play only a minimal role. This aspect of the discrimination-and-response model, I suggest, is of particular interest in understanding the actual exercise of agency in real-

²⁴ Obviously, early texts do discuss individual acts at times. But the theoretical focus—the primary explanandum or unit of action—is *dào*, not discrete acts. Arthur Danto makes a similar point when he remarks that for pre-Qín thinkers, “The unit of moral discourse is not the principles of a moral act but a total moral life.” See “Postscript: Philosophical Individualism in Chinese and Western Thought,” in Donald Munro, ed., *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985), p. 390.

²⁵ Here I am omitting a third aspect of practical reasoning in early texts, *móu* 謀 (planning). *Móu* seems to refer to using the imagination to think through one or more potential courses of action in order to decide what to do.

life scenarios. For how much of our everyday activity do we really deliberate about? Most of us have never deliberated about whether to check a book out of the library, as opposed to stealing it, nor whether to stop a child from running into a busy street, as opposed to standing by and wishing her luck. Even when we do consciously deliberate and decide, often we are making only a routine choice within some general course of action about which we do not seriously deliberate at all. We may deliberate briefly about what to have for supper, but we generally do not deliberate about whether to have supper. As academics, we may deliberate about what course to teach or conference to attend, but we do not seriously deliberate about whether to teach courses or attend conferences in general. These activities are simply part of the *dào* we follow. Indeed, I suspect we rarely even deliberate about what to eat or which conference to attend. In much of our activity, we “just see” what to do—though we may hesitate briefly before doing it, and sometimes, as the pre-Qín model of practical reasoning suggests, we need to concentrate and pause for a while before we “just see.” It is easy to imagine that, in certain social or historical contexts, the scope of habit or mastery could expand to the point that virtually all action becomes a matter of automatic discrimination and immediate response. Certainly it is easy to understand why Xúnzǐ, for example, seems to have thought this was possible.

IV

Let me now try to elaborate on the conception of agency that goes hand in hand with the discrimination-and-response model. As I suggested above, a certain conception of agency familiar from the Western tradition revolves largely around the capacity for reasoning, specifically the capacity to reason from one’s beliefs and desires or principles in order to decide what to do. Hu-
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mans are first thinkers, and then, because they are thinkers, agents. By contrast, in classical Chinese thought, humans are first and foremost performers, not thinkers.²⁶ Agency is related primarily to the capacity for certain sorts of performance—the capacity to develop complex dispositions and abilities and to excel in exercising them.

To better grasp the early Chinese conception of agency, we should attend to features of skilled activities, such as speaking a language, performing music, playing a sport, or carrying out expert work, such as that of a carpenter, waiter, doctor, or university lecturer. In such activities, by emulating a limited range of models—which for pre-Qín thinkers can include rules and guidelines, such as verbal specifications of the content of *lǐ* (ritual propriety)—we develop basic abilities to discriminate and respond to certain paradigmatic situations. We then extend and modify these abilities to handle a wider range of cases, eventually including novel, uncommon ones. As our abilities advance, we may reach the point where we appear to act immediately and automatically, with little or no thought or reflection. Yet such action is not a dumb, conditioned

²⁶ Indeed, the dialogue between Róng Fāng 榮方 and Chénzǐ 陳子 in the *Zhōubì Suànjīng* 周髀算經 suggests that for early Chinese writers, even an apparently abstract, theoretical activity such as mathematics is considered a sort of *dào* performance. See Qián Bǎocóng 錢寶琮, *Suànjīng Shíshū* 算經十書 (Beijing: Zhōnghuá, 1963).

response. Experts and virtuosos are not automatons. Rather, expert performance requires an ability to adjust intelligently to new or changing circumstances and to modify or correct one's RDRDs as the need arises. It also involves an degree of inventiveness or creativity.

The role of practical reasoning in this conception of agency is mainly as a response to unusual or challenging circumstances. When the expert or virtuoso encounters an unfamiliar or difficult situation, she may pause and deliberate about how to proceed.²⁷ But such explicit deliberation is only one aspect of agency, and probably a secondary one. More central is the agent's capacity to pursue a long-term moral path, career track, or training program, even if, having committed to such a course of action, she never really thinks about it much again. This capacity will involve features such as commitment, perseverance, resilience, the ability to monitor and correct one's performance, the intelligence to see how to go on in new cases, and the calm needed to loosen up and let oneself flow—all of the familiar factors that contribute to becoming a skilled performer in any field. The real-time exercise of agency [p. 231]

may lie largely in unselfconscious, automatic, yet intelligent discrimination and response to particular situations. Exemplars of such automatic yet intelligent activity include the Zhuangist character Cook Dīng 庖丁, who handles difficulties in his work by slowing down, concentrating, and letting his RDRDs guide him, and the Xunzian sage, who responds to changing circumstances smoothly and effortlessly.²⁸

Conceptions of agency that tie it to the agent's capacity to deliberate and decide what to do tend to be highly individualistic. To exercise agency is to make up one's own mind on the basis of reasons one affirms for oneself and then to act on one's decisions. The performance of skills, rituals, and other practices is not individualistic in this way. These sorts of activities also manifest autonomy, but differently. They do not focus on the decision-making processes of the individual agent. In performing a skill, such as speaking a language, we must follow norms that do not depend on our decisions. Nevertheless, the performance is our own, issuing from our RDRDs. We can develop our own style of performance. We can also appeal to other of our RDRDs to determine whether to modify or discontinue our performance. Within the constraints set by the nature of a practice, there is room for autonomy and creativity. Think of a violinist performing a concerto. Every movement she will make is scripted and practiced, and the greater her virtuosity, the less likely she is to experience any conscious thought about how to carry out her performance. Yet clearly the performance is an exercise of agency, and it would be perverse to suggest it somehow lacks autonomy or

²⁷ Of course, as I suggested above, the agent can also employ practical reasoning when necessary to explain why she responds to situations as she does.

²⁸ The *Xúnzǐ* contains several descriptions of the masterful, virtuoso performance of the sage, such as this: "He carries out the standards of the hundred kings as easily as distinguishing white from black. His responses square with the changes of the age as easily as counting one, two. He performs ritual and accords with measure, as at ease with them as he is moving his four limbs. His skill in according with the time and establishing achievements is like that of nature decreeing the four seasons." See *A Concordance to Xúnzǐ* 荀子引得, Supplement no. 22, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 8/59–61.

dignity.

The conscious experience of autonomy in the form of decision-making may play little or no role in virtuoso performance. Indeed, the virtuoso may sometimes experience her actions as triggered directly and automatically by events in the environment, such as the conductor's cue, rather than by any conscious decision of her own. We might even suggest that to become a genuine virtuoso, her actions *must* become automatic, to at least some degree, or they will not attain the sort of spontaneity and grace characteristic of virtuosity. Nevertheless, these actions are fully hers, since the spontaneous triggering of

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her performance can occur only by virtue of the complex system of RDRDs that constitutes her character. Only a sort of residual Cartesianism that ties the exercise of agency to conscious, inner ratiocination, rather than the capacity for spontaneous intentional movement, would lead us to think of immediate, automatic actions as lacking autonomy.

Clearly, such actions are autonomous in the sense of being under the agent's control. When philosophers discuss autonomy, however, often their concern is not this point, but a crucial feature of moral agency: the capacity to judge for oneself what is morally right or wrong by appeal to what one understands as objective moral norms. Someone might worry that the conception of agency I am attributing to early Chinese thinkers denies people this capacity. I think we can acknowledge that the Ruist and Mohist *dào*, like those of some major religions, carry a risk of degenerating into something like religious-cult programming. There are grounds for concern in Xúnzǐ's conception of moral training, for instance, with its doctrinaire injunction to follow authority figures and model ourselves on rituals established by the sage-kings.²⁹ But the conception of agency I have been articulating surely leaves room for independent, critical thinking. Judging for oneself what is right or wrong does not require lifting oneself out of one's *dào* or practices to examine them from a neutral or God's-eye standpoint. All it requires is that we be capable of conducting our *dào*-performance as a self-correcting enterprise, in which some of our RDRDs can prompt us to critically examine, and perhaps revise or eliminate, others.³⁰ Our ability to acquire new, complex RDRDs—to learn and improve our skills and habits by modifying our existing network of RDRDs—already ensures that we have this capacity. Occasions for such examination and revision might arise when different RDRDs prompt conflicting responses, forcing us to weigh their relative strengths, assign priority to some, and modify or eliminate others. Or they might arise when we encounter resistance to our actions—due to novel or changing circumstances or the demands of other people—and thus discover that some of our RDRDs do not guide us in performing effectively. Again, the likely result is that we will modify some

²⁹ Part of what is missing, I suggest, is the sort of liberal, flexible, open-minded practical wisdom represented by the Zhuangist concept of *ming* 明 (understanding).

³⁰ Compare Wilfrid Sellars's well-known remark that "empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once." See *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), sect. 38.

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RDRDs on the grounds of others.³¹

V

If dispositions and abilities, rather than reasoning and reasons, stand at the center of the early Chinese conception of agency, this will have important consequences for how Chinese thinkers understand what we think of as ethics and moral psychology, particularly issues concerning motivation and moral worth. In the remainder of this essay, I will make a few programmatic remarks on these points. I expect some of these to be controversial, since they run counter to well-known interpretations of the *Mèngzǐ*, *Mòzǐ*, and *Xúnzǐ*.

If my interpretation of the early Chinese understanding of agency is roughly correct, then for pre-Qín thinkers the main subject matter of what we think of as ethics will be how to train people—including oneself and others, such as pupils and political subordinates—to perform the *dào* reliably and well. Hence we should not expect early Chinese ethical views to fit neatly into categories such as virtue ethics or duty ethics. They will be like virtue theories in placing the development and evaluation of character traits near the center of ethical thought. But this center will be shared by normative notions such as *dào* (way), *lǐ* (ritual propriety), and *fǎ* (models), which play roles analogous to those of moral principles.³² These normative guidelines are structurally different from abstract, general principles, however, and their application is conceived of differently. Unlike general principles, which are typically expressed in propositional form, *dào* refers to a way of doing something, *lǐ* to standard, ritualized patterns of conduct, and *fǎ* to models and paradigms. All three notions can refer to concrete examples of proper action as well as abstract, general norms. They are understood to provide normative guidance mainly through processes such as pattern recognition, model emulation, habituation, and skill acquisition, rather than through the sort of sentential inference captured by a practical syllogism. A further source of ethical guidance in pre-Qín thought is implicit norms associ-

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ated with relational social roles, such as ruler, subject, father, son, and brother—the different “parts” agents play in the performance of the social *dào*. These roles are associated with virtues—the most prominent being *xiào* 孝 (filial devotion), a virtue of morally good children and subordinates. However, the content of these virtues is grounded in a conception not merely of excellence of character, but of the proper performance of social roles. Hence this aspect of early Chinese ethics again distinguishes it from an ethics of virtue, as usually understood.

The performance focus also motivates interest in a normative aspect of

³¹ I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to expand this clarification of how we can apply some of our network of RDRDs to revise other parts of the network. The underlying point is that an RDRD is one way of representing a value or a way of acting. Agents have the capacity for critical evaluation and revision of their network of RDRDs because they are able to appeal to some values or ways in order to modify or reject others.

³² Chad Hansen makes a similar point in “Duty and Virtue,” in P. J. Ivanhoe, ed., *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics* (Lasalle: Open Court, 1996), pp. 173–92.

action that is seldom considered part of ethics: excellence or virtuosity of performance. Early Chinese thinkers are concerned not only with the correctness of an agent's actions, but with how reliably, smoothly, and expertly they are performed.³³ Indeed, this point is likely to be a key to appraisals of character and the moral worth of actions. If pre-Qín thinkers are applying a performance model of action, rather than an argument model, they are unlikely to evaluate agents by reference to the reasons or motives for which they act. Instead, they will evaluate them by reference to the virtuosity or excellence of their performance of the *dào*. Such evaluations will be analogous, in some respects, to how we evaluate the performance of a champion athlete, a master chef, or an expert surgeon. If our focus is on performance, then the reasons for which these virtuosos act are not part of our evaluation, or only a peripheral part. What concerns us above all is how reliable the virtuoso is in achieving success. I might be able to sink a basket or cook a tasty dish occasionally, but my successes are mostly a matter of luck. So no matter how good my intentions or reasons are, I do not qualify as a good basketball player or cook.

What is the difference between me and a good player or cook? Mainly it lies in the robustness or reliability of our performance across various situations. Analogously, on the performance model of action, reliability will be the crux of moral worth. A morally good character will be one that incorporates genuinely reliable, robust moral responsive dispositions. An agent with such RDRDs has in effect internalized the *dào*, such that following it has become part of his character. Morally worthy actions are those that issue from such

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RDRDs; exercising the appropriate RDRDs is sufficient for moral worth.³⁴ The question of what reason an agent acted for, or what desire or emotion motivated her, will not be seen as central. Hence, despite its prominence in influential interpretations of the *Mèngzǐ*,³⁵ the issue of whether an agent does the right thing for the right reason probably plays only a minor role, if any, in early Ruist and Mohist moral psychology and evaluations of moral worth. It is relevant mainly insofar as it contributes to an explanation of why a particular agent's outwardly correct action might not be a manifestation of robust RDRDs of the right type. Accidentally or temporarily correct action is not

³³ This focus may explain why some interpreters, such as David Hall and Roger Ames, have suggested that early Chinese thought has an aesthetic orientation. This line of interpretation is defensible insofar as quality of performance has a central place in pre-Qín ethics. The sort of quality at issue is probably still properly characterized as ethical, but it may well have an aesthetic aspect.

³⁴ I should emphasize that the point of this account is to locate moral worth in features of the agent's character that correspond to the *dào*, rather than in mere outward conformity to it. An agent whose character incorporates appropriate, robust RDRDs is one whose conduct would coincide with the *dào* come what may, even under counterfactual variations in his circumstances. By contrast, an agent whose conduct conforms outwardly to the *dào* but springs from unworthy RDRDs can be expected to deviate from the *dào* in some situations. If the agent is motivated purely by self-interest, for instance, he can be expected to diverge from the *dào* when following it conflicts with his interests. (I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify this point.)

³⁵ See, for example, Táng Jūnyì 唐君毅, 〈原心上：孟子之性情心與墨家之知識心〉，〈中國哲學原論導論篇〉 (Taipei: Xuéshēng, 1986), pp. 90–119, and David Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, Bryan W. Van Norden, ed. (La Salle: Open Court, 1996).

morally worthy because it does not issue from appropriate RDRDs.³⁶

Desire plays a less central role in early Chinese ethics and moral psychology than it does in approaches informed by motivational Humeanism and the belief-desire model.³⁷ According to motivational Humeanism, an agent can be motivated to act only if she already has some pre-existing psychological state that is captured by the motivational premise—the desire—in a practical argument. An agent sees a child crawling toward a well or a woman drowning and responds by rushing to their aid. A Humean model explains this by claiming that perception provides the agent with a belief about the situation, which in itself is powerless to prompt action. That he acts is due to desire, or a cognate conative or affective state, which combines with the belief to move him. This explanation is disputed by motivational judgment internalism, which

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holds instead that an agent can be motivated to act even if she lacks such a desire, provided she judges that the action is right. Early Chinese thinkers generally come closer to judgment internalism than to motivational Humeanism, but in the end I suspect they share neither position.³⁸ For them, fundamentally, it may be neither judgment nor desire that drives action, but habits and dispositions. The agent who saves the child or woman has an RDRD to respond to emergencies by coming to the aid of those in need. The RDRD is not a desire, because it is not an intentional state (it has no satisfaction conditions, for instance). A Humean might insist that the RDRD is at the same time a disposition to generate a desire of the relevant type. But if, as I have argued, pre-Qín thinkers do not presuppose a belief-desire model of action, then for them positing such a desire yields no additional explanatory power beyond simply ascribing to the agent the relevant RDRD.

Rather than the primary source of motivation, on the discrimination-and-response model, desire is just one among many sorts of RDRDs that can prompt action. Conceptually, desire (*yù* 欲) is typically paired with aversion (*wù* 惡) to form an action-guiding distinction akin to *shì-fěi*. The default response to a desire is to pursue its object; that to aversion is to avoid it. But desire versus aversion is neither the only nor the fundamental action-guiding distinction. Xúnzǐ, for instance, explicitly states that the distinction between what we deem “admissible” (*kě* 可) and “inadmissible” can override desire (22/60–62).³⁹ Similarly, both the *Mòzǐ* and *The Annals of Lǚ Bùwéi* indicate

³⁶ Parallel points hold of the Mohist conception of knowledge, which assigns no role to justification, or the reasons for one’s judgment. To the Mohists, knowledge is the reliable disposition to discriminate and name things correctly. If an agent’s dispositions are sufficiently reliable, the agent qualifies as knowing. If the agent’s discrimination is correct in some cases but not others, she does not count as knowing. The Mohists’ concern is not with individual judgments, but with the agent’s overall pattern of discrimination.

³⁷ This point is due partly to Robins, *The Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China*.

³⁸ Most likely, the discriminations that trigger action for Chinese thinkers combine both affective or conative and cognitive components. In recent moral philosophy, James Griffin has articulated a similar position, arguing that cognitive “recognition” and affective “reaction” are inextricably intertwined. See his *Value Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 19–36.

³⁹ Xúnzǐ thus uses the word “desire” (*yù*) in a narrow sense, apparently to refer to a brute inclination to pursue (*qiú* 求) some object or end. “Approval,” or the attitude that something is

that people can act against their preferences or desires.⁴⁰ In general, pre-Qín thinkers do not treat desire—or other conative or affective states—as a necessary con-

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dition for moving agents to act.⁴¹

If this interpretation is correct, then there is no particular reason to expect that early Chinese theorists will link moral worth to the agent's having certain sorts of desires or affects.⁴² Nor, in their moral psychology, should we expect them to see shaping the agent's desires or affects as the key to moral education or improvement—contrary to well-known interpretations of Mencius⁴³ and Xúnzǐ⁴⁴ and familiar criticisms of the Mohists.⁴⁵ Indeed, I suggest that the project of modifying agents' desires and affects is not central to Ruist and Mohist moral psychology.⁴⁶ The focus is instead on training the agent's

admissible (*kě* 可), is not regarded as a form of desire, even when it motivates action. Similarly, the Mohists do not regard the motivating attitude of deeming something *shì* (this, right) as a form of desire. The conception of desire in these texts thus contrasts with the conception in some treatments of action, on which desire refers very broadly to whatever pro-attitude motivates action. For early Chinese thinkers, there are motivating pro-attitudes that are not desires.

⁴⁰ See *A Concordance to Mòzǐ* 墨子引|得, Supplement no. 21, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series (reprint) (Shànghǎi: Shànghǎi Gǔjí, 1986), 47/19–20 and 47/26–28, and John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, tr., *The Annals of Lǚ Bùwéi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), sect. 2.2, p. 80.

⁴¹ Two passages in early texts provide potential counterexamples to this generalization. One is *Mèngzǐ* 6A:10, which seems to imply that people inevitably act on their strongest desire. (On this passage, see Bryan Van Norden, “Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 32 [1992], pp. 161–84.) If this is indeed the Mencian position (it is difficult to tell, since it is not echoed in other Mencian discussions of moral psychology), then arguably desires are a key to morally right action for the *Mèngzǐ*. However, the focus of the passage is not to present a general explanation of action, nor does it tie moral improvement to modifying one's desires. Its main point is that, to be morally good, people must avoid “losing the original heart” by which they put moral considerations above other values. The second passage is *The Annals of Lǚ Bùwéi*, sect. 19.6, which argues that if people lack desires, their ruler will be unable to employ them, because there is no means of motivating them.

⁴² Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, and Táng, 〈原心上〉, both seem to assume such a link.

⁴³ See, for instance, Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), p. 94.

⁴⁴ The interpretations I have in mind include those of Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 314–15; David Wong, “Xunzi on Moral Motivation,” in T. C. Kline III and P. J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), p. 139; and Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, p. 94.

⁴⁵ David Nivison and Kwong-loi Shun, among others, have criticize the Mohists for neglecting the issue of how to cultivate agents' desires or affects. See Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, p. 96, and Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 35. See too Shun's entry on “Mo Tzu” in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 515.

⁴⁶ I believe this is the case even in the *Mèngzǐ*, the text in which affective attitudes play the most prominent role. The focus of Mencian moral psychology is not the development of motivation, but how to bring into play people's native capacity to be morally good. The point of appeals to affective attitudes, such as sympathy, in the *Mèngzǐ* is to establish that all people have the ability (*néng* 能), capacity (*cái* 才), or latent inclinations (*xīn* 心, *xìng* 性) needed to be good. The process of moral improvement lies in activating these pre-existing resources and

dispositions to discriminate and respond to things in normatively appropriate ways.

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The task of becoming good is framed as one of developing agents' abilities and habits, not cultivating motivation. The keys are education, training, and development of traits such as determination, resolve, and resilience. The situation of an individual agent seeking moral improvement is like that of a cadet who has enrolled at a military academy and at the end of the first, difficult week is wondering whether he has what it takes to finish the program. He already has dispositions sufficient to have set out on the path, and this is all the motivation he needs—at least if we understand motivation as a matter of conative and affective states. What he requires now is perseverance—the resolve and resilience to follow through. He needs to develop his steadiness and resoluteness, not desires or affects.⁴⁷ To be sure, such a moral development program might cause the content of the agent's desires and affects to change. Perhaps, for instance, he will cease to have certain selfish desires or become emotionally more sensitive to others' needs. But such changes will be byproducts of the program, not its focus.⁴⁸

To illustrate this interpretive claim about desire, consider a prominent textual passage that might at first glance seem to provide a counterexample to it: the depiction of Confucius at age seventy as able to follow what his heart desires without transgressing the norms (*Analects* 2:4). An outcome of Confucius's lifelong ethical training was that in old age the desires affirmed by his heart conformed perfectly to his ethical ideals. But the text does not imply that this transformation of his desires was the goal or focus of the program of study he commenced at age fifteen, and presumably he was already well on his way toward a reliably good character by age thirty, when he could stand on his own, or by forty, when he was no longer confused. A transformation

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of his desires was the result of his lifelong ethical development, but desires did not provide the initial motivation for it, nor were they the focus of the

employing them to develop the resolve and dispositions needed for virtuous, correct action. (My reading of *Mèngzǐ* on these points is indebted to Robins, *The Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China*.)

⁴⁷ This sort of steadiness or resoluteness is comparable to what the *Mèngzǐ*, for instance, calls *bù dòng xīn* 不動心 (2A:2) and what the *Xúnzǐ* refers to when it mentions “fixing” or having a “robust” intention or commitment (e.g., 2/35–36, 8/18). It may also be what is at stake in *Analects* 6:12, where Confucius criticizes Rǎn Qiú for doubting in advance whether he has the strength to follow the *dào*.

⁴⁸ Early thinkers who did emphasize modifying agents' desires did not advocate shaping their content so much as reducing or eliminating what they considered extraneous desires. Their concern was less with motivation than with a particular normative conception of the *dào*. Parts of the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 and *Zhuāngzǐ* maintain that a life conforming to the *dào* is one of few or no desires. The peace activists Sòngzǐ 宋子 and Yǐn Wén 尹文 contended that people's native desires are few and shallow and thus easily satisfied. Along with *The Annals of Lǚ Bùwéi* (sect. 2.3), they distinguished between desires that are *qíng* 情 (“genuine,” in the sense of arising from our inherent nature) or not, maintaining that a satisfying, healthy life is one that fulfills the “genuine” desires and forgoes the rest. See too *Mencius* 7B:35, which suggests that having few desires is conducive to “nurturing the heart.”

development process. His motivation lies in his *zhì* 志 (commitment), not desire, and the challenge was not to strengthen or change his motivation but to train other aspects of his character.

If, on the discrimination-and-response model, desires are not necessarily what moves us, fundamentally, then what is? I have been arguing that the answer is our RDRDs, of which desires are but one kind. But the various RDRDs do not operate freely on their own. We can intentionally develop new RDRDs, and we can pause to examine the direction in which our RDRDs move us or weigh one against another when making a decision. These facts suggest that something manages the functioning of RDRDs, thus controlling the overall discrimination-and-response system. For most pre-Qín thinkers, this something is probably the heart (*xīn* 心), the executive organ of the body and the locus of agency.⁴⁹ If we accept what Xúnzǐ tells us, however, the heart itself functions according to the discrimination-and-response model, guiding action by discriminating between what is and is not “admissible” (*kě*) (22/60–62). The ability to draw this sort of distinction properly in turn comes from knowing the *dào* (21/32–33).⁵⁰ The quality of our character and conduct rests on our ability to engage in *dào*-learning, employing the heart to override some RDRDs and reinforce others so that we develop robust dispositions to do what accords with the *dào* and avoid what does not.

⁴⁹ One exception to this generalization might be the author of the *Zhuāngzǐ* “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” which parodies the mainstream view that the heart is the “ruler” of the other organs. For the later Mohists, *zhī* 知 (the knowing, the intelligence) fills the role played by the *xīn* in other texts.

⁵⁰ *Mèngzǐ* 6A:7 suggests that we have an inborn tendency to find “morality and orderly pattern” affectively satisfying: they please our hearts just as delicious foods please our mouths. But this and other passages in *Mèngzǐ* by no means entail that we can develop RDRDs to conform to “morality and orderly pattern” without learning and guidance. Indeed, passages such as 4A:1 and 6A:20 suggest that following the model set by the sages is crucial.