Translating and Interpreting the Mengzi: Virtue, Obligation, and Discretion

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Reflections on Bryan Van Norden’s *Mengzi, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*

ABSTRACT

The essay focuses on two aspects of the translation and interpretation of *Mengzi* in Bryan Van Norden’s new translation. First, I argue that Van Norden’s explanation of virtues in terms of obligations is potentially problematic, and show instances in which this unusual understanding of virtue influences the translation itself. Second, I highlight the ways in which Van Norden’s translation and commentary have effectively thematized the role of “discretion (quán 權)” in Mengzi’s text, and make some suggestions for how we can arrive at an even deeper understanding of this important concept.

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One has only to look at the back cover of Mengzi, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries to see that I am a fan of this translation. In the interests of full disclosure, here is what I said:

Bryan W. Van Norden accomplishes two impressive feats in this important new translation of Mengzi (or Mencius). First, he presents the text in a traditional fashion, with indispensable commentary interwoven into — yet always clearly distinct from — the text. This opens up the text to modern readers as never before in a translation. Second, he both lets us hear the voice of the text’s greatest commentator (Zhu Xi from the twelfth century) and gives us a translation faithful to the text’s original time and philosophy. The supple balance with which Van Norden pulls this off makes this translation perfect for students, general readers, and scholars alike.

In the last two semesters, I have twice taught “Classical Chinese Philosophy” at Wesleyan, and both times used Van Norden’s Mengzi as one of our texts. I have thus had considerable opportunity to discuss and reflect on the nature of its interpretation of Mengzi. This experience has suggested some questions but it has not changed by fundamental judgment: Van Norden has produced a splendid translation and interpretation of the Mengzi.

I. VIRTUE VERSUS OBLIGATION

In his commentary to 5A:2, Van Norden writes that the passage has illustrated:

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…the extreme to which Confucianism is an ethics that evaluates actions in terms of the character they express, rather than evaluating character in terms of the actions it leads to. (In Western terms, Mengzian Confucianism is a radical form of virtue ethics, rather than rule-deontology or consequentialism.)

By “radical form” of virtue ethics, Van Norden means that Mengzi does not just have a place for virtue within his overall ethical theory, but puts virtue at the center of that theory: actions are evaluated in terms of virtuous character, rather than the other way around. Other contemporary writers have marked this same distinction by speaking of, for example, Kantian “virtue theory” versus Aristotelian “virtue ethics.” In any event, I now want to turn to a number of issues in Van Norden’s translation and commentary that cluster around the question of virtue ethics.

First of all, I want to press Van Norden a bit on how we should understand the idea of a “virtue,” especially in the context of a putatively “radical” virtue ethics. In his Introduction, Van Norden writes, “To simplify, benevolence is a virtue involving our obligation to help others, while righteousness emphasizes prohibitions against our performance of certain actions.” This same ideas are presented in more detail in Van Norden’s recent book, Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy; for instance, we read there that “Mengzian benevolence is a disposition toward agent-relative obligations involving the well-being of others.” In thus building the notion of obligation into his understanding of virtue, Van Norden is at the very least bucking the trend in recent discussions of virtue. Michael Slote has argued that a virtue ethics “makes primary use of aretaic terms” (like admirable, excellent, virtuous) rather than “deontic terms” (like right or wrong, permissible, and obligatory), which depend on how acts accord with rules. Virtue ethics “either treats deontic epithets as derivative from the aretaic or dispenses with them altogether.” If we look at two recent definitions of virtue, we will see what Slote means. According to Christine Swanton, a virtue is a disposition to respond to items within its field (she also calls this “the demands of the world”) in an excellent way.
Robert Adams says that virtues are persistently excellent ways of “being for the good.” It is arguable that if we look at earlier sources of Western virtue ethics such as Aristotle or Hume, we will also not find an idea of “obligation” as key to their understandings of virtue.

Why does it matter whether “obligation” figures into our view of virtue? For present purposes, it matters most because getting clear on the relations among virtue, rules, obligations, and “deontology” can affect the way that we interpret and translate the Mengzi, as I will elaborate in a moment. There are also a host of philosophical questions riding on such clarification. If virtues are dispositions relative to various obligations, where do these obligations come from? How do we know them? Western philosophers have long taken obligations to be connected up with the idea of guilt. If this is correct, how would it relate to ideas in the Mengzi?

A further set of questions concerns the strictness of obligations: if virtues depend on obligations, does this mean that one either is virtuous (when disposed to precisely meet one’s obligations) or not (if one fails to meet one’s obligations), without room for gradation? What about a person who does more than what he or she is obliged to do; is this irrelevant to virtue?

Let us look at some ways in which these issues are reflected in Van Norden’s translation and commentary. In 2A:2.24, Mengzi is discussing the similarities and differences among ancient sages. On the one hand, he insists that Bo Yi and Yi Yin were not “at the same level (ban 班)” as Kongzi; Mengzi ends the passage by saying (in Van Norden’s perceptive rendering), “there has never been one who has reached a greater summit than Kongzi (wei you sheng yu kongzi ye 未有盛於孔子也).” Both of these lines suggest that sagehood, or excellence or admirability, is a matter of degree. If virtue is relative to obligations, then are we to conclude that Bo Yi and Yi Yin were disposed to meet a lower percentage of their obligations than Kongzi?

Van Norden comments that Bo Yi and Yi Yin are examples of individuals who “attain one aspect
of sagehood but fall short of the complete sageliness of Kongzi.” vii That seems right, but it is still an open question whether we should understand this in terms of their higher failure-rate when it comes to obligations. Bo Yi is fastidious and somewhat narrow; Yi Yin can be too loose and undiscriminating. Kongzi is able to see the differences between different cases, and respond appropriately. It is easy to see this in terms of issues like perceptiveness and wisdom, but less easy to explain the differences in terms of differential dispositions towards a given obligation.

Also relevant here is what Mengzi says the three have in common: “If any [of them] could obtain the world by performing one unrighteous deed, or killing one innocent person, he would not do it.” Van Norden comments: “Mengzi … place[s] great emphasis on using discretion to respond flexibly to complex circumstances. However, this verse makes clear that there are some absolute prohibitions.” viii This comment seems to be informed by Van Norden’s understanding of virtues as relative to obligations and prohibitions, but what exactly does Van Norden mean? Unrighteous deeds are sometime acceptable, but never if they are aimed at gaining rule over the world? Or perhaps it is specifically killing an innocent that he has in mind: killing is sometimes acceptable, but never killing an innocent? Figuring out what Mengzi and Van Norden have in mind here is important because, as contemporary philosophers have noted, we tend to have moral intuitions that support at least some degree of “deontology”: that is, we seem to generally regard “certain sorts of positive acts — such as killing, injuring, stealing, lying, and breaking promises — [as] inherently (or at least prima facie) wrong.” ix An obligation-based ethics like Kantianism has no trouble accounting for this feature of our moral experience. Some versions of consequentialism deny that we should be concerned with deontology: there is no difference, a supporter of such a theory might say, between killing and letting die. What of Mengzi’s virtue ethics?
Return to the two possible readings of “absolute prohibition” mentioned a moment ago. Does Mengzi think we can sometimes do unrighteous things, but never in the case of gaining the world? This sounds wrong to me. Certainly there are some things that we should sometimes do and sometimes not do. To choose a famous example, sometimes we should tell the truth to the authorities, and sometimes we should lie. If our father has committed a crime, then we should lie to cover it up. Or at least, in some circumstances this is the right and righteous thing to do. In the discussions of these themes in both the *Analects* and *Mengzi*, I see no hint of the idea that sometimes we appropriately violate a “prohibition” against lying. So perhaps what Mengzi means to prohibit is ever killing an innocent person in order to gain a state. Mengzi does indeed seem opposed to killing, but it is hard to tell whether this is because he recognizes an absolute prohibition or because it simply follows from the extraordinary care that sages have for the people of the world. In this regard, we should note that Slote has argued that a sentimentalist virtue ethicist can show why virtuous people would recognize a variety of seemingly deontological distinctions despite not rooting them in an idea of obligation. (Roughly, the idea is that the empathic mechanisms that undergird morality do, in fact, distinguish between cases in which we are more or less directly causally connected to an outcome.) Mengzi probably does not give us enough evidence to say whether a sage would distinguish between killing and letting die, but it is plausible to think that a contemporary Mengzian could — and without relying on an underlying, primitive notion of obligation.

The idea that Mengzi is centrally concerned with obligations and prohibitions sneaks into Van Norden’s translation in another place. In 3B:1.4, the exemplary charioteer Wang Liang comments on the bad character of his master, Xi, by saying, “I drove my horses in the prescribed manner for him, and by the end of the day we did not catch one thing. *I violated the rules for him.*
and in one day we caught ten…. I am not accustomed to driving for a petty person.”

Wang Liang thus asks to be excused from driving for Xi. It sounds like Mengzi is conceptualizing the problem with Xi in terms of rules and prohibitions. But I suggest that the italicized portion of the passage, 畏遇, should in fact be translated as I drove deceitfully for him. Mengzi’s emphasis is on the character of the driver, rather than on the rules. To be sure, there may have been a code of charioteering involved, but whether its violation would count as deception depends on the circumstances and motives of the agents involved, as will be clear when we turn to the topic of “discretion,” below. As mentioned above, it is possible that Mengzi could endorse a deontological distinction — for instance, it might be worse for Wang Liang to drive deceitfully himself, than for him to be in the chariot while Xi drove that way — but the concern that Mengzi expresses here seems to be readily encompassed in virtue language.

III. HOW TO EXERCISE DISCRETION

One of the most famous passages in Mengzi is 4A:17, in which Mengzi asserts that “discretion (quan 權)” directs us to save a drowning sister-in-law, notwithstanding the ritual prohibition against men and women touching in certain circumstances. A strength of Van Norden’s commentary is that it brings out the degree to which the role of discretion is an important theme throughout the Mengzi, rather than an idiosyncratic feature of 4A:17 (which is one of only two Mengzi passages to use the term quan in this sense). In 1B:15, Mengzi offers two different options to Duke Wen of Teng, whose small state was in peril: to flee or to defend to the death. Van Norden invokes Zhu Xi’s discussion of the passage to show that the choice is a matter of “discretion”: fleeing is only apt of one’s character is so benevolent that the people will
follow you, as the people of Bin once followed King Tai. Otherwise, one should follow similar
issues are at stake in various other passages like 3B:1, 5A:2, and 6B:1. Van Norden’s treatment
of 4B:11 is particularly interesting, in light of two themes I have discussed above. The
translation reads: “The words of great people are not necessarily faithful, and their actions are
not necessarily resolute. They rest only in righteousness.”xii First of all, Van Norden proceeds to
discuss two different interpretations (those of Zhao Qi and Zhu Xi) in his commentary, adopting
in this case a relatively “open” approach to the text. On Zhao Qi’s reading, this passage is an
instance of “discretion”: the virtuous person can sometimes lie. With the correct (righteous)
motive, in other words, there would be no absolute prohibition against lying.

Van Norden brings out another important aspect of discretion in his commentary to
4B:29. Mengzi notes that Yu, Hou Ji, and Yan Hui lived in different eras and did different things,
but maintains that they all had the “same Way.” Therefore, “If Yu, Hou Ji, and Yan Hui had
exchanged places, they would all have done as the others did.” Van Norden comments:

This passage illustrates very clearly the difference between Confucian “discretion” and
either relativism or pluralism. The correct action is very context-sensitive, but there is
one right response to a situation, so different sages would all do the same thing in the
same situation.xiii

These are helpful and apt distinctions. Relativism would mean that the “Way” was relative to an
era or a place, but Mengzi makes very clear that simply following the values of the current times
is not a guarantee of genuine virtue (7B:37). Pluralism would mean that multiple ways might be
equally correct; this, too, Mengzi rejects. However, it is worth making some further observations.

First, Mengzi does seem to recognize different levels of attainment among exemplary
individuals, as we saw above concerning Bo Yi, Yi Yin, and Kongzi. We can imagine that if they
switched places, they might not all do the same things. Bo Yi and Yi Yin might be less worthy
than Kongzi as a result, but Mengzi still wants to commend their character as far better than the
average person. Second, it is possible to wonder whether one’s distinct, individual character or personality might sometimes figure in to the “context” to which discretion should be sensitive. The closest Mengzi gets to addressing this issue is in the 1B:15 discussion of whether to flee or fight. Zhu Xi claims that staying and fighting is the “standard,” and fleeing alone represents “discretion.” But might there not be a valuable kind of self-knowledge, and thus discretion, involved in knowing that one will fail if one flees and attempts to re-found the state elsewhere? The contemporary philosopher Christine Swanton has argued, following Nietzsche, that we should not try to be virtuous “beyond our strength,” though she also adds that we should continuously try to strengthen or improve our virtue.\textsuperscript{xiv} Perhaps Mengzi would agree, thus adding further nuance to the idea of discretion.\textsuperscript{xv}

My final comment about Van Norden’s treatment of discretion concerns the question of how one actually engages in discretion. In his commentary to 7A:26, he writes that “There is no simple formula for determining to what extent we should prioritize the interests of ourselves, our loved ones, and the world at large…. So we must use “discretion” to judge what is appropriate in each situation.”\textsuperscript{xvi} I agree with this, against those interpreters who think that Mengzi has a fixed ranking of values. However, it certainly seems mysterious how we are supposed to make these judgments. In his commentary to one of the several passages in \textit{Mengzi} in which virtuous people exercise judgment in conflictual circumstances, Van Norden simply writes: “This chapter illustrates the Confucian fondness for seeking creative solutions to ethical dilemmas.”\textsuperscript{xvii} So far, so good, but I would argue that what we see here is not just a “fondness.” It is a key to understanding how discretion works. The word \textit{quan} means to weigh and invokes the idea of balance.\textsuperscript{xviii} I have argued elsewhere that Mengzi’s solutions to apparent dilemmas involves an effort to find a solution that honors all relevant values in a balanced or harmonious fashion.\textsuperscript{xix}
This is not the place to elaborate further, but I would suggest that there is more to say, which both helps us understand Mengzi better, and also may be of relevance to contemporary philosophizing.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me say a word about audience. It is clear from my experience that the translation works very well in a college classroom. In praising it as apt for classroom use, it is possible that some might conclude that Van Norden’s *Mengzi* is a dumbed-down version of the text that will be of no interest to scholars. I believe that implicit in many of my comments here is an argument to the contrary. The full translation of an ancient text is both a labor of love and an irreplaceable part of the interpretive enterprise: indeed, since all translation is interpretation, the idea that there is some deep distinction between translation and commentary is mistaken.\textsuperscript{xx} Even when Van Norden does not make his thinking explicit in commentary, we have his rendition of every passage in the *Mengzi* to serve as examples and elaboration of his understanding of Mengzi’s thought. To be sure, it would be unfair to treat the translation and its commentaries as our only source of Van Norden’s view of the *Mengzi*, but neither should we scholars neglect the value of translation and commentary. It thus deserves places both in our classrooms and in our own bookshelves.

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Endnotes
My thanks to Jiyuan Yu for organizing a very rich “Author Meets Critics” panel on Bryan Van Norden’s translation, and to Jiyuan and Susan Blake and especially to Bryan for their comments on the version of these thoughts that I presented.

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i Bryan Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), 120.

ii Ibid., p. xxxii, emphasis in original.


vi Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14. Adams specifically discusses the differences he sees between virtue and obligation (Ibid., 7-10). It is significant that he does not believe an ethics of virtue can cover the whole subject matter of ethics; he sees it as one “department” of ethical theory, which needs to be complemented by an ethics of “right action” or obligation. See Ibid., 4 and 10.

vii Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi*, 42.

viii Ibid., 43.


x Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi*, 77, emphasis added.


Ibid., 112.

Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 204.

Professor Chung-yi Cheng points out that, if the stakes are very high, Mengzi may still hold that one needs to do what it is not possible to do. This fits with a further nuance of Swanton’s view, namely that sometimes “supererogation” is called for. Note that this use of the idea of supererogation is different from most uses, as it is relative to one’s capabilities rather than an impersonal standard of obligation.


Ibid., 110 (4B24).


In order to avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that I do not hold that translation is only interpretation. There are other important constraints on translation, such as an appropriate degree of syntactical and semantic/inferential match between the original text’s words and
phrases, and the words and phrases of one’s translation. Still, there is no act of translation that is
not interpretive, even though the converse is not true. I thank Professor Chung-ying Cheng for
discussion of this matter.