

## **Inference in the *Mengzi* 1A: 7**

*Koji Tanaka*

Department of Philosophy  
University of Auckland

---

### **I *Mengzi* 1A: 7**

In 1A: 7 of the *Mengzi*, King Xuan of Qi asks Mengzi what it is to be a “true” king. Mengzi responds that a “true” king is one who protects or tends to his people. When the King professes some uncertainty as to whether he is capable of doing so, Mengzi tries to convince King Xuan that he surely is. The reason he offers is based on a story he heard about the king. As Mengzi recalls it, the king happened to see an ox being led to sacrifice and couldn’t bear the fear the ox was experiencing. The king then ordered to spare the ox by replacing it with a lamb. While people thought the king was miserly in so doing, Mengzi tells the king that he, in fact, acted from compassion.<sup>1</sup> Mengzi tries to convince the king that since he has compassion for an ox, the king is a “true” king. The crux of Mengzi’s reason is the following:

If a feather isn’t lifted, it is because one does not use one’s strength. If a cartload of firewood is not seen, it is because one does not use one’s eyesight. And if the people are not cared for, it is because you do not

---

The very first version of this article was presented to the fourteenth International Conference of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy held at the University of New South Wales, Australia, in 2005. I would like to thank the audience for their comments. I am indebted to Chris Fraser and Justin Tiwald for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to thank an anonymous reviewer and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, for their comments which led to a further improvement. Many thanks also go to Bronwyn Finnigan for her comments, which provided a significant improvement of this article, and for her proofreading the last draft.

<sup>1</sup>The argument given by Mengzi is, in fact, much more involved than what I have here. In particular, he explains why replacing an ox (which the king saw) with a lamb (which he has never seen) is a compassionate act.

use your compassion. So, the reason why you do not become a real king is that you do not act, not that you cannot.<sup>2</sup>

Mengzi goes on to conclude:

Hence one who extends one's compassion can take care of all people within the Four Seas. One who does not cannot even care for one's own family. There is just one thing in which the ancients greatly surpassed others, and that was in being good at extending what they did. Why is it then that your compassion is sufficient to reach animals yet you do no good acts that reach the people?<sup>3</sup>

## 2 The Inferential View

A large number of commentaries on this passage have been put forward by traditional and contemporary scholars. Our interest in this article is with the inferential view put forward by David Nivison.<sup>4</sup> According to Nivison's view, Mengzi's persuasion involves "inferences." In particular, he argues that Mengzi appeals to analogical reasoning and that the core of this reasoning is the notion of *tui* 推 (to extend) which Mengzi adopts from the later Mohists. Nivison appears to reconstruct this reasoning as follows:

*tui* his capacity of being compassionate toward an ox to his capacity of being compassionate toward his people.

*tui* his judgment of his capacity as above to his compassionate attitudes toward his people.

*tui* his compassionate attitudes toward his people to his compassionate action toward his people.<sup>5</sup>

What is crucial to the inferential view is the idea that "*tui*" is an inferential notion. Thus, according to Nivison, Mengzi's analogical reasoning can be presented in terms of three inferences, each corresponding to each stage of *tui*:

The king is capable of being compassionate toward an ox.

---

<sup>2</sup>*Mengzi* 1A7: 10. Translations of the passages quoted in this article are those given in David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>*Mengzi* 1A7: 12.

<sup>4</sup>David S. Nivison, "Mencius and Motivation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47, no. 3 (1980): 417-32 and Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, Chapters 6, 7, and 9.

<sup>5</sup>I am here paraphrasing Nivison as I understand his discussion. However, as an anonymous reviewer rightly points out, *tui* technically doesn't take compassion (or emotions generally) as its object.

∴ The king is capable of being compassionate toward his people.

∴ The king is compassionate toward his people.

∴ The king (will) act(s) compassionately toward his people.

Whether or not this passage from Mengzi can be reconstructed in terms of the inferential view evidently depends on what “*tui*” means in the text. This is an exegetical issue. However, it also depends on what is meant by “inference” (or “logic” in general) and, thus, what it means to say that “*tui*” is an “inferential notion.” This is a philosophical issue about the nature of logic. How one resolves the first issue will be informed by how one thinks about the second issue. In this article, I will focus on the second issue. In particular, it has been objected that several problems hold for the inferential view. I shall argue that these objections assume a contemporary Western view about the nature of logic and inferences. I shall propose an alternative characterization of the relevant sense of inference that, I believe, is more sensitive to the classical Chinese philosophical context and shall argue that certain insights might be derived from reading Mengzi in light of this alternative characterization of inferences.

### 3 Problems for the Inferential View

According to Manyul Im there are (at least) three problems with taking *tui* as an inferential notion. These problems correspond to the three inferences in Nivison’s inferential view.<sup>6</sup> With respect to the first inference, Im argues that it is difficult to see how the conclusion follows without the general principle that “If one is capable of doing a difficult task, one is certainly capable of doing an easier task.” With regard to the second, it is not clear how extending *judgment* to *compassion* (i.e., an emotion or attitude), is possible if “extending” is an inferential notion. One may extend one’s *judgment* that one is compassionate toward the people from the judgment that one is capable of feeling compassion for the ox. Yet, it is not clear how compassion can be *inferred* from a judgment. Finally, with regards to the third inference, it doesn’t seem possible for a certain action, that is, a compassionate act, to be *inferred* from one’s emotive state, that is, compassion.

---

<sup>6</sup>Manyul Im, “Action, Emotion, and Inference in Mencius,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2002): 227-49.

<sup>7</sup>Im, “Action, Emotion, and Inference in Mencius,” 239.

## 4 Replies

### 4.1 Analogical Inference

The first problem raised by Im is grounded in a certain standard view concerning the nature of inference. According to the standard view,  $A$  is inferred from  $B$  if truth is guaranteed to be preserved from  $B$  (the premise) to  $A$  (the conclusion). That is, inference is primarily understood as a deductive form of reasoning concerned only with the truth-preserving *relation* between the premise and the conclusion. It is the form of the relation, not the content of the premises and conclusion, that is at issue. According to a “deductive” interpretation of inferences, a premise of conditional form, which mentions both the initial premise and conclusion, is required to bridge the original premise and conclusion and, thereby, preserve truth. Assuming such a view of inference, it is indeed hard to see how the conclusion follows without assuming some such principle as: “If one is capable of doing a difficult task, one is certainly capable of doing an easier task.”

This is not the sense of inference at play in Nivison’s inferential view, however. The inferential view reconstructs Mengzi’s persuasion as form of *analogical* reasoning and, thus, involving analogical inference. An analogical inference is inductive and as such it doesn’t guarantee truth-preservation from the premises to the conclusion: that is, it is not the case that the conclusion is true in *all* situations in which the premises are true. Instead, the conclusion of an inductive inference is said to follow if the conclusion is true in all *normal* situations in which the premises are true.<sup>8</sup> Given that inductive inferences do not guarantee truth-preservation, there is no need to insist on a general principle to guarantee that the conclusion follows from the premises. To suppose otherwise is to assume that deductive inference is the only kind of inference. Thus, Nivison’s inferential view is not subject to Im’s first problem.

Now, certain insights can be derived from thinking of inferences as analogical. For instance, to describe an analogical inference as an inductive inference is to consider the strength of the inference to rest in the fact that the content of the premises establishes a context of normality. Thus, in an analogical inference, one must focus on the particularities of the situation specified by the premises which set the context for what counts as a warranted conclusion. In this way, analogical inferences, unlike deductive inferences, are not formal in the sense that it is not indifferent to particularities and it is not abstracted from the content given in the context.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Graham Priest, “Validity,” in *The Nature of Logic (European Review of Philosophy Vol. 4)*, ed. A. C. Varzi (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 1999), 183-206.

<sup>9</sup>I am here reflecting on the term *lei* 類 (kind, category). It is sometimes thought that this term forms the phrase “*tui lei*” which can be translated as “inference.” See, for example, Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, 101. For the view that logic is abstracted from the content, see Immanuel Kant, *Jäsche*

## 4.2 Emotions and Judgments

The second problem Im identifies with the inferential view is that an emotion, such as compassion, doesn't seem to be something that can be *inferred* from judgment.

From the point of view of contemporary logicians, this objection does not make sense because logic is not concerned with judgment and, hence, inferences concern neither emotions nor judgments. According to contemporary logicians (following Tarski), inferences are primarily about the forms of arguments ascertained schematically in terms of logical connectives (such as “not” [negation], “and” [conjunction], “or” [disjunction], “if ... then ...” [conditional] as well as quantifiers) from a meta-theoretical point of view. Thus, inferences are considered to be primarily concerned with the forms of *argument* and not with judgment.

However, we can give some sense to Im's objection if we adopt a different view of the nature of logic. Frege, for example, held a conception of logic based on the notion of judgment. In particular, Frege maintained that the laws of logic yield norms for thought and judgments in particular. Moreover, he considered these laws to apply to the contents of such thought or judgments (i.e., what is thinkable or judgeable) where this content is numerable in the sense of being about external things which can be counted. Frege writes:

The laws of number are thus not really applicable to external things: they are not laws of nature. But they are certainly applicable to judgements that are made about things in the external world: they are laws of the laws of nature. They do not assert a connection between natural phenomena, but a connection between judgements; and the latter include the laws of nature.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for Frege, judgments that are warranted by the laws of logic entail knowledge of objects. Consider, for instance, the inference from the premises: all whales are mammals and all mammals are vertebrates, to the conclusion all whales are vertebrates. According to Frege, whether the judgment “all whales are vertebrates” follows from these premises depends on whether or not the relevant object (i.e., whales) is assigned the appropriate concepts (e.g., vertebrates).<sup>11</sup>

---

*Logic*, ed. G. B. Jäsche (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1800), an English translation in J. Michael Young, trans. and ed., *Lectures on Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup>Gottlob Frege, *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (Breslau: W. Koebner, 1884), §87, an English translation in Michael Berney, ed., *The Frege Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

<sup>11</sup>There is a complication in Frege's view that I am glossing over here. Strictly speaking, the expression “All whales are mammals” is an expression of the second-order concept mammals which subsumes the first-order concept whales as an object. For Frege's view on this issue, see, for example, Thomas Ricketts, “Concepts, Objects and the Context Principle,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Frege*, eds. Michael Potter and Thomas Ricketts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 149–219.

One must be careful here, however. Frege famously argued against psychologism in logic. In presenting his view of logical laws as bearing on thoughts and judgments, Frege did not think of inferences as *describing* the ways we think. His point, rather, was that those judgments which entail knowledge of (and not beliefs about) objects are subject to evaluation by means of inferences. For Frege, (correct) inferences assert the standards in terms of which our thought can be evaluated.<sup>12</sup>

Now, the inference at issue concerns whether or not one can infer compassion from a judgment. It might not be clear how emotions might fit into such an account. One might think that an emotion does not appear to be made possible by anything law-like nor entail knowledge, as do thoughts and judgments in Frege's account.<sup>13</sup> However, it seems that once we come to be in a certain emotive state, we may make a judgment about it. Thus, an emotion may be an "object" of a judgment and, thus, expressible in a sentence of the form: I am in such and such an emotive state.

In the classical Chinese context, we can, in fact, make a stronger claim. The classical Chinese philosophers arguably didn't distinguish the emotive aspect of cognition from the purely intellectual aspect.<sup>14</sup> For example, the notion of *xin* 心 (heart-mind), the locus (or organ) of thinking and feeling, doesn't give rise to this distinction.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for the classical Chinese philosophers, in making a judgment about what is thinkable by *xin*, one can be considered as asserting one's own emotive state insofar as the judgment expresses one's emotive state. In the classical Chinese context, thus, we can think of inferences as telling us not only about judgments as such but also about emotions expressed by the judgments. When the judgment is expressed, therefore, emotions are also expressed.

This allows us to say that the judgment "This ox is feeling fear" can count as an expression of one's compassion toward the ox. Because an expression of a judgment is an expression of an emotive state, we can say that the inference from the King making this judgment to his possessing the relevant emotional capacity is warranted.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>For this way of putting the point, see John MacFarlane, "Frege, Kant, and the Logic in Logicism," *Philosophical Review* III, no. 1 (2002): 25-65.

<sup>13</sup>These claims, or similar claims, have been challenged in recent years. See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, a stimulating discussion contained in David B. Wong, "Is There a Distinction between Reason and Emotion in Mencius?" *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 1 (1991): 31-44. Note also that some Western philosophers have developed the notion of reasoning without a gulf between emotive and intellectual aspects of cognition. See, for example, Paul Redding, *The Logic of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Koji Tanaka, "Minds, Programs, and Chinese Philosophers: A Chinese Perspective on the Chinese Room," *Sophia* 43, no. 1 (2004): 61-72.

<sup>16</sup>I am indebted to the Editor-in-Chief for suggesting me to elaborate on this point.

### 4.3 Actions and Emotions

Im's third problem with the inferential view is that he considers it as being problematic to characterize the relation between an emotion and an action as inferential. I take this to be the most challenging problem to overcome since it is difficult how such a relation could hold. Nevertheless, I think this problem might be overcome if we reflect further on the nature of inferences.

Consider the form of inference: *A, B therefore C*. This inference says that, given *A* and *B*, *C* is inferred. I call the inferential processes from the premises *A* and *B* to the conclusion *C* *inference-forward*. Since the modernization of logic by Descartes and Leibniz we have been taught to think of the significance of inferences as forward processes of constructing a conclusion from premises. That is, starting with premises, we have been taught to come up with a conclusion by an inferential means.<sup>17</sup> It is this emphasis on inference-forward that has taken the center stage in the twentieth-century development of logic as we can witness it in the significance placed on Hilbert's decision problem (*Entscheidungsproblem*): the problem of coming up with a method that determines in a finite number of steps whether or not a given set of premises can *lead* to a sentence (of first-order logic) in question. In the case of Mengzi's persuasion, the premise is the king's emotion and the conclusion is his action. If one thinks of inferences in the sense of inference-forward, then it is difficult to see how the emotion of the king can lead to and, thus, be sufficient for inferring-forwardly his action. Indeed, King Xuan would be a counterexample to this inference-forward as he fails to act compassionately despite being compassionate.

If an inference can only be looked at forwardly, then the case of King Xuan can be taken as demonstrating that the relationship between emotions and actions can't be thought of as inferential. This seems to be the reason why Philip J. Ivanhoe and David Wong take the point of Mengzi to be that an emotion only "guides" one's actions (rather than actions inferred from emotion) and explain the process of this guidance as "analogical resonance" and "channeling of an instinctual compassionate response," respectively.<sup>18</sup>

However, an inference can tell us something more than that. That is, having *inferred* the conclusion, an inference, in so far as it is a valid or good inference, can tell us what commitment was expressed in the conclusion. Having *inferred* the conclusion, the inference can reveal the "force" of commitment backwardly from

---

<sup>17</sup>See René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "On Wisdom," *Leibniz Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 77-81.

<sup>18</sup>Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Confucian Self Cultivation and Mengzi's Notion of Extension," *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, eds. Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 221-41, and Wong, "Is There a Distinction?" 31-44.

the conclusion to the premises of that inference. This seems to be what Frege had in mind when he writes:

What is distinctive about my conception of logic is that I begin by giving pride of place to the content of the word “true,” and then immediately go on to introduce a thought as that to which the question “Is it true?” is in principle applicable. So I do not begin with concepts and put them together to form a thought or judgement; I come by the parts of a thought by analysing the thought.<sup>19</sup>

By looking at an inference *backwardly*, then, we can see that the act of inferring is constitutive of the commitment that is expressed by the premises of an inference as part of the act. Without such a commitment, one can't be said to be *inferring* a conclusion; one is simply asserting or uttering a sentence.

The notion of inference-backward enables us to read the relevant passage in the *Mengzi* 1A: 7 in a new way. In particular, one might say that the issue about King Xuan concerns not whether he has a sufficient “ground” to act compassionately. The issue here is what was the nature of his action and what does it reveal about his capacities for compassion rather than the “ground” for this action. (In this respect, think of the Chinese version of the Weakness of Will, which says that one will not act; not that one cannot.<sup>20</sup>) By examining the inference in question backwardly, we can see that the king's compassionate act (the conclusion of the inference), when it is actually performed, reveals his compassion. Without his compassion toward his people, his *compassionate* act would not be possible. The king's compassion must be a necessary condition for his *compassionate* act toward his people. (The question of a sufficient condition is irrelevant at this stage.) The inference in question tells us backwardly that it is the king's compassion that is necessary for his compassionate acts toward his people.

Now, according to Mengzi, a “true” king, is one who protects or tends to his people. Also, a king, not the individual who is the king, is a status in a society. Thus, we might say that protecting or tending to the people in the society defines the social norms for being a king. By acting compassionately, the king demonstrates his authority over the social norms that govern him as a king. Hence, his compassionate act makes explicit not only the commitment he has toward his people but also his authoritative character as a “true” king. Mengzi can be seen as convincing the king that he is a “true” king in this way.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>Gottlob Frege, “Notes for Ludwig Darmstaedter,” in *Posthumous Writings*, trans. Peter Long and Roger White (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 253.

<sup>20</sup>See Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, Chapter 6.

<sup>21</sup>I have benefitted from Robert Brandom's pragmatist's (or what he thinks of as neo-Hegelian) notion of the making of inference in writing this paragraph. While I have no intention of attribut-

## 5 *Mengzi* 1A: 7 Reviewed

By considering Nivison's inferential view and challenging some of the presuppositions such a view gives rise to, I have developed a new way of interpreting (a small part of) the *Mengzi* 1A: 7. While I think that this new interpretation sheds light on some classical Chinese notions, I have several reservations about its exegetical correctness. In particular, it assumes an account of action that is foreign to *Mengzi*.

Consider for instance, 2A: 6 of the *Mengzi* where *Mengzi* asks us to imagine a child about to fall into a well. Using this example, *Mengzi* shows that one acts in such a way because of our compassion, and it is because of the heart of compassion that we are human. What *Mengzi* assumes here is that our compassionate heart is “pulled” toward the child and that explains our compassionate act. This assumes that we can distinguish the state of compassion from a compassionate act.

In the interpretation I provided above, compassion is identified only when an act is recognized as compassionate. That is, compassion is not considered as an emotion that *leads* to a compassionate act, but it is considered as a necessary part of a compassionate act. Thus, the four sprouts (*ren* 仁 [benevolence], *yi* 義 [righteousness], *li* 禮 [ritual propriety], and *zhi* 智 [wisdom]) are not recognizable as “virtuous” unless they are manifested in the fruits: the sprouts are “virtuous” only insofar as the fruits are “virtuous.” In short, the sprouts are carved out of the fruits and not the other way around.<sup>22</sup>

It seems, thus, that my interpretation puts *Mengzi* on a wrong footing. What *Mengzi*, in fact, assumes is that one needs to provide an account of how one is *led* to act compassionately. *Mengzi* assumes not only that one's act is compassionate because of one's compassion but also that one's act can be explained as compassionate only in terms of one's inner state “causing” or leading one to act. It is the forward-looking account of what produces a compassionate action that *Mengzi* is after. In this sense, the interpretations that Philip J. Ivanhoe and David Wong provide are textually more accurate.<sup>23</sup>

---

ing these pragmatist's apparatus to *Mengzi* or any classical Chinese philosophers, I find it useful to illuminate what I take to be interesting about some of the thoughts expressed by classical Chinese philosophers in terms of Brandom's discussions contained in, for example, Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) and Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup>As Bronwyn Finnigan has put it in personal communication, this seems to be the account of action that Anscombe presents in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957).

<sup>23</sup>Ivanhoe, “Confucian Self Cultivation,” and Wong, “Is There a Distinction?”

## 6 Inference in Mengzi and Mozi

While my characterization of the relevant sense of inference, as inference-backward, may not strictly apply to Mengzi, I believe that it helps illuminate a central argumentative strategy often invoked by classical Chinese thinkers. To see this, consider the following passage in the *Mozi*:

[T]here are still people in the world who condemn impartiality saying, “Impartiality is benevolent and right but how can one practice it? The impossibility of practicing impartiality is like the impossibility of picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the Chang Jiang or Huang He.” And so impartiality is something they want to do but feel impossible to practice.

Our teacher Mozi says, “As for picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the Chang Jiang or Huang He, this is something that no human being has ever done. But as for impartially caring for and benefitting one another, this is something that we know the four former sage-kind themselves practiced.”<sup>24</sup>

The metaphor of inference-*forward* and inference-*backward* helps cash out the point of Mozi’s teaching. For instance, the salient point of this teaching can be understood as the claim: if we were to look forward to the day when one picks up Mount Tai and leaps over a river with it based on the days when no one has ever done so, the day would never come. Instead, the actions performed by the sages of antiquity are to be taken as pointing *backwardly* to the days when impartial caring and benefitting one another were actually practiced. The focus, thus, is not on a possibility that might be brought about but on the actions and what the actions reveal about their agents. Once we make explicit the social norms that govern our actions and we act out our roles that define our social status in a society, we see that we care about each other impartially. All of this can be elucidated by appropriate (backward-looking rather than forward-looking) inferences.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>*Mozi*, Chapter 16. Translation is from Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005), 67.

<sup>25</sup>As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, the notion of inference-backward may be thought to collapse the often accepted distinction between logic and rhetoric. That distinction has a very long history and I cannot deal with it in this article. However, from a Fregean point of view on which I am drawing, rhetoric which has psychological effects is separate from logic. See, for example, Gottlob Frege, “Der Gedanke” (Thought), *Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus I* (1918-1919): 58-77, an English translation in Michael Beaney, ed., *The Frege Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

## 7 Conclusion

I have considered Nivison's inferential view as a reading of the *Mengzi* 1A: 7 and three objections to this view. I have demonstrated the ways in which each of these objections assumes a certain view about the nature of inference. In response, I have offered alternative characterizations of inference which, I have argued, is more sensitive to the classical Chinese philosophical context. While I have expressed some reservations about whether Mengzi, himself, assumes my alternative sense of inference, I have provided reasons for thinking that it nevertheless helps illuminate a central argumentative strategy often invoked by Chinese thinkers.