

## *Ming* 命 and Acceptance<sup>1</sup>

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In Yang Xiao & Kim-chong Chong (eds.) *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Mencius*  
(Springer Nature 2023): 379-398

### Abstract

This chapter discusses the use of the term *ming* 命 in a number of key passages in the *Mencius* as well as the *Analects*, such as *Mencius* 5A8, 7A1 and 7A2. It proposes that the term is used primarily to convey a certain attitude toward occurrences which go against one's wishes, to which one attaches significance, and which one cannot alter either literally or without conducting oneself improperly. In so responding, one is aware of the unavoidability of what has transpired and is still emotionally affected by it, but one does not fixate on what has happened and is not overwhelmed by one's emotional responses. One is not tempted to alter it by improper means, but at the same time one retains an active sense of engagement with one's life, redirecting attention to other areas of life in which one can make worthwhile efforts. This attitude of acceptance is part of the self-cultivation process in that one should cultivate in oneself a general preparedness to so respond to such occurrences when they do arise.

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<sup>1</sup> I presented preliminary versions of the ideas in this paper in a graduate seminar I taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in fall 2010, and have benefitted from the seminar discussions.

## 1. Introduction

In *Mengzi* 7A:1, Mencius says:

“To fully realize one’s heart/mind is to understand one’s nature. Understanding one’s nature, one also understands Heaven. Preserving one’s heart/mind and nurturing one’s nature is the way to serve Heaven. Not being swayed in one’s purpose whether one dies young or lives to an old age, and cultivating oneself to await it – this is the way to stand firm on *ming* 命.”<sup>2</sup>

Here, Mencius is talking about the process of self-cultivation, and he speaks of awaiting (*si* 俟) and standing firm on (*li* 立) *ming* 命 to convey a certain posture in life that one should cultivate.<sup>3</sup> His remark in *Mengzi* 7A:2 provides a further elaboration on this posture:

“*Ming* resides everywhere, and one should go along with and willingly accept proper *ming*. This is why someone who understands *ming* will not stand under a wall on the verge of collapse. To die after having done one’s best in following the Way – this is proper *ming*. To die in fetters – this is not proper *ming*.”

Here, Mencius speaks of “go along with and willingly accept” (*shun shou* 順受) proper *ming* and of understanding (*zhi* 知) *ming*. The idea of understanding *ming* also occurs in *Lunyu* 20.3, in which Confucius comments that “one has no way of becoming a morally superior person unless one understands *ming*.”<sup>4</sup> That it is presented as a quality of a morally superior person shows that understanding *ming* is a posture that requires cultivation.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, is this posture in life that is conveyed through the use of *ming* and that is one of the goals of self-cultivation? And how should we make sense of the different descriptions of the posture toward *ming* highlighted in *Mengzi* 7A:1 and 7A:2 – awaiting (*si* 俟), standing firm on (*li* 立), going along with and willingly accepting (*shun shou* 順受), as well as understanding (*zhi* 知) *ming*?

In my *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, I discussed the use of *ming* in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*, but did not address these issues other than suggesting a possibility.<sup>6</sup> There, I distinguished between a descriptive and a normative dimension in the use of *ming* in early texts, the former emphasizing that certain occurrences are not due to human efforts or not fully within human control, and the latter carrying implications about what should be done or should happen.

<sup>2</sup> In my translation of passages in the *Mencius*, I have consulted Lau (2003).

<sup>3</sup> In Shun (1997), p. 80, I argued that, in light of the occurrence of the combination *si ming* 俟命 in *Mengzi* 7B:33, *zhi* 之 in *si zhi* 俟之 likely refers to *ming* 命.

<sup>4</sup> In my translation of passages from the *Lunyu*, I have consulted Lau (1992).

<sup>5</sup> This is reinforced by Confucius’ autobiographical statement in *Lunyu* 2.4, in which he describes himself as understanding *tian ming* 天命 at the age of fifty.

<sup>6</sup> Shun (1997), pp. 15-21, 77-83.

I also emphasized that this distinction is just a heuristic device for the purpose of presentation. The authors or editors of these texts might not have drawn a clear distinction of this kind, both dimensions might be present in a single occurrence of the term, and one can easily shift from one dimension to the other for any occurrence of the term. Based on the textual evidence, we do not have definitive support for any specific interpretation of a particular occurrence of *ming*, and this accounts for the extensive scholarly disagreement surrounding the use of *ming* in these two texts.

Although the textual evidence is too thin to definitively support any specific interpretation of an occurrence of *ming*, I suggested that the use of *ming* in certain passages in these two texts likely convey a certain attitude toward occurrences that go against one's wishes and to which one attaches importance. These might concern outcomes, such as making the Way prevail, that fail to come about despite one's efforts, or events, such as serious illness or death of someone close to oneself, that could not be averted. Taking a hint from the idea of "going along with and willingly accepting" *ming* in 7A:2, I described this as an attitude of acceptance. It involves one's not dwelling on and not being disturbed by the adverse outcome or event, not engaging in improper conduct in an attempt to alter things, and instead redirecting one's attention to other worthwhile pursuits.<sup>7</sup>

What I proposed then is that we can detect such an attitude in certain passages that invoke the use of *ming* as well as in certain other passages that are related to the use of the term without actually using it. Even for a passage that does use the term *ming*, my proposal is not that the occurrence of *ming* should be interpreted in a certain way in that passage. Even if we agree that the kind of attitude I described is indeed conveyed in the passage, the use of *ming* can still be interpreted in different ways – as emphasizing that the situation to which we are responding is beyond our control (the descriptive dimension), as emphasizing that we should respond in a certain way to the situation (the normative dimension), or as some combination of both. That is, my proposal is not about the interpretation of the use of *ming* in any specific passage; the proposal is only that the attitude of acceptance is conveyed in certain passages in which *ming* does occur as well as other related passages.

What I will do in this paper is to develop this proposal further by elaborating on the attitude of acceptance, and by making sense of the different descriptions of the posture toward *ming* found in *Mengzi* 7A:1 and 7A:2. To clarify the nature of my present project, let me add four observations.

First, I have translated the expression *shun shou* 順受 in 7A:2 as "going along with and willingly accept". I did take a hint from this expression when using the term "acceptance" to refer to the attitude related to *ming*. But except in the context of translating 7A:2, I will from now on use the term not as a translation, but as a convenient label to refer to an attitude whose content remains to be spelt out.

Second, the scope of my discussion includes certain passages in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* that invoke the use of *ming* as well as certain other related passages. Obviously, the term *ming* is also used in early texts in ways unrelated to the attitude of acceptance. For example, it is

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<sup>7</sup> See Shun (1997), pp. 19-20, 79-83.

often used to refer to directives issued by a ruler. The scope of my discussion includes only those occurrences of *ming* that scholars usually focus on when discussing *ming* as a key term in early Chinese thought. And even though I intend my proposal to extend to most such occurrences, there are a few instances in which *ming* is used in the context of just lamenting some unfortunate occurrences.

Third, while my focus is on the use of *ming* in the *Mengzi*, I will also draw on relevant passages in the *Lunyu* with the expectation that my proposal regarding the use of *ming* extends to both texts. I do see a similarity in the use of *ming* in these two texts, and in *Mengzi* 5A:8, Mencius explicitly presents himself as elaborating on some of Confucius' remarks involving the term *ming*. Still, though I will initially draw on passages in the *Lunyu* in addition to the *Mengzi*, my focus will eventually shift back to key passages in the *Mengzi*, specifically 5A:8, 7A:1, and 7A:2.

Fourth, although I will closely examine relevant passages in the two texts, my discussion will eventually go beyond the texts. In an earlier publication on methodology, I distinguished between three different goals and tasks in our investigation of Chinese thought.<sup>8</sup> The first, *textual analysis*, seeks to approximate the perspective of an early thinker whose ideas are recorded in an early text, and is concerned primarily with what can be supported by textual evidence. The second, *articulation*, draws on the outcome of textual analysis and seeks to make sense of these ideas in a way that is intelligible and appealing to us nowadays. In doing so, it moves between the past and the present, and elaborates on ideas in the text in a way that is continuous with these ideas but that also goes beyond what can be supported by the textual evidence. The third, *philosophical construction*, builds on the second and elaborates on the outcome of articulation in a way that is philosophically appealing to us, in the sense of meeting the criteria of excellence that characterize a contemporary philosophical approach that we work with.

Unlike *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* which is primarily a work in textual analysis, this paper is an exercise in articulation. It builds on the conclusions about the use of *ming* in that earlier work, and elaborates on them in a way that is intelligible and appealing to us and is at the same time continuous with the relevant texts. This further elaboration is continuous with the texts in that it meets a number of constraints. It is consistent with, though not necessarily supported in all its fine details by, the textual evidence, in that it does not contain elements that obviously conflict with the textual evidence or require some forced reading of certain passages. It also fits in with the texts as a whole in that various aspects of this elaboration are corroborated by other ideas that can be ascribed to the texts on the basis of textual evidence. And while this elaboration seeks to relate the ideas in the texts to our own contemporary concerns and experience, we can also see how it relates to the kind of concerns and experiences that the early thinkers might have, such as the challenges they face in the political realm. We can see the appeal of the ideas as elaborated on in this manner, not necessarily in the sense that we actually endorse and seek to live up to these ideas. We can see their appeal in the sense that we can understand their attractiveness, if not as much to us, then at least to these early thinkers in their

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<sup>8</sup> See Shun (2009).

own times and perhaps also to other contemporaries who have life experiences similar to those of the early thinkers, or who have been brought up in a culture influenced by such ideas.

By virtue of the nature of articulation, what we will propose is only one way of elaborating on ideas in the texts among others that might also meet the above constraints. The direction in which I elaborate on these ideas draws inspiration from the writings of the late Tang Junyi on the subject and also refers to contemporary philosophical discussions of related topics.<sup>9</sup> In Section 2, I introduce the notion of acceptance through an examination of the relevant passages in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*, and stay fairly close to the two texts in my discussion. In Section 3, I focus on passages 5A:8, 7A:1 and 7A:2 of the *Mengzi*, and describe a way of making sense of ideas in these passages that goes beyond but is continuous with the text in the sense described earlier. In Section 4, I further elaborate on the attitude of acceptance, setting it against other ideas that appear akin to it in an attempt to bring out its distinctive features.

## 2. Use of *Tian* and *Ming* in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*

Let us start with some fairly uncontroversial observations about the use of *ming* in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*. First, *ming* is often used in relation to *tian* 天 (Heaven). The combination *tian ming* occurs twice in the *Lunyu* (2.4, 16.8), and both are mentioned together in other passages. In *Lunyu* 12.5, Zixia observes that “In life and death, there is *ming*, and wealth and honor resides with *tian*.” *Mengzi* 5A:6 contrasts what is due to *tian* with what is due to humans, observing that “what is done without (humans) doing it is a matter of *tian*, and what comes about without (humans) bringing it about is a matter of *ming*.” Thus, we may expect observations made in certain passages invoking *tian* to also bear on the use of *ming*.

Second, in the relevant passages, *tian* and *ming* are used to highlight the point that certain occurrences are not due to or cannot be altered by humans. *Mengzi* 5A:6 makes this point explicitly.<sup>10</sup> *Mengzi* 5A:5 observes that *tian*, rather than humans, grants the authority to rule, though *tian* might work through the people in this connection.

Third, in addition to the mention in *Lunyu* 12.5 of *tian* and *ming* in relation to life and death as well as wealth and honor, *tian* and *ming* are also used in the political context in relation to the prevailing of the Way or the way one conducts oneself. *Lunyu* 14.36 cites *ming* in relation to whether the Way prevails or falls into disuse. *Mengzi* 4A:7 makes the similar observation that whether the Way prevails in the Empire is due to *tian*. *Lunyu* 3.13 and 6.28 mention *tian* in relation to the proper way to conduct oneself in the political context, while *Mengzi* 5A:8 mentions *ming* in the context of Mencius’ comment on the way Confucius conducts himself.

The above observations are not a matter of scholarly controversy. The focus of scholarly discussion surrounds the question what more, going beyond these observations, the two texts

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<sup>9</sup> See Tang (1976) and Tang (1978).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this passage, see Shun (1997), p. 77.

might be conveying in invoking the use of *ming* and relatedly of *tian*. Are they, for example, making the point that Mozi accuses the Confucians of making, namely, that human efforts are futile in relation to the areas of life just mentioned? This is unlikely to be Confucius' or Mencius' position. Both use *tian* or *ming* in relation to the prevailing of the Way in the political context, but both have also actively dedicated themselves to their political endeavors, making it unlikely that their use of *tian* or *ming* is associated with a view of the futility of human efforts.<sup>11</sup>

To see what might be conveyed through the use of *ming* and *tian*, let us look more closely at the attitude highlighted in the texts toward the relevant areas of life. Consider first the passages related to life and death. There are a couple of passages in the *Lunyu* concerning the serious sickness or death of a student. 6.10 invokes *ming* in relation to Bo Niu's sickness, and 11.9 invokes *tian* in relation to the pre-mature passing of Yan Hui. In these passages, Confucius is likely just using the terms in the context of lamenting the occurrence of some event that is not due to humans and that causes him grief. In *Lunyu* 12.5, Zixia responds to a worry of Sima Niu's, remarking that in life and death there is *ming*. Here, the reference to *ming* occurs in the context of urging someone not to worry about certain occurrences. There are a number of passages in the *Mengzi* conveying the view that one should not deviate from what is proper in the attempt to hold on to life. 6A:10 describes how someone starving to death would not accept food given with abuse, and 6B:1 observes that one should not seek food by all means even if it is a matter of life or death. 7A:2, which invokes the term *ming* and which is probably also drawing on the use of *ming* in early texts to refer to one's life span, distinguishes between a proper and an improper way of dying. Thus, on matters of life and death, *ming* is used sometimes in the context of lamenting the occurrence of some event that causes one grief, sometimes to convey the point that one should not worry too much about such matters, and sometimes to convey the point that one should not conduct oneself improperly to avoid death and that the proper way of dying is for this to come about after having done one's best to follow the Way.

Turning to wealth and honor, the message in both texts is that this should not be the focus of one's concern, that one should not be worried by such matters, and that one should always follow what is proper in seeking them. The *Lunyu* contains a number of passages making the point that one should devote oneself to the Way without worrying about adverse material conditions of life (4.9, 15.32); it describes Yan Hui (6.11) or Confucius himself (7.16) as someone who retains his contentment (*le* 樂) in the midst of poverty. Several passages in the *Lunyu* has the implication that one should not pursue wealth (7.12) or wealth and honor (4.5, 7.16, 8.13) by improper means, while *Mengzi* 3B:2 observes how one should follow the Way without being corrupted by the temptation of wealth and honor. Wealth and honor are often a matter of attaining high positions in government, which depends on appreciation by others. The texts emphasize that one should not focus on appreciation by others nor worry about the lack of

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<sup>11</sup> In *Lunyu* 18.7, Zilu expresses the view that the morally superior people of his times already know that the Way cannot be put into practice, but serve in government only because it is proper (*yi* 義) to do so. This does not mean that Confucius himself holds the view that human efforts are futile in the political realm. Zilu's remark represents his own view, and in other passages such as *Lunyu* 15.7, Confucius himself instead discusses political behavior in different scenarios, depending on whether the Way prevails in the state or not.

appreciation (*Lunyu* 1.1, 1.16; *Mengzi* 7A:9); instead, one's concern should be with one's own capabilities and talents that make one worthy of appreciation (*Lunyu* 4.14, 15.19; cf. 14.24).

Though not all of the above passages invoke the use of *ming* or *tian*, they together convey a common attitude toward matters of life and death, wealth and honor, and relatedly appreciation by others. One's attention should be focused on the Way and on one's qualities rather than on these considerations, one should not be worried if one does not fare well in relation to them, and one should never deviate from what is proper in pursuit of goals related to them.

As for Confucius' and Mencius' endeavors in the political context, they differ from the other areas of life in that these endeavors are geared toward putting the Way into practice and so there is nothing objectionable about making them one's focus of attention. Still, one should not worry about the outcome nor do anything improper to achieve one's purpose. In *Lunyu* 7.23 and 9.3, Confucius expresses the sentiment that no human can really undermine his political efforts as success or failure of his political endeavors resides with *tian*. In 14.35, he observes that, though no one appreciates and employs his talents, perhaps it is *tian* that appreciates and makes use of his talents. In 3.24, a similar point is conveyed through the mouth of a border official of Yi, namely, that *tian* is going to use Confucius to spread the Way (presumably through his teaching) despite his apparent lack of office. Similar observations are made in the *Mengzi*. In 1B:16, Mencius observes that his failing to meet Duke Ping of Lu is due to *tian* rather than to the interference of others. In 2B:13, he mitigates his political frustration by attributing to *tian* his inability to bring about order in the political realm. Thus, in both texts, we find the sentiment of reliance on *tian* so that one is not disturbed by potentially frustrating situations in the political realm.

The point that one should not deviate from what is proper in pursuit of one's political goals is conveyed in *Lunyu* 3.13 and 6.28, in which Confucius remarks that to curry favor with those of influence will offend and incur the displeasure of *tian*. In *Lunyu* 14.36, in response to a supporter who proposes to bring about the death of someone obstructing Confucius, Confucius remarks that whether the Way prevails or falls into disuse is a matter of *ming*, and that humans cannot interfere with the outcome. In *Mengzi* 5A:8, Mencius comments on a scenario in which, in response to a suggestion that he curries favor with someone of influence to accomplish his political goals, Confucius remarks that there is *ming*. According to Mencius, "Confucius went forward in accordance with the rites (*li* 禮) and withdrew in accordance with what is proper (*yi* 義), and in matters of success or failure said, 'There is *ming*.'" And, Mencius adds, to curry favor with someone of influence is "to ignore both *yi* and *ming*." Here, *ming* is used in the context of conveying the point that one should not deviate from what is proper in pursuit of one's political goals.

To summarize, in relation to matters of life and death, wealth and honor, appreciation by others, one's political endeavors and the prevailing of the Way, the attitude common to both the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* is that when one confronts an adverse outcome, one should not worry about the outcome nor try anything improper to alter it. With regard to matters of life and death, wealth and honor, and appreciation by others, these matters should not be one's focus of attention. One should focus on following the Way, and should not be disturbed or swayed by

such considerations. With regard to one's own political endeavors, which is geared toward making the Way prevail, though it is appropriate to make such endeavors one's focus of attention, one might reach the point when one realizes that, not being able to attain office that will enable one to actively put the Way into practice, one should redirect attention to other endeavors such as teaching in order to spread the Way. Such an attitude toward adverse occurrences in life provides a sense in which one accepts such occurrences, and I will from this point on refer to this as an attitude of acceptance.

That one should not deviate from what is proper to accomplish one's goals means that the attitude of acceptance is directed not just toward adverse outcomes that one literally cannot change, but also those that it would be improper to change even if one could alter the outcome. In *Mengzi* 6A:10, we find the example of someone starving to death and yet declining food given with abuse. Here, the impending death is something one could have avoided, but at the expense of acting contrary to propriety. Although this example is about life and death, the passage goes on to make the point that, just as one should not act contrary to propriety in matters of life and death, one should also not act contrary to propriety in accepting wealth and honor. Thus, if we take the attitude of acceptance to be directed to outcomes that one cannot alter, the 'cannot' here has to be understood in terms of not just causal constraints on what can be done, but also normative constraints on what one may do.

In another publication, I have argued that the Confucian attitude of acceptance is based on a reflective ethical view that works with a substantive account of an ethical ideal having to do with not just behavior but also the activities of the heart/mind. It regards it as fully within one's control to attain this ethical ideal, regards the ethical as of greater significance than any other pursuits or conditions of life though the latter may also be of significance, and advocates a transformation of one's whole person so that one is completely oriented toward the ethical.<sup>12</sup> Acceptance is based on such a view in that, by seeing how other pursuits and external conditions of life pale in significance by comparison to the ethical, one relaxes the importance that one attaches to them. One is still affected by these adverse circumstances – one feels sorrow at the death of a beloved one, is disappointed by the lack of appreciation by others, or laments the ethical corruption of the times. But at the same time, one takes consolation in the fact that one has conducted oneself ethically. One would not be bitter and resentful, and would not devote energy to complaining about the outcome. Where possible, one would redirect one's energy in a positive direction, as when Confucius turned to teaching after realizing the inevitable futility of his political endeavors.

With this discussion of acceptance as background, I turn now to some of the key passages in the *Mengzi* in which the term *ming* occurs and in which such an attitude is conveyed, specifically 5A:8, 7A:1 and 7A:2. Through a consideration of these passages, and drawing on the writings of Tang Junyi, I will elaborate further on the place of acceptance in the self-cultivation process.

### 3. *Ming* and Acceptance in the *Mengzi*

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<sup>12</sup> See Shun (2014).



Let us begin with *Mengzi* 5A:8. In the passage, Mencius describes how, in response to a suggestion that he curries favor with someone of influence to accomplish his political goals, Confucius remarks that there is *ming*. According to Mencius, Confucius follows the rites (*li* 禮) in moving forward and, when he can only move forward by acting contrary to what is proper (*yi* 義), he would withhold himself. Confucius would say that there is *ming* in matters of success or failure and, Mencius adds, to curry favor with someone of influence is to ignore both *yi* and *ming*.

5A:8 explicitly links *ming* to *yi*, reinforcing our earlier point that *ming* has to do with normative, not just causal, constraints on human conduct. Such constraints are highlighted in other passages of the *Mengzi*. For example, 6A:10 highlights the notion *yi* when describing the example of someone who declines food given with abuse at the expense of starving to death. Though *ming* is not mentioned, this example is about life and death, which *Lunyu* 12.5 explicitly describes as a matter of *ming*. Indeed, that this person opts to give up life rather than subject himself to abusive treatment is itself an illustration of the idea in 7A:2 of someone who ‘goes along with and willingly accepts’ his proper *ming*.

Another passage that highlights normative constraints on human conduct is 7A:3, in which Mencius says:

“Seek and one will get it; let go and one will lose it. This is a case in which seeking is of help to getting and what is sought resides within oneself. There is a proper way (*dao* 道) to seeking and there is *ming* in getting. This is a case in which seeking is of no help to getting and what is sought resides on the outside.”

In this passage, although *yi* is not mentioned, *dao* is used in connection with normative constraints on one’s conduct. The reference to “there is *ming* in getting” also resonates with the observation in 5A:8 that there is *ming* in matters of success or failure. And the point in 5A:8 about “going forward in accordance with the rites and withdrawing in accordance with what is proper” can also be viewed as an illustration of the reference in 7A:3 to “there is a proper way to seeking.”

That *ming* is used to highlight normative constraints on human conduct has led Tang Junyi to interpret *ming* as referring primarily to normative constraints. Taking his hint from the conjunction of *ming* and *yi* in 5A:8, Tang proposes that, for Mencius, *ming* is basically identical with *yi*. *Ming* in this passage is not about causal constraints on one’s getting what one seeks, but about the proper way of seeking and of responding to the outcome.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, Tang differs from most other scholars, some of whom take *ming* in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* to refer

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<sup>13</sup> See Tang (1978) in which he makes this point in relation to both the *Lunyu* (pp. 512-518) and the *Mengzi* (pp. 522-7).

primarily to what is not due to humans or is not within human control, while others take *ming* to be used sometimes in this manner and sometimes to refer to normative constraints.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the textual evidence alone does not provide definitive support for any specific interpretation of what *ming* might mean or refer to in the relevant passages. My discussion is directed not to this question, but to the different question of what kind of attitude is conveyed in the relevant passages. Our addressing this second question does not depend on our being able to address the first question, and my proposal that these passages emphasize normative constraints on human conduct does not assume any position on what the term *ming* might mean or refer to.

Let us consider next 7A:2, in which Mencius says:

“*Ming* resides everywhere, and one should go along with and willingly accept proper *ming*. This is why someone who understands *ming* will not stand under a wall on the verge of collapse. To die after having done one’s best in following the Way – this is proper *ming*. To die in fetters – this is not proper *ming*.”

In saying that “*ming* resides everywhere”, Mencius is not making the general remark that there are causal constraints on everything that humans do. As Tang and other scholars, such as Xu Fuguan, have noted, early Confucians do not use *ming* to make such general observations. They would not, for example, use *ming* in relation to natural occurrences that humans cannot alter but that have no significance for humans. Rather, they use *ming* in relation to those external, and usually adverse, circumstances of life to which they attach significance, conveying a certain posture toward such circumstances.<sup>15</sup> And, on Tang’s reading of this passage, what Mencius emphasizes here are the normative constraints that pertain to specific situations. These normative constraints concern not just our avoiding improper means of altering a situation, but also our emotional responses to the situation, such as not worrying about or dwelling on it, and not feeling bitter or resentful.<sup>16</sup> On this interpretation, in saying that *ming* resides everywhere, Mencius is saying that human beings see or should ideally see in every situation of significance that they confront certain normative constraints, including the way they should respond to the adverse circumstances of life.<sup>17</sup>

As for the distinction between proper and improper *ming*, it would be difficult to make sense of this distinction on Tang’s proposal that *ming* is basically identical with *yi* as it would be odd to speak of improper *yi*. But, as noted earlier, our making sense of such a distinction does not depend on our addressing the question what *ming* might mean or refer to. In light of the reference to two ways of dying in the latter part of the passage, it seems clear that the distinction is between two ways in which the adverse circumstances of life might come about – whether

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<sup>14</sup> See Shun (1997), chapter 2, notes 15, 17, 18 (pp. 237-8) for different views on the use of *ming* in the *Lunyu*, and chapter 3, notes 42, 43, 44 (p. 245) for different views on the use of *ming* in the *Mengzi*.

<sup>15</sup> Tang (1978), pp. 517-8; Xu Fuguan, pp. 384-5. Xu makes the additional point that, since what people attach significance to may vary from individual to individual, what one would describe in terms of *ming* might also vary from individual to individual.

<sup>16</sup> Tang (1978), pp. 515-6, 522.

<sup>17</sup> Tang (1978), pp. 517-8.

they come about despite one's having conducted oneself properly, or are themselves incurred by one's own improper conduct.<sup>18</sup>

Turning to the expression *zhi ming* 知命 (understand *ming*), it also occurs in *Lunyu* 20.3 (see also 2.4, 16.8) and in a couple of narratives in the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*. Let us consider these narratives before returning to the *Mengzi*. The first is:

“Duke Wen of Zhu divined about moving the capital to Yi. The scribe said, “It will benefit the people but it will not benefit you, my lord.” The viscount of Zhu said, “So long as it benefits the people, it is a benefit to me. Heaven gives birth to the people and sets up a ruler for them to benefit them. As long as the people will be benefitted, I too must have some part in it.”

His attendants said, “If your *ming* would thereby be extended, why not act on it?”

The viscount of Zhu said, “*Ming* consists in nourishing the people. Whether death comes sooner or later is a matter of timeliness. So long as the people can be benefitted, let us move the capital. Nothing else could be as auspicious.”

As a result, they moved the capital to Yi. In the fifth month, Duke Wen of Zhu died. The superior person says, “He understands *ming* (*zhi ming* 知命).”<sup>19</sup>

In this narrative, the outcome of the divination was that moving the capital would benefit the people but would be to the detriment of the ruler. The ruler's subordinates observed that not moving the capital would extend his *ming*, that is, life span – the use of *ming* to refer to one's life span was already well established by that time. In response, the ruler observed that his *ming* resides with nourishing the people; here, he is deliberating shifting attention away from his own life span to his obligations to the people. Although the point he was making is clear, we cannot tell from the textual evidence alone what *ming* here means or refers to. While it can refer to the obligation of the ruler, it is also compatible with the textual evidence to say that *ming* here refers to his life span, and that what he was saying is that his life should be devoted to nourishing the people. Thus, while the point of what the ruler was saying is clear, how to interpret his use of *ming* remains an open question.

The same is true of the commentator's concluding comment that the ruler *zhi ming* 知命, or understands *ming*. The context, along with the fact that *zhi ming* is consistently used in a positive sense in early texts, makes it clear that the commentator was conveying his approval of the ruler's consciously allowing his life span to be shortened in the service of the people. Still, as far as the textual evidence is concerned, the commentator could be using *ming* to refer to the ruler's obligation to the people or to his life span. What the commentator said the ruler understood could be his obligation to the people or the fact that his action would shorten his life span.

In the second narrative, the state of Song was besieged by Chu and sought relief from Jin. The ruler of Jin dispatched Xie Yang to urge Song not to surrender and to await relief from Jin's army. But, while en route, Xie Yang was captured by the people of Zheng and handed over to Chu. The Chu ruler pressed lavish bribes on him to make him betray his mission, and he finally

<sup>18</sup> See Tang (1978), pp. 524-6 and Tang (1976), pp. 242-7 for a discussion of the idea of proper *ming*.

<sup>19</sup> *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 9.6a-6b; my translation follows that of Schaberg, p. 23, with slight modifications.

agreed. Yet, when given the chance to address the people of Song, he nevertheless proceeded to relay the message entrusted him by the ruler of Jin. The ruler of Chu was about to execute him, accusing him of being lacking in good faith. Xie Yang responded:

“I have heard that it is the duty (*yi* 義) of the ruler to issue *ming* properly, and the mark of good faith (*xin* 信) in an official to carry out such *ming*. When good faith joins with duty in action, there is benefit to the state. And the true sovereign is one whose deliberation does not miss an opportunity for such benefit, thereby protecting the state.

Duty does not have room for dual good faith, and good faith does not have room for dual *ming*. Your attempt to bribe me shows that you do not understand *ming* (*zhi ming* 知命). When I received *ming* and set out, I was determined to fulfill it even though it meant death. How could I be bribed? I gave my promise to you merely in order to fulfill my *ming*. An official counts it a blessing to die fulfilling his *ming*. My lord, the ruler of Jin, has officials who act in good faith, and I, who am one of them, have succeeded in fulfilling my mission. Though I die, what more could I ask?”<sup>20</sup>

The ruler of Chu released Xie Yang after hearing his response. In Xie Yang’s response, *ming* is used initially in the sense of a directive from above. When Xie Yang said that good faith does not have room for dual *ming*, he was presumably saying that good faith does not allow him to accept both the directive from the ruler of Jin and the directive from the ruler of Chu not to implement the directive of the ruler of Jin. That the ruler of Chu gave such a directive shows that he did not understand *ming*.

While *ming* is used in Xie Yang’s response initially in the sense of a directive from above, its occurrence in *zhi ming* (“understand *ming*”) can again be given different interpretations. It can refer to directives from rulers in general, the point being that the ruler of Chu did not understand the nature of such directives. Or it can refer to one’s proper duties, the point being that the ruler of Chu did not understand the nature of one’s proper duty toward the ruler. Again, even though the textual evidence does not definitively support one over the other interpretation of what *ming* might refer to, the basic point of the comment is clear. Namely, the ruler of Chu did not grasp the proper way of conducting oneself in relation to a ruler.

Returning to *Mengzi* 7A:2, the same observation applies to the occurrence of *zhi ming*, or “understand *ming*”, namely, we can make sense of the point being conveyed though the textual evidence does not make clear what *ming* might refer to. 7A:2 observes that one who understands *ming* will not stand under a wall on the verge of collapse, and then goes on to talk about two ways of dying. The proper way is to die after one has done one’s best in following the Way, and the improper way is to incur death as a result of some crime one has committed. The textual evidence does not make clear whether the term *ming* refers to causal or to normative constraints on human conduct. But the basic point conveyed by the use of *zhi ming* is clear, namely, that one understands how to properly conduct oneself in relation to the adverse circumstances of life.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan*, 11.16a-16b. I have adopted Watsons’ translation, p. 105, with slight modifications.

<sup>21</sup> The expression *zhi ming*, or “understand *ming*”, also occurs in other early Confucian texts such as the *Xunzi* which, referring back to *Lunyu* 14.35, observes that one who understands oneself will not blame humans and one who understands *ming* will not complain against *tian* (*Xunzi* 2.8b). It also occurs in the

Let us turn next to the part in 7A:1 that refers to *ming*:

“Not being swayed in one’s purpose whether one dies young or lives to an old age, and cultivating oneself to await it – this is the way for one to stand firm on *ming*.”<sup>22</sup>

The passage contains a reference to standing firm on *ming* (*li ming* 立命), and also to awaiting *ming* if we take “it” (*zhi* 之) in “await it” (*si zhi* 俟之) to refer to *ming* in light of the occurrence of “await *ming*” (*si ming* 俟命) in 7B:33. The expression “await *ming*” (*si ming*) also occurs in other early texts, such as the *Guoyu*.<sup>23</sup> In a narrative in the *Guoyu*, Shen Sheng was explaining why, though he had been slandered and was in danger of being unjustly punished and killed, he would not flee to escape death and would instead stay to await *ming*. The context of the narrative leaves it open what *ming*, that which he awaits, might refer to – it can refer to the potential end of his life or the verdict of the ruler. But the point is relatively clear, namely, he would await whatever was to come. Likewise, the context of 7A:1 leaves it open what *ming* might refer to – it might have to do with life and death as such, or with the proper way of responding to adverse circumstances of life including life and death. Without addressing the question what *ming* might refer to, it is still relatively clear that the idea of awaiting *ming* has to do with a preparedness to properly respond to the external circumstances of life, however devastating.

According to Tang Junyi, the difference between understanding *ming* (*zhi ming* 知命) in 7A:2 and awaiting *ming* (*si ming* 俟命) in 7A:1 and 7B:33 is that the former has to do with one’s being able to know one’s proper response to a situation when it arises and to respond accordingly, while the latter has to do with one’s general preparedness to so respond to any situation even before they arise.<sup>24</sup> Such preparedness is particularly important when one undertakes endeavors in face of potentially insurmountable obstacles, such as Confucius’ and Mencius’ own political endeavors. In undertaking such endeavors, one already realizes that the outcome can go either way and should be prepared to accept failure should it come about.<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that one regards failure, when it does come about, as inevitable and regrets having exerted efforts because they would not have made a difference. Rather, it is a matter of responding to the outcome with acceptance in the sense described earlier – not worrying and not complaining, and not being tempted to adopt improper means to alter the outcome. And in areas of life unrelated to one’s endeavors, such as the unexpected premature death of someone close to oneself, there should be a similar awareness that such things could occur and a similar preparedness to respond accordingly. One should conduct oneself properly and be prepared to so respond, even when confronting one’s own death. As long as one has done so, every situation that one confronts, however devastating, could be described in terms of proper *ming* (*zheng ming* 正命), and by so cultivating this preparedness to properly respond to situations of adversity, one

*Yijing*, which notes that one who takes contentment in *tian* and understands *ming* will have no anxiety (*Yijing* 7.3a).

<sup>22</sup> See Shun (1997), pp. 79-81, for a discussion of the textual details of 7A:1 and 7A:2.

<sup>23</sup> *Guoyu* 8.3b. The expression *si ming* also occurs in later texts such as the *Liji*, including the chapter *Zhongyong* (16.4b) and another chapter (12.22b).

<sup>24</sup> See Tang (1976), pp. 128-9.

<sup>25</sup> See Tang (1978), p. 516.

is able to stand firm on *ming* (*li ming* 立命).<sup>26</sup>

While the idea of awaiting *ming* emphasizes the preparedness to respond properly to any situation one might confront, the idea of standing firm on *ming* emphasizes one's unyieldingness when confronting situations that are particularly trying – 7A:1 highlights the point that one should not be swayed even when it is a matter of life and death. Such unyieldingness is also highlighted in *Mengzi* 3B:2, which portrays the firmness of someone who cannot be “led into excesses by wealth and honor, deflected by poverty and obscurity, or bent by superior force.” It is in these trying circumstances that normative constraints are most conspicuous and felt as something coming from beyond oneself, independently of what one might wish or desire. They present themselves as coming from some source beyond humans to which one sees oneself as responding. That source is *tian*, and 7A:1 highlights this linkage of *ming* to *tian*.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. The Attitude of Acceptance

To summarize, my proposal is that *ming* is used in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* to convey an attitude of acceptance toward occurrences which goes against one's wishes, to which one attaches significance, and which one cannot alter either literally or without conducting oneself improperly. This attitude involves one's not dwelling on and worrying about the occurrence, and not being tempted to alter it by improper means. One does not focus attention on such considerations as life and death, wealth and honor, and appreciation by others. There are endeavors that are appropriate objects of one's attention and dedication, such as the political endeavors of Confucius and Mencius, but one might reach a point at which, upon realizing the futility of one's efforts, one should redirect attention to other areas of life in which one can make a difference.

Part of this attitude involves one's recognizing normative constraints on what one may or may not do when confronting such situations, as well as recognizing how one should respond emotionally. The attitude of acceptance is part of the self-cultivation process in that one should cultivate oneself to “understand *ming*” in the sense of recognizing such normative constraints and demands when the situation arises, so that one can conduct oneself properly and respond to the situation accordingly; in this sense, one “goes along with and willingly accepts *ming*”. Furthermore, one should recognize that things can potentially go against one's wishes and that one's endeavors, especially those in face of significant obstacles and adversities, might potentially fail. One should cultivate in oneself a general preparedness to so respond to such situations when they do arise, and in this sense “awaits *ming*.” And one should do so in such a way that one would not in any way be moved or tempted by the adversities one confronts to deviate from the proper response, thereby enabling one to “stand firm on *ming*.”

<sup>26</sup> Tang (1978), pp. 524; Tang (1976), pp. 242-7.

<sup>27</sup> Tang (1976), pp. 116-7, 119.

To further elaborate on this attitude, I will contrast it with other postures that one might take up toward the external circumstances of life. *Ming* is often translated as “destiny” or “fate”, and I will start with some preliminary observations about these two terms.<sup>28</sup>

These terms have been used in very different ways in the literature.<sup>29</sup> For example, “fate” can be used to convey a general belief about certain inexplicable forces that are operative in human history, driving things in a certain direction and rendering human efforts futile. It can also be used of a specific occurrence, conveying that some inexplicable force is at work in leading to that occurrence, but without necessarily implying a general belief about how the world operates. And it can be used of a specific occurrence to convey the significance one ascribes to that occurrence, without necessarily implying that it has come about because of some inexplicable force. These usages might be accompanied by a sense of helplessness in face of forces that humans cannot comprehend or resist and that often bring humans to destruction, or of meaningfulness as one sees retrospectively how an occurrence acquires a significance in the context of an individual life or of human lives in general.

The term “destiny” is also used in a similar variety of ways, though it is a more purposive notion. Like “fate”, it can sometimes be used to convey a general belief about the way things operate, and sometimes only in relation to a specific occurrence to which one ascribes significance. In either case, its use is accompanied by a sense of purpose rather than of helplessness, conveying how human history in general, or a specific occurrence in particular, unfolds in fulfilment of a certain purpose or as part of some larger plan.

While “fate” and “destiny” can be used to convey a general belief about the way things operate, the Confucian attitude of acceptance does not assume any such general belief. Both the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* make certain general comments using the term *ming*; *Lunyu* 2.4 observes in general that life and death are a matter of *ming*, while *Mengzi* 7A:2 observes that *ming* resides everywhere. But, as we have argued, these are general comments not about how things operate, but about how we should respond to the adverse circumstances of life to which we attach significance. Also, the use of *ming* does not carry the connotation of some inexplicable force at work, an idea sometimes associated with the use of “fate”, nor is it a purposive notion like “destiny”. On the account we have proposed, the attitude of acceptance that the early Confucians advocate is set in the context of a commitment to the ethical, not in the context of some view about how an occurrence has come about or what end it might lead to.

That *ming* is typically used of an occurrence to which one attaches significance might seem to take it close to the use of “fate” to ascribe significance to an occurrence. But there is one crucial difference. While “fate” may be used to ascribe significance to an occurrence that by itself initially appears insignificant, *ming* is used to downplay the significance that one initially attaches to an occurrence.

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<sup>28</sup> Lau (1992) and Lau (2003) translate *ming* as “destiny” and Watson (1963) translates it as “fate”.

<sup>29</sup> See Crites, pp. 18-21, for a discussion of some of the usages of these two terms.

To see the difference, consider the way some philosophers have commented on this use of “fate”. Georg Simmel notes how “fate” can be used to convey the significance of certain events in one’s life. An occurrence might in itself be incidental, but in describing that occurrence as “fate”, we are assigning that occurrence a certain meaning, whether positive or negative, that we see in relation to our lives and the meaning of our lives – it is, in his terms, a kind of “retrospective teleology”. Making an acquaintance of someone in the street can be a matter of coincidence, but if the chance meeting leads to further significant consequences for one’s life, then we might speak of it as fate. In this way, the notion of fate transforms what merely occurs into what has purpose and meaning; it is the direction of our life that decides what counts as fate.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Robert C. Solomon comments that to describe a certain event as “fate” is to convey that the event has shaped one’s life in some significant way; this is true particularly of the definitive moments in life such as birth, marriage, death, or of those apparently insignificant encounters that turns out to have momentous consequences. This he describes as a kind of necessity that is teleological or narrative, not logical or causal; that is, the kind of necessity involved has to do with the significance of an event in the unfolding of one’s life, not with the causal path that brings it about.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, *ming* is used in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* in connection with occurrences to which one already attaches significance, though of an adverse nature in that these are typically occurrences that go against one’s wishes. The use of *ming* sets the occurrence in a broader context, but not of a kind that gives it a special meaning or purpose. Instead, the occurrence is viewed in an ethical context, thereby enabling one to endure the adversity while at the same time not being tempted to adopt improper means to alter the outcome. For example, in connection with one’s own death, *Mengzi* 7A:2 speaks of dying after having done one’s best in following the Way. One’s ability to bear one’s death is grounded in the realization that one has done one’s best ethically, not in the belief that one’s death plays a role in some larger plan or serve some special purpose. Setting an adverse occurrence in the broader ethical context lessens the emotional impact of the occurrence on oneself as one sees how that occurrence pales in significance when compared to the ethical.

To further elaborate on this attitude of acceptance, let us explore its differences from other kinds of response that are primarily a matter of subordination to the circumstances of life. As we have noted, the attitude is not ‘fatalistic’ in a sense that implies the futility of human efforts and a surrender to one’s environment. Acceptance is also different from inertia, which involves one’s flowing unreflectively along with the circumstances without question, as in the case of a slave unreflectively and unquestioningly going along with the fact that he was born enslaved. Acceptance differs from inertia in that it involves a reflective awareness of the situation as one that ideally could be otherwise, and the wish that it were otherwise. Acceptance is also different from resignation, understood in a sense that involves a greater degree of reflectivity, as when one resigns to a situation that one knows is not what it should be or at least could ideally have been otherwise. In this sense, to borrow a couple of examples from Sophie

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<sup>30</sup> Simmel, pp. 80-82.

<sup>31</sup> Solomon, pp. 436-444



Botros, a prisoner in an extermination camp may resign to the fact that there is no way out, and a patient may resign to the diagnosis of terminal illness.<sup>32</sup> Unlike inertia, resignation involves one's reflective awareness of the situation as one that one wishes to be otherwise, even though it cannot be altered.

In a situation that literally cannot be altered, both acceptance and resignation involve one's seeing further action directed to changing that situation as pointless. There are obviously different ways of using these terms, but on one common usage, "resignation" has the connotation of passivity or helplessness, while "acceptance" has the connotation that one still retains an active engagement with one's life. To describe a patient as 'accepting' the fact of terminal illness carries the implication that she has now redirected attention to making the best use of her remaining time, while describing her as 'resigning' herself to this fact does not carry such implication, beyond the implication that she no longer defies the evidence and continues to seek remedy. Even when there is little time left, there is still a difference between just no longer entertaining hope of recovery and, while acknowledging the impossibility of recovery, taking up a more positive outlook such as a reflective affirmation of one's life. The latter is the picture presented in *Mengzi* 7A:2, which depicts the situation of someone who willingly accept one's death after having done one's best in ethical terms and, on that basis, making a reflective affirmation of one's life. This difference can also be illustrated with Botros' example of the prisoner in the termination camp.<sup>33</sup> Acceptance, as a more positive outlook, involves one's not being provoked into transgressing moral standards, not dwelling on and worrying about one's plight, and directing attention to what could be positively done, such as efforts to console others in the same situation who might have been emotionally devastated.

Independently of how the words "acceptance" and "resignation" are ordinarily used, my point is that the Confucian attitude of acceptance involves a more positive outlook compared to a response of mere passivity. It involves one's transcending one's environment in a certain sense.<sup>34</sup> One is aware of the unavoidability of what has transpired, and can still be emotionally affected by it. At the same time, one distances oneself from the situation and from one's emotional responses in that one does not fixate on what has happened and is not overwhelmed by one's emotional responses. One does not lose control of one's life but retains an active sense of engagement; to the extent that there are other areas in which one can still exert worthwhile effort, one redirects one's energy to areas of life in which one can still make a difference.

We can understand how such an attitude emerges in the context of the life experiences of individuals who, like Confucius and Mencius, are deeply committed morally and are also driven by a sense of mission to bring about a transformation of the social and political order. Such individuals are bound to confront numerous challenges in life, not just the obstacles they confront in their social and political endeavors, but also the trials and tribulations as they

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<sup>32</sup> Botros, pp. 449-453; I have been helped by this article in the following discussion of the differences between acceptance and resignation.

<sup>33</sup> I have been helped by the discussion of this example in Botros, p. 452.

<sup>34</sup> Botros, pp. 433-4, describes how Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Stoics view acceptance as a way of achieving freedom or making oneself independent of the world.

navigate their way in the political realm, constantly seeking ways of coping with the misfortunes of life, the complexities of politics, and the apparently insurmountable obstacles to their endeavors. On the one hand, there is a deep sense of the normative constraints that pervade the various trying situations they confront, constraints on what they may or may not do to advance their goals as they seek to stand firm on their moral commitments. On the other hand, they also strive to retain control over their lives without being devastated by the misfortunes and failures that they encounter, and to retain an active sense of engagement with what they are driven to accomplish. The attitude of acceptance describes the posture they take up in response to such life experiences, a posture that is integrated into their lives in a way that enables them to respond accordingly whenever the occasion arises.

Setting the attitude of acceptance in the context of the life experiences of Confucius and Mencius, however, also reveals three potential tensions that from time to time surface in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*. The first has to do with the way they view the failure of their political endeavors, the second with their apparent moral stringency as they navigate their way in the political realm, and the third with their perspective on *tian*, or Heaven. To conclude, I will comment briefly on these three potential tensions.

First, the attitude of acceptance involves one's not being emotionally disturbed by the adverse circumstances of life, taking consolation in the fact that one has done one's best within the bounds of the ethical. We can make sense of such a posture in relation to personal goods, such as life and death, or wealth and honor; while one may be disappointed and saddened by personal misfortune or failure, the misfortune or failure pale in significance compared to one's commitment to the ethical. But it is difficult to see how one can maintain such a posture toward the failure of one's own political endeavors which are directed to the public good. For someone like Confucius or Mencius, this is also a failure to bring about a moral transformation of the political order, and what one has failed to bring about is itself an integral part of one's commitment to the ethical. Accordingly, one cannot regard such failure as palling in significance by comparison to one's ethical commitment, and there is a genuine difficulty in maintaining the attitude of acceptance toward such failure. We can sense this in passages such as *Mengzi* 2B:13. Upon leaving the state of Chi after giving up on its ruler, Mencius showed apparent signs of dissatisfaction and was queried about this; he was reminded that Confucius had spoken of how the superior person does not complain against Heaven nor lay blame on humans. Mencius responded that his failure must be because Heaven did not yet wish order to prevail in the Empire, and rhetorically asked why he should be displeased. But his sense of frustration was evident from the passage, and we can understand that his discontent at his failure to bring about political reform could not be mitigated by the awareness that he had done his best within the bounds of the ethical.

Second, the attitude of acceptance involves one's not deviating from what is proper in pursuit of one's political goals. But what if one can actually advance such goals by deviating from what is proper on just this one occasion? Such possibilities have been put to both Confucius and Mencius. In *Lunyu* 14.36, a supporter offered to facilitate Confucius' efforts by putting to death someone who deliberately obstructed him, and in a number of other passages, other offers

of assistance are rendered that Confucius regarded as inappropriate. In *Mengzi* 3B:1, 4A:17 and 5A:7, Mencius was asked why he would not ‘bend’ himself a bit by overlooking some violation of ritual propriety if he could thereby make the Way prevail. Both Confucius and Mencius declined to take up the proposed actions, but if their reason for doing so was just that they would not deviate from what is proper even if their political goals could thereby be advanced, they would be vulnerable to the charge of moral stringency to the point of being morally self-indulgent. To avoid such charges, ultimately they would have to deny that deviating from what is proper could ever help advance their political goals. But taking such a position renders them open to the different charge that they are oblivious to the practical realities of politics.

Third, even if they took the position that acting improperly could never advance their political goals, it would be difficult for them to go further and hold the view that acting properly would eventually lead to success. While there are passages in the *Lunyu* (e.g., 3.13, 6.28) and the *Mengzi* (e.g., 4A:7, 5A:6) that appear to retain faith in a Heaven that supports the good and steer things in a positive direction, other passages show an awareness that Heaven is not always supporting the good outcome. *Lunyu* 14.36 and *Mengzi* 4A:7 observe that whether the Way prevails or falls into disuse is due to Heaven, with the implication that Heaven might allow the Way to fall into disuse.<sup>35</sup> *Mengzi* 1B:14 observes how success still depends on Heaven even after humans have done their best in the political realm, without conveying any sense that the good will always succeed. And in *Mengzi* 2B:13, Mencius himself noted that it was because Heaven did not wish to bring order to the Empire that he was unable to succeed in his political endeavors. But this awareness that Heaven does not always support the good makes it difficult for one to stay unperturbed by, and hence difficult to accept, the failure of one’s political endeavors.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, for someone deeply committed morally and driven by a sense of mission, the attitude of acceptance is an intelligible and attractive posture to adopt when confronted with personal misfortunes and failures. But this attitude might not sit well with a failure in one’s endeavors that are directed toward the public good, such as failure in one’s efforts at a moral transformation of the political order. This accounts for the three potential tensions that surface from time to time in the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*.

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<sup>35</sup> The *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* also remarks how, despite the decline of virtue of the Zhou, there was not yet a change in Heaven’s Mandate and so it was premature to contemplate the end of the Zhou rule (10.7b). The implication is that Heaven might not always be on the side of the good and opposed to the bad – it allowed the Zhou rule to continue despite the decline of its virtue.

<sup>36</sup> Puett makes a similar point, putting it in terms of a tension between Heaven and humans.

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