

Article

On the Coherence of Mencius' Concept of *Li*: An Analysis Based on Moral Reasons Internalism

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Abstract: This paper addresses the problem of coherence, i.e., whether the internal and external dimensions of *li* (禮 rituals, rites, and the observance of them) are compatible. This problem stems mainly from Mencius' seemingly conflicting statements. On the one hand, he emphasized the goodness of *xing* (性 human nature) in terms of the goodness of the heart-mind. On the other hand, he defended the act of following *li* regardless of one's heart-mind. This paper argues that Mencius held coherent moral reasons internalism, asserting that moral reasons are embedded in people's universal and potential instinct to do morally good things. Consequently, he distinguished morality from non-moral normativity and claimed that the former takes precedence over the latter. The concept of *li* is thus divided into moral *li* and non-moral *li*, with moral *li* taking precedence over non-moral *li*. Therefore, the act of "following *li* regardless of one's heart-mind" refers to following non-moral *li*, as long as it does not conflict with moral *li*. Based on the fact that Mencius' concept of *li* is a kind of coherent moral reasons internalism, this paper further responds to some challenges from moral reasons externalism. It does so by clarifying the meaning of "seeking the cause within oneself" (反求諸己 *fan qiu zhu ji*), showing that Mencius believed every individual could establish rational inner guidance and be motivated to lead a reflective and autonomous moral life.

Keywords: Mencius; *li*; moral reasons; motivation; "seeking the cause within oneself"



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1. Introduction

Mencius presents two kinds of arguments about *li* (禮 rituals, rites, and the observance of them). On one hand, he asserts the goodness of *xing* (性 human nature) in relation to the goodness of the heart-mind,¹ suggesting that each individual possesses the inherent capacity to determine and uphold practical norms (see Xu 2001, pp. 139–40). On the other hand, Mencius endorses the way of the Former Kings. In the *Book of Mencius* (孟子 *Mencius* 4A1), he states, "you could not draw squares or dire without a carpenter's square or a pair of compasses", and further cites *The Book of Odes*, "do not swerve to one side, do not overlook anything; follow established rules in everything you do".² This indicates the traditional norms that exist externally to individuals. There is ongoing debate about whether these two arguments are coherent or not. By drawing on the connection between moral reasons and motivation in moral psychology, this paper aims to demonstrate the coherence of Mencius' *li*, i.e., that he held a coherent moral reasons internalism. Furthermore, the paper will address challenges posed by moral reasons externalism and offer potential solutions employing Mencius' teachings.

2. What Is the Problem of Coherence in Mencius' *Li*?

The problem of coherence pertains to the validity of both kinds of arguments mentioned above, raising questions about the nature of *li*: whether it is internal or external to the agent.³ If Mencius' concept of *li* is indeed coherent, the issue lies in understanding why it encompasses two seemingly contradictory dimensions: internal and external.

2.1. On Mencius' Li: Disagreements in Current Studies

Scholars hold different perspectives on Mencius' concept of *li*, leading to disagreements in current studies. Some scholars support compatibilism, arguing that *li*, as external norms, is compatible with the heart-mind definition.⁴ They propose that *li* originates internally and manifests externally, and the natural tendency to manifest behavior outwardly aligns with the requirements of the *Zhou Li* (周礼). In terms of why *li*, as compatible with the heart-mind, coincides with the requirements of the *Zhou Li*, the best explanation is that Mencius believed that the latter originates from the former; i.e., moral instincts give rise to traditions rather than the other way around (see Chad 1992, p. 163).⁵ However, there are scholars who favor incompatibilism, emphasizing a lack of coherence between the theoretical and practical aspects of Mencius' *li*. Chad Hansen, for instance, raises empirical concerns about the relationship between the heart-mind of courtesy and modesty and *li*, arguing that Mencius' claim of the entirety of humanity sharing the endowment of *li* in an a priori sense seems impossible in practice (see Chad 1992, pp. 170–71). Chinese scholars have also observed a certain duality in *li*, where Mencius attempted to establish its foundation on the basis of the heart-mind but did not fully eliminate its external dimension (see Yang and Huang 2013, p. 102). Yang Zebo clearly points out an inconsistency in Mencius' thought, highlighting the importance of “seeking the cause within oneself” (反求诸己 *fan qiu zhu ji*), while acknowledging the presence of contradictory passages in Mencius' writings. He claims that mere self-reflection is insufficient to act in accordance with *li* (see Yang 2016, pp. 214–16). This paper aims to offer a new interpretation of Mencius' *li* by drawing on the connection between moral reasons and motivation. It argues for Mencius' consistent moral reasons internalism, asserting that moral reasons are necessarily connected to motivation, thereby refuting incompatibilist interpretations of Mencius. The justification for this approach stems from the historical evolution of the Confucian concept of *li*, which has gradually emphasized the internal dimension from the time of Confucius to Mencius. The evolution of this concept occurred in conjunction with philosophical inquiries, such as the source of normativity (narrowly speaking, morality) and the connection between moral reasons and motivation.⁶

2.2. Awareness of the Philosophical Problem with Li in Early Confucians before Mencius

The original meaning of *li* pertains to the ritual of offering sacrifices to the gods for blessing (see Xu 1963, p. 7). During the Zhou Dynasty, it was considered a set of behavioral norms based on the patriarchal system. With the decline of the Zhou royal family, the political aspect of *li* faded, and it gradually became known in the society as etiquette and traditions. *Li* generally refers to social norms and institutions. As social norms, *li* serves as the basic guidelines for actions and one's whole life. As social institutions, *li* takes concrete forms within various social organizations, including political systems.⁷ Therefore, *li*, in a broad sense, is normative in nature, which means that it provides normative reasons for action. Normative reasons (all “reasons” used below refer to normative reasons) refer to considerations that support or discourage actions. They are often used to justify whether an action is right or wrong and guide what one should or should not do.⁸ Similarly, the normative nature of *li* is manifest in the fact that people can judge the rightness or wrongness of actions according to *li*, as well as require others to act in compliance with *li*. In a narrower sense, *li* is moral reason for action. Confucianism attaches great importance to the moral aspect of *li*, taking violations of *Zhou Li*'s requirements as a serious moral wrongness. For instance, “Confucius said of the head of the [Ji] family when he had eight teams of dancers performing in his courtyard, ‘If this man can be endured, who cannot be endured!’” (*Analects* 3.1).⁹ However, Confucianism also acknowledges that the moral value of an action cannot merely depend on whether it fits the external norms or not, but should consider the intentions, emotions, and qualities of the agents. For example, Lin Fang asked for some main principles in connection with ritual. Confucius said, “in ritual at large it is a safe rule always to be too sparing rather than too lavish; and in the particular case of mourning-rites, they should be dictated by grief rather than by fear”. (*Analects* 3.4). Later

thinkers focused more on the psychological aspects to investigate the sources of normativity of *li*; i.e., *li* has the function of communicating and bonding emotions. As the *Guo Dian Bamboo Slips* (郭店竹简 *Guodian Zhujian*) states, *li* originates from emotions (礼作于情 *li zuo yu qing*) and the Way begins with emotions (道始于情 *dao shi yu qing*), which further promotes the internalization of *li*. In the case of Mencius, he believed that the normativity of *li* originates from the moral instincts of human beings, namely, the heart-mind of courtesy, modesty, and respect.

The historical evolution of the concept of *li* suggests that Confucians may have undergone philosophical reflections about the nature of morality, particularly the problem of whether moral reasons are internal or external. Similar discussions have emerged in Western ethics. Plato considered the transcendental Forms as the supreme principle and the root of moral knowledge, while Aristotle believed that morality is rooted in virtue, which is the highest fulfillment of human function and is essential for human flourishing. In the eighteenth century, the debate shifted to whether morality derives from reason or sentiment. As David Hume (1983) stated, “it is impossible for reason ever to draw conclusions of this nature...that which renders morality an active principle, and constitutes virtue our happiness, and vice our misery: It is probable, I say, that this final sentence depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species”. In the case of Immanuel Kant (2002), he claimed that “empirical principles are everywhere unsuited to having moral laws grounded on them”. The contemporary discourse incorporates the historical debate about the ground of morality into the division between moral reasons internalism and moral reasons externalism. Internalism and externalism can be defined by the connection between moral reasons and motivation. The concept of motivation must be understood in a broad sense, indicating the practical reason and capacity to act as agents.¹⁰ Thus, the necessary connection between moral reasons and motivation has both actual and potential aspects, which means that moral reasons actually motivate, or they would actually motivate when the agent meets some counterfactual conditions, such as the agent being fully rational. Moral reasons internalism (hereafter, internalism) is the view that moral reasons are necessarily linked to motivation or at least have the power to motivate action. If an agent is unable to fulfill a requirement in either the actual or potential sense, then it cannot be considered a genuine moral requirement. Moral reasons externalism (hereafter, externalism) is the view that there is no necessary connection between moral reasons and motivation. It suggests that there are absolute moral requirements that are independent of any actual or potential motivation of an agent.¹¹

Regarding the historical evolution of the concept of *li* prior to Mencius, the normativity of *li* has undergone a transformation from emphasizing its external dimension to emphasizing its internal dimension. Initially, *li* was understood in terms of its external dimension, defined by existing social norms and institutional requirements. Gradually, it was understood regarding its internal dimension, i.e., the natural emotions and dispositions of agents. Mencius solidifies the internal dimension of *li*, stating, “that which a gentleman follows as his nature, that is to say, benevolence, rightness, the rites and wisdom, is rooted in his heart” (*Mencius* 7A21).

3. Arguments for Incompatibilism

It is widely accepted that Mencius established the internal dimension of *li*. However, some scholars, referred to as incompatibilists, argue that the text of *Mencius* is not completely devoid of the external dimension of *li*, leading to an incoherence within Mencius’ concept of *li*. By drawing on the division between internalism and externalism, the incompatibilist view is presented as follows: Mencius’ *li* is incoherent because he supports both internalism and externalism. Specifically, Mencius regards *li* as internal moral reasons, where the normativity originates from the agents themselves. Nevertheless, in practice, he treats *li* as an external moral reason, wherein the normativity exists independently of the agents.

3.1. The Internalist Position of Mencius' Li

On the one hand, Mencius' concept of *li* is consistent with internalism, which holds that moral reasons can actually or potentially motivate actions. The basis of internalism in Mencius' text lies in his association of the goodness of *xing* with the goodness of the heart-mind. As Mencius states:

As far as what is genuinely in him is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good. That is what I mean by good. As for his becoming bad, that is not the fault of his native endowment. The heart of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect, and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom. Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from the outside; they are in me originally. Only this has never dawned on me. That is why it is said, 'Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it. (Mencius 6A6)

Firstly, the statement "the heart of respect pertains to the observance of the rites" indicates that *li* has foundation in the heart-mind and can be regarded as moral reasons. Thus, moral reasons find their basis in the heart-mind. Furthermore, Mencius reiterates that the heart-mind is inherent in all individuals, emphasizing that the source of morality lies in the moral endowment of everyone. In other words, the moral motivation is inherently present within the human capacity. Similarly, when Mencius states, "benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from the outside; they are in me originally", he stresses that the source of morality resides within the agent, rather than external to the agent. Finally, Mencius adds, "only this has never dawned on me", in explaining why moral reasons may not always motivate in the actual sense. This suggests that regarding moral motivations, "seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it". It will also be argued below that as long as the agent "seeks the cause within himself" through *si* (思 *think, thinking*), moral reasons regain their power to motivate actions. Therefore, Mencius may propose that it is not that people are incapable of "seeking" through *si*, but rather they are unwilling to do so. When the condition of *si* is fulfilled, moral reasons can indeed motivate in the actual sense; thus, individuals should not claim that they are incapable of performing morally good actions.

3.2. The Externalist Position of Mencius' Li

On the other hand, Mencius' concept of *li* seems to align with the externalist view, thereby diverging from internalism. Scholars have drawn attention to Mencius' statement: "the content of benevolence is the serving of one's parents; the content of dutifulness is obedience to one's elder brothers; the content of wisdom is to understand these two and to hold fast to them; the content of the rites is the regulation and adornment of them" (Mencius 4A27). This passage shows that the function of *li* is to regulate and modify actions based on benevolence and righteousness, thereby ensuring moderation. Here, the concept of *li* emphasizes its external dimension, carrying a stronger sense of external obligations (see Yang and Huang 2013, p. 102). Yang Zebo argues that Mencius advocated following Shun (舜) in moral practice, as evidenced by Mencius' statement, "The Great Shun was even greater. He was ever ready to fall into line with others, giving up his own ways for theirs, and glad to take from others that by which he could do good" (Mencius 2A8). However, the praise of following others seems to contradict his claim of the goodness of *xing*, which bring the source of morality back to one's own heart-mind (see Yang 2016, p. 215).

Nevertheless, there is even stronger textual evidence in *Mencius* that supports the incompatibilist view, suggesting that Mencius endorsed the practice of "following *li* regardless of one's heart-mind" and thus recognized moral externalism. The text of *Mencius* records two encounters involving Wang Huan (王欢), an official in Qi (齐). The first encounter occurred as follows:

When Mencius was a Minister of [Qi] he went on a mission of condolence to [Teng]. The King of [Qi] made Wang Huan, the governor of Ke, his deputy. Wang Huan went to see Mencius morning and evening, but throughout the journeys to and from [Teng], Mencius never discussed official business with him...“Your position as Minister of [Qi], asked [Gong du Zi], is by no means insignificant, and the distance between [Qi] and [Teng] is by no means short, yet throughout the journeys between the two states you never discussed official business with Wang Huan. Why was that?”...“He has managed the whole affair. What was there for me to say?” (*Mencius* 2B6)

Regarding Mencius’ attitude toward Wang Huan, Zhao Qi (赵歧) notes, “Wang Huan was good at flattering the King of Qi and later became the senior minister. Mencius did not like him. Although Mencius traveled with him, he never discussed official business with him, this is because he did not want to be compared with him”. (see [Zhao and Sun 2021](#), p. 203). This indicates that Mencius maintained distance from Wang due to his poor character. The second encounter took place when both of them went to offer condolence to Gong hang Zi (公行子) who had lost a son. The text reads:

[Gong hang Zi] lost a son, and Wang Huan, the [you shi]¹² went to offer his condolence. As he entered, people went up to greet him, and, as he sat down, others came over to speak to him. Mencius did not speak to him and Wang Huan was displeased. “All the gentlemen present spoke to me”, said he, “with the sole exception of Mencius. He showed me scant courtesy”. Mencius, on hearing of this, said, “According to the rites, at court one should not step across seats to speak to others, neither should one step across steps to bow to them. All I wished was to observe the rites, and [Zi ao] thought I was showing him scant courtesy. Is that not extraordinary?” (*Mencius* 4B27)

Mencius considered his action justified, as it conformed to the requirements of *li* as an external rule. Zhao Qi notes, “Mencius said he wanted to observe the rites, but in fact, he disgusted Wang Huan at heart, he just apparently went along with Wang Huan’s words”. (Ibid., p. 404). Zhao Qi points out the inconsistency between Mencius’ reasons and his motivation. It is clear that Mencius had no motivation to show respect to Wang Huan, so according to internalism, the rites “at court one should not step across seats to speak to others, neither should one step across steps to bow to them” were not a moral reason for Mencius. Consequently, he could have chosen not to follow them. On the contrary, Mencius appeared to suggest that regardless of his motivation, as long as his actions conformed to *li*, they could be considered morally justified. Thus, as long as his actions are in accordance with *li*, he should not be morally criticized. Here, Mencius seems to acknowledge externalism, which contradicts his internalist position.

Interpreting Mencius’ concept of *li* in terms of the connection between moral reasons and motivation, the view of incompatibilism can be reconstructed into the following:

Premise 1 (P1): Mencius held that moral reasons necessarily have some relationship to motivation.

Premise 2 (P2): There are passages in the *Mencius* showing that moral reasons are not necessarily related to motivation.

Conclusion: Mencius’ concept of *li* is incoherent.

4. A Defense of the Coherence of Mencius’ *Li*

This paper aims to argue that Mencius held a coherent moral reasons internalism. Since incompatibilists also acknowledge the internal dimension of Mencius’ concept of *li* to some extent, the key to refuting incompatibilism lies in P2. Internalists have two possible strategies in their arguments. Firstly, if they maintain that Mencius considered the rites of “not to step across seats, not to step across steps” (see *Mencius* 4B27) as his moral reasons, then according to internalism, the moral status of these rites would be necessarily related

to Mencius' lack of willingness to talk to Wang Huan. However, as argued above, Mencius actually lacked the motivation of respect, which rejects the possibility that the rites serve as moral reasons. Secondly, internalists can abandon the first strategy and propose that in this scenario, Mencius defended a form of normative reasons that is distinct from moral reasons. By narrowing the source of morality to the conditions of the agents' own moral capacities, Mencius must have recognized the distinction between morality and normativity and sought to separate them. Therefore, the category of normative reasons should include both moral reasons and non-moral normative reasons, leading to a division of the concept of *li* into moral *li* and non-moral *li*.¹³ The feasibility of the second strategy will be explored in further detail.

4.1. Moral Li and Non-Moral Li

The disagreement between compatibilists and incompatibilists revolves around the extent of internalism in Mencius' concept of *li*, specifically, whether it can adequately explain the inconsistencies found in the text of *Mencius* within the framework of internalism. Incompatibilists argue that Mencius' concept of *li* is not entirely internal. Despite his theoretical construction of the internal dimension of *li*, Mencius fails to provide a convincing explanation from the standpoint of internalism in cases where the external dimension of *li* becomes evident in ethical practice. More specifically, since there are various norms and rules in society, Mencius' concept of *li* will inevitably be confronted with conflict between moral reasons when it is applied to specific practical issues or to address the problem of what should be done. The text of Mencius reveals an inconsistency between his theoretical moral reasons and the moral reasons he applies in practice. In theory, Mencius emphasizes the importance of preserving one's heart-mind through *li* (see *Mencius* 4B28), but in practice, he follows *li* regardless of his heart-mind. In this paper, I argue that Mencius can offer a convincing explanation, from the internalist point of view, for the act of following *li* regardless of one's heart-mind. Mencius achieves this by distinguishing between moral *li* and non-moral *li* within the broader category of *li* and by establishing the relationship between them, where moral *li* is distinct from and takes precedence over non-moral *li*. The distinction between moral and non-moral *li* can be inferred from Mencius' internalism, as moral *li* is based on one's moral motivation, whereas non-moral *li* does not require such motivation. The other claim that moral *li* takes precedence over non-moral *li* implies that the act of following non-moral *li* is permissible only when it does not conflict with moral *li*. One might argue that these claims should be supported by more textual evidence beyond personal interpretation. Indeed, there are passages in the text of *Mencius* that support the distinction between moral and non-moral *li*, as well as the precedence of the former over the latter. For instance, Mencius states:

There are honours bestowed by Heaven, and there are honours bestowed by man. Benevolence, dutifulness, conscientiousness, truthfulness to one's word, unflagging delight in what is good,—these are honours bestowed by Heaven. The position of a Ducal Minister, a Minister, or a Counsellor is an honour bestowed by man. Men of antiquity bent their efforts towards acquiring honours bestowed by Heaven, and honours bestowed by man followed as a matter of course. Men of today bend their efforts towards acquiring honours bestowed by Heaven in order to win honours bestowed by man, and once the latter is won they discard the former. Such men are deluded to the extreme, and in the end are sure only to perish. (*Mencius* 6A16)

The distinction between moral and non-moral *li* can be inferred from Mencius' definition of the concepts "honours bestowed by Heaven" (天爵 *tianjue*) and "honours bestowed by man" (人爵 *renjue*), both of which pertain to the category of *li*. "Honours bestowed by heaven" encompass moral reasons, such as "benevolence, dutifulness, conscientiousness, truthfulness to one's word, unflagging delight in what is good", making them moral *li*. Conversely, "honours bestowed by man" refer to official positions considered as a hierarchy in the patriarchal system, which are non-moral reasons from an internalist perspective

and therefore non-moral *li*. Although both moral *li* and non-moral *li* belong to the same category of *li*, they are fundamentally different. They share similarities in terms of their normativity and overlapping content and function. For instance, transgressions against rites and laws can result in moral condemnation. However, their essential differences lie in the source of normativity. Mencius argued that the normativity of moral *li* derives from people's universal moral endowment that is invariable. Conversely, the normativity of non-moral *li* is contingent because it likely originates from the will of the ruler. For example, "[Bei gong Qi] asked, 'What was the rank and income system under the House of Zhou, Mencius answered, 'This cannot be known in detail, for the feudal lords destroyed the records, considering the system to be detrimental to themselves'" (Mencius 5B2).

The precedence of moral *li* over non-moral *li* can be inferred from Mencius' formulation of the relationship between "honours bestowed by Heaven" and "honours bestowed by man". Mencius praised that "men of antiquity bent their efforts towards acquiring honours bestowed by Heaven, and honours bestowed by man followed as a matter of course", and he criticized that "men of today bend their efforts towards acquiring honours bestowed by Heaven in order to win honours bestowed by man, and once the latter is won they discard the former". Mencius implied that the moral significance of "honours bestowed by man" depends on their connection to "honours bestowed by Heaven". If "honours bestowed by man" do not violate and hinder "honours bestowed by Heaven", they are morally neutral or non-moral. If "honours bestowed by Heaven" take precedence over "honours bestowed by man" as a premise in practical reasoning, then "honours bestowed by man" are morally good and justified. Conversely, if "honours bestowed by Heaven" are regarded only as means and not as ends, then "honours bestowed by man" are morally evil and unjustified. It is thus clear that "honours bestowed by Heaven" hold complete moral sense, while "honours bestowed by man" do not necessarily possess moral sense. Therefore, "honours bestowed by man" are considered non-moral, which implies that they are not always immoral. In other words, they are not always morally evil and unjustified. By distinguishing between the concepts of "honours bestowed by Heaven" and "honours bestowed by man" and by establishing the precedence of the former, Mencius separated morality from normativity and accorded morality superior importance over non-moral normativity. Thus, moral *li* not only stands independently from non-moral *li* but also takes precedence over non-moral *li*.

4.2. The Argument for the Coherence of Mencius' Li

It has been demonstrated that Mencius drew a distinction between moral and non-moral *li*,¹⁴ emphasizing the precedence of the former over the latter. As a result, non-moral *li* is permissible only when it aligns with moral *li* or does not contradict it. Since moral *li* is rooted in moral motivations, it can be inferred that moral motivations play a central role in determining the moral value of actions. Simply conforming to *li* alone cannot determine the moral value of an action. Therefore, in practical situations, agents should prioritize ensuring that their motivations are moral before considering whether it is necessary to adjust or enhance their actions in accordance with non-moral *li*.

The adjustment of the act itself can be categorized into two types of cases. Firstly, there are cases where the act itself does not conform to non-moral *li*. Mencius has been accused of violating *li* due to his failure to adhere to non-moral *li*, which refers to his action that does not conform to the existing social norms. For example, in the text of *Mencius*, there is a story that records his avoidance of going to the court to see the King Qi, claiming that he was sick. Jing chou (景丑), a friend of Mencius, criticized him for disrespecting King Qi by violating the rite that requires immediate response when summoned by one's prince, without waiting for the horses to be yoked to one's carriage. Mencius responded, "There are three things which are acknowledged by the world to be exalted: rank, age and virtue. At court, rank is supreme; in the village, age; but for giving help to the world and ruling over the people it is virtue. How can a man, on the strength of the possession of one of these, treat the other two with arrogance? If he does not honour virtue and delight in the

Way in such a manner, he is not worthy of being helped towards the achievement of great things" (*Mencius* 2B2). In Mencius' view, King Qi did not honor virtue by giving priority to "honours bestowed by man" over "honours bestowed by Heaven", leading his action to be morally wrong. From the point of view of internalism, the rite mentioned by Jing chou lacks the support of intrinsic moral motivation and therefore pertains to non-moral *li*. As a result, Mencius had a reason not to act in accordance with it, and his conduct in this situation aligns with internalism.

Secondly, there are cases where the act itself follows non-moral *li*, serving as a means or strategy to ensure the precedence of moral *li*. This brings us back to the interaction between Wang Huan and Mencius. Wang Huan lacked virtue, but he was a powerful and favored senior official in Qi. As Mencius describes, he was the typical man of today who would "bend their efforts towards acquiring honours bestowed by Heaven in order to win honours bestowed by man, and once the latter is won they discard the former". People treated Wang Huan with respect out of a motivation to flatter him, which can be seen as using "honours bestowed by Heaven" as a means in order to obtain "honours bestowed by man". For Mencius, these actions were morally evil and unjustified, making it impossible for him to have any motivation of respect and courtesy towards such individuals but rather felt moral disgust towards them. Here, the rites of "not to step across seats, not to step across steps" also lack intrinsic moral motivations. According to internalism, the rite does not pertain to moral *li* but to non-moral *li*. Therefore, for Mencius, what he followed despite his heart-mind was actually non-moral *li*. However, why would he follow non-moral *li* in this case without conflicting with moral *li*? It is because the acts of "not to step across seats, not to step across steps" can be based not only on respect and courtesy towards the virtuous but also on moral disgust towards the wicked and the desire to be away from them. In this case, the rites of "not to step across seats, not to step across steps" manifested moral disgust towards the wicked, which did not conflict with the moral motivation of respecting virtuous persons but rather aligned with it. Although the rites of "not to step across seats, not to step across steps" pertain to non-moral *li*, following them does not contradict moral *li*. Therefore, Mencius' act of "following *li* regardless of his heart-mind" is not contrary to internalism.

Recalling the argument of incompatibilism, incompatibilists claim that although Mencius' concept of *li* upholds internalism, his actions in practice deviated from this position and supported externalism. However, the fact is that Mencius consistently maintained internalism. Based on the above analysis, we can construct a counterargument against the given incompatibilist argument:

P1: Incompatibilists argue that although Mencius advocated internalism, certain passages in the text of *Mencius* indicate that moral reasons can exist independently of agents' motivation, thereby rendering Mencius' view of moral reasons incoherent. Consequently, they claim that Mencius' concept of *li* is also incoherent.

P2: Mencius distinguished moral *li* and non-moral *li*, specifically between moral reasons and non-moral normative reasons. Moral reasons are grounded in moral motivation, whereas non-moral normative reasons need not be necessarily related to the agents' motivation.

P3: All the moral reasons exemplified by incompatibilists refer to non-moral normative reasons from the perspective of internalism. In fact, the cases that Mencius adopted, i.e., non-moral normative reasons, are not contrary to internalism.

Conclusion: The incompatibilists' argument is not correct, and it can be concluded that Mencius consistently adhered to coherent internalism.

5. Responding to the Challenge of Externalism through the Clarification of “Seeking the Cause within Oneself”

The incompatibilist challenge to Mencius’ concept of *li* is twofold. First, there is the argument concerning the inconsistency of Mencius’ concept of *li* between theory and practice, which has already been refuted. Secondly, there is the critique that aligns with the externalist position, questioning the internalist dimension of Mencius’ concept of *li*, namely, that the heart-mind as the source of *li* conflicts with the universality of morality. This second challenge is exemplified by Yang Zebo, who argues that the core idea of Mencius’ ethical theory is simply the concept of “seeking the cause within oneself”. However, in practice, relying solely on oneself is insufficient to achieve *li*. Yang Zebo points out that moral practice inevitably involves learning and the cognition of the world. It is only by accurately grasping the facts of a situation and making relevant concepts clear through practical reasoning that can we settle on moral judgments and further respond to new situations and problems (see Yang 2016, pp. 214–15). Furthermore, there is another criticism by other scholars suggesting that Mencius restricts the scope of *li* to ethical practices involving courtesy and respect, thereby neglecting its role in maintaining and regulating social order (see Liu 2009, p. 149). This criticism points out that society requires unified moral standards, as relying solely on “seeking the cause with oneself” is likely to give rise to moral disagreements. Since each person has different endowments, social and family backgrounds, and life experiences, different people may adopt contrasting moral standpoints in the same situations, leading to social conflicts and disorder. These criticisms of Mencius are similar to the externalist critique of internalism, claiming that the normativity of moral reasons cannot be determined solely by the particular motivations of individuals. Otherwise, individuals with bad moral character, limited knowledge, or weak will could justify their moral failures. Based on the fact that Mencius’ concept of *li* upholds coherent internalism, this paper further responds to these externalist criticisms by clarifying the meaning of “seeking the cause within oneself”.

Yang presupposes a definition of “seeking the cause within oneself”, that is, everyone is entitled to or capable of seeking the source of moral reasons in one’s particular motivation. However, this definition is flawed. According to Mencius, morality is not contingent on the particular and actual motivation of individuals; instead, it resides in people’s universal and potential instinct to do morally good things, known as the four beginnings.¹⁵ In this sense, moral reasons have the capacity to motivate every individual universally. Thus, “seeking the cause within oneself” should not be understood as seeking the cause within one’s particular motivation, but rather within the agents’ universal motivation to do morally good things. In other words, the term “self” does not refer to the individual particular self, but rather to the universal “moral self”, signifying that every person has the capability to do morally good things and the potential to build up or develop one’s moral will.

Externalists, however, can continue to question Mencius’ internalist position, which posits that moral reasons have universal motivating potential even if they are not necessarily motivating in practice. This loosens the necessary connection between moral reasons and motivation, aligning with externalism. This paper argues that Mencius can address this problem by establishing the conditions under which moral reasons do indeed motivate agents, thereby reinforcing the necessary connection between moral reasons and motivation. The condition is that moral reasons actually motivate agents when they engage in *si* (思 *think, thinking*). As mentioned earlier, *si* is an indispensable condition for transforming potential moral motivation into reality. The reason why moral reasons do not actually motivate individuals is that they do not reflect on their inherent moral goodness. Therefore, the term “seeking” in the phrase “seeking the cause within oneself” undoubtedly implies *si*, which involves being fully informed of factual knowledge, clear conceptual clarification, and valid practical reasoning. Moral judgments derived from *si* are more accurate than the prevailing social rules and opinions. The textual evidence can be found in Mencius’ evaluation of Kuang Zhang (匡章). Despite Kuang Zhang being labeled as an undutiful son by

the whole country, Mencius not only associated with him but treated him with courtesy. The argument from Mencius proceeds from his clarification of the concept of “undutiful”. He states, “What the world commonly calls undutiful in a son falls under five heads. First, the neglect of one’s parents through laziness of limb. Second, the neglect of one’s parents through indulgence in the games of *bo* (博 gambling) and *yi* (弈 playing chess) and fondness for drink. Third, the neglect of one’s parents through miserliness in money matters and partiality towards one’s wife. Fourth, indulgence in sensual pleasures to the shame of one’s parents. Fifth, a quarrelsome and truculent disposition that jeopardizes the safety of one’s parents” (*Mencius* 4B30). Moreover, Mencius presented factual information about Kuang Zhang, stating “Has [Zhang Zi] a single one of these failings? In his case father and son are at odds through taxing each other over a moral issue” (*Ibid.*). Finally, Mencius concluded that Kuang Zhang was not unfilial. However, the public was unaware of the truth. They did not know that Kuang Zhang had offended his father by demanding him to do morally good things, leading them to reach a completely opposite conclusion from Mencius. Hence, Mencius’ reasoning showed that *si* is the ability of rational reflection, through which agents would be capable of eliminating a belief-set of error and ignorance under the condition of valid moral reasoning and ultimately making accurate moral judgments. Mencius emphasizes the importance of *si* in the following:

The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things. When one thing acts on another, all it does is to attract it. The organ of the heart can think. But it will find the answer only if it does think; otherwise, it will not find the answer. This is what Heaven has given me. If one makes one’s stand on what is of greater importance in the first instance, what is of smaller importance cannot usurp its place. In this way, one cannot but be a great man. (*Mencius* 6A15)

The heart-mind, as discussed in this paper, refers to the universal “moral heart-mind” that possesses the function of *si*. Therefore, the proper definition of “seeking the cause within oneself” is that individuals should engage in rational reflection based on *si* within their “moral heart-mind”. In terms of how to engage in *si*, each person should consider themselves as agents capable of performing morally good actions and conducting rational reflection from a perspective that is “common to all [heart-minds]” (*Mencius* 6A7). This involves clarifying concepts, dispelling ignorance, and rectifying mistakes in moral practice. Only through this process can we “find the answer” (*Mencius* 6A15), in other words, make accurate moral judgments and be motivated to act accordingly. Thus, Mencius attached importance to the clarification of moral concepts and factual knowledge. Furthermore, he was concerned about whether an individual’s moral judgments can be examined through *si*. It becomes apparent that engaging in what Mencius means by “seeking the cause within oneself”, is the ability to critically doubt the prevailing moral views in society, whereas the public merely accepts existing norms and rules, internalizing them as their so-called “conscience”. For Mencius, the latter is the irrational internal guidance, while “seeking the cause within oneself” is the rational internal guidance. It advocates that individuals should fully utilize their moral instincts to do good things and employ rational reflection to establish accurate moral reasons. In this way, individuals can test and criticize the prevailing institutions, norms, and values of society, ultimately becoming genuine moral agents.

6. Conclusions

The fact that Mencius’ concept of *li* seems to be both internal in theory and external in practice has led scholars to doubt whether it is coherent from theory to practice. This issue, known as the problem of coherence in Mencius’ concept of *li*, is the subject of this paper, aiming to refute the criticism of incompatibilism for its incoherence. By exploring the relationship between moral reasons and motivation in moral psychology, this paper argues that Mencius held a coherent moral reasons internalism, where moral reasons are necessarily connected to motivation. For Mencius, the normative status of moral reasons is based on the agent’s universal motivation to do morally good things. In this manner,

Mencius defined the nature of morality and distinguished it from normativity in a broader sense. He introduced a distinction between moral *li* and non-moral *li*, asserting the independence and priority of the former. This distinction plays a crucial role in refuting incompatibilism because Mencius' act of "following *li* regardless of his heart-mind" follows non-moral *li*, and the motivation expressed in this act does not contradict the motivation of respect and courtesy that underlies moral *li*. In addition, incompatibilists are dissatisfied with Mencius' internalist position, arguing that it deviates from the universality of moral requirements. By clarifying the definition of "seeking the cause within oneself", it becomes clear that individuals should regard themselves as moral agents who have the universal and potential instinct to do morally good things. On this basis, they develop accurate moral reasons through rational reflections. Since moral reasons stem from "seeking the cause within oneself", they are universal. Therefore, Mencius encouraged individuals to cultivate their inner moral selves and live a reflective and autonomous moral life. Prevailing societal institutions, rules, and values are not sufficient unless they withstand the scrutiny of rational reflection emanating from moral selves.

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Notes

- ¹ In this paper, I employ the word "heart-mind" rather than "heart" to translate *xin* (心).
- ² In this paper, I use the translations of D. C. Lau (2003).
- ³ The word "agent" generally means that a person is free and responsible. This paper assumes by default that all people are agents, who have special powers of reasoning and choice, enabling them to engage not just with the physical realm but also with the realm of value and moral principles. At least in the view of Confucians, they do not have doubts and thoughts about whether human beings are agents or are merely determined by causal laws. Thus, this article does not strictly make a distinction between agents, individuals, and persons or people.
- ⁴ Scholars such as Wu Xinying and Zhang Shuye express the view of compatibilism in their papers. Wu (2017, p. 47) claims that *li* plays a dual role in the process of its conceptual internalization; that is, it is regarded as both internalized virtues and external rules of action that manifest these virtues. Zhang (2012, p. 71) states that Mencius' concept of *li* has a heart-mind basis, but this by no means implies that it deviates from Confucian political teachings, in which *li* and *yue* (乐 music) play an important role and they have a powerful and profound institutional evocative effect.
- ⁵ There are also disagreements within compatibilism. Mencius presupposed that human beings have four moral endowments, which are *ren* (仁 benevolence), *yi* (义 righteousness), *li* (礼 rituals, rites, and observance of them), and *zhi* (智 wisdom), but the moral status of them is not balanced. Shun (1997, p. 52) states, "*li* is reflected in the description of *li* as a kind of adornment (Mencius 4A27); *li* is a way of regulating or beautifying interactions that people may engage in for reasons independent of *li*." In other words, he thinks the moral value of *li* itself comes from *ren* and *yi*. In contrast, Liu (2020, pp. 71–72) argues that *li* has intrinsic moral value.
- ⁶ There are two main contributions to this paper, which differ from previous works. Firstly, it provides a clear description of the coherence problem of Mencius' concept of *li* and divides the current studies into two camps, i.e., compatibilism and incompatibilism. Secondly, by regarding Mencius' *li* as moral reasons internalism, it systematically refutes the challenge of incompatibilism, as well as responds to other possible criticisms of Mencius. The majority of compatibilists have defaulted to their position without justifying it and responding to the challenges of incompatibilists. There is other representative work on reconciling Mencius' two dimensions of *li*, but the method is quite different from mine. I mainly compare my work with it in note 14.

- 7 About the general meaning of *li*, see Yang (2018, pp. 5–6).
- 8 Normative reason is usually compared to motivating reason. About this distinction, the best explanation is that a normative reason is a consideration that counts in favor of or against doing something. In contrast, a motivating reason answers the question, “Why did she do it?”. See Valerie Tiberius (2015, p. 49).
- 9 In this paper, I use the translations of Arthur Waley (1997).
- 10 The criteria for the distinction between “internal” and “external” are disputable. In this paper, I adopt Tiberius’ approach to explaining the division that “internal” means it is within the capacity of the agent, whereas “external” means it is not necessarily connected to the capacity of the agent, so there could be something “out there” that is independent of any agent. See Valerie Tiberius (2015, pp. 50–51). In this sense, internalism can accommodate the Kantian position. For example, Christine Korsgaard, a prominent contemporary Kantian scholar, argues that an “internalist,” in the general sense, believes that moral considerations necessarily have some power to motivate us and that internalism, and this general sense is correct. See Korsgaard (1996, p. 81).
- 11 One might object and say, “There is no motivation in the potential sense because motivation entails the actual occurrence of action, whereas potential has nothing to do with action’s actual happening”. Such an understanding of “motivation” is in the narrow sense, defining it in terms of the actual occurrence of an action. This paper interprets “motivation” in a broad sense, including not only facts about the actual occurrence of action but also the agent’s motivational attitudes, such as desires, emotions, and intentions, as well as the ability or mental states which would be predictable to motivate the agent, for example, if they were fully informed. There is common sense that the latter can also play a key role in motivating actions but do not necessarily lead to the actual occurrence of the action.
- 12 *You shi* is 右师. As D. C. Lau notes, “[you shi]: An official post in the state of [Qi]. It is not clear what its functions were”.
- 13 The terms “moral” and “ethical” are often used as equivalent to “right” or “good” and as opposed to “immoral” and “unethical”. However, they can also mean “pertaining to morality” and are opposed to the “nonmoral” or “nonethical”, not to the “immoral” or “unethical”. We also use the word “morality” to refer to something that is coordinated with but different from art, science, law, convention, or religion, though it may be related to them. See William K. Frankena (1973, p. 7).
- 14 Liu (2020, p. 70) thinks Mencius divided the connotation of *li* into normative *li* and virtuous *li* and considered both of them to be of equal importance. By comparison, what is considered in this paper is quite different from hers. Firstly, this paper follows logical dichotomy in distinguishing the connotations of *li*. Here, the point is that Mencius realized that morality and normativity in the broad sense cannot be equivalent, so he consciously made morality independent from the latter, and thus, there is a dichotomy between morality and non-moral normativity. Normativity, in the broad sense, includes not only moral norms but also other non-moral components, such as laws, conventions, and other social regulations. Secondly, this paper argues that from the internalist point of view, moral *li* cannot be given equal importance with normative *li* because moral *li* is independent of and more important than that. However, this does not mean that Mencius did not take normative *li* seriously, as long as they did not conflict with moral *li*. Thirdly, using the term “moral *li*” instead of “virtuous *li*” in this paper seems to give the impression that the terminology is too broad. The reader may go on to ask, “Does the moral normativity of *li* root in emotion, reason, or virtue? If it derives from virtue, does it derive, in Mencius’ view, from the virtue of *ren* and *yi* or from the virtue of *li* itself?” In fact, this paper focuses on the higher-order question of whether the source of morality is internal or external, not the question of the source of the internal. Moreover, the latter question arises from the internalist position and thus does not affect the conclusion of this paper, so its answer is left open.
- 15 David B. Wong (2006, p. 551) also thinks that in Mencius’ view, moral reasons are internal to human motivation or basic motivations shared by all men and external to an individual’s motivational system.

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