

The value of falsity in the *Mencius*: early confucianism is not consequentialism

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Abstract Early pre-Qin Confucian texts are not concerned with analyzing particular elements of a situation or the person as constitutive of moral value. Strong attempts are made in Confucian philosophy to consider as many aspects of the situation or person as possible. Classical Greek philosophy, as represented by Plato and Aristotle, take the opposite approach. These thinkers look for defining essences that determine what is (morally) important about each thing. This approach has been reflected in consequentialist interpretations of Confucianism, resulting in questionable explanations of passages in the *Analects* and *Mencius*. In this paper I will argue that these types of readings, while certainly defensible, overlook a unique Confucian perspective on truth and falsity. By viewing situations as a combination of various influential aspects, and as continuous past and future situations, Confucianism provides an alternative to the Platonic notion of truth and its value.

Keywords Confucianism · Morality · Mencius · Consequentialism · Deception

Broadly speaking, normative arguments in the Western presuppose the paramount importance of truth. Morality is often coupled with notions of the truth, but the two remain distinguishable in many moral theories. Likewise, “truth telling”—in terms of simply giving an accurate expression of one’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions, or knowledge of a situation—is regarded as good. Lies or deception, defined as the breakdown of the agreement between inner states and external behavior (including

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speech), are thereby bad or immoral.¹ Thinkers who appeal to this view are then faced with a problem concerning the use of false means. They can either argue that (a) falsity is allowable in certain situations or (b) that deception is never proper. Plato exemplifies the first position. He condones lies and deception based on a kind of consequentialism where means justify the ends. The latter view is representative of the dominant interpretation of Immanuel Kant's ethical position.

Early Confucianism does make connections between truth and morality, and thereby provides a unique perspective on the morality of truth, and especially truth telling. In pre-Qin Confucian texts truth telling, in the sense of a simple correspondence between one's external expression and inner psychology, has no primacy over morality. Major figures, such as Confucius and Mencius, argue that doing what is appropriate according to may include the use of lies or deception. Furthermore, when these types of actions are required, no excuses or apologies follow.

In this paper I will argue that Confucian morality includes the use of falsity or deception (as described above) without appealing to any form of consequentialism. For Confucius and Mencius moral behavior is determined by the situation as a whole, not one or two elements of it. Accordingly, there is no need to apologize or make excuses for misrepresenting a situation or one's own psychological content when it is the appropriate behavior. In other words, this type of falsehood is a fundamentally amoral issue.² Confucius and Mencius's position on the fundamental value of truth telling has been largely overlooked, resulting in consequentialist interpretations of deceptive strategies found throughout Confucian texts. These readings ignore Confucianism's unique contributions philosophical discussions about the relationship between falsity and morality.

Based on the view that falsity is inherently bad commentators have debated so-called "controversial" passages for centuries without much consensus. One of the most debated issues in the *Analects* revolves around Confucius saying that a son should not report his father to the authorities for stealing a sheep. Confucius is quoted, "A father covers for a son, and a son covers for a father." (*Analects* Zilu 13.18) This story has been rejected, apologized for, or excused, all based on the assumption that lying is inherently immoral. Contemporary scholar Liu Qingping, for example, is particularly opposed to Confucius on this point. Borrowing arguments from Kant, Liu seeks to develop moral imperatives based on Confucian teachings. Any notion of lying or deception is thereby categorically rejected.³ Liu

¹ I want to stress that I am not reducing the entire Western tradition to this perspective on "truth telling" or even coupling "truth" and goodness. Examples of alternative perspectives can easily be found in thinkers from Aristophanes to Nietzsche, and Shakespeare to Freud. However, there are also many who strongly appeal to this type of coupling. This essay is an attempt to offer a new approach to truth and falsity against one particular way of defining them, not each and every definition.

² Friedrich Nietzsche also argues for exploring the use of lies in a "non-moral sense." He projects, however, quite different from the Confucian one. For Nietzsche one experiments with lies in order to test, and ultimately author (only to continually reassess) her own value systems.

³ Immanuel Kant's claim that lying is always morally wrong, even for altruistic purposes, stands out as one of the most radical moral arguments in philosophy. His view on lying is very much representative of his general approach to morality, which focuses on moral principles, or "categorical imperatives," that are considered good in and of themselves. In other words, categorical imperatives are morally good

also believes that this kind of attitude fosters corruption in modern China, and desires to “purge” Confucianism of this “practical evil.” (Liu 2007).

Other scholars are much less critical of Confucius’s idea, but side with Liu insofar as they assume the moral depravity of lying. For instance, according to May Sim the son acts for his father’s good, which, in turn, becomes the good of society. (Sim 2007: 153) Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont explain that *this* theft can be dealt with in the family, so there is no need for the son to report anything to the authorities. (Ames and Rosemont 2009) Bryan Van Norden similarly argues that this particular case is an allowable, but an exception because Confucians generally look down on falsity. (van Norden 2007: 122) These interpreters all share the view that deception is basically bad, but excusable in this case because it can bring about some good. In other words, they read Confucianism as a philosophy where truth telling and morality are generally united, but excuses can be made for the use of false means. They argue that Confucianism is sensitive to the particulars of a situation, which allows for exceptions, and using deception to serve greater moral ends. In effect they are employing a type of consequentialist reading of falsity in the Confucian tradition.

The consequentialist readings of dishonestly imply moral overtones that are not present in the primary texts. Confucian classics do not argue for the moral superiority of truth telling over dishonesty. In many passages Confucius and Mencius clearly have no problem with employing falsity. Accordingly, I will argue that in early Confucianism deception and pretense, in and of themselves, are just as morally worthy as truth telling and honesty. This is evidenced (a) partly by the lack of explanation or justification, which makes it clear that these issues were *not* morally controversial to these thinkers and (b) by the way Confucians make moral judgments, which does not include defining abstract principles. Here I will mainly focus on the former argument. I will focus on an example in the *Mencius* where Mencius himself pretends and lies. After this “case study,” I will turn briefly turn to Plato’s *Republic*, where Socrates explains that falsity is sometimes necessary. By contrasting Mencius’s attitude with Socrates’s rational I hope to outline how consequentialist readings of classical Chinese Confucianism stifle some of its most interesting arguments.

The *Mencius*: where morality lies

One of the most interesting examples of deception in the *Mencius* involves Mencius himself. The story begins as he is leaving his home to see the King of Qi. A messenger suddenly arrives who says that the King is sick and cannot visit Mencius at his home. (Apparently there was a misunderstanding about where they were

Footnote 3 continued

regardless the particulars of a situation or circumstance. Plato’s view is less extreme, since he still allows for lying in certain situations. Comparing Confucianism and Kant on lying yields fewer insights because the two are so radically opposed. I will therefore limit my argument to a brief comparison with Plato, which I hope will elucidate some of the problems with explaining Confucianism based on consequentialist reasoning.

supposed to meet, but the text does not say anything about this.) The messenger then relays the King's request for Mencius to appear at court. The latter somehow realizes that he is being lied to, and, despite the fact that he was originally on his way to see the King, he says that he is also sick and must stay at home. The next day Mencius is out mourning and his disciple Gongsun Chou asks, "Yesterday you said you could not attend court because you were sick (昔者辞以病), but today you are [out] mourning. There seems to be something amiss (或者不可乎)." (Mencius 2007: 242. 2B2) Mencius says that he was not seriously ill the day before, and now feels good enough to leave his house. Later that same day the King sends a physician to check on Mencius. When the doctor arrives at Mencius's house Mencius is still out. One of his servants, worried that the King might take offense, tells the doctor that Mencius is on his way to the court. After learning that the King knows he was not ill Mencius decides to go and stay the night at his friend Jingzi's house. Jingzi learns what has transpired and reproaches Mencius saying,

内则父子, 外则君臣, 人之大伦也。父子主恩, 君臣主敬。丑见王之敬子也, 未见所以敬王也。(Mencius 2007. 2B2)

In the family there is the father-son relation, in society there is the ruler-minister relation; these are the most important relationships. The son should show love to his father, and a minister should respect his ruler. I have seen the King respect you, but I have yet to see you respect the King!

Mencius defends himself by attacking the King's own moral character. In the state of Qi, Mencius replies, no one speaks to the King about humaneness (*ren* 仁) or responsibility (*yi* 义) because they believe that the King is not worthy of having these discussions. This, Mencius claims, is truly disrespecting the King. He goes on to say that he has only talked with the King about the ways of Yao and Shun (ideal Confucian sages) and thereby has shown the King the utmost respect. Jingzi states that Mencius has misunderstood his argument, and offers a literal reading of the *Book of Rites* as a definition of respect:

礼曰: '父召, 无诺; 君命召, 不俟驾。'固将朝也, 闻王命而遂不果, 宜与夫礼若不相似然。(Mencius 2007: 243. 2B2)

The *Book of Rites* says: 'When a father summons, there can be no hesitation; when a ruler gives an order, one does not wait for a horse and carriage.' You were certainly on your way to court, but when you heard the King's command you did not follow through [and go to court]. What you did does not seem fitting with ritual.⁴

Following this Mencius maintains his position, and goes into a long defense of his actions. Worthy rulers, he argues, will attract ministers who are so great that the ruler calls on them, not the other way around. Acting in this way shows the ruler's admiration (*zun* 尊) for virtue (*de* 德). Drawing on a concrete historical example,

⁴ Jingzi's use of this quote to backup his comment on respect shows that he believes that following through with one's duties or promises and acting respectfully are always expressed in the same way, regardless of the situation. Mencius's own understanding of morality is much more dynamic. Below we will see him argue that "making good on one's word" or seeing one's actions through are not as important as being moral.

Mencius offers Duke Huan's reverence towards his minister Guan Zhong as an example for how the King should behave. Jingzi apparently has no rebuttal to this argument, and the passage ends.

Clearly the disagreement between Mencius and Jingzi centers on the way Mencius treats the King. Interestingly, however, neither mentions pretending or lying. Jingzi chastises Mencius for being improper, and lays the most serious charges: being disrespectful and violating ritual. But neither of these charges, or the evidence for them, mentions deception. According to Jingzi Mencius's not continuing on his way to court, and lying about being sick, are inappropriate because they are disrespectful behaviors that violate ritual. The reproach says nothing about deceiving the King as an immoral act itself.⁵ In other words, the deceptive methods *themselves* are not considered objectively immoral, and this is why Jingzi does not explicitly refer to them.

In his commentary to this section Zhu Xi 朱熹 (d. 1200) draws parallels between this passage and section 17.20 of the *Analects*, where Ru Bei goes to visit Confucius and is refused reception on the grounds that the Master is sick. As Ru Bei is leaving Confucius plays the zither and begins to sing. Ru Bei then knows that the master was not actually sick. Zhu Xi remarks that this is an effective method for "deep teaching" (*shenjiao* 深教) as it forces Ru Bei to analyze his own behavior. (Mencius 2007: 180) By connecting this story to the *Mencius's* Zhu Xi is implying that Mencius's deceit aims at using a similar method to educate the King about proper action. According to his reading, the lie is not actually deceptive since no one believes it. Mencius's use falsity is therefore commendable as a tool for "deep teaching."

Although Zhu Xi does not say here whether or not deception itself is bad, his consequentialist explanation seems to imply a coupling of truth telling and morality. It assumes that educating the King was Mencius's goal. However, the *Mencius* does not tell us whether the King ever knows that Mencius was actually on his way to see the King and only feigned sickness. While Zhu Xi's point is certainly a possible interpretation, there is another way of reading this passage that does not impose consequentialism on the *Mencius*. The alternative reading that I purpose argues that Mencius's actions are correct regardless of any "deep teaching." Additionally, falsity itself becomes moral in this case, and does not require any additional explanation or excuse. Mencius's own explanations echo this way of thinking.

When questioned by Jingzi about his role as a subject, Mencius replies, "A ruler who admires virtue and delights in the [proper] way (*dao*). Those who are not like this are not worth serving/working with (其敬德乐道, 不如是, 不足有为也)." (Mencius 2007: 243. 2B2) Clearly, Mencius believes that his actions were unimpeachable regardless of any "deep teaching." Mencius's story therefore differs

⁵ In fact it is Mencius's own disciple, Gongsun Chou, who comes closest to accusing his master of deception. When Gongsun says "you could not attend court because you were sick", this expression already implies suspicion. The "because" in this sentence, *yi* (以), could also be rendered "on the claim that", or more distrustfully, "according to...(pretense)." As he goes on, his doubtful attitude becomes clearer. He says, "There seems to be something amiss (*huozhe bu ke hu* 或者不可乎)." A more literal translation of this line is "this is not possible." Mencius has told a bold-faced lie, but Gongsun does not push to expose such dishonesty; he merely hints at the possibility that something is wrong.

significantly from Confucius's treatment and Ru Bei. Whether the King learns a valuable lesson is completely beside the point, Mencius's lie is already moral. Mencius only needs to concern himself with making sure his own actions are inline with humaneness and responsibility. Being truthful has no independent claim on the morality of his actions. When he is disrespected, and finds the King is unworthy, he is no longer obliged to serve him. The ruler minister relationship has been dissolved, and Mencius comes up with a lie so that he does not have to see the King. Mencius's actions reflect the change in his relationship with the King, and corresponding notions of appropriateness. However, his use of deception is not disrespectfully. Therefore, Mencius's actions do not violate morality (at least in his own view). In another section Mencius draws a clear distinction between truth telling and morality:

孟子曰：“大人者，言不必信，行不必果，惟义所在。”

Mencius said: “A great person speaks but does not necessarily follow through [*xin* 信] with what has been said, [he] takes on a course of action but does not necessarily see it through to the end. The great person is only concerned with doing what is appropriate [*yi*].” (Mencius 2007: 282. 4B10)

Accordingly we can conclude that is not necessarily for the sake of some better end (e.g. “deep teaching”) that Mencius tells a lie. He simply does not draw assume a connection between deception and immorality. Lies and falsity themselves can be appropriate. Other philosophers, including Plato, have also argued that lies can be noble. However, Plato's reasoning is quite different from Mencius's. And the former sounds much more like Zhu Xi than an ancient Confucian.

The *Republic*: the reluctant use of falsity

Certain foundational elements of the consequentialist approaches can be found in Plato's writings. In the first pages of the *Republic*, Socrates asks Polemarchus's father, Cephalus, about property. Cephalus says that to be a just person one must never cheat or act falsely, especially in the reimbursement of borrowed money or goods. Socrates famously questions:

But speaking of this very thing, justice, are we to affirm thus without qualification that it is truth telling and paying back what one has received from anyone...as everyone I presume would admit, if one took over weapons from a friend who was in his right mind and then the lender should go mad and demand them back, that we ought not to return them in that case and that he who did so return them would not be acting justly. (Plato 1974: 580. 331c)

Here Socrates is arguing for a notion of justice beyond simply telling the truth or returning goods. (Plato 1974: 580. 221d) However, Socrates's sympathy for the use of deception has strict qualifications.

In the second book of the *Republic*, Socrates starts his description of the ideal state by expounding on censorship in education. According to Socrates the good is intimately connected to truth. Any stories or poems where gods deceive one another,

or where heroes lie, must be pursued from the cannon. However, misrepresentation, though limited, is not completely ruled out. Socrates explains that exceptions to truth telling and accurate representations of the facts can only be made in the rarest and most extreme cases. Keeping weapons from a madman, telling made-up fables to children, or the “Noble Lie” to ordinary citizens, and deceiving enemies are some of the few concrete examples Socrates imagines. In each of these cases he claims the particulars of this imperfect world require such severe measures. In other words, he has excuses for advocating falsity. Ideally, lies and deception would never be allowed. They have nothing to do with the Good. Even in children’s fables Socrates wants to exclude any mention of gods causing even the slightest harm or evil. He argues, “God is not the cause of all things, but only the good.” (Plato 1974: 627. 380d) Furthermore, humans only love what is true, and hate being deceived more than anything. (Plato 1974: 629. 382b) Socrates thereby concludes, “From every point of view the divine and the divinity are free from falsehood.” (Plato 1974: 630. 382e)

The overall idea, similar to many interpretations of the Confucian tradition, is that falsity is an acceptable *means* to a moral *end*. In other words, lies and deception are, in and of themselves, always wrong. But they are allowable if aspects of our imperfect good require them as exceptions for bringing about some moral outcome. Otherwise, they should be avoided at all costs.

The question then becomes: is this the view held by Mencius? Or, more specifically, does the *Republic* provide an interpretive model for why Mencius lied to the King?

Between the *Mencius* and *Republic*: abstract rules?

Socrates’s approach argues that lying may be (a) necessitated by the extremity of concrete circumstances, and (b) excused for because of an expected good outcome. As I pointed out above, commentators on Confucian texts have also excused lies or deception for these two reasons. However, these consequentialist explanations of why falsity is allowable rest on the assumption that falsity itself is innately immoral.

In addition to lacking a suitable vocabulary to present this view,⁶ the very methodology Confucians used in their teachings is in many ways distinct from the Ancient Greeks’. Socrates can discuss the value of lies and deception independent of their concrete situations because he abstracts them from the actual world. Isolated in this way, falsity is wrong. It is opposed to the truth (and thereby truth telling, as well), which itself is coupled with the Good.

But pre-Qin Confucians do not discuss means or ends independent of actual circumstance. These thinkers do not attempt to dissect actions into distinctive parts, nor do they attempt to analyze methods or behaviors abstracted from from particulars. For this reason Confucius never has the same answer when he is

⁶ Roger Ames and David Hall have argued that Classical Chinese has terms for Ancient Greek notions of “essence” or “natural kinds.” See *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*. Contemporary Chinese scholars have also made similar observations. Some examples include Li Zehou, Chen Lai, and Yang Guorong.

repeatedly asked, “what is humaneness?” Similarly, when Mencius is called out for acting in contradictory ways, he retorts, “that was one time, and this is another time (彼一时, 此一时).” (Mencius 2007: 2B12) In fact, in the passage immediately following the debated between Mencius and Jingzi over the former’s deceptive behavior, he cautions his student against abstracting standards or rules from concrete situations:

陈臻问曰：“前日于齐，王馈兼金一百而不受；于宋，馈七十镒而受；于薛，馈五十镒而受。前日之不受是，则今日之受非也；今日受是，则前日之不受非也。夫子必居一与此矣。”

孟子曰：“皆是也。当在宋也，予将有远行。行者必以赆，辞曰：‘馈赆’予何为不受？当在薛也，予有戒心。辞曰：‘闻戒。’故为兵馈之，予何为不受？若于齐，则未有处也。无处而馈之，是货之也。焉有君子而可以货取乎？” (Mencius 2007: 250. 2B3)

Chen Zhen asked [Mencius]: “A few days ago in Qi the King offered to give you one hundred pieces of gold and you did not take it. In Song [the King] offered to give you seventy pieces and you took it. In Xue [the King] offered you fifty and you took it. [It is either that] a few days ago your not receiving was the [correct] thing to do, and today your receiving is not the [correct] thing to do, [or] today’s receiving is the [correct] thing to do, and a few days ago your not receiving was not the [correct] thing to do. You must reside in one of these [rules/standards].

Mencius said: “They are both right. When in Song, I had a long travel [ahead of me]. One who travels far to use parting gifts for a long journey [i.e. money]. The ruler said ‘A farewell gift for a long journey.’ Why should I not accept it? When in Xue, I was worried. The ruler said ‘I heard about your worries.’ Thereby it was given for guards/weapons, why should I not accept? When in Qi, there was nothing to deal with. With nothing to deal with, [money is] a bribe. Can one be gentleman/sage and accept bribes?

Mencius takes the entirety of the situation must be taken into account when judging what is the right and wrong, or appropriate and inappropriate. When he criticizes Chen Zhen for residing in rules, he is referring to interlocutor’s attempt to abstract a fixed rule from a unique situation. This means ignoring particularities, and simply follow rules. It is the same way that Jingzi explains “respect” as simply responding when called.

Conclusion: no means, ends

For Mencius moral reasoning involves applying rules or role models (*jing* 经) by balancing (*quan* 权) them with as many aspect of the environment as possible. In this way, appropriateness speaks to the wholeness of a situation, not certain elements of it. Similarly, Mencius’s pretending to be sick was therefore not an excusable *means* for a greater moral *end*. His conduct, from start to finish, needs no justification. Even if he did not go to Jingzi’s house, where he makes and edifying argument to his friend, and the reader, feigning sickness would still have been the

proper response in his situation. My point here is expands slightly on Ames and Rosemont's "Confucian Role Ethics" and Van Norden's "particularist" explanations. I agree that the situation can determine the moral value of actions, but not as an excuse or apology for lies and deception as unfortunate expedients. I think Confucianism includes an amoral perspective on dishonesty itself, and that falsity can only be colored by and with the entire situation. For Confucian thinkers whatever is appropriate in a given circumstance *is itself* moral. There is no reason to attach special importance to truth telling, or view deception as inherently immoral.

To state that falsity in itself is amoral is, however, already a very non-Confucian way of defending Confucianism. Truly, most contemporary Confucians argue that lying is bad, but only because in *most* concrete cases lying is immoral, and truth telling is appropriate. In other words, in general lies and deception are negative because they are often coupled with vicious intentions, and give rise to immoral behavior. Similarly, truth telling and following through are usually valued insofar as they are frequently connected to moral conduct. But, the exceptions to these general rules, which Confucians are acutely aware of, prove that in and of themselves, truth and falsity are amoral. Confucians emphasize that morality, and its concrete expressions, should not be viewed independent of the situations in which they arise. *When dishonest methods prove necessary, there is no need to apologize for or justify them, as they become moral themselves.*

We can therefore read Confucius's statement "A father covers for a son, and a son covers for a father," in a very different way. (*Analects* Zilu 13.18) Covering is no more a rule for acting than taking seventy pieces of gold. When covering for a son or a father is appropriate, one should do it. Not because of some greater moral end, rather simply because it is the moral thing to do.

Based on this conclusion, I believe that further research can be done to show that the terms *xin* 信, or "making good on one's word," and *cheng* 诚, or "sincerity," should be interpreted as concepts that correspond to moral ideas rather than truth. In other words, in the context of classical Chinese philosophy, being sincere means being moral, which may include use of falsity. Mencius already hints at this when he writes: "Without being clear [about how to be] good, one cannot be sincere about themselves [their bodies] (不明乎善, 不诚其身矣)." (Mencius 2007: 4A12)

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