

An Analysis of the Argumentative Thinking in The Works of Mencius

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Abstract:

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the philosophers of the Hundred Schools of Thought frequently travelled to persuade rulers and engaged in debates with other schools of thought in order to propagate their doctrines. Among them, Mencius was renowned for his mastery of eloquent discourse. This study focuses on the argumentative thinking manifested in *The Works of Mencius*, employing methods of documentary analysis and close textual reading to explore three specific dimensions: theoretical framework, methodological techniques, and logical reasoning. Research indicates that the argumentative thinking within Mencius' prose manifests specifically through a coherent theoretical framework grounded in the principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom; through argumentative techniques such as analogy, patient and gradual persuasion, and 'holding it with room for the exigency of circumstances'; and through a logical approach characterized by interlocking reasoning, pinpointing vulnerabilities, and delivering precise rebuttals. It is evident that *The Works of Mencius* indeed possesses a systematic and sophisticated argumentative structure. Although certain flaws exist, it nonetheless demonstrates Mencius's exceptional debating skills and the outstanding value of *The Works of Mencius*.

Keywords: Mencius; *The Works of Mencius*; argumentative thinking.

1. Introduction

Mencius was a leading figure of Confucianism during the Warring States period, as well as a renowned thinker and orator. The Works of Mencius, a collection documenting the words and deeds of Mencius and his disciples, later gained canonical status [1]. The Spring and Autumn and Warring States

periods were an era of vigorous intellectual debate. To persuade rulers to adopt his doctrines and propagate Confucian thought, Mencius frequently traveled to engage in discourse and debate with other schools of thought. From the words 'Indeed, I am not fond of disputing, but I am compelled to do it.' [1]. It is evident that in the eyes of his contemporaries, Mencius presented an image of one who was argumentative.

Indeed, Mencius himself possessed exceptional skill in debate.

This study focuses on the argumentative thinking manifested in The Works of Mencius, holding significant importance for understanding Mencius' philosophical ideas, his line of reasoning, and the influence this thinking exerted on subsequent argumentative writing. This paper primarily unfolds its analysis across three dimensions: theoretical framework, methodological techniques, and logical reasoning. Employing literature review and close textual reading methodologies, it conducts research and examination of pertinent materials and scholarly works. Grounded in primary sources, it undertakes an analysis of Mencius' prose works, aiming to delve deeply into the holistic thought processes employed by Mencius during his discursive engagements.

2. Literature Review

Existing research on the Mencius has primarily centered on its Confucian philosophical ideas [2,3], though numerous scholars have also noted the work's masterful debates, conducting studies on themes such as Mencius's art of argumentation and his debating style.

For instance, Li Zhujun's essay *The Art of Argumentation in Mencius' Prose* examines the debating techniques and artistry of Mencius' prose from multiple perspectives, offering valuable insights into Mencius' argumentative methods that have inspired this present study [4].

Xu Li's essay *The Distinctive Features of Mencius's Argumentative Prose* analyses why Mencius's argumentative prose, though not the most accomplished work among the philosophers of the Warring States period, exerted a profound influence on subsequent literary composition. It further elaborates on several defining characteristics of Mencius's prose: its candid expression of individuality, its eloquent and majestic force, its vivid use of allegories and analogies, and its lucid and accessible language. This study has been particularly enlightening in its examination of Mencius's discursive writings and their subsequent influence on later literary works, as well as in its analysis of the use of metaphor within such discursive texts [5].

Wang Zexuan's work *The Art of Debate in Mencius* categorizes and explores the distinctive features of Mencius's debating techniques in considerable detail, providing valuable insights for this study's examination of the structural framework of debating thought [6].

The above-mentioned several documents all focus more on exploring the artistic features of Mencius' prose or argumentative essays. In addition, a small number of articles have also studied Mencius' debating thinking based on works such as *The Transactions of Qi Huan and Jin Wen* [1]. For instance, Chen Jianning's essay *Model of Ancient*

Chinese Debating Prose Writing - Inspired by the Organic Unity of Logical Thinking and Figurative Thinking in 'The Works of Mencius', analyzes the complementary figurative thinking and logical thinking in Mencius' writings [7].

Yang Zhaofu and Li Yaowei's *The Debating Thinking in 'Transactions of Qi Huan and Jin Wen': Logical Effectiveness, Reasonable Argumentative Thinking and Rhetorical Effectiveness* are discussed from the three aspects of logic, argumentative thinking and rhetorical thinking in *The Transactions of Qi Huan and Jin Wen* [8]. Overall, however, there are not many studies on Mencius' debating thinking, and there is also a lack of a more macroscopic and systematic review.

This article systematically sorts out Mencius' debating thinking from an overall perspective, builds an overall argumentative framework with debating as the entry point, and analyzes Mencius' achievements in debating from three parts: thesis, argumentation method and logic, to fill the existing research gap.

3. Analysis

3.1 Theoretical Framework in Debate

The theoretical framework constitutes the intellectual foundation of argumentation, while Mencius's conviction stemmed from his coherent philosophical doctrine. Mencius lived during the mid-Warring States period, an era of profound upheaval and transformation. The royal house had declined, feudal lords were annexing territories, warfare was frequent, and ritual propriety had become hollow and formalistic. At the height of societal collapse, Mencius endeavoured to reconstruct a humanistic order, thereby formulating his philosophical doctrine.

Mencius's own philosophical system encompasses numerous aspects concerning human nature, politics and more, yet at its very core, it ultimately revolves around the concept of benevolence. Benevolence gives rise to the four aspects of benevolence: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. From this, Mencius established his theoretical systems concerning innate goodness, the Way of the King, benevolent governance, and other related matters. The primary element of argumentation is the thesis. Mencius employed his doctrine of innate goodness to establish the principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. He maintained that through self-cultivation and moral refinement, 'all men may be Yaos and Shuns' [1]. Consequently, rulers ought to adopt benevolent governance, placing the people at the heart of their administration. 'Such being indeed the case, the people would flock to him, as water flows downwards with a rush, which no one can repress.' [1].

Mencius inherited and developed Confucius's teachings, proposing the doctrine of benevolent government which emphasised the primacy of the people over the ruler. This proved remarkably valuable during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. However, during the Warring States period, the various feudal states engaged in constant warfare and territorial expansion, each seeking to rapidly enhance their national strength through institutional reforms in order to prevail in battle. Against this historical backdrop, Mencius's principles appeared somewhat idealistic, rendering his doctrines difficult for the rulers of various states to adopt. Since Mencius's theories were not embraced by the rulers, why did he consistently prevail in his debates with other schools of thought? This inevitably brings us to Mencius's concept of the 'Dao'.

Zhu Xi said: 'Unless one's heart is attuned to the Dao and one has no doubts about the principles governing all under heaven, who could possibly achieve this?' [9]. Mencius had attained a thorough understanding of his own principles, and thus was able to discern the validity of other viewpoints. Although Mencius's theoretical doctrines were not adopted, he remained steadfastly committed to the Confucian Way throughout. This unwavering adherence provided him with a solid and self-consistent theoretical foundation during his debates. Moreover, Mencius's philosophy itself possesses considerable merit. His people-centred philosophy, which adopts the perspective of the common populace, often grants his arguments a dominant position.

Mencius's discourse on benevolence is not confined to mere words, but equally manifests in conduct. In *The Works of Mencius: Kung-sun Ch'au, Part I*, Mencius elucidates the concept of the 'vast, flowing passion-nature': 'This is the passion-nature: —It is the mate and assistant of righteousness and reason. Without it, man is in a state of starvation. It is produced by the accumulation of righteous deeds; it is not to be obtained by incidental acts of righteousness. If the mind does not feel complacency in the conduct, the nature becomes starved' [1]. It was precisely because Mencius 'feel complacency in the conduct' that he could continually cultivate his righteous spirit. This 'vast, flowing passion-nature' manifested in Mencius's prose as an unstoppable, majestic vigour, lending his arguments a persuasive power that deeply moved the hearts of his audience.

3.2 Methodological Techniques in Debate

Beyond his arguments, Mencius's methodological techniques employed during debates were particularly striking. These very techniques were also crucial factors in Mencius's frequent triumphs in argumentation.

The first debating technique mentioned is analogy. Regarding analogy, it is essential to clarify the concept's essence. Analogy does not refer to the metaphor in the narrow sense as a rhetorical device, but rather leans towards the effect of comparison. It enables the subject to be better illustrated through the medium, rendering a particular characteristic more vividly. Mencius's most characteristic use of analogy occurs in his debates on human nature, such as the debate between Mencius and Gaozi in *The Works of Mencius: K'ao Tsze, Part I* [1]. When Gaozi likened human nature to turbulent water, Mencius skilfully drew upon Gaozi's own logic to counter: 'The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards' [1]. By seizing upon the characteristics of the analogy and using them to corroborate his own view of innate goodness, Mencius demonstrates his precise mastery of the method of analogy.

The second debating technique is that of gentle persuasion. Mencius excelled at grasping his opponents' psychology, sometimes luring them deeper into his trap step by step before delivering the decisive blow; at other times, he would select the most effective point of entry for his target, gradually deepening his argument to win them over.

A rather typical example is the debate between Mencius and the Chancellor of Chen in *The Works of Mencius: T'ang W'an Kung, Part I*. Chen Xiang and his younger brother Chen Xin, originally disciples of the great Confucian scholar Chen Liang, abandoned Confucianism and instead embraced the theories of the Agrarian School, travelling to the state of Teng to study under Xu Xing. This debate likewise stands as a highly significant historical confrontation between the Agrarian School and the Confucian School. At the beginning of their debate, Mencius had already discerned the overly idealistic nature of the Agrarian School's conception of social division of labour. He thus began by posing a series of seemingly straightforward questions, gradually tightening the noose as the Chen Xiang lowered his guard. This manoeuvred him into a carefully laid trap, prompting him to say: 'The business of the handicraftsman can by no means be carried on along with the business of husbandry.' [1]. Mencius then delivered the decisive blow with the counterpoint: 'Then, is it the government of the kingdom which alone can be carried on along with the practice of husbandry?' [1].

The second example is found in *The Works of Mencius: King Hui of Liang, Part I* [1]. Mencius first seized upon King Xuan of Qi's ideal of 'to rule the Middle Kingdom, and to attract to you the barbarous tribes that surround it' [1]. By acknowledging this aspiration, he moved the king

to believe he could realise the Way of the King. He then pointed out the grave dangers inherent in the king's current conduct. Through patient and gentle persuasion, he guided the king towards the path of implementing benevolent governance to achieve the ideal of the Way of the King, thereby fully demonstrating his own principles.

The final method of debate lies in 'holding it with room for the exigency of circumstances', upholding the middle way while understanding the necessity of adapting to circumstances. Mencius himself applied this philosophy in his own discursive engagements.

For instance, in *The Works of Mencius: Tsin Sin, Part I*, there is a passage where Mencius evaluates Yangzi and Mozi [1]. 'The principle of the philosopher Yang was—"Each one for himself." Though he might have benefited the whole kingdom by plucking out a single hair, he would not have done it. The philosopher Mo loves all equally. If by rubbing smooth his whole body from the crown to the heel, he could have benefited the kingdom, he would have done it.' Mencius held that both positions were excessively dogmatic, and that one should adapt the views of Zimo with flexibility. This approach both upholds the Confucian value system that distinguishes between righteousness and profit, differing from the other two schools, and develops Mencius's methodological principle of 'holding it with room for the exigency of circumstances'. Consequently, Mencius's perspectives and arguments are generally more practical and feasible.

3.3 Logical Thinking in Debate

Logic forms the bedrock of reasoning, linking premises to conclusions. Rigorous logic serves as formidable armour in debate, repelling adversaries' assaults and securing an unassailable position. Regarding Mencius, there has long been a perception that his arguments lack logical coherence, primarily due to the use of the 'analogy' technique mentioned earlier in the text.

Metaphor itself does not belong to very strict deductive reasoning, but it still employs the logic of induction and analogy. 'In such a thing as taking the T'âi mountain under your arm, and leaping over the north sea with it, if you say to people—"I am not able to do it," that is a real case of not being able. In such a matter as breaking off a branch from a tree at the order of a superior, if you say to people—"I am not able to do it," that is a case of not doing it, it is not a case of not being able to do it.' [1]. Mencius classified the situations where 'I am not able to do it' into two categories, and they respectively made analogies with 'taking the T'âi mountain under your arm, and leaping over the north sea with it' and 'breaking off a branch from a tree at the order of a superior'. This further enabled

King Xuan of Qi to understand what it means to "not do" and what it means to "not be able to". And sentences like 'The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards', which purely use analogy without logical connection, are also Mencius' attempts to refute Gaozi and continue his debate by following Gaozi's parable.

Therefore, we cannot deny Mencius' inherent logical thinking just because he was good at using metaphors. From Mencius' prose, we can see that in the process of debate, Mencius had a rigorous logical chain and rational reasoning. Sometimes he chooses to use metaphor as a debating method, more to make the dull theory more acceptable in a vivid and visual way, so as to achieve a better persuasive and promotional effect than rigorous logical reasoning.

In *The Works of Mencius: Tǎng Wǎn Kung, Part I*, the debate between Mencius and Chen Xiang reveals that Mencius consistently advanced his arguments in a step-by-step manner, constructing a tightly interlocking chain of logic that gradually led to his true conclusion. Mencius's logical reasoning is particularly evident in his analysis and rebuttal of others' arguments.

Mencius possessed the ability to 'understand words', specifically demonstrated by his capacity to perceive the inadequacies in four types of discourse: 'When words are one-sided, I know how the mind of the speaker is clouded over. When the words are extravagant, I know how the mind is fallen and sunk. When words are all-depraved, I know how mind has departed from principle. When words are evasive, I know how the mind is at its wit's end.' [1]. By categorising inappropriate remarks into four types and identifying the flaws in each, Mencius demonstrates his clear logical reasoning throughout the debate.

Moreover, Mencius possessed a comprehensive grasp of the logic of debate, enabling him to pinpoint precisely where his opponents' logical flaws lay—whether in their thesis, evidence, or method of argumentation—and then target these weak points to gain the upper hand and secure victory. A classic example is Mencius's refutation of the dilemma. A dilemma arises when the other party presents two pre-established scenarios, the conclusions of both being equally unacceptable, thereby placing them in a predicament where they are caught between a rock and a hard place. Mencius was able to discern this trap, thereby directly dismantling his opponent's presuppositions on the subject matter and thus avoiding falling into it. In *The Works of Mencius: Tsin Sin, Part I*, the disciple Tao Ying's question to Mencius.

Táo Ying asked, saying, 'Shun being sovereign, and Kào-yào chief minister of justice, if Kû-sǎu had murdered a

man, what would have been done in the case?

Mencius said, 'Kào-yào would simply have apprehended him.'

'But would not Shun have forbidden such a thing?'

'Indeed, how could Shun have forbidden it? Kào-yào had received the law from a proper source.'

'In that case what would Shun have done?'

'Shun would have regarded abandoning the kingdom as throwing away a worn-out sandal. He would privately have taken his father on his back, and retired into concealment, living somewhere along the sea-coast. There he would have been all his life, cheerful and happy, forgetting the kingdom.' [1].

Kû-sǎu was Shun's father, while Kào-yào was the man Shun appointed to administer justice. Had Kû-sǎu committed murder, and Shun allowed Kào-yào to punish him according to the law, he would have fallen into a state of filial disobedience; yet if Shun had intervened to stop Kào-yào, he would have disregarded the nation's legal system. This presented the emperor, Shun, with a dilemma between virtue and law. Mencius's response directly undermined the premise that 'Shun was the emperor'. He argued that Shun regarded the throne as discarded footwear; he would have fled bearing his father on his back, preserving his filial duty while, as an individual, transgressing the law to minimise the harm his actions inflicted upon it. Though not a perfect solution, this approach sufficiently demonstrated Mencius's logical acumen in such circumstances.

In summary, although Mencius did not always adhere strictly to rigorous logic during debates, his clear logical thinking is nonetheless evident in his prose.

4. Discussion

From the analytical sections, we can discern that Mencius' prose indeed possesses a systematic argumentative structure, embedded within each component of its discourse and worthy of our scholarly exploration. This argumentative approach has exerted a significant influence on subsequent prose traditions.

The status of the Mencius did not become particularly prominent in the era following the Pre-Qin period. It was not until the Tang dynasty, with the rise of the Classical Prose Movement, that Han Yu proposed the Confucian doctrine of the 'The Doctrine of the Dao' and vigorously championed the writings of the Mencius. Subsequently, with the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty, scholars emphasised the inward transformation of nature and the mind. Song Confucians such as Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi regarded Mencius as the inheritor of Confucius's doctrinal tradition. After Neo-Confucianism

became the official doctrine, Mencius's status consequently rose.

The influence of Mencius' prose on Tang and Song prose, including its mode of argumentation. Liu Xizai's *Artistic Principles* states: 'Han Yu's prose derives from Mencius' [10], 'Wang Anshi's prose drew inspiration from Mencius and Han Yu' [10]. In his essay *Huibian*, Han Yu refuted criticism that Li He should not have been admitted to the imperial examinations because his father's name, 'Jin Su,' was considered taboo. He retorted: 'If a father's name is Jin Su, must his son be barred from passing the imperial examinations (homophone of the character 'Jin' in Chinese)? If a father's name is Ren (homophone of the character 'human' in Chinese), must his son be forbidden from being a human?' [11]. Layered and progressive, with a majestic momentum, it employs logical *reductio ad absurdum* to effectively refute the opponent's argument, displaying the very style of Mencius's writings.

In his essay *Yuanguo*, Wang Anshi begins: 'Does heaven transgress? Yes, when it oversteps the constellations and eclipses the sun. Does earth transgress? Yes, when it collapses, sags, dries up, or becomes blocked.' [12]. This sentence uses the technique of metaphor to introduce the subsequent exploration of human nature, similar to Mencius' debating approach. In addition, this article also reflects that Wang Anshi was influenced by Mencius' thoughts. 'Heaven bestows the five elements upon all living beings, and human beings thus possess them. To have something but not think about it is to lose it; to think about it but not act on it is to fail. To blame one's past mistakes for a day, to think deeply and act upon them, is to regain what has been lost and restore what has been abandoned.' [12]. The "Five Constants" of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faithfulness are inherent in people. If one does not think about or practice them, they may be lost. However, once one corrects their mistakes, they can be regained. The premise of these inferences is that human nature is inherently good, which inherits the idea of Mencius' theory of innate goodness. As mentioned in the *The Studies of the Song and Yuan Dynasties*, 'When Jing Gong's (Wang Anshi's) *Miscellaneous Sayings on Huainan* was first published, those who saw it regarded it as *The Works of Mencius*.' [13]. From this, it can be seen that Mencius' argumentative thinking also had an impact on argumentative essays.

5. Conclusion

This paper employs methods of literature analysis and close reading to investigate and identify the specific manifestations of argumentative thinking within the prose of Mencius. The theoretical framework grounded in the

principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom, the rhetorical techniques of analogy, patient guidance and ‘holding it with room for the exigency of circumstances’, alongside the logical reasoning that interlinks arguments, pinpoints flaws and delivers precise rebuttals, constitute the subtlety of Mencius’s dialectical approach. It is evident that the prose of Mencius indeed possesses a systematic and sophisticated argumentative structure. Though it contains certain flaws, it nonetheless demonstrates Mencius’s exceptional debating skills and the outstanding value of the work itself, alongside its profound influence on the development of argumentative writing in subsequent generations.

This study contributes to a better understanding of Mencius’ prose from a dialectical perspective, illuminating the overall structure of his reasoning during debates and explaining why he consistently prevailed in argumentation. It explores the value and influence of Mencius’ prose through this analytical lens.

However, this study leaves several areas unexplored. For instance, the analysis of argumentative thinking remains incomplete, primarily relying on close readings of Mencius’ prose without sufficient comparative examination of contemporary or later philosophical works. Future research may delve more deeply into this subject, employing comparative reading and cross-referencing classical texts to further explore the similarities and differences between Mencius’s argumentative thinking and that of his contemporaries, as well as the influence and reception of his argumentative approach in later generations.

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