Equal Care versus Graded Love

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Abstract

The central question for this paper is: what should we do when the interests of our family members conflict with the interests of strangers? There has been a heated debate within the Chinese philosophy community on this question. The debate is situated in two classic Chinese schools of thoughts: Confucianism and Mohism. This paper begins by analyzing the debate.

Recently, some scholars have argued that this so-called Confucian-Mohist debate is the result of misinterpretation. I reject this view and argue that, although Confucians and Mohists have some common grounds, they do have a central difference. Mohists believe that we should treat family members and strangers equally when they conflict, whereas Confucians believe that we should treat family members with some priority.

Besides the interpretation issue, I argue that Confucians are right on the normative aspect. We should give family members some priority, and this is one of the important factors to consider when facing the moral conflict between family members and strangers. However, I argue that there are other important factors to consider, including our equal obligation towards strangers. Thus, in order to make a better decision in the conflict, we need to distinguish between doing and allowing harm, and love and care.
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Introduction

When I was thirteen years old, I went to a movie called *Troy* with my mother. The movie was adapted from the Greek epic poem *the Iliad*. I remembered two scenes from the movie. One of them was the huge wooden horse used by the Greeks during the final battle against the Trojans. The second scene, which often reappears in my memory, was the duel between Paris and Menelaus. The reason for this duel was that Paris, the Trojan prince, stole Helen the beautiful wife of Menelaus. Although Menelaus easily beat Paris during the duel, before he could kill Paris and end the fight, Paris’s brother Hector told Menelaus “He is my brother.” Then Hector broke the contract of the duel and killed Menelaus to save his little brother. “‘He is my brother,’” my mother said to me after the film “represents the great familial love that can surpass everything else in the world.” Since then, the scene has repeatedly come back to me as a reminder that family always comes first. I carried this default view until I came to the United States and learned different values through my experience and education. I started to question these assumptions I had about family. Is familial love the most important value in my life? How much weight should I hold for familial relationships? Should I even violate rules and laws for a family member?

Since then, I have been thinking about these intriguing questions, but I did not find any satisfying answer. Recently, a heated debate among philosophers caught my attention. The debate was about whether familial love can trump all other moral values and be regarded as the absolute and supreme moral good. It was situated in the context of Chinese philosophy, especially between Confucianism and Mohism.\(^1\) In a series of papers, Qingping Liu defended

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\(^1\) Although I grew up in China, I learned almost nothing about Mohism. I suspect the two-thousand years of
the Mohist doctrine of *jian ai*, which is often translated as “universal love” or “impartial caring.”² The doctrine asks people to love the family members of others as much as they love their own family members. Liu argued that this kind of universal love is the supreme moral good, and familial love can only come after universal love because it otherwise could be the source of corruption. On the other sides, Qiyong Guo argued that familial love deserves priority because it is the root of our morality.³ I was obsessed with this debate because it lined up with my personal puzzle. Thus, I decided to take the quest of exploring the debate within this Master’s project.

In Chapter 1, I will sketch out the central issues in the Confucian-Mohist debate by pointing out the common ground and differences between Mohism and Confucianism. I respond to the recent claim that the so-called Confucian-Mohist argument about graded love and equal care is a result of misinterpretation, and that there is no genuine difference between Confucianism and Mohism on this issue, which I will articulate the issue in Chapter 1. I reject this claim and argue that Confucianism and Mohism do hold different views. Besides responding to this claim, I will extract this difference and reframe it into the normative conflict that I am going to discuss through my paper. The main task of extracting is disambiguating some essential concepts such as “universal” or “impartial.”

² See Defoort C. The Growing Scope of “Jian” 較: Differences between Chapters 14, 15 and 16 of the Mozi. *Oriens extremus*, 2005, 45: 119-140. As Defoort points out, there are more translation as “concern for everyone,” “inclusive care” and “co-love.” These translations look similar, but they imply different things. I will spend some space in my paper to discuss the ambiguity among these translations and their interpretations.
³ I only mentioned Qingping Liu and Qiyong Guo because they are generally considered as the initiators of this debate and my goal is to show the central arguments from both sides. However, many scholars participated or joined the debate. I will discuss these scholar’s works later in my paper. In addition, there was discussion about the similar issue much earlier, such as David Wong’s paper *Universalism Versus Love with Distinction: an ancient debate Revived* in 1989.
In Chapter 2, I will delve into the debate between equal care and graded love. I use Confucian texts again since it provides both great puzzles and insights for this debate. I claim that familial relationship should have its own moral weight in a moral conflict. This moral weight, however, is not unlimited and it will not be able to trump all other moral values in every situation. In this chapter, I will not provide the full argument for my claim. The central question is how to balance the conflict between familial love and equal obligation to all. My goals are modest. On one hand, I want to distinguish some concepts so that we could better understand the conflict. The two major pairs of distinction I want to make are: doing and allowing harm; love and care. On the other hand, I want to articulate the things that we need to consider for making better decisions. One special group I want to discuss is highly altruistic people. These people treat strangers equally or as more important than themselves. Trying to understand what they are doing will help us pinpoint the essential issues in the conflict.

In Chapter 3, I will conclude my paper by arguing that family relationships should have some moral weight. I will first provide positive arguments and then provide a negative argument. Compared to the existing literature, my arguments are brief. I focus on normative reasoning instead of an evolutionary theory of kin selection. The reasons for doing so are twofold. On one hand, an evolutionary approach on familial preference is controversial both in its methodology and its content. On the other hand, instead of defending familial preference, this paper focuses on providing guides and hints in conflicting situations. Thus, I choose to provide brief arguments for my claim.
Chapter 1. The Confucian-Mohist Debate

Discussing the Confucian-Mohist debate, most scholars use the term “partial love” to describe Confucian teaching and “impartial love” to describe Mohist teachings. Therefore, the Confucian-Mohist debate is often characterized as the debate between partiality and impartiality. However, both “(im)partiality” and “love” are ambiguous since they have multiple connotations. Love, as we normally use the term, could refer to an intense and intimate emotion between spouses and family members, but in the Confucian-Mohist debate, it usually refers to the emotion like “care” or “concern.” I will discuss this later in this chapter. I want to focus on the ambiguity of “(im)partiality” first. Among different meanings of this term, two aspects are closely related to the Confucian-Mohist debate—inclusiveness and equal consideration. For instance, one could have no concern for the strangers at all or one could have more concern towards family members than strangers. Both forms can be understood as partiality, corresponding to two kinds of impartiality—**inclusive** love and **equal** love. The former focuses on whether we should love everyone including strangers, whereas the latter focuses on whether we should love everyone equally.

Given the distinction, we end up with three claims: (1) one only cares about family members and does not care about strangers at all; (2) one cares about both family members and strangers equally; (3) one cares about family members and strangers with distinction. In

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4 Ellen Marie Maccarone, “Impartiality: its nature and application” (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2004), 115-9. Maccarone seems to use “impartiality” as what I later call “equal consideration.” But sometimes, it is very hard to draw the clear line. Nonetheless, Maccarone’s discussion demonstrates the ambiguity of the issue.

5 At this point, I do not specify whether one loves family members more or loves strangers more for the completeness of the classification. These two situations are both included as “love with distinction.” However, Confucians hold that we should love family members more than strangers.
this section, I will argue that Confucians and Mohists\(^6\) agree with each other by rejecting (1). The debate between them concentrates on (2) and (3). Mohists support (2) while Confucians support (3). If I am correct that Confucians and Mohists both reject? (1), the central question in the debate becomes: Should we love everyone equally or with distinction? Thus, excluding the meaning of inclusiveness, I rephrase the Confucian-Mohist debate between impartiality and partiality as the debate between *equal care* and *graded love*.\(^7\) Equal care indicates that one loves everyone equally; graded love indicates that one loves one’s family members more than strangers.

### 1.1 Common Ground between Confucians and Mohists

Do Confucians and Mohists really agree on inclusive love? In the Confucian-Mohist debate, Mohism represented equal love, as its doctrine of *jian ai*, or “universal love.” To my knowledge, no one disagrees that *jian ai* includes the notion of inclusive love, so I will simply move on without further discussion. As the counterpart of Mohism, Confucianism falls under particularism, which might create a false impression that Confucianism does not care about anyone except close relatives. In fact, on the contrary, Confucians’ teaching about love is inclusive. Particularism only implies that love for family members is greater than love for strangers. In the *Analects*, although Confucius does not explicitly discuss universal love, he expresses this idea in the teachings of *ren* and *sheng*. *Ren*, which is often translated as

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\(^6\) Here I mostly refer to Confucius, Mencius and Mozi. I do not attribute my view to contemporary Confucians and Mohists because their views could be different.

\(^7\) This term is adopted from David Wong’s paper *Universalism Versus Love with Distinction: an ancient debate revived*. I use “graded love” instead of “love with distinction” to empathize its hierarchical structure, which I will discuss later in my paper. Since I later distinguish between love and care, I will not discuss why I use “equal care” instead of “equal love” here.
“benevolence” or “humanity,” is a crucial concept in Confucianism. Confucius gives multiple explanations of ren. One of them is given in the passage 12:22, in which Confucius was asked about what is ren. He answered, “Love people.” Most scholars agree that “people” in this answer is not limited to family members, but extends to all.\(^8\)

Another clear passage from *Analects* that shows the inclusiveness of Confucius’ love is about sheng (Analects, 6:30). When asked whether a person who is generous with all people and able to help others could be considered as a person with the virtue of ren, Confucius replies that this person has surpassed the standard of ren and should be considered as sheng, or a sage. As Bojun Yang notes, in Confucius’s mind, sheng requires people to extend their love to everyone, which is the ultimate standard for evaluating a person.

In addition, Confucius and Mencius often express the idea that a good ruler must love and bring peace to all the common people. In 14:42, Confucius says that it is not enough for exemplary persons to bring peace and happiness just to their peers. Exemplary persons must cultivate themselves so that they could bring peace and happiness to all the common people. He also speaks in 5:16 that exemplary persons must be beneficent to all the common people. Similar to Confucius, Mencius tells King Xuan of Qi that the way to rule is to make all common people live in peace and serenity (*Mencius* 1A7).

I have shown that Confucians and Mohists agree on inclusive love. In fact, there is another point on which they agree—filial piety or familial love is important and good. However, they disagree on the precise definition of filial piety. Thus, I will leave it to the next section.

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\(^8\) See David Wong’s endnote 6 in *Universalism Versus Love with Distinction: an ancient debate revived*. Bojun Yang also expresses a similar idea in the introduction of his *Annotation of Analects*. 

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1.2 Differences between Confucians and Mohists

Since Confucians and Mohists agree on inclusive love, there must be some differences between them in order to have a debate. Recently, some scholars challenged this presupposition of differences. They argue that Confucians and Mohists share more common ground than we used to think. The so-called Confucian-Mohist debate comes from unfair or incorrect interpretations.

Thomas Radice notes a comment on Mozi from Mencius in 3B.9:

[T]he words of Yang Zhu and Mo Di (Mencius) fill the world. If the teachings in the world are not Yang’s they are Mo’s. Yang endorses being ‘for oneself’ which is to be without a ruler. Mo endorses universal love (jian ai), which is to be without a father. To be without a father or a ruler is to be an animal.\(^9\)

Radice warns us not to take Mencius’ words for granted because it creates an illusion that Mozi denounces filial piety. He points out that the term for filial piety appears thirty-eight times, in the “core chapter” of Mozi (fourteen more times than in Mencius) without a single negative connotation. On the contrary, it is quite clear that Mozi regards filial piety as an important and positive virtue.\(^10\) I agree with Radice that Mozi also emphasizes the value of filial piety, and it is wrong to construct the debate between Mohists and Confucians around whether children should be filial or not. The central difference between them is how to be filial, or phasing it differently, what counts as filial children.

For Mencius, filial children must realize different grades of love. In 7A.45, he writes:


\(^10\) Ibid., 142.
The gentleman is loving (ai) toward creatures, but not humane (ren). He is humane toward the people, but not affectionate (qin) with them. He is affectionate with his kin, and thus humane toward the people. He is humane toward the people and thus loving toward other creatures.\(^{11}\)

In this passage, Mencius shows the clear hierarchy of the emotions one should have towards others through terms ai, ren and qin. He reserves a special emotion qin only for parents and relatives. Thus, in order to be qualified as filial children, they must have certain preference towards their family members.

There are two kinds of preference that we need to distinguish.\(^{12}\) The first kind is an Emotional Preference, Preference\(^E\), which is shown in the above passage. We have different emotions towards others. These emotions are different both in kind and intensity. Affection (qin) is the personal love we establish towards our parents, spouse, and other relatives. It is a different kind of love. Normally, this personal love is more intense than other emotions towards strangers, such as what Mencius calls humane (ren) or the love from our concern and compassion. So when one says that she has a Preference\(^E\) towards her family members, she means that she has a different and usually a stronger kind of emotion towards her family members. I will discuss this kind of preference in the later chapter.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 146.
\(^{12}\) Yong Li rightly points out that there are two senses of familial partiality. A weak sense of familial partiality is that we should give our family more resources than strangers. A strong sense is that we should give our family more resources even by not following the principle of justice. I think this distinction is a little ambiguous, which I want to improve with my own distinction. First, I do not think resources are the most important elements in familial partiality. Love or emotional contribution is. On one hand, Confucians should find it too weak to only require a person to allocate more resources to their family as familial partiality. On the other hand, to give more resources to strangers does not automatically disqualify a person as not preferring her family members. She could prefer them in an emotional or a less-material sense. Second, for the weak sense to be non-trivial[ I can’t make sense of this: do you mean “non-trivial”?], there must be moral conflict involved. Otherwise, the weak sense is just saying that we should give more resources to our family members when strangers do not need them. I think imperialists can and will agree with this view. If there is a conflict, I think it is at least in a minimal sense, failing to follow the principle of justice because we ignore the needs of strangers. Thus, the weak sense and strong sense have an ineligible overlapping.
However, I now want to focus on the second kind of preference and its relation to the first one. The best way to illustrate the second kind of preference is through a widely-used imaginary case: suppose my mother and a stranger are about to drown and I could only save one of them, what would I do? If I am a Confucian, I should save my mother because I have to prioritize my family members. I call this kind of preference Preference\textsuperscript{P}. Based on Mohist’s “universal love,” however, I could either save my mother or the stranger. It does not matter because having Preference\textsuperscript{E} does not give me extra reasons to prioritize my mother in this situation. In other words, Preference\textsuperscript{E} does not necessarily lead to Preference\textsuperscript{P}, which require me to save my mother instead of the stranger. Thus, for Mohists, there should be no Preference\textsuperscript{P}.

Confucians might think it obvious that Preference\textsuperscript{E} gives both causal and normative force to Preference\textsuperscript{P}. In other words, because we have special emotions towards our family members, we would and should choose to save our mother and not to save the stranger if both were drowning. I agree with this view, but the relation between these two kinds of preference is the exact question to ask, and the crux of the debate. Both Confucians and Mohists need to provide arguments for and against the connections between them. It is important not to assume that Preference\textsuperscript{E} and Preference\textsuperscript{P} are identical, or Preference\textsuperscript{E} causally or normatively leads to Preference\textsuperscript{P}. The quick assumption excludes a possible view held by Mohists and Liu. This view accepts Preference\textsuperscript{E} while rejecting Preference\textsuperscript{P}. In

14 Liu states in 2007 paper that, “kinship love may be put above humane love [ren] in order of intensity, but not in order of priority.” This is the possible view that accepts Preference\textsuperscript{E} while rejecting Preference\textsuperscript{P}. I think Mohist holds the similar view. I need to say that “possible” does not imply “convincing.” It is “possible” in a sense that Mohist, Liu and other scholars could hold it without being considered as “irrational” or “stupid.” Li Chengyang finds this view puzzling, he writes “In Confucianism, filial love is above other kinds of love both
addition, this assumption might prevent us looking for other reasons for prioritizing our family members. For example, we might do so out of gratitude, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

Wai Wai Chiu seems to take this assumption for granted with insufficient arguments. He disagrees that Mohists hold a view that one should love others equally. For him, Mohists “would agree with the preferential treatment we grant to people close to us” (434). Thus, the debate between Confucianism and Mohism is not genuine, but the result of misinterpretation. He argues that it is wrong to interpret *jian ai* as equal love because *jian ai* only includes the notion of inclusive love for Mozi.\(^{15}\) I will argue that this view is incorrect because, based on the three chapters in the text *Mozi* (14, 15, and 16), *jian ai* not only requires inclusiveness, but also equality.

One difficulty in interpreting *Mozi* is its strange structure. Some topics, including *Jian Ai*, are written in different chapters, but these chapters are quite similar in content. One chapter is often an expanded version of the previous one. Furthermore, some terms shared in these chapters could have different meanings. As Chiu notes:

> The meaning of *jian* may not be exactly the same in different passages, and the position on *jian ai* may be different in different chapters. But the point here is not to give a comprehensive analysis of *jian*. It is enough to show that the term, at least in the Jian Ai chapters, does not imply equality in one’s treatment of different people.\(^{16}\)

His observation and methodology are correct. However, he fails to include a thorough

\(^{15}\) Wai Wai Chiu "Jian ai and the Mohist attack of Early Confucianism," Philosophy Compass 8.5 (2013): 425-437. Chiu himself uses the term “universal love” instead of equal love. But these two terms are interchangeable given how he uses it.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 427.
analysis in his paper. In fact, his analysis of the text is quite selective as he mainly focuses on chapter 14 and 15. This negligence is problematic because, as Thomas Radice notes, the first two chapters discuss a kind of love that is not modified with jian.\(^ {17}\) I agree with Radice that the most important chapter for analyzing jian ai is chapter 16. Yet, I do not think that Mozi just discusses two unrelated kinds of love in these chapters. In fact, there is a logical connection between them, which helps us better understand the concept of jian ai.

In chapter 16, there is a passage showing the logical connection between the two forms of love:

Thus, master Mozi says: With “inclusiveness” replace “exclusiveness”. But how can “inclusiveness” replace “exclusiveness”? Well, assume that people are for someone else’s state as they are for their own state, who would then mobilize his own state to attack someone else’s state? They would be for the others as they are for themselves.\(^ {18}\)

In the previous chapters of Jian Ai, Mozi discusses the importance of inclusive love, which is the goal people should aim at. In the above passage, Mozi follows this claim and asks the logical question about how to achieve this inclusive love. He answers that the way to do so is to love others as one loves oneself. Chiu offers two apparently possible interpretations of the word “as” (ruo):

(i) one cares for others to the same extent as one cares for oneself. The word ruo concerns the action of care as well as the degree of care. Let’s call this the strong claim.
(ii) as one cares for oneself, so does one care for others (instead of hating or attacking them). The word ruo concerns only the action of care. Call this the weak claim.\(^ {19}\)

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\(^ {17}\) Radice, “Manufacturing Mohism,” 142.

\(^ {18}\) Defoort, “The Growing Scope of” Jian.” This is not the full passage. Following it, Mozi talks about love others as love oneself and love others family as love one’s own family.

\(^ {19}\) Chiu, “Jian ai and the Mohist attack of Early Confucianism,” 428. We need to notice that Chiu brings up these two interpretations for the passage in chapter 14. Given the similarity of the usage, we could safely extend his interpretations to the same word, ruo, in chapter 16. If we could not, it means that Chiu does not provide a thorough analysis, thus his conclusion will not hold.
The strong claim implies “equal,” whereas the weak claim only implies “inclusive.” Chiu argues that “as,” or the Chinese word ruo in the passage does not mean “equal” or “identical.” It only means “inclusive.” He gives two arguments:

(1) exalting filial piety seems incompatible with equal care for all, since to respect one’s parents as parents implies giving them priority in practice [emphasis added] and developing a stronger emotional tie with them.

(2) one need not care for all people to the same degree [emphasis added] in order to stop attacking them.20

Let us first try to understand which kind of preference Chiu means by saying “priority in practice.” If it is similar to “developing a stronger emotional tie with them,” I think we should understand it as PreferenceE. In this case, I agree with him that “respecting one’s parents as parents” implies PreferenceE. However, the problem for understanding priority this way is that it fails to provide reasons for why exalting the stronger emotional tie is incompatible with equal care for all. Chiu seems to rely on the assumption that PreferenceE leads to PreferenceP.

What if we understand “priority in practice” as PreferenceP? In this case, I agree with Chiu that prioritizing family members seems incompatible with equal care for all. Chiu, however, needs to offer a stronger argument for his implication from respecting one’s parents to prioritizing family members, or PreferenceP. As I have said earlier, I think this is the most

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20 Chiu only points out one possible way to understand Mozi’s goal in Jian Ai chapters, which is “stop attacking others.” Hui-chieh Loy notes three ways: NOT Harming, BENEFITING and HELPING. Chiu’s interpretation is the first way. But if we use BENEFITING or HELPING, it will be harder to say that one need not care for all people to the same degree in order to help/benefit others. Thus, (2) will be weakened. Nonetheless, as Loy points out, no matter how to interpret Mozi, “We can see jian’ai as making explicit the notion that the common benefit of the world is, in some sense, impartially and equally the benefit of everyone.” For more discussion, see Hui-chieh Loy, "On the Argument for Jian’ai." Dao 12.4 (2013): 487-504.
important issue that differentiates Confucians and Mohists. Confucians hold Preference\textsuperscript{P} for family members while Mohists do not.

Giving both interpretation of “priority in practice,” I hope I have shown that (1) from Chiu is inadequate. How about (2)? Again, it only sounds correct if we understand “not care for all people to the same degree” as Preference\textsuperscript{E}, but not as Preference\textsuperscript{P}. If we interpret it as Emotional Preference, which means one needs to love strangers rather than merely care for them, I will agree with Chiu that loving strangers is not necessary to stop attacking them.

But (2) will be problematic if we interpret it as Preference\textsuperscript{P}, which means prioritizing family members in conflict situations. How can we be so sure that there are no conflict situations where prioritizing family members over strangers requires us to attack strangers? For instance, it is plausible that the only way to save my starving family members is to steal food from others. Chiu seems to imply that this kind of situation is rare in practice by saying that “According to our contemporary moral practice, most of the time, it is practically possible to treat relationships with significant others as special or even essential, yet still genuinely respect and help others not within the close circle.”\textsuperscript{21} I agree with Chiu’s observation, but it fall short to eliminating the possible conflicts that require us to attack strangers in order to prioritize family members.

Thus, both (1) and (2) fail. Since Chiu uses them to support his claim of weak interpretation of ruo:

(ii) as one cares for oneself, so does one care for others (instead of hating or attacking them). The word ruo concerns only the action of care.

(ii) also fails.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 429.
Moreover, (ii) could not be the right interpretation of Mozi for an independent reason.

Let us revisit the passage of the logical transition of Mozi:

Thus, master Mozi says: With “inclusiveness” replace “exclusiveness”. But how can “inclusiveness” replace “exclusiveness”? Well, assume that people are for someone else’s state as they are for their own state, who would then mobilize his own state to attack someone else’s state? They would be for the others as they are for themselves.22

He tries to answer how inclusiveness replace exclusiveness. If Chiu were right to interpret “as” in the weak sense, which only implies inclusive, how could we understand Mozi’s logic here? Is he saying that the means to achieve inclusiveness is being inclusive? Chiu’s interpretation will force Mozi into a tautology, which I find hard to accept. Therefore, in order to avoid such logical fallacy, “as” has to be interpreted in the strong sense, that is, as “equal.” As a result, it will be wrong to deny the existing debate between Confucians and Mohists on the issue of PreferenceP.

What are the reasons for Mozi to reject PreferenceP? I think the major reason is that he believes in perfect reciprocity. He quotes the Elegies:

There are no words that are left unanswered,
   No virtue that is left without a response.
   If you toss me a peach,
   I respond with a plum.23

He interprets these lines as “anyone who cares for others will receive care from them while anyone who dislikes others will in turn be disliked.” Given this view of perfect reciprocity, Mozi does not take prioritizing family members seriously. If helping others is equal to helping oneself, it does not matter whether one starts with family members or strangers. I do

22 Defoort, "The Growing Scope of" Jian.
23 The translation is adopted from Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden. As they note, the Elegies are a section in the Odes. The Odes is a collection of rhymed poems derived from earlier folk songs and ceremonial incantations. The text was often cited by classic Confucians and Mohists as examples and evidence for their arguments and claims.
not mean Mozi’s view on reciprocity is right, all I try to show is that, given such an idealistic view, it is plausible for him to reject Preference⁹. 

In addition to this view, I think Mozi’s ambitious goal of jian ai also leads him to reject Preference⁹. Let us look at the following passage from chapter 16.

Will others reward me by taking care of and benefiting my parents if I first work at taking care of and benefiting their parents? Or will they reward me by taking care of and benefiting my parents if I first work at hating and hurting their parents? Certainly, they will reward me by taking care of and benefiting my parents if I first work at taking care of and benefiting their parents.⁴²

One might ask, if we need to love strangers first, how could our family members and the strangers be equal? Does Mozi imply that we need to have a preference towards strangers? I agree that Mozi clearly states the “priority” of strangers in this passage, but it does not necessarily mean strangers are more important to us. Choosing them first rather than family members is the way to promote inclusive love through perfect reciprocity. As I mentioned earlier, if we accept that there are possible conflict situations where prioritizing family members requires us to attack strangers, rejecting Preference⁹ seems to be the only way to achieve jian ai. Again, Mozi does not pay enough attention to whether his view is practical.

1.3 The Normative Debate

In the previous sections, defending the genuineness of the Confucian-Mohist debate, I tried to articulate the common grounds and central difference in that debate. Foremost, the debate is not about whether our love or concern should include everyone, since both schools agree that we should. Moreover, as Radice correctly points out, the debate is not about

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²⁴ Mozi 16:29; translation is adapted from Defoort, “The Growing Scope of Jian,” 126.
whether a child should be filial or not. Confucians and Mohists agree that filial piety is praiseworthy.

The debate between them focuses on how to be filial, or what counts as a filial child. I have argued that Confucians and Mohists might agree that a filial child should have a special affection (*qin*) and attachment towards their family members, which is captured as Preference $E$. However, they hold different opinions on whether a filial child always needs to prioritize their family members in a moral conflict between strangers and them. In other words, whether a filial child need to hold Preference $P$. For Confucians, it seems that if one does not always prioritize family members in the conflict, one will be disqualified as a filial child. Mohists seem to hold a less demanding account of filial piety. For them, one could be considered as a filial child even if she takes an equal care position during the conflict.

I believe that filial piety, like other virtues, comes in degrees. There is a whole spectrum that contains decent children, good children and filial children. Furthermore, there is no clear line that separates filial children from good children. If we consider filial piety as a virtue, then filial piety should be more demanding than merely good. I am not able to provide the minimum standard for filial piety, but I suspect that it lies between Confucian and Mohist positions. For this paper, without further discussion, I will simply use “filial” or “good” in a sense that it meets the minim standard of the virtue.

Leaving the interpretation issue aside, I turn to the normative issues of the debate. I claim that, in order to have a genuine debate, there must be a *moral conflict* between family

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25 At this point, I hope that I have successfully shown the essential difference between Confucians and Mohists. What I have done is largely interpretational, and it is debatable whether I have a plausible and convincing interpretation. However, from now on, I will shift gears and focus on the normative issues that underlie any interpretation of Confucian and Mohist texts.
members and strangers. This point is so obvious that it is often ignored. Last year, some students of Qingpin Liu labeled him as evil and asked the university to banish him due to his harsh criticism on filial piety. We need to realize that Liu’s criticism of filial piety specifically targets the situation where filial piety and humane love conflict. He does not ask us to stop being a good son or daughter. The interest of family members and the interest of strangers for a certain person are normally not in any conflict at all. For example, my mother tells me that she has a fever, and wants me to pick her up and drive her to see a doctor. As a good son, I will drive her to see a doctor without any hesitation. In this situation, I do not need to think about strangers at all because there is no competing need from strangers; being a good son is simply taking care of my mother. Thus, we do not have to always think about Preference\textsuperscript{P} in practice; and filial piety simply requires us to love and take care of our parents, i.e, show our Emotional Preference.

This observation is true for equal care as well. Using Mencius’ own example in 2A.6, if I see a child about to fall into the well, what should I do? I should run as fast as I could to save the child. Although this child is a stranger to me, I still make an equal amount of effort to save her. I should not run slower to avoid falling just because she is not my own child. In other words, I should treat this child as my own child if there is no conflict. And saving this child with full effort should be considered as equal care. In sum, the issue of different gradations of love does not always apply in practical situations.

If we do not clearly point out that the discussion is specifically for conflict situations, it will create a wrong impression that filial piety and care for strangers are necessarily and always incompatible. Although they are mostly compatible, I will focus on the conflict
situations. In the conflict, we need to take all the possible factors into account in order to produce a good judgment. Each factor has different moral weight in different situations.

Sometimes the moral weight from different factors are easy to compare, but other times they are not. Our goal is to reach a good decision based on the moral weight of variable factors.

For the defender of the doctrine of equal care, the relationship between family members has no moral weight in the conflict because we should consider family members and strangers equally. On the contrary, the supporters of the doctrine of graded love hold that the special familial relationship has significant moral weight that strangers do not have. Thus, the issue of equal care and graded love boils down to the moral weight the family relationship has in the moral conflict.
Chapter 2. Familial Love versus Equal Obligation

In this previous chapter, I have extracted the normative conflict from the Confucian-Mohist debate. I will delve into this conflict in this chapter. I first claim that familial love has some moral weight. I will not provide the full arguments for my claim until Chapter 3. Given my claim, the central question I try to answer in this section is: How do we reach a good decision when facing such conflict? I shall not consider myself as providing an “answer” for this question. I am not even sure if there is a concrete answer. My goals are modest. On one hand, I want to distinguish some concepts so that we could better understand the conflict. The two major pairs of distinction I want to make are: doing and allowing harm; and love and care. On the other hand, I want to articulate the things that we need to consider for making better decisions. I will divide different contexts into categories, and move from the easier to the harder, looking for unique factors in each category.

The Confucian-Mohist debate contains lots of insights, so my discussion will start with two controversial passages in Confucian texts that involve moral conflict between family members and strangers. The first passage is from Confucius’s *Analects* and the second one is from the *Mencius*. In the first passage, Confucius apparently approves the mutual concealment of wrongdoings among family members. In the second passage, Mencius endorses the ancient sage-king Shun’s special treatment of his father’s wrongdoing.²⁶

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²⁶ Both passages are adopted from Yong Huang. See Huang, Yong. "Editor’s Word-Filial Piety: Root of Morality or Source of Corruption." (2008).
Case 1. Confucius on Mutual Concealment:

The governor of She said to Confucius, “In our village there is a man nicknamed ‘Straight Body.’ When his father stole a sheep, he gave evidence against him.” Confucius answered, “In our village, those who are straight are quite different. Fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. Straightness is to be found in such behavior.” (Analects 13.18)

Case 2. Mencius on Shun’s Treatment of His Father:

TAO Ying [Mencius’s student] asked, “When Shun was emperor and GAO Yao was the judge, if the Blind Man [Shun’s father] killed a man, what would GAO Yao have done?”

Mencius replied, “The only thing to do was to apprehend him.” “In that case, would Shun not try to stop it?” “How could Shun stop it? GAO Yao had his authority from which he received the law.” “Then what would Shun have done?” “Shun looked upon casting aside the empire as no more than discarding a worn shoe. He would have secretly carried the old man on his back and fled to the edge of the sea and lived there happily, never giving a thought to the empire.” (Mencius 7A35)

These controversial passages are the core of the Confucian-Mohist debate. Scholars who support equal love cite these passages as evidence of corruption and nepotism, whereas scholars who support preferential treatment of family members cite these passages as examples of filial piety and graded love. Unlike these scholars, I neither fully endorse nor fully reject the issues in these passages. I will use these passages as two cases of moral conflict between family members and strangers. Examining the cases, I will discuss the crucial factors that characterize the moral conflict between strangers and family members.

Besides the Confucian-Mohist debate, I will also include some highly altruistic people in my discussion. They have initiated a new movement called effective altruism, which asks people to do the most good they can. In my opinion, these altruistic people demonstrate extraordinary motivations and actions to help others. Living with the belief that
they should care for everyone equally, they challenge the existing barriers between self, family members and strangers. Effective altruism is highly controversial, and I am not intending to defend or criticize it in this paper. My goal is to capture some insights from it. Why should we care for strangers? How much should we care? Is there any practical limitation while trying to care for everyone as equally as possible?

2.1 Familial Love as a Supreme Value

One solution for moral conflict is following a supreme value that could trump any other values. In the context of the Confucian-Mohist debate, the tentative supreme value could be familial love. To be consistent with my discussion in the last chapter, I will rephrase this supreme value into a view in terms of moral weight:

\[ \text{SV1: Familial love has infinite moral weight.} \]

I discuss SV1 for two reasons. First, Liu attributes this view to Confucius and Mencius. It becomes one of the most crucial interpretational and normative issues in the Confucian-Mohist debate. I would like to add some small clarifications. Second, since I will eventually reject SV1, it provides a negative argument for my claim that familial love has some moral weight.

Liu attributes SV1 to Confucius and Mencius. In the discussion of the second case, Liu asserts that:

Hence, the only possible reason that Mencius approves of such an act would be: it places filial piety absolutely above everything else—including the legal system of the empire and the Confucian ideal of humane government, and thus entirely conforms to the Confucian spirit of taking consanguineous affection as the supreme principle—even arriving at such a height that “the son is still filial despite the father’s ruthlessness.” (2008, 6)
He rejects SV1, accusing it as the origin of China’s corruption. I agree with Liu that this principle is wrong. However, I think Liu should be more careful while attributing this principle to “Confucians” for two reasons. First, Confucians are not homogenous. In fact, most Confucian scholars are willing to reject SV1 and deny that Confucians commit to such a principle (see Guo 2008; Fan 2008). For instance, an important classic Confucian figure, Xunzi, rejects SV1. In his chapter “The Way to Be a Son,” Xunzi writes:

To follow the Way and not one’s lord, to follow righteousness and not one’s father is the greatest conduct. If one’s intentions are at ease in ritual, and one’s words are put forth in accordance with the proper classes of things, then the Confucian way is complete. Even Shun should not improve on this by so much as a hair’s breath…A proverb states, ‘Follow the Way, not your lord. Follow righteousness, not your father.” This expresses my meaning.27

This passage clearly show that “following one’s parents” is not the absolute supreme value. Instead, one should follow “righteousness.” I think Xunzi is a strong example of a Confucian who rejects SV1.

Second, even to solely focus on Case 1 and Case 2, although Confucius and Mencius apparently approve the preferential treatment of family members, it is not clear whether Confucius and Mencius hold SV1. I am sympathetic to Liu’s view, and I suspect that one reason inducing him to think this way is that Confucius, Mencius and some other commentators do not provide a fully satisfactory explanation of these puzzling cases. The essential weakness of their arguments is the insufficient consideration of strangers.28


28 Van Norden and Liu exchanged some views on whether Mencius believed obedience to one’s parents can be overridden. Van Norden cites 5A2 from Mencius as evidence that filial piety could be overridden since Shun acts against the wishes of his parents. Liu responds to him that Shun’s resistance is ultimately for the sake of filial piety. 4A26 is an example for supporting Liu’s claim. In general, I agree with Liu on this point. But since this is an interpretational rather than normative issue, I will leave it aside and take a more generous interpretation of Mencius.
For the mutual concealment case (Case 1), the ultimate explanation seems to be that stealing the sheep is only a minor offense. Guo admits that “[hiding or concealing] is limited to minor offenses and not applicable to such felonies as manslaughter and robbery” (2008, 25). Bryan Van Norden implies the similar idea by stating that “in Kongzi’s (Confucius’) era, the primary owners of sheep were the extremely wealthy” and these wealthy owners “benefit so little [if the son turns in his father].”

Liu argues that he finds no textual evidence to support that stealing a sheep is only a minor offense. I agree with him, but we also need to notice that the same thing could be said from Van Norden. There is no textual evidence to support that stealing a sheep is not a minor offense.

In my opinion, however, although it is a minor offense, the father nonetheless had done something wrong. Thus, there is a need to compensate the victim. This compensation is missed by Confucius and some of his supporters in the discussion of the Case 1. At this point, I just want to point out the lack of compensation. I will argue later why the compensation is necessary and what kind of compensation is adequate.

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31 How should we go on at this tricky spot? In my opinion, Tongdong Bai suggests a good solution to settle down this interpretational problem. He writes “To read a classical text means that we should try to make explicit what is implicit and hidden in it, and to understand the subtle message beneath the surface, especially when some passages look peculiar and are apparently contradictory. If we fail to offer an interpretation of these passages, instead of accusing the great thinker of not thinking clearly, we should first examine the possibility of our failure to fully understand the text by this great thinker.” Bai, Tongdong. "Back to Confucius: a comment on the debate on the Confucian idea of consanguineous affection." Dao 7, no. 1 (2008): 27-33. Following Bai’s suggestion, I think Van Norden demonstrates an example of trying to fully understand the text. Thus, I claim that Van Norden provides a potential reason the mutual concealment. But we still need to be aware that this reason is not fully satisfactory.

32 One reason for Confucius to make such comment on the mutual concealment case might due to his general dislike of “spreading rumors.” In the Analects 17.24, when his student Zigong asks about what things do exemplary persons detest, Confucius answers “they detest those who announce what is detestable in others.” Confucius then asks Zigong about the thing he detests. Zigong answers “I detest those who think that revealing the secrets of others is being straight.” Noting what Confucius says in this passage, in the case of stealing sheep, Confucius might associate Straight Body’s action with revealing secrets. I do not think this association is fair due to the nature of the wrongdoing.
I do not imply that mutual concealment is always wrong. What I want to point out here is that covering for the father cannot be the entire story. Bai seems to acknowledge this weakness of the argument. He writes:

Moreover, to conceal one’s close relative’s misconduct does not mean to let this person go free. Rather, by concealing this person’s misconduct and thus preserving the loving relationship and trust, one can then more effectively help this person to right the wrongs.\(^{33}\)

I agree with Bai that it is important to right the wrongs. I also claim that righting the wrongs could not be merely giving the father a lesson about stealing, and then pretending nothing had happened. The father (or the son) must recognize the harm to the victim and provide compensation accordingly.\(^{34}\)

Case 2 has a similar problem—it does not mention the victim at all. Guo states that “Emperor Shun thus chose to abandon his crown, carrying his father on his back to the seaside, the area beyond the jurisdiction of the law” (2008, 32). He seems to imply that since there is no jurisdiction of the law on the seaside area, Shun and his father’s escape is no longer a problem. Although it might be true that the law does not reach the seaside, surely does our morality. The lack of the jurisdiction does not make the murderer’s escape and Shun’s aid in escaping morally acceptable. Moreover, the second case seems to be even

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{34}\) We need to notice that there are two different actions in the discussion: father steals a sheep and son covers for his father. Thus, as Yong Li’s literature review shows, there are at least three different views. First, father’s stealing is wrong, but mutual concealment is not wrong because turning father in is not the best way to reform him. Second, father’s stealing is not wrong and neither is the concealment. Third, both father’s stealing and son’s concealment are wrong, but family relationship defeats the public interests or the laws. The third view is not an explanation since it is SV1. The second view is similar to what I discuss in this paragraph, treating the stealing as a minor offense or something not morally wrong. Li supports the first view. I partially agree with him because compensating the victim does not require the son to turn in his father. He could give the sheep back or provide volunteer fine for his father’s wrongdoing. However, if the wrongdoing is a much more serious crime such as manslaughter, the appropriate way of compensation might be turning his father in to the authority.
harder to explain since Shun’s father kills a person, which is a more serious crime than stealing a sheep.

Unlike Guo and Liu, I think Mencius’ suggestion does not focus on either justifying Shun’s escape with his father or showing that filial piety has infinite moral weight. Instead, Mencius tries to harmonize the competing values. On one hand, Shun fulfills filial piety by not turning his father in to the official. On the other hand, Shun has chosen a kind of punishment for himself. For Shun, the “punishment” is giving up the empire. Mencius emphasizes this point in the passage. First, he says “Shun looked upon casting aside the empire as no more than *discarding a worn shoe*” [emphasis added]. Following this metaphor, he says Shun should never “give a thought to the empire.” As Bai states, “Shun did not stop GAO Yao from performing his legal duty, although an emperor in Shun’s times had this power.”35 Thus, I believe Case 2 could be considered as an improvement on Case 1 for its acknowledgement of the punishment. However, it is not clear that this punishment will provide appropriate compensation for the victim and his family members.36 Thus, this case still suffers similar essential weakness.

In the previous passages, I discuss two interpretational problems of attributing SV1 to Confucians. On one hand, Liu should not attribute SV1 to all “Confucians” since they are not homogeneous. On the other hand, although Confucius and Mencius might induce Liu to think that filial piety could not be overridden due to unsatisfactory explanation of puzzling cases, it is still possible to interpret these masters in a more generous way. Discussing the

36 Bai also thinks this is a problem for Mencius. He states that “he did not address the problem about how justice to the victim’s family is served and how people’s interests are protected when Shun the sage-king abandoned his office.” Ibid., 30.
interpretational problems, I aim to extract the essential weakness of SV1, which is insufficient consideration of victims. In fact, most Confucians recognize this weakness. For example, Stephen Angle and Yong Li, both rejecting SV1, suggest that we read these cases more critically. Angle concludes that “Mencius leaves out of his picture the critically important emotion of grief that Shun should be feeling.”\footnote{Stephen C Angle. "No supreme principle: confucianism’s harmonization of multiple values." *Dao* 7.1 (2008): 35-40.} Li warns us that, defending Case 1, one should not ignore the egalitarian obligation towards the neighbor who loses the sheep.\footnote{Yong Li. "The Confucian Puzzle." *Asian Philosophy* 22.1 (2012): 37-50.}

In my opinion, Li points out the crucial problem for holding SV1. We have some impartial obligation towards others. Given the conflict between family love and egalitarian obligation towards strangers, if we accept SV1, we must always sacrifice the egalitarian obligation. Since we do not want to give up egalitarian obligation, we must reject SV1. What is egalitarian obligation? Why should we hold it? I will turn to these questions soon.

SV1 has another potential social damage. As Wong warns us, “dangerous partiality takes the form of unselfish devotion to family and state as well as a narrow egoism.”\footnote{Wong, David B. "Universalism versus love with distinctions: An ancient debate revived." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 16, no. 3-4 (1989): 251-272. 260.} One of such dangers could be in a form of “amoral familism.” Edward Banfield defines this concept as a culture that is deficient in communitarian values but fosters familial ties.\footnote{Banfield, Edward C. "The moral basis of a backward society." (1967). P85.} For example, a corrupted government official might justify her wrongdoing by so-called familial love. She might truthfully say “I do so for my family members instead of myself.” Living in contemporary China, I frequently observe manifestations of amoral familism, especially from parents to their children.
Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington’s study also supports this observation. Using data from The World Values Survey 1990 and other aggregate statistics from the World Bank, they construct three measures to represent amoral familism: a scale deals with unqualified respect for parents, measured by the percentage of people who agreed that regardless of the qualities and faults of one’s parents, a person must always love and respect them; the percentage of people who think that divorce is unjustifiable; the mean number of children per woman. The result of the study shows that the nations that score high on this scale tend to be among the more corrupt; and the nations that score lowest are the least corrupt.\textsuperscript{41} Along with the regression analysis, the study affirms the association between amoral familism and corruption, which proves the potential danger of holding SV1.

### 2.2 Other Supreme Values

If we Reject SV1, how will we make decisions in the conflict situation between family members and strangers? Liu provides an alternative way:

Correspondingly, only the moral intuition “harm no one and benefit humans,” or its modern reformulation “respect everyone’s deserved fundamental rights and interests” (henceforth “DFRI”), which I call the basic principle of “Critical Humanism” (Liu 2007a: 14), can trump anything else, because it alone is a universal, absolute, and supreme moral good. In this sense, it constitutes the ultimate principle of moral rightness, which is prior to any other good: any acts against it are morally wrong, whereas any acts conforming to it are morally right.\textsuperscript{42}

Unlike SV1, Liu does not give us a supreme value. Instead, he provides us a supreme principle. His supreme principle is similar to Kant’s claim that we must always respect


\textsuperscript{42} Liu, “May we harm,” 308.
humanity, or the ‘rational nature’ that makes us persons. The differences between them are their concepts of DFRI and humanity. I will return to this point shortly.

Since Liu suggests a supreme principle that he holds as universal, he suffers the same criticism as that of Kant. First, Liu’s supreme principle will not help us decide the right acts in difficult moral conflicts since the only standard we have now is whether an act follows the principle or not. For example, if we must choose between two harmful acts and one act clearly has much worse consequences than the other one, following the principle could only tell us that both acts are wrong, which is not very helpful. In addition, this supreme principle could lead us to some very counterintuitive result. Let us look at the following case:

**Case 3. Stealing the life-saving medicine:**

Supposing that my father is seriously sick, and there is a medicine I could buy to save him in the pharmacy shop next to my house. Unfortunately, I have no money to buy the life-saving medicine. The only way to get the medicine is to steal it.

In this case, since stealing the medicine violates the principle of respecting DFRI, it will be immoral to steal it and save my father. I believe this conclusion is unacceptable for most people. Liu claims that the primary fault of the Confucian ideas about humanity is they overestimate the significance of family relationship.\(^{43}\) Liu, however, seems to make the similar mistake by overestimating the significance of supreme principle.

Given that Liu’s suggestion of a supreme principle does not work, could we interpret it in term of supreme value? As Derek Parfit notes, there is an unsolved ethical question about the relationship between “the good” and “the right.” While Rawl interprets Kant as suggesting “the right” is more fundamental than “the good,” Allen Wood and Barbara

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\(^{43}\) Liu, Qingping. "To become a filial son, a loyal subject, or a humane person?—on the Confucian ideas about humanity." *Asian Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (2009). 182.
Herman claim that, although Kant’s ethics takes the form of a rule or commandment, it is best understood as an ethics of value.\textsuperscript{44} I think the controversy over interpreting Kant encourages us to look for the substantive value behind rules or principles. In fact, looking for the substantive value behind rules is also applicable to Confucianism. Wong points out “Confucians are willing to articulate their teachings in the form of principles, but such principles seem to function as designators of values or general considerations that ought to be given weight in judgments about what to do.”\textsuperscript{45} Following Wong, I want to find the substantive value behind Liu’s supreme principle. I think, unlike knowing his supreme principle, knowing the substantive value will help us make better decisions in situations of moral conflict.

What is the substantive value behind Liu’s supreme principle? I think the answer lies in his definition of DFRI, which refers to “harm no one and benefit humans.” Liu seems to include two components or two substantive values when he says it. In his 2008 paper, he explicitly fleshes out these two components:

Indeed, if we benefit our relatives without harming others in conflicts, universal love is concretely realized to some degree, since no one’s DFRI are infringed wrongfully. Furthermore, if we observe public order, comply with public morality, take good care of public property, do not spit and scatter garbage everywhere, do not waste natural resources, etc., we are the agents who are implementing “universal love” because we harm no one and benefit fellow humans.\textsuperscript{46}

The first value is quite clear—not harming others. The second value, however, is not very clear. The problem is that the description Liu provides is a very weak sense of “benefiting


\textsuperscript{46} Liu, “May we harm,”308.
humans.” In my opinion, “benefiting humans” is more than not spitting or scattering garbage, not wasting natural resources and the like. These descriptions should be understood as “not damaging public property.” In other words, this weak sense of “benefiting humans” could be loosely understood as the first component, that is, not harming others. Benefiting humans requires a more active approach, such as taking care of people, including strangers, in great need. To keep things simple, I will use benefiting humans in a utilitarian sense as “promoting others’ well-being.”

Having identified the two values behind Liu’s principle, we could now ask whether these values are supreme values. I will first discuss benefiting humans as a supreme value:

SV2: Benefiting humans has infinite moral weight.

SV2 will fail if we realize the amount of suffering we could relieve around the world. It is close to infinite. Susan Wolf argues that if we held this value as supreme, we would have to spend all our resources to help strangers. In other words, benefiting humans is too demanding to be a supreme value.\(^{47}\) I will discuss this point in more detail in the next section.

How about not harming others as a supreme principle?

SV3: Not harming others has infinite moral weight.

Not harming others is less demanding than benefiting humans, but neither could it be a supreme value. Holding SV3 will cause trouble in some conflict situations. Angle provides three ways one might reach a decision on what to do in the face of an apparent conflict between values:

One possibility is to strive to maximize some underlying ur-value, to which all other values may ultimately be reduced. A second option allows for

irreducibly distinct values, but calls for choosing the greater value over the lesser, according to a fixed, ordinal ranking.\textsuperscript{48}

Angle argues that holding SV3 forces Liu to accept either the first or the second option. For the first option, we do not want to say that there is only one irreducible value that all other values could ultimately be reduced. However, if there is more than one irreducible value, holding one supreme value will not help us decide. For the second option, although the supreme value stays at the top of the ranking, this value could be trumped by the accumulation of other smaller values. Thus, depending on different contexts, choosing the supreme value is not always the best decision.

Although not harming others and benefiting humans are not supreme values, I argue that they are very significant values.\textsuperscript{49} In other words, they should have significant moral weight in moral considerations. For benefiting humans, there are two factors making them significant: the tremendous suffering of people around the world and considerable impact we could make to relieve the suffering. If we believe that pointless suffering for everyone should be eliminated, these two factors show that benefiting humans is a significant value.

As for not harming others, this is a significant value because of its universality. As David Wong argues “There is a plurality of true moralities, but that plurality does not include all moralities.” True moralities must have some overlap in order to be qualified as true moralities.\textsuperscript{50} I believe “not harming others” is an essential constituent in that overlap. This overlap

\textsuperscript{48} Angle, “No supreme principle,”35-6.

\textsuperscript{49} I am not claiming that these two values are categorically more significance than other values. In the next section, I will argue that it is impossible to make the categorical claim because these values vary in its type and scale. Not harming others and benefiting strangers are significant if we assume the scale is similar.

\textsuperscript{50} For more discussion, see Wong, David B. Natural moralities: A defense of pluralistic relativism. Oxford University Press, 2009.
sets up the constraints for all true moralities. Ruiping Fan points out a similar idea in the Confucian-Mohist debate “The favoritism affirmed by Confucius and Mencius is set within the moral constraints of a life of virtue.”\textsuperscript{51} This universality is a strong reason to think not harming others is a significant value.

2.3 Harmonization of familial love and equal obligation

I will begin by citing the third option that Angle offers for reaching a decision:

The third method I consider grants that some values may generally be more significant than others, but advocates the situation-specific harmonization of all values in a manner that honors the importance of each distinct value.\textsuperscript{52} He uses an analogy of soup to illustrate how to harmonize incommensurable values. Different values are like salt, pepper and other spices. In order to achieve an appropriate saltiness, a cook must also consider the amount of pepper and other spices she wants. Thus, it is not choosing salt over pepper, but balancing all of them.

I like Angle’s approach and his analogy, but there is one caveat. In certain conflict situations, in order to reach a harmonized decision, it could be impossible to realize all the values. I think “honors the importance of each distinct value” should be our aim instead of a requirement of harmonization. If we agree that there is no supreme value that we should always hold, we could similarly deny the extreme claim there are values that we should never give up. In Case 3, where I had to steal the medicine to save my father, I would say that I sacrificed the value of “not harming others” to fulfill the value of “filial piety.” It is not clear how Angle argues that I nevertheless honored the victim in this case. If I fail to do so, the

\textsuperscript{51} Fan, Ruiping. ”Consanguinism, corruption, and humane love: remembering why Confucian morality is not modern western morality.” Dao 7, no. 1 (2008): 25.

\textsuperscript{52} Angel, “No supreme Principle.” 36.
result could still be a harmonized decision since harmonization does not require us to honor each single value. Using Angle’s soup analogy, I believe if we want the soup to taste bitter, we could give up adding sugar into it because it is counterproductive for harmonization.

So far, I have argued that familial love and equal obligation are not supreme values. I have also argued that they are values that we could never sacrifice. In this section, I want to discuss how we could balance or harmonize familial love and equal obligation. Agreeing with Angle and other scholars, I also think that familial love and equal obligation are incommensurable since there is no single value that familial love and equal obligation could reduce to. However, I think they are comparable. Harmony, nevertheless, is a concrete decision on what we should do or would do in the conflict situation. This decision cannot be randomly picked from some incomparable values. Otherwise, why do we call this decision a harmony instead of a chaos? Thus, harmony must be a result of our careful consideration of different comparable moral weights. Harmonization is still very important because although these values are comparable, in most situations, they are, using Parfit’s term, imprecisely comparable. Thus, balancing familial love and equal obligation is balancing these imprecisely comparable moral weights.

Parfit’s analysis on comparability provides a good framework for my discussion of balancing familial love and equal obligation.\footnote{Parfit, “On what matters: Volume 1,”130-41.} When we say two values are precisely comparable, it means there are precise truths about their relative weight or strength. Calling some values precisely comparable is similar to calling them commensurable. As I have
previously discussed, familial love and equal obligation are not commensurable, that is, not precisely comparable.

Familial love and equal obligation could not be wholly incomparable either. If they were, we would have to accept that no moral weights of familial love could be either stronger or weaker than that of equal obligation. On one hand, this means harmonization is totally random, which I have rejected. On the other hand, it contradicts our common sense in many situations. For example, in Case 3, our intuition tells us, compared to stealing, saving my father has a stronger moral weight. If they were wholly incomparable, we would have to concede that not saving my father is also fine.

What can we do to harmonize these moral weights that are only imprecisely comparable? I suggest focusing on two things: types of acts and scale. We fulfill familial love or equal obligation through different acts. These acts vary in their types. For example, I could fulfill familial love through giving resources to my family members, saving the life of my father, spending time with my parents, and other acts like these. Similarly, we could fulfill equal obligation through the same or different acts. I believe we have an intuition that is less imprecise to help us compare the moral weight of these types. Saving a life weighs more than spending time, and killing weighs more than stealing the medicine. In other words, there is an imprecise rank for the moral weights of different types of acts, which we could utilize to reach a harmonized decision.

Besides types of act, scale also plays a crucial role. The manifestation of different acts varies in scale. For example, the scale could vary from saving one person to saving one-hundred persons, from stealing ten dollars from a person to stealing everything from her.
Again, our intuition tells us that, other things being equal, saving one-hundred persons has stronger moral weight than saving one person. However, it does not imply that the moral weight of saving one hundred persons is a hundred times stronger than that of saving one person. They could only be imprecisely comparable. However, our intuition makes it less imprecise.

The hardest and easiest situations come from certain combinations of type and scale. For example, as Singer argues, we ought to pull the drowning child out of a shallow pond, even though in doing so we will get our clothes muddy. The sharp contrast of type and scale makes it impermissible not to act. However, what if saving the child will cost one of my arms, are we still required to do so? It becomes less clear. Comparing familial love and equal obligation, we will never be able to categorically claim that one overweighs the other due to the variation in type and scale. Since it is practically impossible to discuss every case, I will focus on the most salient factors of harmonizing filial love and equal obligation.

The first factor is a distinction between doing and allowing harm. I will begin by introducing the doctrine of doing and allowing. The philosophical distinction between doing and allowing could be very complicated, but for this paper, I will distinguish doing and allowing by following Fiona Woollard’s definition. I think this definition matches our intuition very well. Woollard notes the distinction between doing and allowing matches up with an asymmetry in the structure of imposition. She claims, “When an agent does harm, the agent imposes on the victim; when an agent refrains from allowing harm, the victim imposes on the agent.” For example, in Case 1, 2 and 3, stealing the sheep, killing a person, and stealing the medicine are all instances of doing harm since the agents impose on the victims.
Besides doing harm, there are also examples of allowing harm in Case 1 and Case 2. Examples are the mutual concealment and the escaping. The victims impose the need for justice and compensation on the new agents (the son in Case 1 and Shun in Case 2). Thus, the mutual concealment and the escaping should be considered as allowing harm because they prevent the victims from receiving the deserved compensation.

According to the doctrine of doing and allowing, there is a morally significant asymmetry between doing harm and allowing harm. As David McCarthy points out:

[T]he constraints on harming are strong and... the constraints on allowing harm are weak. Very roughly, commonsense morality says that it is typically impermissible [emphasis added] for an agent to harm someone else even if the agent would thereby prevent herself or a bystander from suffering a greater [emphasis added] harm. But commonsense morality also says that it is typically permissible [emphasis added] for an agent to allow someone else to suffer a harm even if the agent thereby only avoids herself or a bystander suffering a smaller [emphasis added] harm.  

I will not defend this doctrine here. I adhere to this doctrine and claim that if the types of act are the same and their scales are similar, doing harm weighs more than allowing harm. As Fiona Woollard puts it, “doing harm is harder to justify than merely allowing harm.”

Therefore, to justify harming rather than allowing harm, the moral weight of filial piety must also be stronger.

Besides the distinction of doing and allowing harm, I think the distinction between harming oneself and harming others is also important. I claim that, other things equal, it is harder to justify harming others than harming oneself. In other words, if we must harm someone to fulfill familial love, we should try to harm ourselves rather than harm others. For example, in Case 3, if I could “beg” the shop owner to give me the medicine instead of

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54 McCarcy, “Harming and Allowing Harm,” 749.
stealing, I would have a reason to do so. Begging the shop owner, I sacrifice my own dignity rather than shop owner’s private property. I do not mean that this reason is decisive. Depending on how much weight we put on our “dignity,” the final decision could go either way.

In my opinion, for both Confucians and Mohists, self-sacrifice is the essence of filial piety. As I have mentioned, in Case 2, giving up the empire could be interpreted as a self-sacrifice for Shun. We can find similar examples in the *Analects*. In 4.19, Confucius asks children not to travel far when parents are alive. Thus, facing the conflict of fulfilling filial piety and harming strangers, we should try to convert the situation into self-sacrifice.

If we *must* harm others, we will need to recognize this moral weight in our consideration. The best way to think about this moral weight is in term of appropriate compensation for the victim. In Case 1, in considering covering for his father, the son ought to think about whether he could return the sheep or compensate with something of equal or greater value. I do not mean that this is the only appropriate compensation; there are many other ways depending on what view one has about compensation and punishment. I believe some views are more convincing than others, but I shall not go any further to complicate this paper. My goal is to emphasize the moral weight of appropriate compensation, since the insufficient consideration of victims is an essential weakness for Confucius and Mencius.

So far, I have focused on the situation where we benefit our family members by harming others. Another common and difficult situation is benefiting our family members by allowing harm to others. I will turn to this situation by discussing people who are very altruistic. Since they consider strangers’ suffering to be equal to their own suffering, they consider not
helping strangers as allowing harm, which they find unacceptable. Thus, they devote their life to helping strangers. I have mixed feeling towards these highly altruistic people. On the one hand, I find them very admirable since relieving people from harm is always something I want to do. On the other hand, I could not imagine living in such a demanding way as these people do. They are almost “too extreme” for me. Holding this mixed feeling, I want to find out what I can learn from them.

The first thing we could learn from them is to realize the suffering around the world and how much impact we can make to relieve the suffering. For most people, it is not hard to recognize the potential harm if they are exposed to the situation such as seeing a child about to fall into a well. However, it is hard for people to always think about the suffering that is far from them, such as the hunger in Africa or even in the United States. In the influential paper *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Peter Singer argues that physical distance should make no difference on our obligation to help strangers.\(^{56}\) In addition, the physical distance will keep becoming less problematic on our ability to help. As David Rodin points out:

> globalization has profoundly increased the mobility of goods, labor, and capital; the increasing interconnectedness of political, economic, and financial systems and the radical empowerment of groups and individuals through technology—have enabled us to harm and help others in ways that our forebears could not have imagined.\(^{57}\)

Given this reason, in thinking about equal care, we should have a global perspective.

Taking a global perspective also brings some trouble for equal care that we need to be aware of. First, we seem to have infinite responsibility. The world is just too big and too messy. As an individual, I could not and probably will never resolve the problem. What

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should I do? Singer and other promoters of effective altruism suggest that: we should do the
most good we can. I think this idea has been understood mistakenly by some of its
opponents and some of its supporters. The wrong interpretation is that we should do the most
good we physically(materially) can. I will use a story in Larissa MacFarquhar’s book
Strangers Drowning to elucidate this point. MacFarquhar follows the life of extreme
altruistic people. Charles and Dorothy are two of these people.

Both Charles and Dorothy had given up most of their wealth and lived together with a
very committed standard—about sixty-two dollars a month per person. In other words, they
are almost doing the most good they physically can. At one point, Charles believes that there
is more he could do. So, he told Dorothy that he thought they should live on the street so that
the rent could be given away to people who needed it more. Dorothy rejects it because she
thinks nobody should live on the street. Both Charles and Dorothy could be considered as the
extreme examples of effective altruism. However, even being extreme, Dorothy will not live
on the street because it is the psychological boundary for her. Singer admits that “everyone
has boundaries,” and “if you find yourself doing something that makes you bitter, it is time to
reconsider.”

For most altruistic people, a psychological boundary stops them from doing further good
long before they reach the physical boundary. Singer himself is no exception. For him, the
psychological boundary for increasing the donation is that “for many years we (he and his

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58 Singer, Peter. The most good you can do: How effective altruism is changing ideas about living ethically. Text Publishing, 2015. Effective altruism is based on the simple idea I mentioned in this sentence. It provides more concert guidelines to live an ethical life. For more discussion, see Singer’s book.


60 Singer, “The most good you can do,” 13-4.
wife) were giving away a bigger slice of our income than anyone we knew. No one, not even the megarich seemed to be giving a higher proportion.”

There is also another “famous” criticism of Singer. When his mother suffered with Alzheimer’s disease, he spent a lot of resources to take care of her. Some people use this example to show that Singer broke all his own principles, but I think it demonstrates that there is a psychological boundary for everyone and an important one is familial love.

While trying to help others, familial love and equal obligation could be in conflict when we realize that our resources are limited. Resources do not merely mean material resources. In fact, our emotional reservoir is also bounded. Another story from MacFarquhar shows this point. Hector and Sue are extreme altruists who had two kids and adopted twenty-two children. Hector and Sue had tried very hard to take care of all these children. It seems that they had done a great job to provide material needs for them as all of the children grow up healthily. However, they are not able to provide enough emotional care. Among the twenty-two children, two were sent to jail and three got pregnant as teenagers. I do not mean Hector and Sue are bad parents. They tried everything they could. These troubles only show that they were not able to provide enough care for all the children because their capacity to love and care was not boundless. In fact, none of us has such capacity. Realizing our limitation to love and care will help us make better decisions in the conflict between love towards family members and equal care towards strangers.

Another problem for effective altruism and for extreme altruists is that they only focus on relieving suffering. Given that there is almost infinite suffering in the world, one could set

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61 Ibid., 29.
up her goal to reduce suffering and working on it for a life time. However, reducing suffering could not be the only meaningful thing to do. Producing happiness is also worthy doing. Again, since the moral weights of relieving suffering and producing happiness are only imprecisely comparable, I will not be able to provide a formula on how to calculate this. If this view is acceptable, however, it will be permissible, in some situations, to produce happiness for our family members while allowing some harm to strangers.
Chapter 3. Gratitude and Familial Love

In the last chapter, I will conclude with the arguments on why family relationship should have some moral weight. I argue that this moral weight comes from multiple factors that are unique for family relationship, including special gratitude towards family members, self-identity and emotional bonding. These factors reinforce each other, forming a strong reason to treat family members with some preference. I will also argue that having no preference towards family members is humanly unreasonable.

The first reason is that we owe our family members too much, so we should be grateful towards what they have done for us. This gratitude gives special moral weight for family relationship. We receive various things from our family members, some are material and others are not. Among these things, love is probably the most important one. Wong pinpoints the essential character of love and the gratitude we should have due to this love, “the love received is not merely a ‘benefit,’ and the gratitude we feel toward those who gave it is not just a desire to reciprocate a benefit. It is based on the recognition that we would be perhaps unimaginably different without that love.”62 I agree with Wong that, without this love from our family members, we would be totally different. I will return to this point on identification later. I want to add one more point about why should we be grateful for this love.

I frequently heard this saying while growing up, but I did not really comprehend it until recently—that the love from parents is the most selfless thing is the world. The pain my mother bore during the delivery; the noise they bore during the midnight feedings; the

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loneliness they bore for sending me to study in the United States. The examples are countless, but the reason is one—selfless love. Moreover, I believe in almost all healthy family relationships, parents infuse this love into all their actions. Therefore, we should also be grateful for material things we receive from them, and not treat them merely as a benefit.

Besides the character of love, Wong also points out that the gratitude we feel is not a desire to reciprocate a benefit. I believe Wong implies that the best way to express our gratitude is not merely reciprocating a benefit. I support this point, and I think some Western theories of filial obligation fail to capture this important idea. As Simon Keller points out, theorists of filial obligation try to find out “things that we ought to do for our parents, but not just anyone.”\textsuperscript{63} The debt theorists and the gratitude theorists answer this question quite similarly. They think that children have duties because they need to pay back what they get from their parents, and the way to do so is reciprocating a benefit. The idea behind it is that children should offer some things in return to clear up what their family members have offered them, so they could feel “I owe you nothing anymore.”

Confucians raise objection to this approach through their teaching of three-year mourning. Three years is the expected length for filial children to mourn their lost parents. Since this ritual is quite demanding, one person said that “To observe a single year’s mourning is better than to dispense with it altogether.” Mencius replied, “This is as if there were someone twisting his older brother’s arm, and you said to him, ‘Gently, gently,’ whereas what you should be teaching him is filiality and brotherliness; that is all.”\textsuperscript{64} What Mencius implies is that the length of mourning is not something to bargain because children


\textsuperscript{64} Bloom, “Mencius,”7A39.
are not paying back the benefit from their parents. To discuss whether one year or three years is the permissible length totally miss the point of mourning.

What is the point of mourning? When Confucius’s student Zaiwo told Confucius that he thought a year is good enough for mourning, Confucius remarked:

Zaiwo is really perverse! It is only after being tended by his parents for three years that an infant can finally leave their bosom. The ritual of a three-year mourning period for one’s parents is practiced throughout the empire. Certainly Zaiwo received this three years of loving care from his parents! Clearly, Confucius emphasizes the love we have received from our parents. Mourning is the way to be grateful and express this gratitude of their love. Filial children do not want to get rid of the “indebted” feeling because they know that they are and will always be indebted to their parents. In Confucian tradition, gratitude towards parents does not need to stop after our parents pass away. But how should we express it while living with them? My answer is intuitive and straightforward—keep being grateful and loving them back. If there is anything that is comparable to love, it has to be love itself. This is the special “duty” we have towards family members.

In addition to the gratitude that we should have towards our family members, family relationship provides a sense of identity. Keller’s special goods theory seems to follow this line of thought. He argues that parent-child relationship provides unique goods for parents and children that any other relationships will not be able to provide. One such good is the formation of our identities. For example, parents see their children as younger version of themselves and experience a sense of continuity and transcendence. This point resonates with Wong’s observation that one prime example of filial piety in the Confucian tradition is

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66 Keller, "Four theories of filial duty." 266.
“the son’s carrying out the way of the father.”67 In other words, family relationship forms the identities for family members, and filial piety requires us to acknowledge and maintain such identities.

Since we identify ourselves with family members, we establish a very strong emotional bond with them. This emotional bond is usually much stronger than that with strangers. This emotional bond provides a reason for us to treat our family members partially. Let us see what will happen if we treat them equally. In the example where both my mother and a stranger are drowning, it is normal for us, as human beings, to have a stronger emotional response towards our family members than towards the stranger. Thus, in order to treat them equally, we must suppress this natural humane emotional response. The stronger our emotional bonding with family members, the more suppression is required to treat them equally with strangers. I think there is a human unreasonableness in this idea.68

Gratitude, self-identity and emotional bonding all provide reasons to treat family members with some preference. Moreover, these factors reinforce each other. If we have more gratitude towards our parents, we will usually establish stronger identity and emotional bonds with them. Meanwhile, the stronger emotional bond will promote greater gratitude towards our family members.

In the end of this paper, I want to revisit what my mother said after watching the movie Troy. Although she was wrong to say that familial love could trump any other values, there is no doubt that family relationship is unique and deserves special treatment. I have had some

68 In the Universalism, Wong states that “even though there is no logical impossibility in the idea of family love becoming an impartial universal love, there is a human impossibility in the idea.” Wong says that he probably will not use impossibility anymore because some people demonstrate extreme altruism in real world. I agree with Wong, so I soften this claim by calling it human unreasonable.
difficult situations where I chose the interest of strangers, and I do not doubt that more situations are coming. However, I find myself no longer anxious. Knowing my obligation towards strangers and my gratitude towards my family members, I believe love and care are the very tools that help us resolve difficult situations. Although this memory always flashes back to me, I hardly remember other movies I watched with my parents. This movie might be the last one I watched with them. Since then, I started to go to movies with my friends instead of my parents. I spend less and less time with them. How hard it is to be a good, or even a filial child? Perhaps all they need is spending some time and watching a movie with me. Going to a movie with them will be the first thing I do the next time I visit them.
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