
A Dialogue Between Julius Caesar and Mencius on the Justice of War

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Abstract: This article examines Brutus's assassination of Caesar in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* through the framework of Mencius' theory of just war. Using the Mencian criteria of motive, means, and consequence, it offers a cross-cultural reassessment of the legitimacy of tyrannicide in the play. The study argues that Caesar does not meet Mencius' standard of a tyrant, while the violent consequences of the assassination and the reversal of public opinion undermine Brutus's claim to justice. From the perspective of Mencian ethics, the assassination lacks a foundation in benevolence and therefore cannot be regarded as a just political act.

Keywords: Mencius; *Julius Caesar*; outcast; benevolence

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1. Introduction

Julius Caesar is generally regarded as one of William Shakespeare's earliest tragedies, composed around 1599. The play is adapted from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and recounts the assassination of the Roman ruler Caius Julius Caesar and the subsequent struggles for power and moral legitimacy that ensue. Unlike the heroic and grand image of Caesar portrayed by Plutarch, Shakespeare presents a markedly humanized figure: "his 'Caesar' is depicted as aged, partially deaf, superstitious, and vain^[1]." As a Renaissance humanist, Shakespeare foregrounds the mortal and fallible dimensions of political authority. It is precisely this ambiguous portrayal that fuels the senators' fear that Caesar might become a tyrant and undermine the Roman Republic, leading them to orchestrate his assassination. His bodily demise, like that of an ordinary man, may be seen as a tragic consequence of his own political prestige.

Caesar remains a highly controversial figure among scholars: Plutarch suggests "that he did not show a proper respect for the Senate^[2]". Whereas St. Augustine evaluates Caesar more positively, claiming that he "used his victory with mercy^[2]". In contrast to Western philosophies of war shaped by religious and theological traditions, the Confucian philosopher Mencius articulates a theory of just warfare grounded in "benevolence". His well-known formulation, often summarized as "to comfort the people and punish the guilty (*diaomin fazui*), asserts that the legitimacy of military action lies in its moral orientation toward the people^[3]."

Mencius' theory of just war may be understood as a tripartite structure encompassing: motive, means and

consequence. First, with regard to motive, he declares: “I have indeed heard of the punishment of the ‘outcast Tchou’, but I have not heard of any regicide^[4].” Second, concerning means, Mencius maintains that “The benevolent man has no match”^[4] and that “One who is not fond of killing can unite it.”^[4] Third, at the level of consequence, Mencius warns against empty political practice divorced from genuine benefit to the people: “The multitude can be said never to understand what they practise, to notice what they repeatedly do, or to be aware of the path they follow all their lives^[4].”

Building upon this comparative trajectory, the present study seeks to employ Chinese philosophical thought as a theoretical foundation, thereby opening an interdisciplinary path for rereading Shakespeare through a cross-cultural lens. “Yang Zhouhan, for instance, conducted comparative studies between Shakespeare and Chinese opera, as well as between Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu^[5].” Taking Mencius’ theory of just war as a normative framework of political philosophy, this article rereads Caesar to argue that Brutus’s act of assassination, lacking a genuine foundation in benevolence, transforms political violence carried out in the name of the people into a disorderly force, precisely because it fails to rest upon authentic popular will.

2. Chapter One: Executing Before Tyranny Emerges

Mencius responds to King’s question concerning the legitimacy of punitive military action. He argues that when a ruler tramples upon “ren” (benevolence) and “yi” (righteousness), he ceases to be a legitimate sovereign and degenerates into a “outcast”. Consequently, to punish such a solitary tyrant is not to assassinate a ruler, but rather to execute a single criminal, an act of moral justice. It follows that, within Mencius’ theory of just war, tyrannical oppression constitutes the indispensable precondition for a morally justified campaign. If a ruler has not enacted despotism and continues to enjoy broad popular support, he does not qualify as a solitary villain and enemy of the people, and political violence directed against him can scarcely claim legitimacy.

Judged by this standard, the Caesar portrayed in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* does not conform to Mencius’ conception of a tyrant. In Act I, the Roman populace warmly welcomes Caesar’s return: common citizens such as the Cobbler lay aside their work and gather in the streets to greet him, demonstrating both his prestige and popular support. Act I, Scene 2 further confirms that Caesar cannot be easily categorized as a despot. Casca, one of the conspirators, recounts: “Ay, marry, was’t, and he put it by thrice, every time gentler than other; and at every putting-by mine honest neighbors shouted^[6].” Not only does Caesar return in triumph, but he publicly refuses the offered crown three times, displaying a gesture of humility that appears to deepen his popularity. As one critic observes, “Caesar’s rule is by no means a tyrannical usurpation, but rather a virtuous kingship, after all, Caesar is not Tarquin^[7].” According to Mencius’ criteria, therefore, Caesar neither constitutes an outcast nor forfeits the people’s support. Brutus’s violent act, Caesar’s assassination, thus loses its moral foundation from the outset and must be regarded as illegitimate violence.

Before analyzing Brutus’s speech, it is necessary to consider his character. Born into one of Rome’s most ancient aristocratic families, Brutus traced his lineage, according to family legend, to Lucius Junius Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic. His father was executed in a political purge carried out by Pompey’s faction. “Regarded as a ‘moral saint’, Brutus adheres to a rationalist ideal and remains deeply wary of personal autocracy and strongman politics^[8].” During the Roman civil war, he sided with Pompey against Caesar. Yet after Caesar’s victory, he was pardoned and even appointed to high office as praetor-designate. In terms of personal relations, Brutus was indebted to Caesar’s clemency; by ordinary standards of gratitude and political loyalty, he would not seem the likely organizer and architect of the assassination. Yet the dramatic structure of the play generates precisely such tension, producing a striking reversal in Brutus’s trajectory.

In his speech, Brutus declares: “It must be by his death; and for my part, I know no personal cause to spurn at him, But for the general^[6].” He frames himself as a representative of the public good, asserting that when concentrated personal power threatens the republic, swift removal becomes necessary. However, from the perspective of Mencius’ theory of just war, such an appeal to saving the people cannot rest solely upon individual judgment. The Roman populace has not

identified Caesar as a tyrant, nor have they demonstrably suffered grievous oppression under his rule. Brutus's political violence is therefore grounded neither in actual despotism nor in authentic popular will. Within the Mencian framework, its claim to justice is difficult to sustain.

Moreover, Brutus's act is not a response to realized tyranny but a preventive measure. At the conclusion of his soliloquy, he asserts: "And therefore think him as a serpent's egg, Which, hatch'd, would as his kind grow mischievous, And kill him in the shell^[6]." This metaphor makes clear that, in Brutus's view, Caesar has not yet become a tyrant. Yet as a Stoic republican, Brutus cannot tolerate the prospect of power concentrated in a single individual. His solution is preemptive destruction. From Mencius' standpoint, however, the people have not yet suffered, nor has a genuine tyrant fully emerged. Acting upon speculative future danger rather than concrete injustice, Brutus's assassination of Caesar cannot be regarded as a just act.

3. Chapter Two: Violent Consequences and Betrayal

Mencius also offers an explicit discussion of the problem of benevolence in the conduct of war. He states: "In wars to gain land, the dead fill the plains; in wars to gain cities, the dead fill the cities. This is known as showing the land the way to devour human flesh. Death is too light a punishment for such men^[4]." In other words, when armies are raised to seize territory, corpses cover the countryside; when cities are fought over, blood saturates the streets. To wage war for the sake of land is, metaphorically, to feed upon human life. The crime is so grave that even death cannot atone for it.

This passage reveals another core dimension of Mencius' theory of just war: violent consequences are not incidental by-products of warfare but constitute one of the central criteria for judging its moral legitimacy. Even if those who initiate war claim just intentions, if their methods and outcomes inflict large-scale harm upon the people, moral justification becomes impossible. Crucially, Mencius' conception of just war is not governed by a single standard but forms a tripartite structure of motive, means, consequence. The present chapter focuses on the second dimension, "the means" by which political violence is carried out.

When this standard is applied to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Brutus's conspiracy vividly illustrates Mencius' warning that violence indifferent to its consequences invites severe moral condemnation. After assassinating Caesar, Brutus and his fellow conspirators achieve a fleeting triumph; yet this apparent victory fails to restore political order. Instead, Antony's funeral oration successfully incites popular fury, unleashing mass unrest in Rome. Shortly thereafter, the city descends into the bloody alliance of Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus, ushering in a period of proscriptions and terror. Rome becomes embroiled in a tripartite struggle for supremacy, culminating in large-scale civil war and the decisive Battle of Philippi.

Although Brutus proclaims at the end of Act III, Scene 1, "Do so, and let no man abide this deed, But we the doers^[6]." and insists upon assuming responsibility for the deed, the actual consequences far exceed any notion of limited, personal accountability. The violence he initiates does not remain confined to the conspirators; rather, it plunges the entire Roman polity into bloodshed and fragmentation. From a Mencian perspective, the assassination produces precisely the kind of catastrophic outcome that demands moral and legal censure. If the justice of war is ultimately measured by whether the people benefit, Brutus's action completely disregards popular welfare and instead engenders greater suffering. Its claim to justice thereby collapses.

Caesar's final and most famous words "*Et tu, Brute?* --Then fall, Caesar!"^[6] carry profound ethical resonance. In Western cultural memory, this Latin phrase has become emblematic of betrayal: the most trusted friend delivers the most fatal blow. The utterance signifies not only Caesar's physical death but also the rupture of moral bonds. Brutus's betrayal is doubly cruel. First, it constitutes a political betrayal rooted in ideological divergence over republican principles. Second, it represents an ethical betrayal within the hierarchical yet personal relationship between ruler and subordinate. In his final moment, Caesar beholds not merely naked blades but the treachery of a trusted companion.

Brutus betrays his sovereign not because Caesar has demonstrably become a tyrant, but because of anticipated

political danger. In doing so, he reveals a deficiency of benevolence at its core. Such betrayal marks the ultimate loss of moral conscience: when one kills a ruler who has extended clemency and favor, the heart of benevolence and righteousness is gravely compromised. Brutus thus fails to embody benevolence both toward his ruler and toward the people. Though he claims to act for the public good, his deed ignores the disaster inflicted upon the Roman populace. According to Mencius' ethical framework, Brutus is therefore an "unbenevolent man". What might have been construed as the righteous punishment of a tyrant degenerates instead into a mere act of regicide. From its inception, his action lacks any legitimate foundation.

Moreover, the conspiracy is conceived in secrecy by a small circle of aristocrats and executed within the Senate; it neither represents the will of the broader populace nor embodies the Mencian principle that justice must be grounded in benevolent concern for the people. Brutus's assassination thus suffers from a dual deficiency: it lacks "benevolence" toward the ruler and "benevolence" toward the people. Under this double absence, its moral legitimacy can never be sustained.

4. Chapter Three: The Reversal of Public Opinion

Mencius articulates the well-known proposition: "Mencius said, 'The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler^[4].'" The core implication of this statement is that political institutions must not override the well-being of the people, and that the ruler's authority ultimately depends upon the support and recognition of the populace. Applied to the question of war, this principle establishes a decisive standard: public opinion constitutes the final arbiter of legitimacy. Any war or act of political violence that claims to be just must withstand the judgment of the people and secure their moral and emotional assent. If it fails this test, no degree of self-justification on the part of its initiators can sustain its claim to justice.

Yet in Act III, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, this very test of public opinion undergoes a dramatic collapse. After Caesar's assassination, Brutus and the conspirators believe they have liberated Rome. However, when Mark Antony ascends the rostrum, his carefully orchestrated funeral oration entirely destabilizes the fragile foundation of popular support that Brutus has secured. Later interpreters of Mencius have observed that public opinion within his theory of just war may possess a degree of instability^[9]; nevertheless, the people, as the embodiment of the majority's interests, remain the ultimate source of legitimacy. The rapid reversal of the Roman crowd demonstrates that Brutus's action fails to meet the demands of a genuinely just cause. Brutus assumes that the populace naturally shares his republican convictions, yet he never addresses their concrete concerns. When Antony reveals Caesar's will—bequeathing wealth and public spaces to the citizens, the crowd recognizes that Caesar had attended to their material interests. By contrast, Brutus, the self-proclaimed liberator, offers them little beyond abstract political ideals.

Under Antony's rhetoric, public opinion undergoes a startling transformation: "The Roman mob, who moments earlier had sworn loyalty to the 'noble' Brutus, now prepare to devote themselves to Caesar's 'just' cause^[10]." The conspirators are recast as "traitors" and "villains," and the enraged populace calls for violent retribution. If the assassination had truly been, as Brutus claims, an act undertaken to rescue Rome from impending tyranny, then according to Mencius' framework, a justice genuinely rooted in popular will should withstand public scrutiny. Once public sentiment reverses so swiftly, it reveals that the purported justice never genuinely engaged the people's lived interests. The conspiratorial coalition disintegrates after a single speech, exposing the fragility of its moral foundation one grounded more in elite consensus than in authentic popular conviction.

More importantly, the consequences that follow the assassination further expose the injustice of the political violence. Antony's oration does not restore civic order; instead, it ignites a cycle of vengeance and escalating unrest. The fury of the crowd culminates in the tragic killing of Cinna the Poet, who is murdered merely because he shares the same name as one of the conspirators. Mencius explicitly condemns the practice of "feigning benevolence and righteousness while engaging in slaughter"^[4] insisting that true justice must alleviate suffering and restore order rather than produce greater chaos and

bloodshed. When an act of violence precipitates the rapid fragmentation of the polity and draws the populace into renewed conflict driven by fear and passion, it betrays the very ends it claims to serve.

Thus, *Julius Caesar* dramatizes a profound political truth: when violence accelerates the disintegration of the state, entangles the people in emotional upheaval, and plunges society into greater instability than existed prior to the assassination, such action has already departed from the path of justice it professes to uphold.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, this study contends that, when viewed through the lens of Mencius' theory of just war, Brutus's assassination of Caesar cannot be justified at the levels of motive, means, or consequence. What Shakespeare presents in *Julius Caesar* is not merely a straightforward tragedy of tyrannicide, but a profound meditation on elite political violence. When political action is severed from the foundation of "benevolence" and rests solely upon the moral self-discipline and rational judgment of a select few, even if carried out in the name of the people, it inevitably descends into disorder and catastrophe.

Seen in the light of Mencian war ethics, *Julius Caesar* reveals a striking cross-cultural resonance: genuine justice must withstand the combined tests of the people, of time, and of consequence. Mencius' war philosophy, grounded in benevolence as its ethical core, thus provides not only an illuminating interpretive framework for reading *Julius Caesar*, but also a warning to contemporary political philosophy any form of political violence divorced from the will and welfare of the people, regardless of its proclaimed motives, will ultimately disclose its unjust nature.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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