

Dai Zhen's Normative Ethics

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Abstract: In philosophy today, normative ethics is usually understood as the enterprise of making theoretical, systematic, or at least general claims about ethical behavior and character, or ethical values more broadly. Most 21st-century specialists in normative ethics are expected to have views about certain systematic theories of ethical value, such as deontology, consequentialism, or virtue ethics. Dai Zhen certainly had systematic and theoretical views about ethical values, but his theorizing was largely in response to a distinctive set of issues that motivated him in his own time, especially the importance of desire fulfillment and well-being for ethical norms and the relations between the virtues. In this paper, I will explicate Dai's general views about these and other issues in normative ethics – the ones that were important to Dai and his interlocutors in their historical and intellectual contexts. My conclusions are as follows: First, his most controversial claims about desire-satisfaction had to do with a certain set of self-interested desires, not so much with desires more broadly. Second, Dai was convinced that the moral orthodoxy of his day systematically discounted the welfare-based interests of ordinary people, but he did not go so far as to defend a purely welfarist theory of ethical value (according to which, the only good is well-being and the only bad is ill-being). In addition to human welfare, he was also concerned to protect and promote orderliness, which is concerned with justice and promotion of special relationships (the value of which are not reducible to welfare alone). Finally, Dai had an interesting account of the relations between the virtues, according to which some were more responsible for tracking and promoting order and others were more concerned with tracking and promoting well-being. He nevertheless thought that there was a certain unity of the virtues, such that one couldn't instantiate the highest grade of any one cardinal virtue without also instantiating some of the other cardinal virtues.