

Resolving the “Trolley Problem” through Human Nature, Pragmatism, and Institutions: An Exploration of Han Feizi’s Thought in a Scene from *Swords into Plowshares*

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Abstract: This thesis takes as its analytical entry point a pivotal scene from the historical drama *Swords into Plowshares*, in which the protagonist Guo Rong confronts a breakdown of order during a refugee food distribution. By drawing an analogy with the well-known ethical dilemma of the “trolley problem,” the study investigates the Legalist undercurrents—specifically those of Han Feizi—that inform Guo’s drastic decision. The discussion proceeds along three interconnected dimensions. First, “governing by following human nature” reveals how Guo exploits the refugees’ innate self-interest through exemplary punishment, a strategy that resonates with Han Feizi’s conviction that people are fundamentally driven by the desire for gain and the fear of harm. Second, “valuing pragmatism in governance” demonstrates that Guo’s imposition of a severe penalty for a minor infraction is deliberately calibrated to restore public order with maximum efficiency, echoing the Legalist criterion of practical utility as the ultimate measure of political action. Third, “wielding the two handles and upholding institutions” shows that Guo combines rewards and punishments with the explicit enunciation of rules—an embryonic form of institutional governance—which mirrors Han Feizi’s tripartite framework of law (fa), statecraft (shu), and power (shi). The thesis further observes that Guo, though performing as a Legalist enforcer, remains keenly aware of the moral cost of his deeds, thereby exposing a profound tension between political expediency and ethical conscience. Through a close reading of both the dramatic narrative and canonical Legalist texts, this study not only illuminates the contextual applicability of Han Feizi’s philosophy but also invites reflection on the enduring ethical predicaments inherent in crisis governance.

Keywords: Han Feizi, Human Nature, Pragmatism, Institutions, *Swords into Plowshares*.

1. Introduction

In 2026, the historical drama *Swords into Plowshares* captivated Chinese audiences and generated extensive public discussion. Set against the turbulent backdrop of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, the series chronicles the intertwined fates of three young rulers—Qian Hongchu, Zhao Kuangyin, and Guo Rong—as they navigate the collapse of political order and the devastation of war. Through their gradual awakening to the necessity of national reunification, and after decades of painstaking effort, they ultimately bring about a peaceful consolidation of the realm. The drama not only impresses with its meticulous historical reconstruction but also serves as a rich repository of pre-Qin philosophical ideas. Indeed, the ethical norms, social hierarchies, strategic calculations, and principles of conduct portrayed in the narrative variously reflect the doctrines of the “four schools and seven masters.” Among these, Legalism—often marginalized in popular discourse—emerges as particularly salient in moments of acute crisis.

The narrative is inextricably tied to chaos: displaced populations flood into cities, desperately seeking food and shelter—a situation vividly rendered in Episode 7. In that episode, Guo Rong is entrusted with managing refugee relief through a work-for-food program. However, at the porridge distribution site, order quickly collapses as starving refugees, driven by primal hunger, scramble frantically for the food, spilling both porridge and cakes and thereby depriving others of their share. Faced with this escalating turmoil, Guo Rong makes a swift and brutal decision: he slits the throat of one

refugee who violated the queue. As blood spills and the crowd falls into stunned silence, he turns to the assembled multitude and declares: “Follow orders and abide by the rules, and everyone will receive porridge. Disobey and break the rules, and this will be your fate.” Witnessing this, Qian Hongchu, who embodies a more compassionate governance ideal, protests vehemently, throwing his official credentials to the ground and crying out: “He was merely hungry and wanted a bowl of hot porridge—what law did he break?” This stark confrontation between the two characters bears a striking resemblance to the classic “trolley problem” in modern ethics: should one choose Guo’s path of sacrificing one to save a thousand, or should one adhere to Qian’s principle of equal care for every individual? There is no absolute answer. Yet, upon closer inspection, both the refugees’ unruly behaviour and Guo’s draconian response can be fruitfully interpreted through the lens of Han Feizi’s political philosophy.

2. Governing by Following Human Nature

Han Feizi posits that human nature is inherently self-interested, but he does not advocate its transformation; rather, he insists that the wise ruler should harness this nature to his own ends. In the chapter “Eight Canons” of the Han Feizi, he writes: “In governing all under heaven, one must follow human nature. Human nature possesses likes and dislikes; hence rewards and punishments can be employed. Once rewards and punishments are usable, prohibitions and ordinances can be established, and the means of governance are complete.”^[1] For Han Feizi, the universal inclination

toward benefit and away from harm furnishes the very basis for effective sanctioning systems. People act under the impetus of desire and self-preservation, and it is precisely this predictability that allows the ruler to steer collective behaviour through calibrated incentives and deterrents.

The food-rioting episode in *Swords into Plowshares* offers a compelling dramatization of this theoretical premise. Initially, the refugees were queuing in an orderly fashion, but one individual, propelled by the instinct for survival, broke rank and triggered a chaotic scramble. Guo Rong's response—executing that rule-breaker—was not an arbitrary act of cruelty but a calculated intervention designed to exploit the crowd's psychological disposition. The refugees, desperate to avoid starvation, naturally sought any immediate advantage, which led them to defy order. Guo, in turn, leveraged this very self-regarding impulse: by making an example of one transgressor, he compelled the others to recognize that disobedience would incur a fatal cost. In this sense, Guo acted not against human nature but in full accord with it—using the fear of death to redirect the refugees' behaviour toward orderly compliance.

Han Feizi famously held that “the people fear power rather than virtue.” Guo's authority, therefore, derives its force from an accurate reading of popular sentiment. The reward of receiving food by obeying rules is made salient precisely by the severe punishment meted out to the disobedient. Obedience, though outwardly altruistic, is in fact a strategic choice for self-preservation, since it guarantees one's own share. Only through exemplary killing could Guo instil a sufficiently vivid fear of the ultimate harm—death—thereby deterring future violations. Whether such a method is morally justifiable, as Qian Hongchu questions, is open to debate; yet, in terms of its alignment with Han Feizi's dictum that “governing must follow human nature,” Guo's action stands as a textbook illustration.

3. Valuing Pragmatism in Governance

In terms of political means, Han Feizi unequivocally prioritizes the direct attainment of tangible results, often endorsing measures that appear ruthless but prove effective. He maintains that a ruler may resort to any necessary expedient to achieve his objectives. For instance, in the “Inner Congeries of Sayings” he cites the ancient Yin law that punished the mere act of throwing ashes on a public road with amputation of the hand^[2]—an exemplary instance of imposing heavy penalties for trivial offences. Moreover, Han Feizi consistently evaluates words and deeds by their practical consequences: the Han Feizi states that “words and actions must take utility as their target.”^[3] Only those measures that yield the expected efficacy are deemed valuable. Hence, severe punishment for minor misdeeds is justified if it contributes to the long-term stability of governance.

Guo Rong's handling of the refugee crisis resonates strongly with this pragmatic ethos. From Qian Hongchu's standpoint, “grabbing food” is a petty infraction unworthy of capital punishment; he exclaims in dismay, “He was only hungry and wanted some hot porridge—what law did he break?” Yet Guo's choice of a lethal response, disproportionate as it may seem, was paradoxically the most efficient tool available in the midst of chaos. The deterrent effect of public execution far exceeds any verbal admonition or lighter penalty. By witnessing one of their own suffer the ultimate consequence, the remaining refugees immediately internalize the connection between disorder and personal ruin, and

consequently adjust their conduct to secure their own survival. In this way, Guo achieves his intended outcome—restoring order and ensuring that the distribution can proceed—at a remarkably low cost in terms of overall casualties. As Han Feizi observes, “merit consists in obtaining much at little expense.” Within this specific scene, Guo epitomizes the pragmatic statesman, unhesitatingly sacrificing a single life to preserve the functioning of the entire relief operation and, by extension, the lives of the many who would otherwise perish in the ensuing mayhem.

4. Wielding the Two Handles and Upholding Institutions

If Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism are often characterized as idealistic schools, Legalism stands out as a thoroughly realistic doctrine. Han Feizi places paramount importance on the systematic use of rewards and punishments—what he calls the “two handles” of rulership. In the eponymous chapter, he asserts: “The instruments by which an enlightened ruler controls his ministers are none other than these two handles.”^[4] He dismisses the benevolence advocated by Confucians and Mohists as impractical, insisting instead that “rewards should be generous and credible so that the people may benefit from them; punishments should be heavy and certain so that the people may fear them; and laws should be uniform and fixed so that the people may know them.”^[5] Furthermore, “the sage ruler does not bestow reward on the undeserving, nor does he fail to punish the guilty.”^[6] Only through the rigorous and impartial application of these two handles can the ruler secure both order and the people's welfare.

Beyond rewards and punishments, Han Feizi underscores the indispensability of formal institutions. For him, effective governance requires the integration of law (fa), statecraft (shu), and power (shi). He defines law as “written statutes deposited in the official archives and promulgated to the common people”^[7]—that is, state-issued policies, decrees, and regulations. Institutions, in his view, are more reliable than the personal virtue or wisdom of any individual ruler, because they provide stable and predictable standards of conduct. Even the two handles must be exercised within a clear institutional framework to avoid arbitrariness.

In the scene under analysis, Guo Rong's measures clearly embody this dual emphasis. His use of lethal force and the promised reward of food constitute the two handles in action. More importantly, his invocation of “rules” (guiju) carries an institutional connotation. He does not merely punish capriciously; he explicitly articulates the norm: “Follow orders and abide by the rules—finish your work and everyone gets porridge. Disobey and break the rules, and this is your fate.” Although no formal legal code is enacted in that moment, Guo's pronouncement establishes a clear, public standard that applies equally to all refugees. Compliance yields a tangible benefit; violation invites fatal consequences. This rudimentary rule-based system, albeit brutal, effectively translates Han Feizi's abstract principles into practical crisis management.

5. Conclusion

It must be stressed that this analysis of a single episode does not imply that Guo Rong is a wholesale proponent of Legalist doctrine; rather, it reveals how certain Han Feizi-inspired ideas surface in his emergency decision-making.

Significantly, Guo himself does not endorse his own action as morally right. He later confesses: “There are many things in this world that one must do, but that does not mean they are right. Right and wrong must always be distinguished. No matter what others say or think, one must know in one’s own heart that this is wrong. The wrongness of this age is also wrong.” Yet he accepts the role of the one who performs the dirty work, believing that the larger goal of national peace demands such sacrifices. This painful self-awareness introduces a profound ethical tension: the Legalist solution, though effective in the short term, exacts a heavy moral price and remains at odds with the humane instincts embodied by Qian Hongchu. The scene thus not only illustrates the contextual power of Han Feizi’s thought but also invites viewers-and scholars-to ponder the perennial question of whether the ends can ever justify the means, and whether institutional pragmatism can coexist with moral accountability.

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