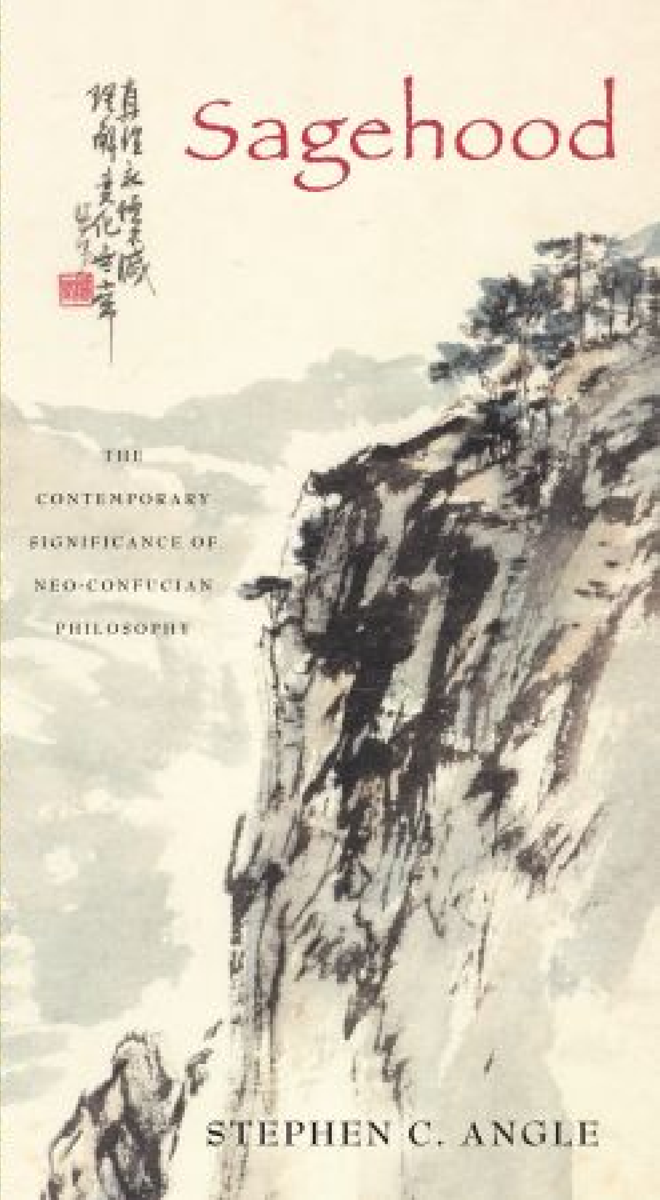
Sagehood



THE CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF NEO-CONFUCIAN PHILOSOPHY

STEPHEN C. ANGLE

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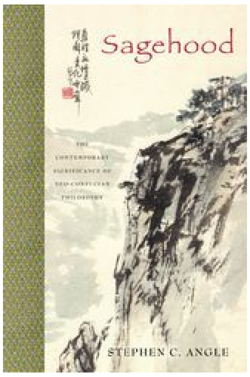

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(p.iv)

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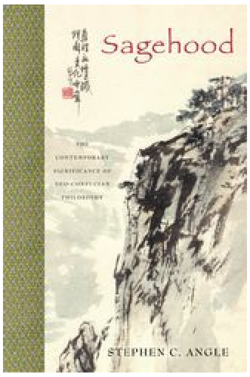

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Dedication

(p.v) *For Professors Jonathan Spence,*

Yu Ying-shih,

and

Donald Munro **(p.vi)**

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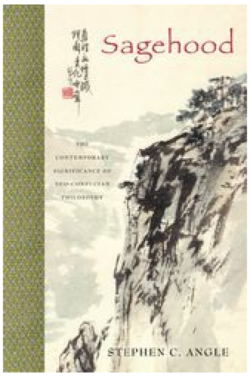

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(p.vii) Acknowledgments

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The painting that graces the book's cover is “In the White Mountains” by Charles Chu. Charles was an extraordinary gentleman who lived, taught, and painted for many years in Connecticut. His vision of New England through the lenses of the Chinese artistic tradition is a beautiful symbol of this book's goal of putting different traditions into

dialogue. I had a chance to meet both Charles and his marvelous wife **(p.ix)** Betty, though they have now passed away within months of one another. I am grateful to them, and to their families, for their willingness to allow me to use “In the White Mountains.”

Finally, I would like to thank—and dedicate the book to—an inspiring trio of senior scholars who were my first teachers of Chinese history and philosophy. Jonathan Spence at Yale fired my imagination. Also at Yale, Ying-shih Yu introduced me to Neo-Confucianism through both his lectures and his own prodigious learning. Finally, in graduate school at Michigan, Donald Munro embodied what a teacher and mentor should be: supporting, challenging, and yet always allowing me to find my own way. The earliest beginnings of this book lie in a seminar paper written for Don. My humble gratitude to all three of these exemplary scholars. **(p.x)**

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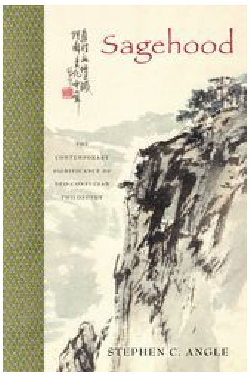

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(p.xv) Chronology and Dramatis Personae

Classical Figures and Texts

Confucius (d.479 BCE). Associated with the *Analects*; founder of the tradition.
Mencius (4th c. BCE). Associated with the *Mencius*; develops Confucian teachings.
Xunzi (3rd c. BCE). The third great Confucian, associated with the *Xunzi*.

Early Neo-Confucians (Song dynasty, 960–1279; Yuan dynasty, 1279–1368)

Zhou Dunyi (1017–73). Best-known for his concept of "supreme polarity (*taiji*)."
Zhang Zai (1020–77). Develops sophisticated cosmological theory centering on *qi*. Author of the moral manifesto "The Western Inscription."
Cheng Hao (1032–85). Older brother of Cheng Yi; stressed the centrality of "humaneness (*ren*)."
Cheng Yi (1033–1107). Cheng Hao's younger brother; most famous for emphasis on "coherence (*li*)" and "reverence (*jing*)."
Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Great synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism; drew on all of

the above.

Later Neo-Confucians (Ming dynasty, 1368–1644; Qing dynasty, 1644–1911)

Wang Yangming (1472–1529). Most influential Neo-Confucian of the Ming dynasty. Famous for ideas of “the unity of knowledge and action” and “innate good knowing (*liang zhi*).”

Luo Qinshun (1465–1547). Sophisticated thinker who sought to critically develop Zhu Xi's ideas.

(p.xvi)

Huang Zongxi (1610–95). Most famous as political thinker (author of *Waiting for the Dawn*) and intellectual historian.

Dai Zhen (1723–77). Giant of Qing dynasty philosophy and scholarship; highly critical of Song and Ming Neo-Confucians.

Twentieth-Century Figures (Republic of China, 1912–; People's Republic of China, 1949–)

Liang Shuming (1893–1988). Influenced by both Buddhism and Confucianism, sought to develop distinctively Chinese ideas so as to be relevant to the modern world.

Xu Fuguan (1902–82). “New Confucian” historian and philosopher.

Mou Zongsan (1909–95). Leading “New Confucian” philosopher; well-known for his thesis that morality must undergo “self-negation (*ziwo kanxian*)” in order to realize its ends—and to be compatible with democratic politics.

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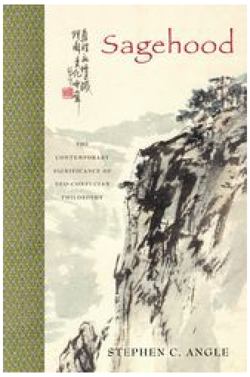

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Introduction

Stephen C. Angle (Contributor Webpage)

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

The introduction addresses two methodological preliminaries: the book's approach to comparative philosophy, called “rooted global philosophy”; and the scope of the “Neo-Confucian” tradition—in particular, why the book draws simultaneously on two thinkers often thought of as great rivals, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529). Rooted global philosophy means to creatively develop a particular philosophical tradition in open dialogue with other traditions from around the globe. The roots of the book's project are in Neo-Confucianism, and careful, contextualized, historical understandings of that tradition are critical to the book. But the book's project is to treat Neo-Confucianism as a live tradition and to develop these ideas in dialogue with contemporary thinkers. With regard to the scope of “Neo-Confucianism,” the book considers a variety of controversies about how to define the limits of Neo-Confucianism and about the relations between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, but argues that its open stance is justified by strong continuities between them, together with a resolution on the author's part to remain vigilant for (and explicit about) important differences.

Keywords: rooted global philosophy, Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, tradition, dialogue

What happens if we take Neo-Confucianism and its ideal of sagehood seriously as contemporary philosophy? That is the question this book seeks to answer. Here in the introduction, I sketch what I mean by “Neo-Confucianism,” explain the approach to philosophy that enables me to take Neo-Confucianism seriously, and delineate the different audiences that I hope to encompass by the “we” in that initial question.

Confucianism had its explicit beginnings in the fifth century BCE, though some of the sources and stories on which Confucius and his students drew go back further than that. Throughout the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), thinkers and texts that explicitly marked themselves as developing the tradition of Confucius proliferated. The most famous Confucian texts from this Classical era include the *Analects*, associated with Confucius himself; the *Mencius*, associated with Master Meng (or Mengzi); and the *Xunzi*, written in whole or in part by Master Xun.[1] The Warring States era comes to an end and the Imperial era is inaugurated in 221 BCE when the state of Qin conquers its last rival and founds the Qin Dynasty. In the following centuries, Confucianism becomes a central part of state ideology, especially under the long-lived Han Dynasty, but in the process loses much of its intellectual vitality. Notwithstanding a variety of exceptions, we can characterize this era as dominated by “scholastic Confucianism,” with its focus on commentaries on classical texts. This same period saw the introduction of Buddhism to China, which flourished alongside burgeoning Daoist religious movements.

The next phase of the Confucian tradition is Neo-Confucianism itself. Already in the latter part of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), certain individuals begin to call for a return to the learning of the sages—and especially, of Confucius—and to explicitly oppose this to the then-current **(p.4)** dominance of Buddhism and Daoism. It is in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) that this revival of Confucianism starts to have widespread effect. An increasing number of thinkers identify themselves as fellow devotees of “Dao Learning,” which refers to the *dao* ▯ or “way” of Confucius. The figure of the “sage” is central for all of these philosophers, both as subject of theoretical inquiry and as personal ethical goal. By the latter part of the twelfth century, the leading figure in the Dao Learning movement is Zhu Xi (1130–1200), one of the two main sources on whom I will draw throughout this book.[2] Zhu is a towering figure in Chinese intellectual history, synthesizing the philosophical and pedagogical innovations of several predecessors into a single vision that came to virtually define Dao Learning. In 1314 his commentaries on the Classics are declared the authoritative interpretations for the purposes of the civil service exams, which turns his already-influential writings into an orthodoxy memorized by countless students over the next several centuries.

Zhu Xi has many followers and defenders in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), but the leading thinker of the era is Wang Yangming (1472–1529), a powerful official, successful general, charismatic teacher, and sometime critic of Zhu Xi. Wang is my other main historical source. Drawing on both Zhu and Wang may seem odd to anyone who has been exposed to historiographic traditions that emphasize their differences; indeed, for many years it has been common to speak of Zhu as leading a “school of *li* □ (coherence)”[3] and Wang as chief of the “school of *xin* □ (mind-heart).” As readers of either philosopher immediately note, however, *li* and *xin* are core notions for both of them, despite differences in emphasis. Indeed, various thinkers in the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties pursued projects aimed at reconciling Zhu and Wang, and a number of modern scholars have emphasized their many similarities. I make use of both their similarities and their differences.

Wang Yangming is critical of the Dao Learning movement in a variety of ways and does not identify himself as a member of it [Wang 1963, 215]. In order to find a term that is broad enough to cover both Zhu and Wang, I therefore employ “Neo-Confucianism,” by which I refer to the entire Confucian revival. Neo-Confucianism is internally diverse and often contested, and its central commitments develop over time. The Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming comes in for harsh criticism by some Qing Dynasty Confucians, but I would urge an understanding of “Neo-Confucianism” that is broad enough to encompass even these critics. I certainly acknowledge that there is value in using terms that would be recognized by the thinkers one is analyzing, which “Neo-Confucianism” is not. It was first coined by Western scholars, though some in the Chinese world have taken to using it in approximately the sense I do. In any event, “Neo-Confucianism” is a useful rubric referring loosely to a wide range of thinkers, chief among whom are Zhu and Wang.

The final historical period of which we should take note is the last 100 years, from the end of the civil service exam system in 1905 (and the end of the Qing Dynasty itself in 1911) down to the present. The label “New Confucians” refers to a number of Chinese philosophers and historians from this past century who aim to interpret and/or reconstruct Confucianism—typically drawing significantly on **(p.5)** Neo-Confucianism—for the new realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[4] Some of these thinkers had significant exposure to Western philosophy and engaged with themes from Kant or Hegel, for example, quite explicitly. An important goal for many of them, in addition, was to show that Confucianism either already was, or could be made, compatible with science and democracy. My own approach in this book is influenced to some degree by the work of these New Confucians; the main point at which I draw on them is when I turn to political philosophy in the last chapters of the book.

The mention of both historical and philosophical pursuits among the New Confucians can serve as transition to the second of my main goals in this introduction, which is to explain the sense in which I propose to take Neo-Confucianism seriously as philosophy. There is an inevitable tension between historical fidelity and philosophical construction. The former pushes us toward carefully qualified, highly context-sensitive interpretations; the latter, toward generalization, loose paraphrase, and critical emendation. No matter what our goals, anyone dealing with an intellectual tradition finds him or herself pulled back and forth between these poles. No one is a pure “historian” or pure “philosopher.” Historians cannot do their work without endeavoring to genuinely understand (and thereby become engaged by) the ideas with which their subject grappled. For their part, philosophers cannot make words they have inherited from a tradition mean whatever they want: changing things requires work, the work of engaging with the tradition's meanings, to one degree or another.

The ever-present need for even the committed historian to put on a philosopher's hat is exacerbated when the texts under study are, in one sense or another, fragmented. Aristotle's lecture notes look like seamless treatises when presented in modern editions, but scholars know them for what they are. What a scholar may see as a difficult interpretive challenge, though, can also be an interpretive opportunity. The *Nichomachean Ethics* infamously contains (at least) two visions of the best life for humans. We will probably never know whether Aristotle intended these to be unified in some way, actually thought there were multiple possible best lives, or would have rejected one in favor of the other, on balance. Nonetheless, his insightful comments on each ideal provide excellent grounds for philosophers to work toward a variety of possible solutions, each in its own way "Aristotelian," each of which can be assessed independently based on a variety of philosophical criteria. The texts of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming present challenges and opportunities that are very different from those offered by Aristotle's writings, but nonetheless leave us in a similar position of having to balance context-based interpretation with philosophical construction. Not only did neither man write much by way of systematic treatise; Wang, explicitly wished that the conversations he had with his students not be recorded and published.[5] Be this as it may, they were recorded, and his resulting works (including his many letters) have an open-endedness that requires some degree of philosophical construction if we are to understand them.

Philosophical construction is always part of a live philosophical tradition. When Zhu, Wang, and others of their era interpreted classical Confucian writings like the *Analects*, they engaged in considerable construction. Sometimes this **(p.6)** was conscious, as when one classical passage was given a new interpretation to make it fit better with another classical source that the latter-day thinker also wanted to respect. Sometimes the construction was unconscious, as when the changed social and intellectual climate pushed them to view matters differently from the ways in which individuals from the classical era would have. For example, P. J. Ivanhoe has argued convincingly that in a variety of important respects, the world views of later Confucians like Wang differed dramatically from those of earlier figures like Mencius, in part because of the conscious and unconscious influence of Buddhism on the later thinkers [Ivanhoe 2002].

Another key to a live philosophical tradition is openness to criticism. To be sure, traditions will always contain certain commitments, values, and concepts that lie deep at their core—whether or not this is made explicit—and which are typically not challenged. Indeed, these orientations tend to be the terms in which criticism and disputes are evaluated.[6] With this in mind, I propose two, closely related ways of taking Neo-Confucianism seriously as philosophy, which I call "rooted global philosophy" and "constructive engagement."[7] "Rooted global philosophy" means to work within a particular live philosophical tradition—thus its rootedness—but to do so in a way that is open to stimulus and insights from other philosophical traditions—thus its global nature. Engaging in rooted global philosophy, therefore, does not mean giving up one's "home" in a particular tradition or approach. Alasdair MacIntyre worries that global communication these days depends on neutered, accessible-because-empty "internationalized languages" that have been shorn of connection to central texts and terminology.[8] But this is not the perspective of rooted global philosophy. Rather, it demands that we work to understand other traditions in their own terms, and find grounds on which we can engage one another constructively. In addition, rooted global philosophy is not premised on our ultimate convergence on some single set of philosophical truths; perhaps this will take place, but the plurality of human concerns and historically contingent differences in traditions provide us with no guarantees. [9] Still, mutual interaction and reasoned influence[10] is possible, so at least some degree of convergence may be expected.

It would be natural to worry that just as the socio-economic process called "globalization" seems to be led primarily by the interests of the most powerful individuals, corporations, and states, so any "global philosophy" will be primarily shaped by those philosophical traditions whose adherents and institutional supporters currently possess the most cultural (and other forms of) capital. This is a legitimate concern. Indeed, writing about the increasing hegemony of modern Anglo-American and European philosophy around the globe, Robert Solomon laments, "It seems that the globalization of free market economics goes with the globalization of one brief moment in philosophy, with similarly devastating effects on local cultures and the rich varieties of human experience" [Solomon 2001, 100]. However, as I hope to have made clear, the goals of "rooted global philosophy" are precisely to counter the globalization of one philosophical tradition.[11]

The primary focus of rooted global philosophy is on what we might call one's local perspective: it is about developing a given philosophical tradition. The **(p.7)** primary focus of "constructive engagement" is on dialogue between adherents of two live philosophical traditions. The perspective of "constructive engagement" emphasizes that contemporary, live philosophical traditions can challenge and yet learn from one another. A live philosophical tradition is vulnerable to change and critique in a way a dead tradition is not. The only way to encounter a dead tradition is through purely historical investigation, wherein there is no point in asking whether a given concept would have been better framed in a different way, or asking how a long-dead thinker might have responded to some new situation or challenge.[12] Constructive engagement requires the vulnerability and flexibility—the openness to new and better answers—of live traditions. But note that constructive engagement is not wholesale critique. Constructive engagement means engaging in dialogue with other traditions (by talking, reading and writing, or even through one's own reflection on multiple traditions) in order to learn more through a process of mutual openness, grounded in the belief that no live philosophical tradition has all the answers or is impervious to criticism.

One important point about both approaches is that while sometimes one tradition may offer a better answer to a particular question with which thinkers in an alternative tradition have struggled, the many differences between traditions mean that we should not expect mutual interactions to regularly be so “neat.” More often, challenges will have to be filtered through a layer of interpretation in order to really get traction. For example, we can come to see that a given issue with which philosophers of tradition A are concerned, when reinterpreted into terms more hospitable to tradition B, raises issues that tradition B has not previously encountered, or perhaps does not immediately have the resources to solve. This can lead to constructive development within tradition B. Now perhaps this development can, when re-inserted into tradition A (via whatever interpretation is necessary), also stimulate further development within tradition A. “Constructive engagement” emphasizes such possibilities for two-way influence, while “rooted global philosophy” puts its stress on how the process looks from within a single tradition. Still, it should be clear that the two perspectives are not just compatible, but based on the very same attitude toward open, constructive philosophical growth.

Both perspectives mean, in all likelihood, critiquing some of one's own tradition's assumptions, but I believe that all live traditions must be prepared for such critiques in any case. Here is Zheng Jiadong, a contemporary scholar of Confucianism, on the situation in which Confucianism finds itself:

> As an ancient spiritual tradition, Confucianism is facing a more serious test than it has ever before encountered. This test will not be resolved by shouting stirring slogans about how this next century will be the “Asian Century” or the “Confucian Century.” From another perspective, though, this kind of test can at the same time provide contemporary Confucianism with a favorable opportunity for self-transformation and development. A simultaneous test and opportunity, a crisis and a turning point: this is the fundamental reality that Confucianism today must face. [Zheng 2001, 519]

(p.8) This well expresses the kind of vulnerability to which rooted global philosophy and constructive engagement open us up. Of course the Confucian tradition is more than (what we now call) philosophy: there are important cultural and religious dimensions as well. But the point I want to emphasize here is the sense in which constructive engagement poses a simultaneous challenge and opportunity to all philosophical traditions.

The question this book sets out to answer, I have said, is “What would happen if we took Neo-Confucianism and its ideal of sagehood seriously as contemporary philosophy?” The twin ideas of rooted global philosophy and constructive engagement help me to flesh out the meanings of “we” in that question. I say “meanings” because my question is purposefully ambiguous. On the one hand, what I am doing here is rooted global philosophy: I have rooted myself in the neo-Confucian tradition that I have studied for many years, and am addressing fellow scholars of Confucianism, and perhaps a broader Chinese audience as well. Let “us” think about Confucianism as live philosophical tradition, open to critiques from outside, vulnerable and yet poised to develop. On the other hand, I can view myself as an American philosopher and encourage my colleagues in the West to open ourselves up to constructive engagement. In this mode, I might say, let “us” see the resources and challenges that Neo-Confucianism poses to “our” philosophical work. Western philosophy, too, can be pursued in a rooted, yet global manner: Look at the ways that our own traditions can develop when stimulated by the encounter with Neo-Confucianism.

I hope that those who are not students or scholars of philosophy can learn things from this book, as well. For the broad audience composed of all those interested in China, at whatever level, perhaps the message of the book is: see that Confucianism needs to be understood not just as defunct ideology and ancient source of certain widespread values, but as a live and sophisticated philosophical tradition, poised to develop further and to contribute to other traditions as it participates in constructive engagement. For those drawn to the book because “sagehood” sounds like an intriguing ideal, finally, there are rich and stimulating ideas that await. One does not have to be a card-carrying Confucian to be inspired by its ideals, or to learn from the ways in which these ideals are fleshed out and can be practiced. Indeed, the relevance of Neo-Confucianism may come as a surprise to many readers interested in what could be called a spiritual yet this-worldly and non-theistic way of living. Buddhism and even Daoism (or Taoism) have enjoyed some attention in the West while Confucianism has not, perhaps because it is seen as more narrowly linked to Chinese culture. Whatever the reason for its past neglect, I hope this book will help to show the Neo-Confucianism has a great deal to offer to contemporary conversations about how to live in our world.

My answers to the challenge of taking Neo-Confucianism seriously are developed over the course of the three parts of the book. part I, “Keywords,” focuses on the four terms that lie at the heart of my interpretation of Neo-Confucianism; in each case, I combine historical context with preliminary philosophical exploration into the ideas' significances. I begin with *sheng* □ or “sage.” The pursuit of sagehood is critical to both the theory and practice of Neo-Confucianism. The importance of sagehood goes well beyond the extremely unlikely possibility that **(p.9)** any of us will actually attain it, because the ever-present goal of ethical improvement that Neo-Confucianism puts before each of us is understood in terms of its connection to our ultimate objective, namely, sagehood. The second chapter investigates the chief Neo-Confucian metaphysical idea: *li* □, which I translate as “coherence.” In the third chapter, I unpack *de* □ or “virtue” and lay the groundwork for my subsequent dialogues between Neo-Confucianism and contemporary Western virtue ethics. Chapter 4, finally, introduces the idea of *he* □ or “harmony.” I show that this ideal—which is closely related to the more abstract idea of “coherence”—lies at the heart of Neo-Confucian ethical and political goals, and thus it will be no surprise when we later see it intimately connected to the process of ethical cultivation that culminates in sagehood.

Part II, “Ethics and Psychology,” is the theoretical core of the book. Over the course of three chapters I develop a novel understanding of Neo-Confucian ethical philosophy that both challenges and is challenged by contemporary Western thinkers like Michael Slote, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, and Lawrence Blum. We come to see the multiple ways in which harmony figures into the ethical cultivation and behavior of a good person, while at the same time arriving at a deeper understanding of harmony which, in avoiding some common but superficial ways of interpreting harmony, makes the Neo-Confucian ideal much more interesting and robust than might have been thought. We see that a person striving toward sagehood should seek imaginative resolutions to moral conflicts that honor all the relevant values. Another key theme is that sages have an active form of moral perception that I call “looking for harmony”: this explains both the sense in which a sage's knowledge and action can be said to be unified and the resulting ease with which a sage can act.

Four chapters dealing with “Education and Politics” make up part III. Neo-Confucianism was far more than an abstract, theoretical enterprise, and any effort to think about its contemporary significance must take seriously its practical goals for personal and societal improvement. In many ways these chapters dovetail with ideas in the previous two parts, but also look more concretely at what one is supposed to do in order to make progress on the road toward sagehood. While I find much to commend in Neo-Confucian ideas regarding moral education, my treatment of Neo-Confucian politics is more critical. Building on ideas of some twentieth-century “New Confucians,” though, I am able to articulate the outline of a contemporary sagely politics that is both attractive and provocative. In the book's brief conclusion, finally, I reflect on the different meanings of “Confucianism” today and urge that while Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism are not only “philosophy,” a great deal stands to be gained from taking them seriously as philosophy. **(p.10)**

Notes:

(1.) Numerous questions surround the authorship and dating of each of these texts, though many scholars continue to see a great deal of unity in the latter two. Since these texts concern us only insofar as they were interpreted by later Neo-Confucians—all of whom took these three texts to have been composed, in their entirety, by their putative authors—for our purposes we can put these difficult issues aside.

(2.) Tillman [1992] tells the story of the rise of Zhu Xi. See Wilson [1995] for more on Dao Learning, and Bol [2008] for extended discussion of the historical significance of Neo-Confucianism.

(3.) “*Li* □” is often translated as “principle”; I explain my reasons for translating it as “coherence” in chapter 2.

(4.) Bresciani [2001] chronicles the history of New Confucianism. See also Makeham [2003] and Cheng and Bunnin [2002].

(5.) Wang did write some short treatises, such as his “Inquiry on the *Great Learning*,” but they are a small portion of his collected works. On Wang's wishes with respect to his conversations, see Ivanhoe [2002, Appendix 1]. On the difficulties posed by Wang's texts, see also Cua [1998, 156].

(6.) An important work developing these ideas is MacIntyres's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [MacIntyre 1988]. Thomas Metzger has developed related ideas specifically with respect to China; he calls the underlying norms “rules of successful thinking.” See

Metzger [2005].

(7.) Thanks to Xia Yong for suggesting the addition of “rooted” to “global philosophy” in order to more clearly express my meaning; and to Bo Mou for the term “constructive engagement.”

(8.) See MacIntyre [1988, 373]; for some critical discussion, see [Angle 2002b].

(9.) Compare Brian Fay's notion of multicultural “interactionism,” which “doesn't envision the transcendence of difference (something it thinks is impossible in any case)…. [Instead,] in encounters between selves and others, between similarity and difference, the choice is not to adopt one or the other, but to hold them in dynamic tension.” Fay looks for “growth,” as seen from within each perspective, but not for “consensus” [Fay 1996, 234 and 245]. In his contribution to the 1948 Symposium on Oriental Philosophy, E. A. Burtt proposes a way in which “Occidental” philosophers can approach “Oriental” philosophies in a spirit Fay would no doubt applaud: “Readiness for … growth, through appreciative understanding of the contrasting contexts of ways of philosophizing in the East is, indeed, the only attitude by which we can gradually learn what in our present criterion is dependably sound and what is merely an expression of some partisan cultural interest of the Occident” [Burtt 1948, 603].

(10.) Just to be clear: by “reasoned influence,” I mean influence that is mediated through the giving of reasons, which themselves can come in many shapes and forms. I do not assume or rely upon some single, specific, universal conception of Reason.

(11.) In addition, some have argued that “globalization” itself has quite different effects, creating new local environments and healthy fragmentation. See Pieterse [1994].

(12.) It is perfectly possible for a tradition to go dormant. For some time—perhaps even centuries—no one treats it as open to change or in need of revision. Then, for some reason, its potential relevance (after suitable reconstruction) is noticed and the tradition lives again. My thanks to Aaron Stalnaker for pointing this out.

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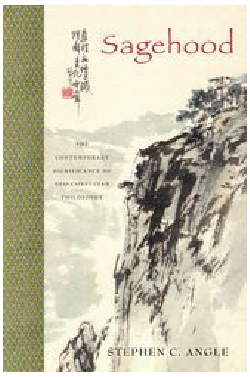

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter considers the concept and history of “sage” within Confucianism. It begins with an historical survey that shows how “sage (*sheng*)” evolves toward expressing the idea of human achievement of moral perfection. The chapter pays particular attention to what Neo-Confucians meant by their repeated insistences that achieving sagehood is possible, as well as by their own personal commitments to advancing toward sagehood. Differences between “sage” and other personality ideals (like “superior person [*junzi*]”) are noted, and then the chapter turns to a brief comparison between these Confucian conceptions and comparable notions (like *sophos* and *phronimos*) from ancient Greek thought. The chapter then looks at discussion within contemporary philosophy of moral saints and moral heroes, as well as the idea of supererogation, which, we discover, is not applicable in a sage-centered conception of ethics. The chapter concludes by examining two criticisms of sagehood, namely, whether it is possible and whether it is desirable.

Keywords: sage, moral perfection, psychological realism, moral saint, Susan Wolf, supererogation, perfectionism

Chinese and Western philosophical traditions evolved independently of one another, and over the centuries developed their own distinctive concerns, vocabularies, modes of pedagogy, and genres of written expression. None of these were static, of course, which is a key to the possibility of cross-tradition philosophical inquiry. Both abstract thinkers and concrete moralists respond to changing circumstances, and one critical aspect of our present circumstance is the accessibility of Chinese and Western philosophical traditions to one another. “Accessibility” certainly does not mean “equivalence,” but the rich variety of our respective historical traditions, coupled with the malleability of our contemporary philosophical languages, makes constructive dialogue a ready possibility, so long as we are willing to do the work necessary to orient ourselves to one another's distinctive concerns. Once we have begun to understand one another in our respective traditions' own terms, we will find that cross-tradition challenges and opportunities for learning are numerous and exciting.

The goal of all the chapters in part I is to establish the preliminary understandings necessary for the more synthetic work that will come later. My first subject is “sage” itself, the explicit topic of the entire book. By unpacking the history of this term, comparing it to a few related notions both East and West, and reflecting on the role that such an ideal can play for us, I clarify what can be expected from the rest of this book: in what sense is this all about sagehood? I explore the concept of the sage in three stages. First, we need to have a sense of the changing views toward the sage within the Confucian tradition, as well as to look at the relations among various personality ideals in the tradition. Next, I dip briefly into traditions from outside China, in order to give us some context in which to view the significant features of **(p.14)** the Neo-Confucian sage. Finally, the chapter concludes with attention to some broad questions about the significance of an ideal like the sage.

1.1 “Sage” in the Confucian Tradition

1.1.1 Historical Survey

Chinese scholars have paid considerable attention in recent years to the historical development of the concept of the sage. A useful framework for synthesizing their research is to divide its history into the following five phases: pre-Confucian, classical Confucian, Han—Tang dynasties, Song—Ming Neo-Confucianism, and Qing dynasty criticism (and beyond). A certain amount of controversy attends the question of exactly where to begin the story and what the earliest version of *sheng* □ meant. Most likely it had to do with hearing. But in any event, most scholars agree that by the Western Zhou (1045–770 BCE) period, its core meaning had settled on intelligence and wisdom.[1] It did not signify supreme virtue, but rather could be applied to anyone “who was considered intelligent or capable”; for example, it is used in one instance to refer to a brilliant grandson [Chen 2000, 414–15].

A number of critical changes take place within Confucian writings of the classical period.[2]

Since my main focus here is on the later Neo-Confucian time period, I will only glance briefly at the question of stages of development within the classical period itself. Suffice it to say that we have good evidence to believe that the *Analects*, thought to be the most reliable source for Confucius himself, was not composed all at once, and expresses differing attitudes toward the idea and content of the sage. In one relatively early passage, for instance, sagehood is associated with being variously skilled, and Confucius is at pains to distinguish it from the superior, because moral, status of "gentleman (*junzi* □□)."[3] I will put off for now the question of the relation between sages and *junzi*; instead, note that elsewhere (and perhaps chronologically later) in the *Analects*, sagehood has become an elusive and mysterious state, surpassing even Confucius's master virtue of humaneness (*ren* □).[4] Its sense of mystery is only enhanced by various comments linking sagehood to Heaven (*tian* □), the ultimate source of value for most classical Chinese thinkers [Chen 2000, 416–17]. It will retain an air of mystery ever after, though most Confucians will nonetheless insist that it can be attained by anyone. As Mencius famously asserts, "The sage and I are of the same kind."[5]

I will discuss the tension between sagehood's elusiveness and its accessibility—a tension that is probably the concept's defining feature—later in this chapter. For now, let us return to the classical era developments. In addition to broad skill (or even omnicompetence) and a level of mystery, sagehood becomes linked with creativity, political authority, keen perception, and most fundamentally, moral virtue. The link to creativity is partly tied to its earlier meaning of intelligence; Xunzi argues, for example, that the early sages' brilliance enabled them to see a solution to the problem of unending competition over scarce resources, namely the establishment of rites.[6] Political authority is **(p.15)** closely associated with sagehood; most of the culture-heroes labeled as sages were rulers, and the classical period also sees the coining of what will become a famous slogan expressing the continuity between personal morality and political authority: "inner sageliness—outer kingliness (*neisheng—waiwang*)."[7] Turning to the sage as virtuoso perceiver, various early thinkers stressed that sagehood was a consequence, in part, of achieving what one scholar characterizes as "superhuman perceptions" [Csikszentmihalyi 2004, 170]. These early views differed in how they understood the sources of sagely perceptiveness, with some emphasizing an attunement to subtle clues while others stress an unusual sensitivity to larger patterns [Brown and Bergeton 2008]. As we will see in chapters 6 and 7, these themes will be variously developed by Neo-Confucians. Finally, sagehood from the classical period on becomes conceptually tied to supreme moral virtue. As one scholar puts it, "the Confucians attach the highest moral character to the sage, such that not only are sages supremely wise, but they are also the embodiment of perfect, transformed human relationships and morality" [Wang 1999, 29]. This same author points out that while there had been a connection between sages and "virtue (*de* □)" in some pre-Confucian texts, this becomes complete or perfect virtue during the classical period. Thus *Mencius* contains a passage in which sages are said to be the "culmination (*zhi* □)" of human relationships; another text speaks of sages as "the culmination of virtue (*zhi de* □□)." Another way of expressing the same idea is Xunzi's, who says that sages "exhaust (*jin* □)" human relationships, meaning that sages fulfill such relationships completely.[8] Sages thus come to represent the human achievement of moral perfection.[9]

Critical to this ideal of moral perfection is the ease or spontaneity with which sages act correctly; sagehood does not mean to conscientiously follow rules. Two famous passages make this clear. First is *Analects* 2:3, in which the author of the passage makes Confucius out to be describing his moral development:

> The master said, At fifteen I was committed to learning, at thirty I was established, at forty I had no doubts, at fifty I understood the commands of heaven, at sixty my ears were obedient, and at seventy I could follow what my heart desires without transgressing the limits.[10]

I discuss the idea of sagely ease extensively below, in chapter 7, using this passage (and later Neo-Confucian discussions of it) as my starting point. For now, it suffices to say that ease and spontaneity were already themes in early Chinese writings [Slingerland 2003, 39–41] that became firmly attached to the notion of sagehood during the classical period. In addition, it is useful to juxtapose part of *Mencius* 5B:1 to the picture of Confucius at seventy, as a way of fleshing out the nature of the sage's spontaneity. This passage describes three ancient heroes, all labeled in the passages as sages, each of whom had different personalities, which affected which princes they would be willing to serve. Then Mencius describes Confucius's own attitude, which was to make decisions "according to circumstances":

> Bo Yi was the sage who was unsullied; Yi Yin was the sage who accepted responsibility; Liu Xiahui was the sage who was harmonious; **(p.16)** Confucius was the sage whose actions were timely. Confucius was the one who gathered together all that was good. To do this is to open with bells and conclude with jade tubes. To open with bells is to begin in an orderly fashion; to conclude with jade tubes is to end in an orderly fashion. To begin in an orderly fashion is the concern of the wise while to end in an orderly fashion is the concern of the sage. Wisdom is like skill, shall I say, while sagehood is like strength. It is like shooting from beyond a hundred paces. It is due to your strength that the arrow reaches the target, but it is not due to your strength that it hits its mark.[11]

I cite this passage in part to note the connection between a sage's ultimate goal and musical harmony, because we will dwell at some length in subsequent chapters on the ways in which sages seek harmony through balancing complementary differences (like bells and tubes). Its discussion of strength is also important; I will pick up this thread below. More immediately, let us note two things in connection with sagely ease: (1) Different sorts of reactions count here as sagely actions. All are spontaneous, moral, edify others (as is made clear elsewhere in the passage), and in addition are apt expressions of the individual's particular perspective on the situation. Still, (2) Confucius is better than the others because he is more flexible, less tied to a single perspective. Situational flexibility that enables one to bring out the best in a situation (which I will eventually characterize in terms of harmony) is a hallmark of sagehood.[12]

The next stage in sagehood's vicissitudes comes in the lengthy and diverse period from the beginning of the Han dynasty to the end of the Tang dynasty (206 BCE—tenth century CE). For some in this era, sagehood became such a high, mysterious state that they argued it was not accessible, even in principle, to most people.[13] On the other hand, the idea that sages set the ultimate normative standard for humanity continued to be emphasized [Wang 1993, 14]. Given that my main concern is with Neo-Confucian ideas of sagehood, the most important development in this period concerns not sagehood itself, but the flourishing of other traditions—in particular, Buddhism—that would significantly influence the way that sagehood and related ideas come to be understood by Neo-Confucians. I will address this most explicitly in the next chapter, on “coherence.” But it is clear that Buddhist teachings about the ability to “become a Buddha (*cheng fo* □□)” put pressure on Confucians in the Tang dynasty, especially in light of the many assertions at the time that sagehood could not be sought or studied, but was simply a matter of the rare person who was born with sagely abilities. Tang dynasty Confucians began to develop theories about the metaphysical and psychological underpinnings of sagehood that explained how it was, after all, accessible to all [Wang 1993, 43].

1.1.2 Neo-Confucianism

Sagehood took on a renewed theoretical prominence during the Neo-Confucian revival that began in the Song dynasty, but its importance went even deeper for **(p.17)** the thinkers I am calling Neo-Confucians,[14] for whom sagehood was the appropriate object of a personal quest. Seeking to come ever-closer to sagehood was a concrete goal for many. We can see this in a variety of ways: through essays and commentaries, through collected sayings, through various references to practices, and even through a few documents that might be called spiritual autobiographies [Wu 1990, ch. 5]. Drawing on this range of sources, as well as on contemporary Chinese scholarship, I will sketch a picture of Neo-Confucian ideas about sagehood.

The core idea has to be its accessibility. Early Song thinkers like Zhou Dunyi and the Cheng brothers[15] were explicit that “sagehood could be studied and attained.”[16] It became common to offer Confucius's disciple Yan Hui, in particular, as an instance of someone who, through studying, had made progress toward sagehood, though never quite attained it.[17] In addition to Yan Hui, the characters, dispositions, achievements, and shortcomings of a number of other figures were discussed and studied. The final chapter of the Neo-Confucian primer, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, in fact, is called “Observing Sages and Worthies.”[18] Quoting Cheng Hao, it begins with brief reference to the idea that very rarely, someone can be born with a sagely disposition. According to the *Mencius*, this was the case for the early sage-kings Yao and Shun; Cheng Hao adds King Wen, founder of the ancient Zhou Dynasty, to that list. Three other early luminaries (Yu, Tang, and Wu) are said to have reached sagehood through learning. Aside from these six, no one in the chapter—not even Confucius—is explicitly called a sage.[19] To be sure, Confucius is lauded in many ways; no faults are discussed; and an early commentator on the *Reflections* says explicitly that “The Grand Master [i.e., Confucius] was a great sage by nature” [Zhu & Lu 1967, 290]. So my point is not that Confucius was not understood to be a sage, but rather to emphasize the diffidence with which the status of sage was applied. Yan Hui was, according to the same commentator just cited, “second to the Sage [i.e., Confucius] in character,” but he was not a sage himself.

It was clearly believed that much could be gained from studying the “dispositions (*qixiang* □□)” of someone who had advanced toward sagehood, even if that person still had flaws [Jiang 1994]. Much of the *Reflections* chapter contains such descriptions, along with discussion of wherein lay the particular strengths and weaknesses of the figures discussed. Two aspects of this are worth noting. First, the fact that mere “worthies” are extensively discussed tells us that we can learn from those on the road to sagehood, and not just from sages themselves. Indeed, in many ways it is easier to learn from worthies, because there is a mystery surrounding full sagehood that makes it more difficult to take as a model.[20] In addition, it is not at all clear that there were any sages around on whom to directly model, but one can more readily imagine that one's teacher or other local notables could count as “worthies.” The descriptions in *Reflections* of the characters of both Zhang Zai and, in particular, Cheng Hao are extensive and extremely favorable. They may not have been sages, but they certainly offer excellent examples of what can be attained.[21] Second, it is important that Neo-Confucians show how we can learn from worthies, because directly modeling on sages may well be a bad idea. We already saw, in *Mencius* 5B:1, the idea that sagehood is connected **(p.18)** to “strength.” Sages can do things—in fact, can do them with ease—that less developed people may fail to do, no matter how conscientious they are. And trying, but failing, to do “what a sage would do” in a given situation might be worse than aiming at a more modest goal: worse not just in terms of consequences, but also in terms of one's own future cultivation, since repeated failure to live up to the standard one takes as necessary could undermine one's motivation to continue striving to be better.[22]

Not only was sagehood understood to be accessible; it was also the explicit goal to which many Neo-Confucian teachers committed themselves and which they urged on their students. We can see this in many of Zhu Xi's remarks on learning. For instance, he said both that “Students must establish their commitment. That people nowadays are aimless is simply because they've never taken learning seriously”; and that “Sages and worthies simply do to the fullest the things a man ought to do. Now to be a sage or a worthy, stop at just the right place and go no further” [Zhu 1990, 104–5]. A more extreme and personal statement can be found in the spiritual autobiography of the later Neo-Confucian Gao Panlong (1562–1626). During a period of exile, Gao wrote: “… Deeply and thoroughly I examined myself. I discovered that I did not know anything at all about the Way and that my body and mind had gained nothing. Greatly agitated, I said to myself, “If I do not completely solve this problem during this trip, my life will have been lived in vain!' ” [Wu 1990, 133]. A modern biographer of the early Neo-Confucian Zhang Zai summarizes Zhang's commitment:

> …These passages reveal that, probably from a fairly early time, [Zhang] felt a sense of mission: like some of his contemporaries, he believed that he had rediscovered the Way of the sages, lost for some fifteen hundred years. It was up to him to reveal the Way, to eliminate the pernicious doctrines of the Buddhist schools, and

> to usher in the period of ‘Great Peace’. [Kasoff 1984, 121]

Sometimes these thinkers experienced sudden advances toward sagehood—I will discuss these “enlightenment experiences” later, in chapter 8—but more often progress was slow, difficult, and uneven. What is clear is that commitment to sagehood was a distinctive mark of Neo-Confucianism. I will discuss the nature of this “commitment” repeatedly below, especially in chapters 7 through 9.

Zhu Xi says that “‘sagehood’ refers to virtue being [fully] present” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 137]. Elsewhere, Zhu notes that while it is true (as had been emphasized in some earlier conceptions of sagehood) that sages have limitless ability (*duo neng* □□), that is not what is primarily important about sages.[23] Instead, it is their virtue that most distinguishes them [Wang 1993, 284]. In general, it is possible to say that while aspects of sagehood like wisdom, political leadership, and broad ability do not disappear in the Neo-Confucian universe, the strong tendency is to focus on the moral aspects of sagehood, and in particular, on its tie to virtue. To be sure, many thinkers used the classical formula “honor the virtuous nature/follow the path of inquiry and study” which seemed to balance the moral and cognitive sides of education and sagehood, but in truth the latter half of this pair was also highly moralized, as we will see.[24] For the early Neo-Confucian Zhou **(p.19)** Dunyi, sagehood was constituted by an individual's attaining complete “integrity (*cheng* □)” and required nothing else [Zhou 1990, 14]. Zhu Xi says that in sages, “all goodness is completely present” [Wang 1993, 284]. Whether Cheng Hao was considered a sage, or just extremely worthy, the *Reflections on Things at Hand* says that his “virtuous nature was complete and perfect (*dexing chong wan* □□□□)” [Zhu & Lu 1967, 305].

By the Ming dynasty, Wang Yangming takes this moralization of sages to the extreme, asserting that all that matters, to be a sage, is one's moral purity:

> The reason the sage has become a sage is that his mind has become completely identified with universal coherence (*chun hu tianli* □□□□) and is no longer mixed with any impurity of selfish human desires (*wu renyu zhi za* □□□□□). It is comparable to pure gold, which attains its purity because its golden quality is perfect (*se zu* □□) and is no longer mixed with copper or lead. A man must have reached the state of having been completely identified with universal coherence before he becomes a sage, and gold must be perfect in quality before it becomes pure.
>
> However, the abilities of sages differ in degree, just as the several pieces of gold quantitatively differ in weight. The sage-emperors Yao and Shun may be compared to 10,000 pounds; King Wen and Confucius to 9,000 pounds; Kings Yu, Tang, and Wu to 7 or 8,000 pounds, and Bo Yi and Yi Yin to 4 or 5,000 pounds. Their abilities and efforts differ, but in being completely identified with universal coherence they were the same and may all be called sages.…Therefore even an ordinary person, if he is willing to learn so as to enable his mind to become completely identified with universal coherence, can also become a sage, in the same way that although a one

> ounce piece, when compared to a 10,000 pound piece, is widely different in quantity, it is not deficient in perfection in quality. This is why it is said that "every man can become Yao and Shun." [Wang 1983, 119 (§99)], translation from Wang [1963, 60–1], slightly modified.

Wang is also well-known for his teaching that "the people filling the street are all sages." In light of the pedagogical contexts in which this saying appears, and given the "pure gold" idea, we can see "the people filling the street are all sages" as another way of emphasizing that identification with universal coherence[25] is possible for anyone, in any walk of life, and anyone who attains this counts as a sage.[26]

In the "pure gold" passage, Wang goes on to contrast his understanding of how one learns to be a sage with the views he attributes to earlier Confucians, including Zhu Xi. He says:

> Later generations [i.e., those who came after the classical era] do not realize that the foundation for becoming a sage is to be completely identified with universal coherence, but instead seek sagehood only in knowledge and ability. They regard the sage as knowing all and able **(p.20)** to do all, and they feel they have to understand all the knowledge and ability of the sage before they can succeed. Consequently they do not direct their efforts toward universal coherence but merely cripple their spirit and exhaust their energy in scrutinizing books, investigating the names and varieties of things, and imitating the forms and traces [of the acts of the ancients]." [Wang 1983, 119 (§99)], translation from Wang [1963, 60–1], slightly modified.

The fact there are differences between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming has already been noted in my introduction, as has my basic strategy for dealing with these differences. Here, we have a specific instance.[27] The first thing to notice is that the differences are not as great as Wang makes them out to be. While Zhu does not deny the "sage can do all" idea, neither does he put much emphasis on it. He agrees with Wang, that is, that sagehood is centrally about virtue.[28] Second, though, we must acknowledge a real difference in approach to moral education. Recall the emphasis in *Reflections on Things at Hand*, edited by Zhu, on observing the dispositions (*qixiang* □□) of past sages and worthies. Wang dismisses this (along with most book learning) as useless "imitating the forms and traces" of the ancients. His own teachings regularly focus on "dispositions (*qixiang*)," but in every case he refers to an individual's own dispositions. For instance, when a student asks him to "describe the disposition of equilibrium" that is said to characterize all of us before our feelings are aroused, Wang replies, "I cannot tell you any more than a dumb man can tell you about the bitterness of a bitter melon he has just eaten. If you want to know the bitterness, you have to eat a bitter melon yourself."[29] As we will see in chapter 8 on moral education, personal realization is also important for Zhu Xi, but Zhu (and many others) sees the need to balance personal realization with other techniques.[30]

Neo-Confucian debate over the nature of sagehood did not end with Wang Yangming.

Some of his rough contemporaries advocated quite different views, even reviving the much earlier emphasis on a sage's ability (and need) to create institutions like rites and legal codes in order to institute moral standards in a world devoid of eternal values.[31] Various aspects of Song and Ming teachings about sagehood came under criticism in the Qing dynasty [Wang 1993, 60]. One vocal critic was Yan Yuan (1635–1704), who believed that Song and Ming philosophers had forsaken the simple teachings of the classical masters, particularly in their theories about the *xing* □ (nature). A contemporary scholar writes that according to Yan, "Sagehood was like a skill or craft; one needed to study and practice in order to acquire it."[32] Dai Zhen (1723–77) was perhaps the most sophisticated Qing dynasty critic of Zhu Xi. He also held a highly moralized view of sages as perfect, virtuous people, though he translates the idea into his own technical language which is based on a somewhat different set of metaphysical assumptions.[33] Discussion of sagehood continued among twentieth-century New Confucians like Feng Youlan and Mou Zongsan; I will discuss some of Mou's views, in particular, in the book's final chapters.[34] Some of the objections to the Song–Ming Neo-Confucian conception of sagehood that I have just catalogued will serve as stimuli that push me to creatively **(p.21)** develop Neo-Confucianism, though I will not seek to fully explicate and rebut each and every one.

1.1.3 Shengren *versus* Junzi

Allow this to stand as a sketch of the changing notion of sagehood within the Confucian tradition. Before moving on, there is one more important issue to consider, namely, the relation between the "sage (*shengren* □□)" and the "*junzi* □□," commonly translated "gentleman" or "superior person." Three questions will help us flesh out the relationship. First, is there a difference between the ways these terms were used in classical as opposed to Neo-Confucian discourse? Second, what are the differences, if any, between the two ideals? Third, insofar as there are differences, are there reasons to aim at being a *junzi* and not a sage?

In the classical era, Confucians discuss the *junzi* much more than the sage. Some contemporary interpreters argue that this difference reflects very different conceptualizations of the two ideals, with *junzi* understood to be a more accessible, appropriate ideal for humans, as opposed to seeking the "fullness of human perfection [that] was a hallmark of the sage" [DeBary 1991, 6]. Such a view is emphasized in one proposed gloss for *junzi*, namely, "really good person"; this seems like a realistic ideal, even if it will still take quite a bit of work.[35] It is indeed possible that quite early in the development of classical Confucianism, the sage was understood to be a very different idea from *junzi*, and not an appropriate target for our strivings. But by the middle of the classical era, Mencius was explicitly arguing that we average people were fundamentally like sages, and *junzi* and sage came to be linked together as stages in one's moral attainment. The exact specification of the stages varied; one well-known instance is Xunzi's, which tells us to move from "knight (*shi* □)" to *junzi* to sage. Other sets of stages include the "worthy (*xian* □)," usually between *junzi* and sage, as well as other gradations.[36]

Insofar as *junzi* is conceived of as a stage on the way to sagehood, the question of whether it is a better, more realistic goal for us still remains. Contemporary scholar Wang Wenliang has argued against such a conclusion, pointing out that in fact *junzi* is still a lofty ideal; like the sage ideal itself, the possibility of becoming a *junzi* is more metaphysical than practical [Wang 1993, 302]. I agree with this analysis, which becomes even more apt for Neo-Confucians, who as often as not simply make no distinction between the two ideals. Taking sagehood as an ideal, like taking *junzi* as an ideal, means striving to improve oneself. It means committing oneself to being on the road to sagehood. There is no good reason for desiring to be on the road to sagehood only as far as becoming a *junzi*, both because this would make no practical difference (since one will not attain either state, in all likelihood) and because sagehood is not a less "human" ideal than *junzi*.[37] Furthermore, all Confucians oppose the idea of reaching some level of moral achievement and then resting on one's laurels; this would be to embrace the idea of "supererogation," which I will discuss below. Zhu Xi criticizes his contemporaries for losing sight of the connection between early stages of cultivation and ultimate (and thus never-ending) goals like sagehood. He says that the ancients began by seeking to be a knight and ended by seeking to be a sage. **(p.22)** "This means that knowing how to be a knight just is knowing how to be a sage. Today, those who strive to be knights are many, but I have not heard of any of them striving to reach all the way to sagehood."[38] Even more explicitly, Zhu says, "Today, when friends do not make any improvement, it is because they all have the attitude that they are already good enough, so they have no commitment to becoming sages and worthies. They all make excuses for themselves and leave no way to get rid of the problem. Thus, their problem remains.…If it happens that they come to want to be better, they find they cannot."[39]

1.2 Western Ideals

1.2.1 Greece

If this book were a comparative history of different cultures' highest personality ideals, it would now be time to turn to an extensive survey, since virtually every philosophical or religious tradition has at least one personality ideal that could be fruitfully compared to the idea of sagehood within Neo-Confucianism. My project here is a different one, however. Rather than a broad comparison, I am interested in a focused philosophical dialogue: what happens when the Neo-Confucian idea of sagehood and its attendant doctrines are put into contact with contemporary Western philosophy? The comparisons that are relevant to my goals, therefore, are quite specific, confined mainly to the personality ideals lying in the background of contemporary Western discussions of virtue theory. I will look first at two Greek notions, the concepts of *sophos*, which is often translated as "sage," and *phronimos*, which itself is sometimes rendered "sage" or "moral sage," and may also be understood as "gentleman." Then I will turn to a set of terms that are used in contemporary Western discussions, including (moral) hero and (moral) saint.

Ideas of sagehood in Greece are often bound up with a conception of divinity, which is a realm of perfection separate from humanity. Only gods are truly wise, though humans can and should aspire after wisdom (*sophia*); those who do so are lovers of *sophia*, or "philosophers." Since these individuals love and aspire to something that is fundamentally different from our limited human knowledge, though, Greek theorists generally recognize that its pursuit requires a rupture with everyday life. They argue that people should seek to shape their lives by spiritual exercises that bring divine wisdom tantalizingly closer. For many thinkers, the best human life (i.e., the life of happiness or "*eudaimonia*") is the life of contemplation ("*theoria*").[40] The upshot of all this is that even though the use of "spiritual exercises"[41] to shape one in pursuit of perfection resonates strongly with Neo-Confucian ideas (on which see chapters 8 and 9), the impossibility of actually living a human life as a *sophos* has important consequences.[42] The Neo-Confucian pursuit of sagehood does not involve the same kind of rupture with everyday life; indeed, one of the most telling Neo-Confucian critiques of their Buddhist rivals was precisely that the latter *did* call for a rupture with everyday life.

When we bring the ideal of *phronimos* into the picture, things get even more interesting. The *phronimos* is the practically wise person (i.e., the person with **(p.23)** "*phronesis*") who excels not so much in contemplation as in practical activity ("*praxis*"). Most of Aristotle's famous treatise on ethics, the *Nichomachean Ethics*, is devoted to the virtues and practical wisdom of the *phronimos*, and it seems to detail a life of happiness that, in its well-rounded sociality, contrasts with the life of contemplation, which is self-contained and has only minimal reliance on external goods. When one leading interpreter of Aristotle describes the *phronimos* as a "gentleman" [Rorty 1980, 386], it is tempting to think that whereas in the Confucian context, I have argued that *junzi* and sage are fundamentally continuous with one another, in the Greek context we are offered two distinct ideals: the practical, human-centered life of the *phronimos* or gentleman, and the contemplative, divine-oriented life of the philosopher, striving to become a *sophos*. Some scholars do indeed read Aristotle this way, but most look for a way to reconcile the two visions of ideal life, typically by maintaining that contemplation is, in one way or another, the perfection of a practical life.[43] Given how ultimately imperfect human attempts at contemplation must be—and how removed from the normal concerns of human life—these solutions strike me as technically clever but unsatisfying.[44]

1.2.2 Contemporary Saints and Heroes

Let us turn now to some more recent terms for talking about the morally exemplary. In 1958, J. O. Urmson published an influential essay titled "Saints and Heroes," a chief goal of which was to convince fellow philosophers of something he found in everyday thinking about morally exemplary people, namely that "a line must be drawn between what we can expect and demand from others and what we can merely hope for and receive with gratitude when we get it" [Urmson 1958, 213].[45] I will discuss this idea that there is a realm of moral action beyond our duty, which has subsequently become known as the "supererogatory," near the end of this chapter. For the time being, our interest is in "saints" and "heroes" themselves. Urmson does not offer a very detailed typology. His main point is that there are people who, either because they ignore self-interest (saints) or fear (heroes), reach "the higher flights of morality" [Ibid., 215]. Individuals whom the Catholic Church has labeled as "saints" may or may not count as what philosophers now came to recognize as the category of "moral saint."

If we set aside the category of "hero" for a moment, we can note some important developments regarding the idea of moral saint. Urmson's idea was that the "higher flights of morality" were good for us to reach and admirable, but optional. Several philosophers objected. A. I. Melden characterized the saint as one for whom "the line between the special rights of those within one's care within the family circle, and the human rights of any human being, has vanished" [Melden 1984, 75]. As a result, he says, we should view the saint as "a very different sort of person from the rest of us," even suggesting that like psychopaths, saints simply have a different status: one to which we, "given the sorts of beings we are, cannot aspire" [Ibid., 79]. In other words, saints are simply not relevant to our moral status or aspiration. In her classic article "Moral Saints," Susan Wolf mounts an even broader attack on the category, writing that "moral perfection, in the **(p.24)** sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive" [Wolf 1982, 419]. Wolf describes two types of saints, the Loving Saint and the Rational Saint. The first is maximally devoted to morality out of love; the other, out of duty. (Wolf subsequently uses these characterizations to criticize the ideals of utilitarianism and Kantianism, respectively.) She argues that because their every moment and every inclination must be devoted to morality, these saints will fail to have well-rounded characters, will probably be dull-witted or humorless or bland, and in other ways are not characters to which we should or will want to aspire. Like Melden, she objects to the idea that sainthood represents a desirable ideal, albeit one that we are permitted not to seek. As she puts it, one can be "perfectly wonderful without being perfectly moral" [Ibid., 436]. She urges that we evaluate lives from what she calls the "point of view of individual perfection" rather than from the "moral point of view," although she acknowledges that one admirable aspect—among others—that will be acknowledged from the former perspective is moral goodness.

Other than a brief allusion to Mother Theresa, Wolf does not mention any specific instances of saints; her argument is based on imagining what maximal moral perfection would look like.[46] Melden has in mind historical individuals like St. Francis, whom he contrasts to "paradigms of moral excellence" that we actually encounter, upon occasion, and whose lives may serve as ideals for us. These latter individuals, "heroes," still have the same kinds of interests we do, but are "far better than the rest of us" in their sensitivity to others' rights.[47] On this account, in other words, a hero is someone who is greatly admirable, but whose motivations are still recognizably continuous with our own. I have some, modest, sensitivity to others' rights; heroes have more. A hero need not have every possible virtue, and may even have some vices. A hero need not be maximally good all the time. A number of philosophers have discussed the characteristics of exemplary moral heroes, and have even sought to reclaim the word "saint." According to Lawrence Blum's typology, for instance, heroes are those with particular "moral projects" (like Oskar Schindler's commitment to saving Jews during the Holocaust) who face significant risks, whereas saints have a more passive kind of moral purity or selflessness, but not in the radical or obsessive way that led Melden and Wolf to reject them.[48]

Finally, we need to note Andrew Flescher's book *Heroes, Saints, and Ordinary Morality* as probably the most thorough treatment of these themes [Flescher 2003]. Drawing on both secular and religious ethical traditions, and looking with care at the biographies of several extraordinary people, Flescher arrives at a characterization of heroes that is in many ways similar to that of Blum and others. His view of saints, though, bears quoting at some length:

> Saints, in contrast to heroes, are not ordinary, nor are they imitable in quite the same way that heroes are. Theirs is an excessive morality that begins from an already expanded sense of duty and extends to their total submission to the face of the Other. Saints are disposed to go beyond any robust sense of moral requirement, **(p.25)** indeed to the very limit of what they can manage. While we can emulate heroes to a limited degree, it is unlikely that we would be able to make a saintly ethics of excess a requirement to which we *should* adhere. Although this does not mean that saints are wrong in describing their actions as morally obligatory, it does mean that Urmson was right to want to characterize the works of saints as supererogatory, insofar as that comment is made from the perspective of ordinary persons. At the same time, saints importantly remind us of what we are not yet, which is necessary to shake us out of a complacency to which we, as mortals, are naturally susceptible. This negative effect becomes a positive one over time as self-examination propels us to hope for a better age and strive toward higher standards individually. Saints are scarce in the world in a way that even heroes are not. This scarcity is reflected in their attitude toward other-regard. Whereas heroes perform considerable altruistic actions in *response* to a situation that morally requires their attention and action, saints *proactively* seek out others who might be in need anywhere. [Ibid., 219, emphasis in original]

Flescher titles the chapter from which this quotation is drawn “Suffering Saints,” and the following gives a sense of what he means by a morality of excess: “Given the overwhelmingly abject state of the Other who is suffering, only by adopting such an excessive, ‘wild’ attitude can we begin to address the enormity of the lack before us” [Ibid., 210]. Similarly, “saints accelerate their service to humanity just at the point where most others would succumb to despair” [Ibid., 186]. Not succumbing to despair does not mean they did not suffer, though; writing specifically of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dorothy Day, Flescher says that the excessiveness to which they were prone “made them incurably anxious, barring them from ever considering their work completed, and in turn, rendering them ineligible for living comfortably in any social environment not dominated by the recurring human crises that so fiercely occupied their attention” [Ibid., 183]. On Flescher's account, saints are extraordinarily sensitive, and indeed seem to make little of the distinction between self and other, as Melden worried. Flescher tells us that this sensitivity is the source of their suffering and their strength; in his terms, this is their “excess.”[49] In the end, unlike Melden, Flescher still believes that saints have things to teach us, albeit indirectly, about avoiding complacency.

1.3 Concerns About Sagehood

1.3.1 Is Sagehood Realistic?

Sophos and *phronimos*, sage and hero: these categories are sufficient to allow us to move on to this chapter's final section, and address some of the main issues which confront a contemporary Confucian seeking to build on the Neo-Confucian idea of sagehood. This is the first of many times that I draw on both historical and contemporary sources to raise challenges to Neo-Confucianism; here, as below, **(p.26)** my goal is to flesh out and push forward a contemporary Confucianism based on Neo-Confucian orientations.

A key question is whether people can really become sages. Skepticism about the possibility of sagehood lies at the core of Wang Wenliang's monograph on Chinese ideas of sagehood. The contemporary philosopher Owen Flanagan also draws on what he calls “psychological realism” to challenge the possibility of “moral perfection.” Flanagan's idea of moral perfection is not far from what a Neo-Confucian would count as sagehood, encompassing exemplary “moral perception, motives, and actions”—though we will have to pay attention to whether different uses of the words “moral” and “morality” conform adequately to the categories of the Neo-Confucians. Flanagan poses himself the following question: if we are aware of people who have responded perfectly to certain situations, even under considerable duress, why cannot we imagine people who do this all the time? He has two related answers: one is that even if we can imagine such morally perfect responses to particular situations, it is much harder to imagine the underlying morally perfect character that would have to be in place for a true sage. Second, he queries whether a person can keep up his or her “moral guard” over the course of a whole life: “there are too many other things besides morality which need attending to, and being perfect is tiring after a while” [Flanagan 1991, 29–30].

Of course, as Flanagan admits, neither of these considerations is completely conclusive. After all, as we have seen, a key to sagehood is a transformation such that one is able to effortlessly follow the Way. In subsequent chapters I will explore what this means, and how it might be possible, in much greater detail. For now, the point is that the transformation envisioned is—unlike the Greek *sophos*—not predicated on a division between human and “divine.” However unlikely that attainment of sagehood may be, it is a metaphysical possibility because it is fundamentally a human status. Sages are exceptional humans, to be sure, and may sometimes appear to be mysterious, beyond the ken of ordinary people.[50] But they are humans nonetheless: as we have seen, this is a core Neo-Confucian commitment.

There is no need to insist that very many people are or can become sages. The only people clearly identified as such are those far in the past, cases in which little is actually known about them and we can almost imagine that their status as “sage” is partly honorific. I think nothing would be lost if a Confucian were to acknowledge the possibility that there never has been a full-on, one-hundred-percent sage. At least, there is no harm in this so long as we insist on a crucial kind of continuity between ordinary humans and sages, and see the attainment of sagehood as both articulated via stages, and more generally a matter of degree. If the process of “learning to be a sage” and the various milestones that one might be able to reach along the way were fundamentally unlike the ideal end-state of sagehood, and sagehood itself were all but unattainable, then one could argue that sagehood was irrelevant. We should focus instead on the ways we can actually improve ourselves. This is the way that Melden encourages us to think about "saints," for instance. Perhaps one could still make an argument along Flescher's lines that the existence of sages might keep one from complacency;[51] or perhaps **(p.27)** the extraordinary draw of sagehood (if it is conceived in this way, and not as Flescher's "suffering saint") could serve as a motivation to keep striving [Kasoff 1984, 97]. My understanding of the Neo-Confucian position, though, embraces the idea of a continuity between non-sages and sages. The ultimate state is not fundamentally different from those states that we can partially achieve. I will have to explain how this works in subsequent chapters, but the core idea will be that the sage's spontaneous ability to look for harmony in his or her world is something that we can partially and gradually achieve.

It is worth dwelling at a bit more length on the question of whether sages are "Other" in the way that Melden and Flescher—for all their differences—both suggest that saints are. Flescher tells us, "King's was an infinitely demanding sense of moral responsibility, justified by his faith in God and his commitment to love agapistically." The Christian ideal of *agape*, in turn, King explained this way: "*agape* means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers" [Flescher 2003, 187]. At least on the surface, a strong sense of interconnectedness and the incurable anxiety on behalf of others that I described above both seem to resonate with Confucian and Neo-Confucian understandings of sagehood. Interconectedness will be a particular theme of my next chapter. As for anxiety, perhaps we can see that in the classic passage from *Mencius* which explains that although the gentleman (*junzi*) has no "unexpected vexations," he does have "perennial worries." "His worries are of this kind: Shun was a man; I am also a man. Shun set an example for the Empire worthy of being handed down to posterity, yet here I am, just an ordinary man. That is something worth worrying about."[52] The solution to these worries? "One should become like Shun." Since this is a lifelong task, the worries are "perennial."

I certainly do not want to minimize the ways in which sages are, and seem to be, extraordinary. The ease and spontaneity with which they respond to situations can make them seem mysterious, almost like part of nature. Be this as it may, I believe that their difference from ordinary people lies along quite different lines than the saint. The key is the precise understanding of "interrelatedness" that Neo-Confucians develop. This interrelatedness—as we will see in chapters 2 and 4, in particular—is rooted in a sense of organism and harmony, according to which all things matter, but not all in the same ways or to the same degrees. Harmony is about complementary differences, not universal sameness. In King's case, saintly "excess" is about the maximal alleviation of suffering [Flescher 2003, 187]. The sagely ideal, in contrast, is not about maximal devotion to any one value, but about seeking to realize all relevant values in harmonious interrelation.[53] This is related to the fact that the values recognized by Confucians are wide-ranging and variously interrelated, and certainly not limited to the selfless promotion of others' goods. This Confucian position is in marked contrast with the understanding of "moral" value that drives Flescher's analysis, which puts “universal altruism” at its center [Ibid., 23–5]. The aspects of life and value with which a sage is concerned are pervasive rather than narrowly focused; the sage's task of harmonizing these values is therefore quite different from the saint's task, at least as Flescher has laid it out.[54]

1.3.2 Is Sagehood Desirable?

(p.28) These considerations point the way toward a reply to Susan Wolf's criticisms (see Section 1.2.2), in that they suggest that sages are quite different from the “moral saints” about whom she is worried. Insofar as she is right that a single-minded devotion to (narrowly conceived) morality is self-undermining—either in one's own ability to become more morally perfect, or in the positive influences one might have on others—this should not be a problem for sages and seekers after sagehood, which is rooted in the notion of harmonious balance. Sages will have no trouble seeing why leaning too far in a single direction is problematic. I want to acknowledge, though, that it may be easier to say this than to genuinely realize it in one's life. Consider, for instance, the following characterization of Liang Shuming, a leading twentieth-century intellectual:

> Liang's obsessive concern for self-control and personal integrity is legendary. His life was a continuous struggle to act upon the moral imperatives he felt. Life was a desperate business—a continuous combat with the ever present danger of moral failure. This moral compulsion made him into a most serious individual. He seldom laughed or even smiled; a joke was beyond him. This was strange to no one, for his identity as a sage with a capital S was well known. A communist critic noted in 1956 that Liang “has always considered himself a sage and believed that ‘Heaven had begot the power that was in [him].’”[55]

In short, Liang sounds like someone Wolf would offer as Exhibit A if she were to prosecute sages along the same lines that she deals with saints. In response, here are a few thoughts. First, “obsessive concern with self-control” is not a mark of a sage, but perhaps it is a way to progress. I will turn explicitly to moral education in chapters 8 and 9. Second, if a conscious effort to improve oneself did not have an effect on others—which might well include making them uncomfortable some of the time—then we should be suspicious of how thoroughgoing the effort really was. Finally, and returning to my basic point about the difference between saints and sages, here is a passage from the classical Confucian text the *Record of Rites* in which Confucius endorses a balance between tension and relaxation:

> Zigong had gone to see the agricultural ceremony at the end of the year. Confucius said to him, “Did you enjoy it?” Zigong replied, “The whole country seemed to have gone mad. I didn't enjoy it.” Confucius said, “After a hundred days of labor, people have one day of fun. That's not something you understand. To get tense all the time and never get relaxed, that is too much even for King Wen and King Wu. To get relaxed all the time and never get tense, that is not what King Wen and King Wu would prefer. To alternate being relaxed and tense—that is the way of King Wen and King Wu.[56]

Perhaps Liang Shuming needed to take this message more to heart.

(p.29) Liang's example raises the question, even if we do not feel this applies to Liang himself, of whether something bad can come from trying to push oneself to be too good—that is, better than one is really able to be. Would it be better to accept one's flaws than to try obsessively to rid oneself of them? As we saw earlier, Zhu Xi criticizes those who have “the attitude that they are already good enough.” In other words, there is no stopping: everything matters and one can never just rest on one's laurels. So Neo-Confucians would not accept the idea of “supererogation” promoted by Urmson and many others, namely, that one has certain, limited moral duties, and that doing anything beyond this is “supererogatory”: good and praiseworthy, but optional.[57] Indeed, supererogation in this form has been challenged by a number of contemporary authors. One of the arguments against supererogation that I find most compelling, and believe that contemporary Confucians would endorse, is the observation that ethically exemplary individuals (whether we think of them as heroes, saints, or sages) typically do not understand their actions or undertakings to have been “optional.” Time and again, they describe their reactions as automatic and their choices as necessary. To offer just one example, Philip Hallie's book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* describes the way that the villagers of Le Chambon, led by their pastor, André Trocmé, saved many Jews during World War II. Hallie relates his repeated encounters with villagers that went along the following lines: “How can you call us ‘good’? We were doing what had to be done. Who else could help them? And what has all this to do with goodness? Things had to be done, that's all, and we happened to be there to do them. You must understand, it was the most natural thing in the world to help these people” [Hallie 1979, 20–1].[58]

I will elaborate on how Neo-Confucians themselves develop similar themes below, particularly in chapter 8. As a way of concluding the present chapter, and yet pointing toward the fruitfulness of ongoing dialogue between contemporary philosophers East and West, let me note in closing another way to think about supererogation that fits better with the concept of sagehood. Inspired by Nietzsche, Christine Swanton has recently argued that, in general, “we should not be virtuous beyond our strength” [Swanton 2003, 204–5]. There is quite a lot packed into this slogan, but the basic idea is that one's virtue should be constrained by “one's effectiveness, the desideratum of expressing self-love, and the availability of other agents who will do a job for which one is not very adequate.” Crucially, Swanton adds that such a conception of virtue must also make room for gradual improvements in one's strength, and argues that a virtuous sort of “perfectionism” is also necessary.[59] In this context, Swanton argues, there is room for a kind of supererogation: these would be cases where one pushes “beyond one's strength,” finding a way to do some critical good even if, in so doing, one betrays a bit of resentment or in some other way acts less than perfectly and spontaneously. These are complicated matters that we cannot pursue right now, in advance of a much more sophisticated understanding of Neo-Confucian ideas about virtue, sagely motivation, and so on. Let us set them aside, as fodder for future rooted global philosophy, and turn to the Confucian idea of coherence (*li* □). **(p.30)**

Notes:

(1.) See Wang [1993, 6], Wang [1999, 27–8], and Chen [2000, 409–13]. Chen argues explicitly that it was not related to manifesting things to others.

(2.) Also known as the Warring States Era, it can be dated from 481 to 221 BCE. Confucius himself is believed to have lived from 551 to 479 BCE.

(3.) See *Analects* 9:6, and Chen [2000, 415]. The dating of passages in the *Analects* is very controversial; for an extremely stimulating approach that agrees with Chen in seeing *Analects* 9:6 as early, see Brooks and Brooks [1998, 52 and *passim*].

(4.) See *Analects* 6:30, which the Brooks argue is a late interpolation [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 176]. One challenge to the Brooks' dating scheme, it is worth noting, is *Analects* 7:26, which they date rather early, yet seems to view the sage as an elusive ideal.

(5.) *Mencius* 6A:7; see also *Mencius* 4B:28.

(6.) See *Xunzi* 19, as well as his account of sagely intelligence itself in *Xunzi* 21. Another paradigmatic assertion of sagely creativity is found in the *Li Ji*; see discussion in Wang [1993, 287–8].

(7.) I will discuss this slogan, which first appears in the Daoist *Zhuangzi*, in considerable detail in chapter 10. We should note in this context that the tie between sagehood and rulership was loose, even in the classical period; *Mencius* 7B:15, for example, describes as “sages” people who were not rulers. For further discussion, see Wang [1993, 12], Chen [2000, 419], and Bol [2008, esp. ch. 4].

(8.) *Mencius* 4A:2; *Zhou Li*, *Qi* section; and *Xunzi* 21, respectively. “Culmination” is D.C. Lau's apt translation [Mencius 1970, 118].

(9.) Contemporary Western philosophers have seen a difference between rooting ethics in individual virtue and seeing fulfilled relationships as central to ethics; see Slote [2007, 7 and 86]. I will discuss how these ideas connect to Neo-Confucian “virtue ethics” in chapter 3.

(10.) Translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 110], slightly modified.

(11.) Translation from Mencius [1970, 150–1], slightly modified.

(12.) In an important recent study, Mark Csikszentmihalyi shows how ideas of the sage's perfection—his ability to avoid quandaries or dilemmas—developed in tandem with ideas of “material virtue,” by which Csikszentmihalyi means various theories about how the virtues manifest themselves through physiological changes. See Csikszentmihalyi [2004].

(13.) On the increasing mystification, see Wang [1993, 11]. As for inaccessibility, here is a Tang dynasty thinker: “Sagehood is a matter of heaven (*tian*), and not something that can be arrived at through cultivation,” quoted in Wang [1999, 31]. One scholar notes that some went so far as to divinize sages, but that this was unusual [Wang 1993, 24].

(14.) For discussion of this term, see the introduction.

(15.) Zhou Dunyi, the Cheng brothers, and other Neo-Confucians are briefly introduced in the Dramatis Personae.

(16.) See Zhou [1990, 29]; Cheng and Cheng [1981, 577]; and discussion in Jiang [1994, 278–9].

(17.) See Kasoff [1984, 26–7] and Jiang [1994], who notes that students were encouraged to study Yan because Confucius himself was too lofty as an initial target.

(18.) *Reflections on Things at Hand* was compiled and edited by Zhu Xi and Lü Zuqian, and contains thematically organized quotations from the sayings and writings of earlier Neo-Confucian thinkers. See Zhu and Lü [1983] and, for a translation, Zhu and Lü [1967].

(19.) There is one reference to “the ideas of the sage and the worthy,” which refers to Confucius and Mencius.

(20.) For instance, the text says that “[Confucius] left no trace” [Zhu & Lü 1967, 291]. In the first instance, this means no trace of selfish intentions—unlike Yan Yuan, who could not leave all such intentions behind. But the ambiguity is intentional.

(21.) It is worth noting that while Cheng Hao is not said to have been born with a sagely nature—and is never labeled as a sage—he is said to have “possessed an unusual nature by endowment, and nourished it in accordance with the Way” [Zhu & Lü 1967, 299]; cf. Zhu and Lü [1983, 335]. In addition, Zhang Zai came closer than any other Neo-Confucian I know of to claiming sagehood for himself. He titled his magnum opus *Correcting the Unenlightened*, and surely had in mind the following passage from the *Classic of Change*: “To cultivate correctness in the unenlightened is the task of the sage.” See discussion in Kasoff [1984, 123–4].

(22.) Contemporary philosopher Christine Swanton argues that, in general, we should not be “virtuous beyond our strength,” but also combines this with an astute discussion of the ways in which perfectionism itself is a virtue: that is, we should work to “strengthen” ourselves morally. Indirectly, then, we *are* striving to be virtuous beyond our (current) strength. In addition, Swanton suggests that in some circumstances, we should after all try to go beyond our strength. I discuss these ideas briefly at the end of this chapter, and see Swanton [2003, ch. 9].

(23.) “*Duo neng* □□”—a phrase being quoted from *Analects* 9:6, which we discussed briefly earlier—literally means capable of many things or omnicompetent, and certainly did not have, in its original context, the sense of truly “limitless” ability. By the Song dynasty, though, many seem to take it to be equivalent to “*wusuobuneng* □□□□,” which is literally “able to do anything.” Zhu Xi uses the phrases interchangeably. See Wang [1999, 32].

(24.) The paired phrases come from *Zhongyong* 27. Jiang discusses a related formula used by the Cheng brothers that purportedly balances the two kinds of learning: aim at the “correctness of universal coherence (*tianli zhi zheng* □□□□)” as well as the “fullness of human relationships (*renlun zhi zhi* □□□□)” [Jiang 1994, 280]. An important article on Zhu Xi's efforts to balance the two is Yu [1986].

(25.) The meaning of “coherence (*li* □)” is the topic of the next chapter.

(26.) In Wang's *Record for Practice*, “the people filling the street are all sages” appears twice, both times said by students. It seems clear that they are repeating a teaching of the Master's, though, and in each case Wang responds so as to deepen his students' understanding of their fundamental commonality with the common people. See Wang [1983, 357 (§313)] and Wang [1963, 239–40].

(27.) For further elaboration of Wang's resistance to the idea that the sage is omniscient, see Wang [1983, 303–4 (§227)]. In fact, in two of his letters Wang explicitly asserts that sages are imperfect. In one he writes that sages are “as prone to faults as other men”; in the other, he points out that Confucius makes clear that he does not think himself to be without faults [Wang 1972, 49 and 76].

(28.) Zhu actually sounds very much like Wang when he says, “The Way is … so distant that even sages cannot … comprehensively understand it … . But the coherence (*li* □) that is the reason for things, though hidden and not visible, can nonetheless be known and acted upon” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 2, 8]. This statement is a comment on *Zhongyong* 12, which says that “ … even sages in trying to penetrate to [the Way's] furthest limits do not know it all” [Ames and Hall 2001, 93].

(29.) [Wang 1983, 148–9 (§125)], translation from Wang [1963 , 82]. The same idea can be found in many other passages in Wang's *Record for Practice*; it is especially explicit in Ibid. [205 (§146)], where the Cheng brothers' discussion of recognizing the “dispositions of the sage” is criticized and the need for personal realization stressed.

(30.) For a different view of the relations between Zhu and Wang on sagehood, putting more emphasis on their differences (while still recognizing key, underlying similarities), see Guo [2003]. Another interesting difference between them lies in their understanding of Confucius himself. Briefly, Zhu Xi (following Cheng Yi) believed that Confucius was born a sage and did not need to engage in rigorous cultivation; he described himself as going through such cultivation (especially in *Analects* 2:3) only out of humility and to inspire others' efforts. Wang, in contrast, believed that Confucius had to work so that his “commitment” gradually “matured,” just like anyone else. This view of Wang's will be a major topic of chapter 7; on Zhu's view, see Zhu [1987, Pt. 3, 8].

(31.) Wang Tingxiang (1474–1544) is a notable example of this trend.

(32.) [Ivanhoe 2000, 83]; see also Wang [1993, 60–4].

(33.) See Wang [1999, 33] and Tiwald [2006].

(34.) Scholars disagree on whether sagehood has had a significant continuing relevance in broader Chinese culture. For two important accounts, contrast Gu [2005] with Metzger [2005]. For a stimulating discussion of Feng Youlan's focus on everyday life rather than on the quest for sagehood, see Chen [2007].

(35.) Joel Kupperman used “really good person” in a lecture at Wesleyan University. See also Kupperman [1999], where the term also appears (though not explicitly as a translation of *junzi*).

(36.) [Wang 1993 , 83 and 301]. See also Wang's discussion of Jia Yi's elaborate conception of stages [Ibid., 149].

(37.) It is interesting to note that based on his reading of *Mencius*, Yu Jiyuan distinguishes between two goals that are continuous and sequential, the “moral self” and the “perfect self.” Only in the latter case does one fully realize oneself as a human being: “A person fully actualizes his nature not in oneness with society, but in oneness with Heaven, although if the society is one in which the way of heaven prevails, there is no tension between these two unities” [Yu 2001, 246].

(38.) Cited in Wang [1993, 146].

(39.) [Zhu 1974, 199–200]; cf. Zhu [1991, 152].

(40.) See generally the essays in Hadot [1995], pp. 57 and 265 in particular.

(41.) This is Hadot's term; see Hadot [1995]. I discuss its relation to Neo-Confucian ideas in chapter 8.

(42.) The exact kind of impossibility differs depending on the specific Greek thinker. For Plato, it is metaphysically impossible for a human to attain *sophia*. Aristotle's views on this score are somewhat muddled. He does seem to think it is possible to attain *sophia*, but the life in question will be bizarre and “useless” from a human perspective [Aristotle 1987 , 422 (1141^b)]. Even so, at the end of the *Nichomachean Ethics* he nonetheless recommends that we “must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us” [Ibid., 471 (1177^b)].

(43.) Rorty herself makes such an argument; see Dehart [1995] for another example.

(44.) For a recent effort to compare Aristotle with early Confucianism on this issue, see Yu [2007 , ch. 7]. While I am uncomfortable with the degree to which Yu uses language like “divine” and “saint” when discussing (or translating) Confucian sources, I am in basic agreement with his conclusion: “[For Aristotle,] the fulfillment of the practical self does not lead to the fulfillment of the theoretical self, and vice-versa. These are two models of human flourishing that cannot be fulfilled within a single career.… In contrast, in Confucius, there is only one continuous process of the development of the relational self, in which one's virtuous character keeps deepening and perfecting” [Ibid., 204].

(45.) For a detailed account of the context for and significance of Urmson's essay, see Flescher [2003 , ch. 1].

(46.) Mother Theresa is mentioned in Ibid. [432]. Wolf also cites George Orwell's famous comment from his “Reflections on Gandhi”: “Sainthood is … a thing that human beings must avoid.… It is too readily assumed that … the ordinary man only rejects it because it is too difficult; in other words, that the average man is a failed saint. It is doubtful whether this is true. Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings” [Ibid. , 436n4].

(47.) [Melden 1984 , 79]; Melden suggests that they are “heroes” (and disagrees with Urmson's conflation of the categories of saint and hero) at Ibid. [81n15].

(48.) See Blum [1988]. Blum also uses the term “Murdochian exemplar” for those he labels saints, alluding to Iris Murdoch's notion of the best kind of person, which I will discuss in chapter 7. In addition to hero and saint, Blum also discusses the cross-cutting categories of “idealist” and “responder.” There is another interesting discussion of “saints” in the Preface to Flanagan [1991]; Flanagan's main point is that we do not have an adequate theory of moral psychology to explain such exemplars.

(49.) Flescher's account of “excessive” sensitivity, both the suffering and the great moral works it enables, bears comparison with Lisa Tessman's insightful remarks about the “burden” of sensitivity, and yet the difficulty of saying how much sensitivity is “enough.” See Tessman [2005, ch. 4].

(50.) Huang [2007, 203–4] discusses the connection that the Cheng brothers saw between sages and *shen*, a difficult term that means both “mysterious, wonderful” and “spirit” or even (tendentiously) “divine.” Huang explicitly raises the question of the appropriateness of taking *shen* to correspond to divinity or God in Western thought, and concludes that this is only apt if we follow certain revisionist Christian theologians in questioning the traditional notion of a deified, radically transcendent God.

(51.) Aaron Stalnaker makes precisely this argument about the classical Confucian Xunzi's view of sagehood: such an ideal of perfection is meant to chasten the virtuous, to keep them from self-satisfaction [Stalnaker 2006, 191 and 263].

(52.) *Mencius* 4B:28; translation from Mencius [1970, 134].

(53.) Explaining and defending this claim is a major task of chapter 6.

(54.) The idea that “morality” as it has been understood in the last few hundred years of Western philosophy is too narrow has been widely endorsed in contemporary Western virtue ethics. Williams [1985] is a famous statement of this view; I particularly like Swanton's articulation of the way that virtue “seep[s] into every nook and cranny of life.”

See Swanton [2003, 68–76].

(55.) [Alitto 1979 , 3]; see also Ibid. [30] for some discussion of his youthful efforts at personal cultivation. Alitto says “single-minded character building cannot avoid having a tinge of self-conceit.” See also Ibid. [46], for some discussion of Liang's father's own “life of scrupulous striving for moral perfection.”

(56.) *Li Ji, Zaji Xia*; cited from Yu [forthcoming, 64].

(57.) In addition to Urmson, an influential formulation of the view is Heyd [1982], who characterizes supererogatory acts as: (1) neither obligatory or forbidden; (2) morally good, both in their (intended) consequences and their intrinsic value; and (3) done voluntarily, for someone else's good. A famous *locus classicus* for the idea is in the New Testament, *Book of Matthew*. Jesus is said to tell a rich man: “If thou wilt enter into [eternal] life, keep the commandments,” but also “if thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor” [quoted in Heyd (1982, 17)].

(58.) One Western philosopher who sees the phenomenology of moral “choice” in a similar way is Iris Murdoch, whose views I will discuss extensively in later chapters. In an essay called “The Idea of Perfection,” she argues that it is a mistake to think that our will can make unconditioned choices among various goods. She writes that “I can only chose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort.… One is often compelled almost automatically by what one can see” [Murdoch 1970a, 37]. See also astute discussion of this theme in Colby and Damon [1992 , 70–6] and Flescher [2003].

(59.) She understands that the line between virtuous and vicious perfectionism can be tricky to draw, and requires “a sophisticated understanding of the relationships between the individual's own psyche, the facts of her behavior in a specific context, the social milieu in which she operates, and her attitudes toward that milieu” [Ibid., 208].

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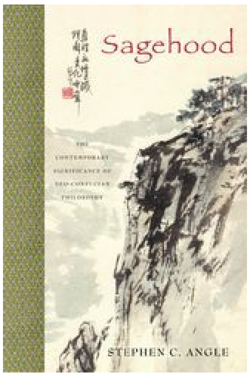

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Li □/Coherence

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Li is a difficult term, sometimes translated as “principle” or “pattern,” that lies at the center of Neo-Confucian philosophizing. Building on the insights of Willard Peterson, Brook Ziporyn, and other scholars, the chapter argues that *li* means “the valuable and intelligible way that things fits together,” and chooses “coherence” as the best short translation of *li*. The chapter draws not only on Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, but also on other Neo-Confucians like Zhang Zai and Luo Qinshun. P.J. Ivanhoe's important arguments concerning the influence of Huayan Buddhism on Neo-Confucianism are both developed and critiqued. The chapter examines *li*'s combination of subjective and objective dimensions, including the way that *li* is partly constituted by human purposes. Other topics include the ontological status of *li*, its causal role, and its simultaneous unity and multiplicity. The chapter concludes by showing that once *li* is understood as coherence, the question of how it can be both descriptive and prescriptive—which has

long bedeviled interpreters, some of them worried by Hume's distinction between “is” and “ought”—is readily answered.

Keywords: Principle, Pattern, Brook Ziporyn, Zhang Zai, Luo Qinshun, P. J. Ivanhoe, Huayan Buddhism, ontology, normativity

The translations I have chosen for most of the key Chinese terms I use in this book present little controversy. “Sage” for “*sheng* □,” “harmony” for “*he* □,” even “virtue” for “*de* □”: each of these has a long pedigree and is firmly grounded in the semantics of the Chinese word. With one exception, even when there is no scholarly consensus or when I have had to argue for a specific translation—as with “reverence” for “*jing* □” or “commitment” for “*zhi* □”[1]—my translations are unlikely to raise many scholarly eyebrows. The exception is “*li* □,”[2] which I will translate as “coherence.” *Li* is a difficult term that lies at the center of Neo-Confucian philosophizing; this combination of complexity and centrality means that it is more or less permanently enmeshed in controversy. This controversy is not just about translation, but about what the term means, and therefore what the Neo-Confucian philosophical tradition as a whole means. Without taking a stand on the meaning of *li*, one cannot hope to understand Neo-Confucianism. Luckily, amidst all the controversy is a thread of argument that I find persuasive. Seeing that *li* means “coherence,” in a specific sense that I will shortly discuss, simultaneously helps us to understand the Neo-Confucian masters and to appreciate the significance of their philosophical insight today.

2.1 First Steps

It may help to begin by thinking ourselves into the Neo-Confucian orientation toward the world, and only then beginning to interpret specific passages. First, put aside the idea that the universe was created by something outside it. No order or intelligibility was stamped onto a **(p.32)** whirling, incoherent mass from above. Still, it is apparent that we do experience order, patterns, and intelligibility in our world. It is a world constantly in motion and yet we perceive (see, feel) similarities and differences, connections and disconnections. The generation and regeneration of life—our lives, the lives of those we find ourselves caring about most, even any life at all—cannot but be salient to us, and valuable. Our perceptions of things or events or reactions are inevitably patterned, coherent, and conceptualized. On reflection, we might be able to say that some aspects of this patterning are more “natural” and other aspects more “cultural,” but it is impossible to fully separate these aspects: from the first, our experience of our world is shaped by both dimensions. There is no separating ourselves and our reactions out from this picture, no setting ourselves aside and asking what is the world “really” like, apart from our participation in it. This is not to say, though, that the world exists simply as one sees and experiences it. In any number of ways one can be wrong about what one thought one perceived (again, including both cognitive and conative perceptions).

Further reflection brings us ever closer to explicitly philosophical territory (questions like: How is it that we go wrong? What do our patterned perceptions have in common?), so now let us bring Neo-Confucians more explicitly into the conversation. In order to talk about the way in which our worlds make sense to us, they adopted a term with a long pedigree, namely "*li*."[3] My thesis in this chapter is that *li* means "the valuable, intelligible way that things fit together," and that this meaning is well-expressed by the word "coherence."[4] Zhu Xi is explicit that *li* has the kind of inner complexity necessary for it to match with "coherence" when he tells us that, "Each coherence has ordered elements and distinct segments."[5] This short sentence already points toward another of *li*'s critical dimensions, namely the idea that there are multiple coherences; as we will see, they can overlap with or nest within each other, though there is one maximal coherence (*tianli* □□ or universal coherence) that encompasses everything. I certainly grant that the English word "coherence" has various other meanings, but when I use it as translation for *li*, I mean it in the specific sense that I have just begun to explain. I should also note at the outset that different thinkers might have different ideas about what counts, in a given context, as "the valuable, intelligible way that things fit together." They might agree on what *li* means, that is, but disagree on what its specific content is in a specific case. The content of "coherence" in a given instance will depend on premises about what is valuable, for instance. Furthermore, some Buddhist thinkers use *li* in this same sense, except they do not believe that there is any unique "coherence" to a given situation. According to them, no one way that things might fit together is uniquely intelligible and valuable. For Neo-Confucians, though, the content of a given situation's "coherence" is determinate, as I will discuss in more detail below.

As a first step toward fleshing out and defending this interpretation of *li*, let us consider the weaknesses of three alternative translations of *li*, "law," "principle," and "pattern." Although law has not been used in recent scholarship to translate *li*, the similarities between *li* and natural law have been noted (and indeed, I will draw on this comparison below).[6] Zhu Xi says, "As far as things in the universe go, we can be certain that each has a reason why it is thus (*suoyiran zhi gu* **(p.33)** □□□□□) and a rule to which it should conform (*suodangran zhi ze* □□□□□). This is what is meant by coherence (*li*)."[7] The two aspects of this definition look like they tally well with different meanings of "law." But Zhu—and indeed, Neo-Confucians in general—are explicit that there is no "lawgiver" in their cosmology.[8] In addition, as we will see shortly, *li* has a crucial subjective dimension that is absent from modern conceptions of scientific or natural laws.

"Principle" is perhaps the most widely used translation for *li*, in part because it seems to capture well the normative dimension of *li*—that is, the aspect Zhu expresses as "a rule to which it should conform." We are all familiar with ethical principles like "respect your parents." Even though we can make a wide variety of generalizations about the content of *li*, however, we will see presently that *li* are extremely context-dependent. The "valuable, intelligible way that things fit together" depends, in each context, on what the things are. Often the "things" will include people, each with different emotional and physical capacities. In the next chapter I will be arguing that Neo-Confucian ethics is a virtue-based ethics, rather than a principle-based ethics; part of the argument will be that "coherence" itself, on which ethics is based, is not best understood as "principle."

Finally, let us consider "pattern." Although there are some attractions to understanding *li* as "pattern," in the end such an equation founders on one of two difficulties: either "pattern" is too vague to adequately give us the meaning of *li*, or it is too specific. It has been suggested that pattern is a more basic idea than coherence. We cannot find something to be intelligible, for example, without noticing some kind of patterns: some commonalities, some connection with other aspects of our experience.[9] Still, *li* is more than merely being-patterned. Its connection to value is fundamental. Its connection to human intelligibility is also critical. Whereas there could be patterns that no human could ever notice or make sense of, *li* is necessarily accessible to humans.[10] From this perspective, "coherence" better expresses the meaning of *li* because its meaning (as I have stipulated it for our purposes) is richer and narrower. On the other hand, if we try to equate *li* to some specific Pattern—the precise pattern that occurs in all things—we will lose the contextual flexibility and sensitivity to human subjectivity that is vital to *li*. The contemporary scholar Brook Ziporyn, on whose work I draw extensively in this chapter, has noted that both "pattern" and "principle" imply "repeatability, reiterability, [or] the recurrence of 'the same' in different instances; the same ratio, the same form, the same relations" [Ziporyn forthcoming, 85]. However, there is no saying precisely which pattern is universally present, whenever we can say there is *li*.[11]

The argument of the last few paragraphs has incurred a number of promissory notes, including the claims that *li* is partly subjective, highly context-dependent, and richer than merely being patterned without being as specific as one, particular pattern. In addition, readers may be wondering how one particular thing can be said to have "coherence": which are the parts of the thing that are said to valuably, intelligibly fit together? For that matter, there are a number of notoriously difficult aspects of *li* that I have not yet alluded to, such as its precise relationship to the *qi* (roughly, matter-energy) that makes up the universe, and **(p.34)** the way in which *li* can be simultaneously one and many. The following sections address these questions.

2.2 Subjective and Objective

Early meanings of *li* include "dividing [land into cultivatable fields]" and "dressing [jade, in keeping with its veins]." Each of these uses inextricably combines human purpose with external reality. A "cultivatable field"—unlike a valley or a plain—cannot be understood apart from our interests and goals; neither can a crafted piece of jade make sense except in reference to our desires for such things [Hall and Ames 1995, 212; Ziporyn forthcoming, 79]. At the same time, both fields and worked jade must honor the objective constraints set by the local topography and the specific composition of the jade, respectively. A cultivatable field cannot be too steep; a jade pendant cannot be cracked or sharp-edged. If it is otherwise, these things simply will not work as fields or as pendants. They lose their value to us, and therefore lose their point. The constitutive role of human purposes in these early uses of *li* is further emphasized by *li*'s use here as a verb: this is something that humans do. In short, we can say that *li*'s earliest uses combine objective and subjective dimensions, and do so by simultaneously calling on our (subjective) purposes and our (objective) environment.

2.2.1 Nature and Subjectivity

Let us now leap forward to the Neo-Confucians, and pursue the sense in which their much more elaborate notion of *li* can also be said to have a subjective dimension. The source of human tendencies toward good or bad, and the best means to cultivate reliable dispositions toward the former, are perennial Confucian concerns that through the ages tended to be discussed in terms of one's “*xing*□,” a contested term that is typically, and ambiguously, translated as “nature.” Classical Confucians debated whether one's *xing* should be understood as good, bad, indifferent, and so on. The key idea on which most Neo-Confucians settled was first articulated by Zhang Zai and then refined by Cheng Yi. They resolved the ambiguity surrounding *xing* by distinguishing between one's actual “endowment” of tendencies (for instance, to be “soft and lax” or “hard and energetic”), on the one hand, and the valued coherence of one's nature (“*xing zhi li*□□□” [Cheng and Cheng 1981, 313]), on the other. We can talk of the coherence of our natures on two different levels. First of all, it is the valuable, intelligible way that our various feelings and capacities fit together. For example, when our desires for food are apt and do not lead us into selfish gluttony, and our compassion for strangers is able to function, but without causing us to forget those closest to us—these are aspects of the coherence that our nature can attain. Secondly, we can think about the coherence of our nature as the way we fit in with all other things harmoniously. We can tell that this is the coherence *of our nature*, and not just an abstract ideal, because of the actual promptings we feel toward such coherence—and here Cheng Yi would advert to things like feelings of compassion for others. In this **(p.35)** latter sense, admittedly, the “coherence of our nature” extends beyond our body to include relations with other things. Zhu Xi makes it explicit that *li* works this way when he says that the coherence of a boat includes “that it can only move on water” [Zhu 1997, 56]. The coherence of the boat is not just the way that its pieces (keel, oars, etc.) fit together, but also the way that the whole boat fits together with an environment. Whether we are talking about the fit of a boat with its environment or the fit of people with our environment, Neo-Confucians believed this fit to be objective. There are ways that things fit and ways that things do not fit, and the difference is not up to us to decide. At the same time, our reactions and purposes partly constitute the fit between our human natures and our environment. A critical part of our fit with our environments is that we care for other people to various degrees. Because of the role these subjective reactions play, we can say that coherence is both objective and subjective.

Another way to talk about the “coherence of our nature (*xing zhi li* □□□)” is to refer to the aspect of our nature that *is* coherence, and this is how Cheng Yi arrived at his most famous slogan, “Nature is coherence (*xing ji li* □□□).”[12] If *li* were thought to be something purely objective—which was encouraged by the old-fashioned translation of *li* as “principle”—then it might be hard to see how some aspect of our nature could be *li*. Since coherence (*li*) is partly constituted by our valuations, though, it makes much more sense to say that our nature and coherence are one and the same. Our spontaneous reactions themselves are part of the valuable, intelligible way that things fit together: these reactions, which are aspects of our “nature,” are also aspects of coherence. A. C. Graham has put the point very nicely:

> [*Li*] is itself conceived as a vast three-dimensional structure which looks different from different angles. In laying down the lines along which everything moves, it

> appears as the Way (*dao*); in that the lines are independent of my own personal desires, it imposes itself on me as Heaven (*tian*); as a pattern which from my own viewpoint spreads out from the sub-pattern of my own profoundest reactions, it appears to me as my own basic Nature (*xing*).[13]

Li is indeed a kind of pattern or network of interdependencies, a pattern that is partly constituted by my own “profoundest reactions.” Coherence—the valuable, intelligible way things fit together—is part and parcel of my own reactions to my environment. Thus Cheng Yi (and Zhu Xi, following him) concludes that one's nature is coherence.

Careful readers may have been brought up short by Graham's statement that “in that the lines are independent of my own desires, it imposes itself upon me as Heaven.” How can this be consistent with my claim that *li* is partly subjective? How, indeed, can this be consistent with Graham's own subsequent claim that *li* is rooted in “my own profoundest reactions”? The answers to these questions lie in an understanding of *li* as not only subjective, but also objective. In fact, Neo-Confucians like Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi did not want to over-emphasize the subjective dimension of coherence. Even though they saw that coherence was a critically human-centered notion, they did not want to give the impression that **(p.36)** coherence could be invented out of whole cloth. Neither things nor values could be manipulated at will. Just as only some areas of land can be articulated as “cultivatable fields,” so not every way of articulating a situation is equally coherent. Confucians saw the terms in which universal coherence (*tianli*) should be understood as beyond debate: the early sages had already seen that certain virtues were necessary for broad-based harmony to emerge, and this was based in their insights into the kinds of creatures that we humans are.[14]

2.2.2 Settled Coherence and Objectivity

Philosophers like Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, therefore, stressed this objective aspect of coherence by saying things like “Throughout the universe there is only a settled (*ding* □) and unchanging (*chang* □) coherence. This we must understand. Do not pretend for a moment that you can manipulate it, and do not assume for a moment that you can change it. Naturally, the way of the sages, both before and now, matched like two halves of a tally.”[15] The point here is clearly to stress that one cannot make moral values (i.e., the way of the sages) into whatever one likes. They are not simply a matter of what one happens to desire at the moment, and thus—notwithstanding the fact that the coherence of a situation depends, in part, on one's own reactions to it—coherence has the *feel* of something objective, choiceless. Zhu Xi connects “settled coherence (*dingli* □□)” with the following passage from the classic text *Great Learning*: “Knowing where to come to rest, one becomes settled (*ding*); being settled, one may be tranquil; tranquility then leads to peaceful repose; peaceful repose makes reflection possible; only with reflection is one able to reach the resting place.”[16] Zhu comments that “settled (*ding*),” “peace of mind (*jing* □),” and “inner serenity (*an* □)” all mean roughly the same thing. In particular, though, “settled” is when “in one's heart-mind one knows that ‘as a ruler one should rest in humaneness; as a subject one should rest in reverence.’ ”[17] In other words, when one's reactions are thoroughly made up of Confucian virtues, one is “settled,” which leads to peace of mind and inner serenity. These attitudes, in turn, are linked to the spontaneous ease with which one is able to act. Coherence is "settled" in the sense of being automatic, immediately and always available. Zhu elsewhere describes being "settled" as automatically knowing that in the cold, one needs warm clothing, without the need for reflection: more generally, one is "settled" when, for all things and events, "one always knows their settled coherence" [Zhu 1997, 247].

One important caveat: "settled coherence" does not mean that there is a settled rule that can be known in advance for every situation. Both the Chengs and Zhu Xi make it very clear that explicit rules—which the Chengs unfortunately sometimes refer to as "settled (*ding*)"—cannot always apply. For example, Cheng Yi writes that the only eternal verity is change, and so anything "settled" cannot be eternal [Cheng and Cheng 1981, 862]. An explicit instance of "settled coherence (*dingli*)" can therefore be categorized as an "[explicit] standard (*jing* □)," which typically but not always applies [Ibid., 160]. The Chengs then allude to a passage in the *Mencius*, in which the explicit rule that one should not touch female relatives—in this case, the "standard"—can be waived if one encounters **(p.37)** one's drowning sister-in-law. Knowing when to follow the standard and when to waive it is a matter of (in Mencius's terms) "discretion (*quan* □)," which the Chengs and Zhu Xi also refer to as the "balanced (*zhong* □)."[18] The "standard" may be unchanging, but it is not universally applicable. The "balanced" is always right, but not formulatable as a set of explicit rules. Zhu Xi clarifies the Chengs' terminology somewhat, suggesting that "typical (*pingchang* □□)" is better than "settled" to express the limitations of "standard" rules. He can then reserve "settled" for the kind of coherence that we perceive when we have fully internalized the virtues. In other words, when Zhu Xi talks of "settled coherence," he has in mind the situationally apt notion of "balance" rather than the explicit but fragile idea of a "standard."[19]

Read charitably, then, Zhu's discussion of "settled coherence" does not deny that human subjectivity plays an important role in articulating coherence. Zhu's later critics were not always so charitable, though, and one has to acknowledge that "settled" and "unchanging" do lend themselves to being read in exclusively objective terms. Thus Wang Yangming took explicit exception to Zhu's statement that "each event and thing possesses a settled coherence," complaining that this is to inappropriately distinguish one's mind (and subjectivity) from coherence. It is as if, Wang says, the coherence of filial piety was "in" one's parents' bodies; when they passed away, no filial piety would be left.[20] Instead, Wang insists on talking of the "coherence *of the mind* (*xin zhi li* □□□)," in order to foreground the role of our subjectivity in coherence. Indeed, in a manner reminiscent of Cheng Yi's move from "coherence *of* nature" to "coherence *is* nature," Wang Yangming moves from talk of the "coherence of mind" to his more famous slogan, "mind is coherence (*xin ji li* □□□)."[21] In order to avoid exaggerating the difference between Wang and his predecessors, though, we have to see that Wang is not saying that our minds simply invent coherence however they like. He explains that our mind's response to any situation or stimulus is called "intention (*yi* □)," and being thusly engaged with one's environment defines a specific "thing (*wu* □)." Things are therefore always articulated both conceptually and affectively, via the way one has understood and responded to the situation. One of Wang's examples is having one's intention engaged by serving one's parents: in such a context, serving one's parents is a “thing.” Someone else might have been intentionally engaged by the same physical situation in a different way, thus leading to a different “thing.” However, Wang stresses that there are better and worse ways of perceiving the situation, depending on how closely one is adhering to what he calls the “original substance (*benti* □□)” of one's mind.[22] Even when he says that “there is no mind-independent coherence” and “there are no mind-independent things,” therefore, we should not see him as advocating what Western philosophers would call idealism.[23] Instead, he is emphasizing the subjective dimension of coherence without abandoning its critical objective side.[24]

Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming lean in somewhat different directions, with the former putting comparatively more emphasis on the objective side of *li*, while the latter lays somewhat more stress on its subjective side. But, to reiterate, both thinkers see both sides. For both, “selfish” desires and intentions can keep us from perceiving coherence in objectively correct ways. The subjective dimension **(p.38)** of *li* is not, therefore, that it responds willy-nilly to our desires, but that it is fundamentally human-centered. Coherence gets much of its determinateness, according to Neo-Confucians, from the unavoidable value that we humans put on life, as we shall see. Not everything, therefore, is equally coherent. Brook Ziporyn makes this point nicely by contrasting Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian understanding of *li* with the Tiantai Buddhist view, using “edibility” as a metaphorical way of referring to what I have called the necessity that *li* be “valuable and intelligible”:

> In both [Neo-Confucianism and Tiantai Buddhism], *li* must be “edible” to humans to count as *li*, must be useful for specifically human ends. Tiantai, working within the framework of infinite rebirths and infinitely multifarious bodhisattva work, regards all possible [coherences] as materials that will prove useful to this project. Zhu Xi, with a more modest conception of human spiritual digestion, sees only Confucian virtues as edible, i.e., transformable into the energy and activities of human social, political, and emotional life. [Ziporyn forthcoming, 667–8]

Confucians and Tiantai Buddhists may disagree, that is, about which situations are to count as exemplifying coherence. Confucians can criticize as incoherent a situation—depending on the circumstances, perhaps laughing at the funeral of one's parent would be incoherent for a Confucian—that Buddhists could find coherent.[25]

2.3 *Li* and *Qi*

According to Neo-Confucians, a “thing (*wu* □)” is a dynamic configuration of the matter-energy they call “*qi* □.” In other words, things have a shape and they can change. Some change quickly, like a person moving about; some change slowly, like a mountain eroding. All of these are “within form (*xing er xia* □□□),” meaning simply that they have a form that can be seen or touched. The dynamism of things, and of *qi* more generally, reflects the deep-seated idea that change and life characterize the universe; this, in turn, helps to explain why Neo-Confucians saw no real difference between a “thing” and an “event (*shi* □).” In contrast, coherence is “above form (*xing er shang* □□□)”: this means that on its own, it has no concrete, touchable reality [Zhu 1997, 2]. Despite this agreement by all Neo-Confucians that *qi* is below form and *li* is above form, many further issues concerning the relations between *li* and *qi* are vexed and complex. The two key areas of relevance to our concerns are: (1) Is *li* a thing, or not? What sort of ontological status does it have? (2) Can *li* influence *qi*, or not? What is its causal role? In brief, I argue here that while Neo-Confucians tend to say that *li* is not a “thing (*wu*),” some—including Zhu Xi—have a problematic tendency to reify *li*. Whether a given thinker reifies *li* or not, there is a general agreement among Neo-Confucians that *li* does have an important causal role in structuring reality, though this is not the “independent” causal power that many Western traditions assign to a transcendent deity.

(p.39) 2.3.1 Ontological Status

In English, it only makes sense to say that while things can be coherent, coherence is not a thing. Coherence is a property that situations organized in particular ways can be said to have, but one cannot reach out and touch the coherence. We must remember, though, that we are talking about *li* rather than the English word “coherence”; even if “coherence” comes closer to any other English word in matching the semantic field of *li*, we should be cautious not to jump to conclusions that may be based on the intuitions we have about “coherence” but are not well-grounded in Neo-Confucian writings. The question of the ontological status of *li* can also be phrased as “What sort of reality does *li* have, if any?” Western philosophers have created—and debated—many such categories, from Platonic forms to abstract objects to emergent properties. How did Neo-Confucians understand *li*?

The best way to answer this question is to break it down into five separate dimensions, because Neo-Confucians are in disagreement, and sometimes unclear, about some of these dimensions. The questions are:

1. Is *li* real (*shi* □) or illusory?
2. Does *li* have concrete or abstract existence?
3. Is *li* conceptually prior to *qi* (and thus serves to explain *qi*)?
4. Is *li* in some sense temporally prior to *qi*?
5. Is *li* in some sense a “thing (*wu* □)”?

After looking at all five we will be able to assemble a synthetic answer.

The first question is comparatively simple, because a major theme within Neo-Confucianism is that its norms are real, not illusory as they understood Buddhists to claim. This is a somewhat similar distinction to the hoary Western argument between realism and nominalism. Neo-Confucians believe that *li* are discovered, not invented; as Cheng Yi put it, “there is nothing in the world more real than *li*” [Cheng and Cheng 1981, 66]. This sort of reality is “constant (*chang* □),” which as we saw above is closely related to the idea that *li* is “settled” and objective, rather than something we can invent. The one complication here is how the notion of *li* being “real” sits alongside my earlier insistence that *li* is partly constituted by our subjectivity. Since a frequent way to understand the difference between realists and nominalists is to ask about a world in which there were no humans, let us ask a similar question here. According to Neo-Confucians, would there be an ethical order, or indeed any “coherence,” in a world without humans? Absent the fact that we value life—not just as an abstract proposition, but through our caring reactions—*li* would be fundamentally different, because those caring reactions partly constitute what we are. They are critical to the possibility of a recognizably ethical stance toward the world. If humans (and all things) lacked social emotions—felt no resonance with one another—then *li* would be very different. It is possible to imagine that it would still have some minimal content, but its connection with ideas like harmony would be sharply attenuated. What about a world in which there were no humans? A philosopher like Zhu Xi might still say that there could be an ethical order in such a world, because he observes that **(p.40)** even animals like wolves and bees have rudimentary social reactions. We might, therefore, be able to say what the fully realized Way *would be*, if only such a world contained creatures better able to realize these caring reactions (since Zhu Xi did not believe nonhuman animals were capable of such full realization).[26]

The second question is whether *li* has concrete or abstract existence. Zhu Xi makes explicit that *li* has only abstract existence in the following passage:

> *Qi* can condense and disperse; it can create. *Li* has neither feeling nor intention, it does not calculate, it does not create. It is just that wherever *qi* condenses or disperses, *li* is right there. It is like the living things of the world: their coming alive never happens without a seed. It is impossible for a thing to come alive without a seed; this [process] is all *qi*. If there were only *li*, there would only be a blank and open (*jingjie kongkuo* □□□□) world, devoid of form or trace. [Zhu 1997, 3]

That is, *li* is like the idea of “life”: life does not give birth to things, seeds do. Both the seeds and the things to which they give birth are *qi*. Zhu Xi does say in this passage that *li* is “right there”; we will see in Section 2.4 that *li* is “completely present” in every thing. Nonetheless, it seems clear that its presence is “above form” or abstract.[27]

Now follow two issues of priority. My third question asks about conceptual priority; my fourth relates to temporal priority. Zhu Xi and other Neo-Confucians did not always distinguish these two very explicitly, but they clearly understood the difference. We might say that ingredients are temporally prior to the sauce that a chef makes with them. The chef must work with ingredients, and there is no “sauce” until he or she makes it. The ingredients come first. Conceptual priority sometimes tracks along with temporal priority. In the ingredients–sauce case, we could say that the idea of ingredients is conceptually prior to the sauce, though the particular ingredients used to make a particular sauce are not conceptually prior. After all, the chef could have used different ingredients. I will argue in Section 2.3.2 that *li* plays an important causal role in structuring the possibilities for *qi*. That is, we will see that *li* helps to explain what *qi* is and does. Since *li* serves to explain or constrain the movement of *qi*, then it must be conceptually prior to *qi*. It cannot merely be an after-the-fact description or summary of the patterns through which *qi* moved. *Li* must be more than just the fact that we happen to find something coherent. One passage from Zhu Xi that expresses this idea is, “That *yin* and *yang* and the five phases [of *qi*] maintain their order amidst the complexity of their interactions, is *li*" [Zhu 1997, 3]. I believe all Neo-Confucians took *li* to be conceptually prior to *qi*.[28]

Things are not as clear when it comes to temporal priority. Does *li* exist in some way—perhaps as the blank and open world described a few paragraphs ago—prior to the arrival of *qi*? The first thing to emphasize is that Zhu Xi did not say, in the passage quoted above, that the "blank and open world" exists. He is simply using a metaphor to stress that there is nothing concrete without *qi*. It would be an error to leap from this metaphor to the conclusion that *li* exist in something akin to Plato's world of Forms. After all, he also says many things like the following: "There is fundamentally no priority (*xianhou* □□) to speak of. **(p.41)** However, if we want to infer its origins, then we must say that *li* is first. Nonetheless, *li* is not a separate thing (*wu*), but exists amidst *qi*" [Zhu 1997, 2]. It certainly seems like Zhu is only speaking of conceptual priority here.

Unfortunately, things are not quite this simple. The passage I was just quoting continues by saying that "were it not for this *qi*, *li* would have nothing to which to attach (*guada* □ □)." Despite the fact that he just said that *li* is not a separate thing, this image of one thing "attaching" to another is very suggestive. To make matters more complicated, Zhu wrote the following in a letter: "*Li* and *qi* are certainly two things (*jue er wu* □□□), but when seen in things they are two things mixed together; they cannot be separated each into its own place, but this does not prevent the two things from each being an individual thing."[29] Other passages can also be found that at least ambiguously suggest that *li* is a thing that may be temporally prior to *qi*.[30] What, then, should we conclude? When a *qi*-thing is in front of us, is there simultaneously an abstract *li*-thing inside it?

Possibly Zhu Xi believed this, though the evidence is mixed. For my own purposes, I offer the following considerations. First, it is at best ambiguous that Zhu believed in temporal priority and full reification (i.e., making *li* into a full-fledged "thing"). Second, nothing in his other commitments requires him to make these further steps. It is perfectly cogent to believe that *li* has no existence independent from *qi*, but rather expresses the structuring of *qi*, as I will elaborate below. Third, some Neo-Confucians did explicitly believe precisely this. In particular, the great Ming dynasty rival of Wang Yangming, Luo Qinshun (1465–1547), articulates a position that gives the same answers as Zhu to questions one through three, but disagrees with him on questions four and five.[31] Luo writes, for instance, that: "*Li* is only the *li* of *qi*. It must be observed in the phenomenon of revolving and turning of *qi*" [Luo 1987, 173].[32] He also notes that Zhu's idea of the supreme polarity (*taiji* □□, which is identical to *li*) has "… led some to suspect that there is a single entity that acts as a controlling power amid the transformations of yin and yang. But this is not the case" [Luo 1987, 59]. *Li* is what Luo calls that which "controls without controlling" (*bu zai zhi zai* □□□□)" [Luo 1990, 5].[33] As I have already explained, this book is not a strict interpretation of any one Neo-Confucian thinker, though it is based on the premise that Neo-Confucians share a great deal. Luo and Zhu (and Wang Yangming, for that matter) do indeed share most of their central commitments and meanings. On the issue of the ontological status of *li*, I propose that we part company with Zhu and follow

Luo's lead.

2.3.2 Causal Role

Dai Zhen, the trenchant critic of Song and Ming dynasty Neo-Confucianism, asked the following: “Where in the writings of the Six Classics … is there any taking of coherence (*li*) as a kind of thing, external to the expressions of man's nature in feelings and desires and rigorously controlling them (*qiang zhi zhi* □□□)?” [Dai 1995, 161]; cf. Dai [1990, 152]. Dai is certainly right that the classical writings contain no such idea. His intention, of course, is to suggest that Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi took *li* in precisely this sense. I begin with this point because I want to argue that while *li* does play a significant causal role, it is not **(p.42)** the kind of external control that Dai Zhen here describes and criticizes.[34] The best interpretation of Zhu Xi does not ascribe such a view to him, and other Neo-Confucians clearly deny such a view.

Recall from above Graham's image of *li* as “a vast three-dimensional structure which … lay[s] down the lines along which everything moves,” and which from one's own perspective appears to spread out as “sub-pattern of [one's] own profoundest reactions.” Ziporyn has suggested that we further qualify this image, not as a “flat mapping of a ‘pattern,’ but rather as a system of ravines or valleys. They are intrinsically centers of gravitational pull, vertices of possible movements” [Ziporyn forthcoming, 659]. This fits well with Zhu Xi's own statement that the “supreme polarity,” which he identifies with coherence itself, is the “pivot of creative transformations.”[35] I take this to mean that coherence constrains or structures the transformations of *qi* in certain, critical ways, just as an inflexible pivot constrains the possible movements of an object turning around such an axis. *Li* does, in other words, have a causal influence on *qi*. But what kind of influence? Zhu further specifies his understanding in the following passage:

> [Someone] asked: There's the heart-mind of heaven and earth, and the *li* of heaven and earth. *Li* is the coherence of the way (*li shi daoli* □□□□); does heart-mind mean ‘controller (*zhuzai* □□)’?
>
> [Master Zhu] answered: The heart-mind does indeed mean the controller. That which controls is none other than *li*, and this is not some *li* that is external to the heart-mind—nor is there any heart-mind outside of *li*. [Zhu 1997, 3]

So *li*, in and through the reactions of the heart-mind, exercises control. Clearly there is an idea of causal power here, but the way in which it is intimately bound up with the heart-mind poses a challenge to the idea that this is some kind of external control.

I believe that we must understand *li*'s causal role in terms of structuring. Maximally understood, *li* is that whereby *qi* can be arranged and interact in all coherent ways—and not be arranged or interact in noncoherent ways. A good analogy for this is may be Western ideas of natural law, with two caveats.[36] (1) We normally speak as if natural laws are separable: this phenomenon is explained by this law, that phenomenon is explained by that law. But in fact all the laws are interrelated and all of them always apply. It is just that most of them are not tightly relevant to a given situation. (2) Without a lawgiver, “law” is not the best way to understand *li*, as Needham and Graham have argued. We find ourselves and our world to be structured according to these patterns of coherence (which we find both valuable and intelligible), without being “bound” to them by any authority.

We can learn more about how coherence structures both our world and our choices by considering the following discussion of *li* and the Way (*dao* □):

> Someone asked what the difference is between the Way and coherence. Master Zhu said: “The Way is like a roadway. Coherence is its ordered **(p.43)** pattern (*tiaoli* □□).” It was also asked if this is anything like the grains in wood, and Master Zhu answered: “It is.”
>
> It was further asked that, if this is the case, then the Way and coherence appear to be alike, and Master Zhu said: “The word ‘Way’ is vastly inclusive, while coherence is the many coherent veins within it.” He also said: “The Way is vast and large. Coherence is minute and detailed.” [Zhu 1997, 90]; translation from Zhu [1991, 67], slightly modified.

The Way is *like* a roadway, in that it is something that can and should be followed, but it is not a literal roadway; like the coherence with which it is closely tied, the Way is abstract, above form. Coherence is that which explains the Way: finding the particular “ordered pattern” in a situation is to see and feel coherence, and thus to be drawn along the Way.

Being drawn along the Way is similar to the person who is “settled (*ding*)” and thus spontaneously doing the coherent thing in a given situation. As I will elaborate in later chapters, sagehood means perceiving-and-acting in accord with the Way, not standing still on the road. It means having a dynamic relationship to *li*: responding coherently in ways that generate situations with evermore inclusive coherence. The question we need to face now, which has been a matter of debate among scholars and Confucians themselves for centuries, is what exactly is the role of *li* in this dynamism? Is it, in some sense, “active”? Unlike some scholars, I do not think there is evidence that Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming believed *li* could constrain or otherwise manipulate *qi* in an active way.[37] One of Zhu's metaphors for the relation between *li* and *qi* is to think of *qi* as a horse and *li* as its rider [Zhu 1997, 2135]. If we adopt this image, we should not see the rider as using his spurs or tugging on the reins. At most, we can think of the horse as acting in certain ways because it has a rider at all (for instance, not bucking or not lying down).[38] Let me elaborate on what I mean. The keys are to recall that *li* is the valued, intelligible way that things fit together, together with the founding Confucian insight that we humans cannot but value certain things. These valuations (examples of which are a child's love for its parents, or one's spontaneous compassion for a stranger's plight) are what Graham calls our “profoundest reactions.” This is the sense in which our nature (for Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi) or even our mind (for Wang Yangming) can be said to be coherence. Many aspects of coherence have little directly to do with our immediate reactions. That a boat can move on water and not on land, for instance, is an intelligible and valuable pattern, from a human-centered perspective, but it is not dependent on our affective reactions in a more direct way. *Qi* is itself vibrant, dynamic, and continuously (if sometimes very slowly) transforming. *Li* is the coherence of these processes.

One of the most important generalizations Neo-Confucians made about *li* is that it is intimately linked to the life-giving activity of *qi*. Cheng Hao asserted, "Unceasing life-giving activity (*sheng sheng* □ □) is called 'change.' It is right in this life-giving activity that *li* is complete."[39] His brother Cheng Yi put the point this way: "The coherence of life-giving activity is natural and ceaseless."[40] Zhu Xi **(p.44)** characterizes the Supreme Polarity as generative—like the growth of a plant and its flowers and seeds—and containing the coherence of endless life-giving activity [Zhu 1997, 1733].[41] With his characteristic willingness to emphasize the subjective side of coherence, Wang Yangming says that the supreme human virtue of humaneness (*ren*) itself is the coherence of the "ceaseless life-giving activity" that characterizes our world. *Ren* provides coherence because it is a complex kind of caring, acknowledging differences among the many possible objects of our care (unlike, Wang says, Mozi's doctrine of "impartial love").[42] I will elaborate on this theme below; for now, suffice it to say that the Neo-Confucians believed that we could find no valuable coherence in our world save one that honored our, and the world's, deep reliance on eternal generativity.

In conclusion, the two halves of this section have shown how it is possible for coherence both to play a genuine causal role and yet to avoid being reified as an independent "thing." I have granted that Zhu Xi himself waffles on the latter issue, though his critic Dai Zhen's strongest assertions are unfair. In any event, the position I advocate here might have been Zhu Xi's "all things considered" position: it is suggested by many of his statements, and is not inconsistent with any of his main tenets. Furthermore, we have seen that the "causal role without reification" view was explicitly advocated by some Neo-Confucians. For one more striking statement of this view, here is Zhu Xi's Northern Song dynasty predecessor Zhang Zai:

> As the *yin* and *yang qi* revolve through their cycle of alternation, they react upon one another through integration and disintegration.… They include and determine one another (*xiangjian xiangzhi* □□□□).… There being no agent which causes this (*mo huo shi zhi* □□□□), it can only be called the coherence of nature and destiny (*xingming zhi li* □□□□).[43]

2.4 One and Many

The aspect of coherence (*li*) that has proven most challenging to contemporary interpreters is its simultaneous unity and multiplicity. Cheng Yi's statement, adapted from an earlier Buddhist use, that "coherence is one and distinguished into many (*li yi fen shu* □□□□)" is the paradigmatic slogan expressing this aspect of coherence. It has important consequences not just for an abstract understanding of coherence itself, but also for the ultimate ethical and political implications of Neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi often elaborates on the significance of "coherence is one and distinguished into many," for instance by saying, "When we speak of heaven, earth, and the myriad things together, there is just one coherence. When we come to humans, each has his or her own coherence" [Zhu 1997, 2]. He also invokes various metaphors to help explain the one- and-many idea. For instance, an oft-discussed passage runs as follows:

> A passerby asked about the statement that “All things have their own coherence, yet all coherences come from the same source, and this is **(p.45)** why [a sage] can infer [from one to another] without obstacle.” Master Zhu answered: “As near as within oneself, or as far as beyond the eight deserts, or even amidst the grasses and trees, there is nothing that does not have its coherence. When four men sit together, each has his coherence of the Way without needing to …seek it in another…. Although each has his own coherence, each nonetheless emerges from a single coherence. It is as if one lined up some basins of water: this one has its water, and that one has its water, each full up without having to rely on any others. But break them and release the water, and it is all the same water…. The Buddhists say, ‘The one moon is commonly reflected in all pools of water; in all pools the moon is the same moon”; herein the Buddhists have glimpsed the coherence of the Way.” [Zhu 1997, 357]

Another passage makes a similar point by saying that when it rains, on the one hand the water is different on each tree and blade of grass, but on the other hand it is all water [Ibid.].

If we are to understand these images, it would be helpful to understand why Zhu Xi believes the unity of *li* to be so important. Shortly after the passages just cited, Zhu says the following.

> [Let us consider the idea that one] extends one's knowledge by apprehending the coherence in things (*gewu* □□). [One possibility is that this means] that with respect to one thing, one exhaustively attains one portion of coherence, and thus one's knowledge gains one portion; with respect to a second thing, one exhaustively [attains] a second portion of coherence, and thus one's knowledge gains a second portion; the more things' coherences one can exhaustively attain, the broader one's knowledge will be. [However, this is not the case.] In fact, there is just one coherence, and “when you understand ‘this’, ‘that’ is also clear.” Therefore the *Great Learning* said “The extension of knowledge lies in apprehending the coherence in things,” and did not say “If you want to extend your knowledge in a particular respect, the way lies in apprehending the coherence of a particular thing.” [Ibid.]

In other words, the coherence one can access through focused attention on a single “thing” need not be partial or distorted. More generally, we can say that the Neo-Confucian program of education relies on broad educational consequences following from focused inquiry and attention. Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming (among others) develop this idea in somewhat different ways, the former stressing that one can learn from an encounter with any particular “thing,” while the latter stresses the encounter with one's mind's own reactions to its surroundings. As explained above, these differences reflect somewhat different weightings of the objective and subjective aspects of coherence, but both aspects are present for both thinkers. For both of them, therefore, it is critical that the coherence on which one focuses one's attention, in the process of personal cultivation, be broadly—even universally—applicable. I will explore **(p.46)** both the goals and process of Neo-Confucian moral education in later chapters. Here, we are concerned with the underlying presumptions necessary for such an approach to education.

One interpretation has been developed in a number of works by the contemporary scholar P. J. Ivanhoe. He summarizes his view of Zhu Xi's idea of *li* as follows:

> “The underlying structure of the universe came to be seen as *completely present* in every mote of dust. Each aspect of reality was thought to reflect all the other aspects, and so all the world was present in each and every particle of it.… Since each thing possesses all the *li*, in theory at least, each and every thing is innately endowed with perfect knowledge.… This endowment, something like a complete set of innate ideas, is our basic *xing* [nature].” [Ivanhoe 2000, 46–8]

In addition, since humans (unlike other animals) can completely purify our *qi*, we are uniquely able to “move from relative ignorance to a complete and comprehensive knowledge of the world” [Ibid., 48–9]. An important source for Ivanhoe's interpretation is his thesis that Neo-Confucians took over a great deal from Huayan and other types of Chinese Buddhism. In particular, Ivanhoe stresses the image of Indra's net: each of the net's nodes contains a glittering jewel, and all jewels reflect all the other jewels in the net.[44] On Ivanhoe's reading, this image tells us that each individual thing has its own individual *li* (which I would be tempted to render as “principle” in this context), but that in fact all individual things contain all the individual principles. Instead of individual principles, then, we can also speak of all the principles together as a single, grand Principle. This fits with his reading of Zhu Xi: each thing “possesses all the *li*,” and thus each is endowed with “something like a complete set of innate ideas.”

Ivanhoe's reasoning has two key premises: (1) Huayan Buddhism understood *li* in a particular way, and (2) Neo-Confucians were strongly influenced by this understanding of *li*, and thus adopted a similar view. I believe the second premise is correct, but part company with Ivanhoe on his reading of Buddhism. To make my case, we need to consider two passages, both from Fazang, the leading theoretician of Huayan Buddhism. First, here is part of Fazang's famous discussion of the golden lion, which will give us some context for understanding Indra's net:

> In each of the lion's eyes, ears, limbs, joints, and in each and every hair, there is the golden lion. All the lions embraced by all the single hairs simultaneously and instantaneously enter a single hair. Thus in each and every hair there are an infinite number of lions, and in addition all the single hairs, together with their infinite number of lions, in turn enter into a single hair. In this way the geometric progression is infinite, like the jewels of Celestial Lord Indra's net. [Chan 1963, 412]

(p.47) A puzzling passage, to be sure. Here we have the infinite interconnection of Indra's net put into a more concrete context, and we are challenged to understand how there is a golden lion in each hair, etc. If we turn to Brook Ziporyn's explanation of another Fazang analogy, though, things start to make sense. The key is understanding Fazang's understanding of the “interpenetration and omnipresence of all particulars”—that is, the way in which the golden lion can be in every hair, or every jewel be in each and every jewel. Regarding the image of a house and a pillar (that is part of the house), Ziporyn explains that Fazang reasons as follows:

> Fazang says that the pillar is precisely the house, because the one pillar alone is able to make the house. The reason for this is that if the pillar is lacking, the house cannot come into existence, and whenever the pillar exists, the house exists. This last point depends on a distinction between a “real pillar” and a mere plank of wood.… For Fazang's point is that, in the absence of the existing, completed house, the pillar is simply not a pillar—it is merely a plank of wood. It cannot be accurately named a pillar unless the whole house is there. The same argument is used to assert that the pillar is also identical to all the other parts of the house, each being identical to the whole house in the same way. For if the pillar is gone, the house cannot exist, and without the house, the walls, roof and so on are not “really” walls, roof and so on, but merely chunks of wood.… This means that what interpenetrates in each case is not what we normally call a pillar, if we are deluded about interpenetration and think of it as a separable single part of the house. That pillar simply does not exist.… The only pillar that qualifies as a pillar is the one that is seen to be interpenetrating. [Ziporyn forthcoming, 488–9]

The pillar is not simply a pillar, much less a particularly shaped piece of wood: it is a pillar *of a house*. Neither it nor the house can make sense without one another. In this same way, we are given to understand, nothing can be understood except as interdependent with any other thing, up to and including the whole of the universe. In this very particular sense, then, each thing can be said to be present in every other.

Zhu Xi follows this logic to a considerable degree, but he does not conclude that each thing is present in every other. Rather, as the contemporary scholar Chen Lai has emphasized, it is coherence (or its equivalents such as the Supreme Polarity) that is “fully present” in each thing.[45] By saying that it is the coherence of things—which is their “substance (*ti* □)”—that is the same, rather than the individual things themselves all being identical, Zhu Xi is able to avoid the implication that the things are illusory [Chen 1987, 50]. Things are real, in part because notwithstanding the unified *li* that is present in all things, we can also talk about their distinct, individual *li*. This is captured in the slogan “coherence is one and distinguished into many.”

When I say that Zhu Xi follows the Buddhist logic, it is therefore not because he sees all things as identical. Instead, he draws on the idea that *li* is **(p.48)** ultimately identical, and identically present in all things, because of the ways in which the individual coherence of any thing systematically interrelates with the coherence of all other things. For the Buddhist Fazang, a given piece of wood is a pillar only because of its relation to a house. I would suggest that for Zhu Xi, the coherence of a boat—that which makes it what it is, namely a boat instead of a sculpture or a water-collector or … —lies in its relation to its environment and to the institutions of human transportation. We can understand the interdependence of *li* at multiple levels. We can drill down one level from the boat, and ask about the oars, the sail, and so on. What makes them what they are? It is their coherent relation to the boat and its context. There are a variety of passages in Zhu's writings that support this idea that coherence is fundamentally about interrelations, and that *li* can be parsed in different ways, depending on our interest of the moment. For example: “Someone asked, ‘There is the single coherence, yet also the Five Norms; how is this?’ Master Zhu replied, ‘You can call it the single coherence and you can also call it five coherences. When covering everything, we speak of one; when distinguishing, we speak of five.’ ”[46] Even more revealingly, Zhu said, “There is only this coherence; we can distinguish it in four sections, or into eight sections, or even make still finer distinctions.”[47] Finally, when asked if the Way, with its single Supreme Polarity, must be understood in terms of the Five Norms, Zhu replies, “There is just one coherence of the way. Divided up, one can speak of it in terms of seasons, in which case there are spring, summer, fall, and winter; … or one can speak of it in terms of a day, in which case there are dawn, daylight, twilight, and night” [Zhu 1997, 366]. Depending on our perspective, there are any number of ways we can distinguish the one *li* into many.

Still, Zhu Xi is insistent that it is fully present in each thing. Given the interrelatedness that is at the core of the idea of coherence, how could it not be complete? Since local coherence ultimately depends on higher order coherence, any individual *li* depends on all the other *li*. How do we know that is an oar as opposed to a club or a pillar or a work of art? Because it fits in to the *li* of the boat. Huayan Buddhists move from this argument to the conclusion that our normal way of perceiving the world is deeply mistaken; that the things we desire are illusory; and that enlightenment/release comes from seeing that no one “particular” thing is actually more valuable or important than any other. Neo-Confucians like Zhu draw a different conclusion, for theirs is a human-centered vision in a manner that Buddhism eschews. The value of human life, and ultimately life-giving generativity itself, are built into the Neo-Confucian understanding of the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together. Neo-Confucian coherence is partly constituted by human subjectivity. At its most basic this subjectivity involves the empathy we feel for each “other,” no matter what it is—albeit not always to the same degree, nor in the same way. Even if we should care more than we probably do about strangers, or about our natural environment, we should still not care about them in exactly the same way and degree we care about our most intimate family and friends. As I will explain in the chapter below on harmony, “coherence is one and distinguished into many” is a key conceptual resource on which Neo-Confucians rely as they develop their **(p.49)** view that everything matters, but in a harmonious way according to which not everything matters the same.

2.5 Normativity and Conclusion

To conclude this chapter on coherence, I turn briefly to the issue of normativity. In other words, can *li* not only lay out the way things are, but also prescribe how they should be? Zhu Xi and the Neo-Confucians quite generally seem to think the answer is “yes,” but interpreters have disagreed on how to understand the putative normative dimension of *li*, with some arguing that we can only interpret the Neo-Confucians correctly if we see that they conflated "ought" and "is" questions in a problematic way. I will show that once we have seen that *li* means coherence, this problem disappears.

Our starting point is the observation that *li* applies both to seemingly natural "things (*wu*)" like a chair or boat, and to explicitly ethically charged situations (also called "things," in the technical sense discussed earlier), like the relation between a child and parent. In each case, there is a relevant *li*. If we understand *li* as "principle," then we would say that there is a principle of a thing's being a chair, and a principle of one's acting as a child to one's parent. But the latter is not a mere physical or biological description: it involves ethical norms. Whereas a chair just *is* such and such a thing, one *ought* to act toward one's parents in such and such a way. When *li* is understood as valued coherence, though, this distinction goes away: no matter which *li* we are talking about, it is always partly constituted by human purposes. For example, there are many ways that some pieces of wood nailed together can be understood, but only some of them cohere with human purposes in relevant ways. When we say that the *li* of the "thing" is to-be-sat-upon, we are saying that in this context, coherence (i.e., value and intelligibility) is attained by seeing it as a chair.[48] Similarly, when we say that the *li* of a particular human relationship involves children respecting and caring for their parents, we are saying that coherence (value and intelligibility) is attained by seeing the situation as structured by filial piety: this is part of what it is to identify the constituents of the situation as "children" and "parents" in the first place. There are certainly complex issues about how best to articulate the coherence of a particular situation, which I will take up in chapter 4 on harmony. The key point for now is that *li* is always normative and always relative to its particular context.

If a skeptic—perhaps informed by a reading of the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*—were to wonder how we know that such and such a thing is indeed a chair (and thus can be evaluated, in part, based on how well it serves its to-be-sat-upon role), the answer emerges from the ways in which human purposes help to constitute the very structure of our world. To be sure, the object in question *could* be a sculpture or a weapon, but typically it is not. The fact that Neo-Confucianism takes very seriously the idea of continuous change helps them to avoid an overly static vision of a "cosmos" in which each thing has one and only one role that it can play—although some Neo-Confucians are sometimes tempted by such a vision, as we will see later.[49] At the same time, the Neo-Confucians' embrace of life and **(p.50)** generativity allows them to distinguish between more and less coherent orderings of the universe in ways that Buddhist or Daoist metaphysics may make difficult.[50] The balance of these two commitments means that Neo-Confucian concern with coherence—and with harmony, as we will soon see—is not just a hangover from an anthropomorphized worldview relevant only in premodern times. We need not think of coherence as specifying a particular, final end. Instead, it offers a way to think about our interdependence that points toward the way in which we can flourish together in (and with) the broader world. The next two chapters, on virtue and on harmony, start to bring some of this abstract metaphysics down to earth, after which we will be in a good position to engage in detailed dialogue with Neo-Confucian ethical and political philosophy.

Notes:

(1.) On “reverence,” see chapter 4; “commitment” is discussed at length in chapter 7.

(2.) Note that this is an entirely different word from the “*li* □” that means “ritual,” even though they are homonyms. For some discussion of ritual, see chapter 8.

(3.) “*Li*” was not universally emphasized by all early Neo-Confucians, but soon came to be widely adopted as a central explanatory concept. For one version of the idea's history, see Ziporyn [forthcoming], a work that has been very influential on my thinking. See also Chan [1964].

(4.) Willard Peterson was the first to explicitly argue for translating *li* as “coherence” [Peterson 1986]. My more immediate inspiration is Brook Ziporyn's book on the pre-Neo-Confucian idea of *li* [Ziporyn forthcoming].

(5.) “*Li ge you tiaoli jieban* □□□□□□□” [Zhu 1974, 22]; cf. Zhu [1991, 67].

(6.) See Wood [1995]. “Law” is used as the translation for *li* in Bruce [1923], which is criticized by Needham and Graham [Graham [1992, 12].

(7.) [Zhu 2002, vol. 6, 512].

(8.) Some Confucian philosophers over the last century have interpreted Confucianism through the lens of the Kantian ideas of “autonomy” and “heteronomy,” arguing that something within us (perhaps the *daoxin* □□, perhaps the *liang zhi* □□) can be construed as, in effect, a source of autonomous moral law. Mou Zongsan is the best-known proponent of such a view, and he argues that while Zhu Xi himself cannot avoid heteronomy, others (like Wang Yangming) have more successful views. While I cannot engage in a detailed effort to refute such interpretations here, in my view such approaches are both historically and philosophically problematic.

(9.) My thanks to Bryan Van Norden for this point.

(10.) We know this because sages can, in principle, become perfectly attuned to all *li*. Ziporyn writes that “the perception and the valuation are inseparable” [675], a thought he suggests is most explicit in Wang Yangming's philosophizing, but I would argue is equally basic for Zhu Xi.

(11.) Bryan Van Norden's reading of *li* as “pattern” vacillates between the vague and the specific senses of pattern. On the one hand, he says that *li* is “a pattern common in all things.” He also suggests that certain numeric patterns (sets of one, two, four, and five) might point at the structure of “the pattern” [Van Norden 2004, 107–8]. But in the end these efforts toward specificity are abandoned, because of the “limitations of the adequacy of language,” and we are left with only the vaguer idea of being patterned.

(12.) See Cheng and Cheng [1981, 292], and Graham's well-known analysis at Graham [1992 1992, 49–50].

(13.) [Graham 1986, 426]; see also the discussion in Ziporyn [2007, 65–7].

(14.) Although I have drawn on the work of Hall and Ames mentioned earlier, I believe they underplay the objective dimension of *li* and related ideas, leaning too far in a nominalist direction. See also Ziporyn [2007, 76], where he suggests that Hall and Ames “slightly overstate the nominalism of the tradition.”

(15.) [Zhu 1974, 24]; translation from Zhu [1991, 68], slightly modified.

(16.) *Great Learning* 1:2; translation draws on Gardner [2007, 4] and Chan [1963, 86].

(17.) [Zhu 1997, 245]. The internal quotation is from *Great Learning* 3.

(18.) See *Mencius* 4A: 17. For a detailed sinological discussion of *quan* in various early texts, see Vankeerberghen [2006]. Vankeerberghen argues that in a case like the example mentioned here from *Mencius*, the agent “gives up … something of lasting, unchanging value,” namely, “ritual prescriptions”; furthermore, he suggests that this is a matter of “reason” winning out over “passion” [Ibid., 74–5]. I am skeptical about this interpretation, and suspect Mencius——much like the later Neo-Confucians——saw *quan* as arriving at a balanced response to a particular situation's demands, but I will not pursue the point (concerning interpretation of Mencius) further here. For a discussion of Zhu Xi on *jing* versus *quan*, see Wei [1986].

(19.) In his discussion of the Chengs' distinction between “balanced (*zhong*)” and “commonly applied (*yong* □)”——which the Chengs equate to “standard”——he says that “typical” is better than “settled” [Zhu 1997, 1324]. Also, he clearly prioritizes the “balanced” or situationally apt over the “standard” or “commonly applied”: “First there is balance, and only after is there common application” [Ibid., 1327].

(20.) See Wang [1983, §2 and §135].

(21.) In Wang [1983, §140], the two phrases follow immediately on one another, suggesting that “mind is coherence” is simply a way of emphasizing the importance of the “coherence of mind.” See also Wang [1983, §117 and §222] for *xin zhi li*, and *passim* for *xin ji li*.

(22.) This clearly needs more elaboration, which will largely have to wait until chapters 6 and 7. Briefly, as one approaches sagehood one sees in an increasingly capacious way, finding a way to see the relevance and connection of aspects of the situation one had previously ignored or resisted.

(23.) [Wang 1983, §6]. Chan's translation contains two important mistakes [Wang 1963, 12–14]. First, he translates “*yi* □” as “will” and adds a notion of this will's being “*directed* towards” particular objects, which corresponds to nothing in Wang's original. There is no notion corresponding closely to Western ideas of will in Neo-Confucianism. I discuss this at more length in chapter 7. Second, instead of "no mind-independent coherence" and "no mind-independent things," he gives us "neither principles nor things outside the mind," which sounds too much like idealism. Ziporyn's otherwise excellent discussion of Wang leans a bit too far toward idealism, too, when he says "'The mind is *li*' means that the mind is the decisive vortex creating a unique vortex around itself *whenever it wills* …" [Ziporyn 2007, 669, emphasis added].

(24.) I must disagree, therefore, with contemporary scholar Zhao Weidong, who argues that Wang Yangming leaves behind objectivity entirely [Zhao 2001, 59].

(25.) Even for the Neo-Confucian, it is not that there could be *no* coherence in such a situation. Perhaps the laughter is in response to a lighthearted remark by one's brother. But this exchange fits poorly, we are imagining, into larger and highly relevant patterns of coherence, and thus can be criticized. For further discussion, see Section 2.5.

(26.) Thanks to P. J. Ivanhoe for pressing me on these points, on which see also Section 2.5 on normativity.

(27.) The great Qing Dynasty philosopher Dai Zhen was uncomfortable with Zhu's characterization of *li* as "above form"; see Dai [1995, VI, 171]; cf. Dai [1990, 198]. He felt that Zhu had made *li* into a peculiar abstract entity that was disconnected from our lived reality (and from the term's earlier meaning). In the present context, though, I would argue that Dai's understanding of *li* (as "necessity [*biran* □□]") differed with Zhu Xi on the issue of whether it was a "thing," not on the issue of whether it was abstract. On this latter point, they actually agreed.

(28.) This includes Dai Zhen, who wrote that "If in all cases with regard to heaven, earth, persons, things, affairs, and actions one seeks what is necessary and cannot change, the *li* will be perfectly clear" [Dai 1995, VI, 165]; cf. Dai [1990, 171].

(29.) This passage is quoted by several of Zhu's critics, among them Dai Zhen——see Dai [1995, VI, 163]; cf. Dai [1990, 168]——and Luo Qinshun [Luo 1987, 61], on whom see in the main text.

(30.) Here is contemporary scholar Yung Sik Kim: "[Zhu said,] for example, that the heart, the physical site for the mind, has empty spaces in it so that it can contain and store ways and *li* abundantly. His firm opposition to Buddhist doctrines of the void (*kong*) and nothingness (*wu*) also reinforced this tendency, for it made him defend the reality and actuality of *li*, which could easily lead to the implication of separate existence of *li*" [Kim 2000, 27].

(31.) That is, Luo interprets Zhu as believing that *li* is temporally prior and is a "thing," and disagrees with these views.

(32.) See Luo [1990, 68].

(33.) Bloom's otherwise exemplary translation slips up here, rendering “*bu zai zhi zai*” as “unregulated regularity” [Luo 1987, 59]. The problem with this is that it makes *li* out to be mere regularity rather than causal power, but this is neither what “*zai* □” means nor what Luo has in mind.

(34.) It is notable that in this section of his text, the only citations Dai Zhen makes to Song Confucians are to various statements of their involvement with Buddhism and Daoism. That is, he does not cite Zhu Xi as saying that *li* is external and rigorously controls the feelings. Rather, he more vaguely alludes to the policies of “those who govern” nowadays: *they* invoke coherence (*li*) in order to censure others.

(35.) [Zhou 1990, 3]. One of Zhu Xi's major theoretical innovations was to identify ultimate coherence with “*tai ji*,” a term whose literal meaning is “supreme ridgepole” that he takes from Zhou Dunyi. Joseph Adler has shown that *ji* must be understood as “polarity,” by which he means the back and forth, ordered (i.e., coherent) change between the two poles of *yin* and *yang* [Adler 2008, 69–73].

(36.) For another suggestion that *li* is like natural law, see Wood [1995].

(37.) For a powerful, well-documented argument that Zhu Xi did not believe that *li* was active, see Li [2005].

(38.) See Berthrong [2007, 10–12]. Influenced by his interpretation of Chen Chun's reading of Zhu Xi, Berthrong concludes that the rider has a more active role than I am allowing here. The extensive discussion of the horse-rider metaphor in the Korean Neo-Confucian “Four-Seven Debate” is extremely illuminating. I believe that the position at which Yulgok eventually arrives is the same as the view I am defending here. See Kalton et al. [1994, 173–83], though contrast this to Yulgok's earlier, perhaps more problematic view [Ibid., 115 and 152].

(39.) [Cheng and Cheng 1981, 33]; translation from Huang [2007, 196].

(40.) [Ibid., 167]. Huang Yong believes that for the Cheng brothers, *li* is precisely the *activity* of “life-giving (*sheng sheng*),” but he stretches the evidence too far. A case in point is this short passage: he translates “□□□□□□□□” as “*li* as life-giving activity is natural and ceaseless.” He similarly claims that when Zhu says “this chair is a thing; that it can be sat in is its *li*,” Zhu is saying that *li* is an activity. See Huang [2007, 196 and 196n20]; the Zhu Xi reference is to Zhu [1997, 1768].

(41.) Following the lead of the contemporary scholar Zhang Jiacai, John Berthrong has argued that at least for Zhu Xi's student Chen Chun, the Supreme Polarity is an instance of *li* that is fully “active.” See Zhang [2004] and Berthrong [2007].

(42.) See Wang [1983, 114 (§93)].

(43.) [Zhang 1978, 12]. This passage is cited approvingly by Luo Qinshun [Luo 1990, 31]; translation from Luo [1987, 128–9], slightly altered. We should note that *li* does not play as important a theoretical role for Zhang Zai as it would for many subsequent Neo-Confucians, but Kasoff downplays its role in Zhang's thought too far. See Kasoff [1984, 52–3].

(44.) For some discussion of this image, see Cook [1977, 2 f].

(45.) See, for instance, Zhu's statement that “With regard to coherence, [in each thing] it is always complete (*wubuquan* □□□)” [Zhu 1997, 52]; or “each thing contains the Supreme Polarity” [Ibid., 366].

(46.) [Zhu 1997, 90]. The Five Norms are humaneness, appropriateness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness.

(47.) [Ibid.]; an annotator suggests that “four sections” may refer to the “Four Beginnings” in *Mencius* 2A:6.

(48.) See [Zhu 1997, 1768] for the *li* of a chair.

(49.) Contrast Wang Yangming's political vision, discussed in Section 4.4.3, with my development of a contemporary “sagely politics” in Section 11.4.

(50.) The deep Buddhist concern to end suffering may be undermined by at least some ways in which their metaphysics is articulated; see Section 2.2.2.

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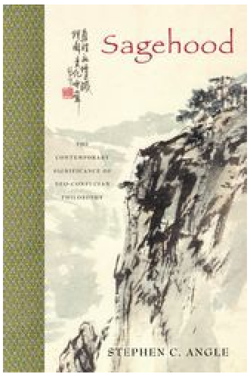

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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De □/Virtue

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter argues that we can use “virtue” as what Aaron Stalnaker has called a “bridge concept” to facilitate comparative dialogue between Neo-Confucian discussions centered around “*de*” and current work in virtue ethics. The chapter traces early uses and theories concerning *de*, drawing on the work of Chinese scholars like Chen Lai and others. It then turns to a detailed look at uses of *de* in Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, and explicates the relation between *de*—which functions very much like “virtue” functions in Western philosophies—and other key ideas like coherence (*li*), heart-mind (*xin*), and humaneness (*ren*). The chapter also looks at the role of rules in a virtue-based ethics. On the basis of this analysis, the chapter concludes that Neo-Confucianism is a virtue ethics.

Keywords: Aaron Stalnaker, bridge concept, virtue ethics, Chen Lai, rules

The goal of this book is to develop Neo-Confucian ethical and political ideas, particularly as they relate to sagehood, through a critical dialogue with contemporary Western philosophers. It turns out that most of the Western philosophers with whom we will be conversing over the course of the book cluster into a single approach to ethics, namely “virtue ethics.” My objective in this chapter is to explain why it is not a coincidence that Western virtue ethics and Neo-Confucianism have a lot to talk about. Virtue ethics is an approach to ethics that puts a person's character, and thus his or her virtues, at the center of its analysis. In ancient Greece such views predominated, but in recent Western moral philosophy, utilitarian and Kantian ways of understanding morality have been more influential. According to these latter views, the chief goal of morality is to articulate a rule in accord with which we can choose “right” actions, as opposed to the broader but more diffuse goal of being a “good” person on which virtue ethics focuses. It is no coincidence that Western virtue ethics speaks to Neo-Confucianism because Neo-Confucianism is itself a virtue ethic.

3.1 Virtue as a Bridge Concept

In labeling Neo-Confucianism a virtue ethic, and still more in translating “*de* □” as “virtue,” I am making a somewhat different move than that involved in the other translations discussed throughout part I. “Sage” is a convenient and not-particularly-misleading label for *sheng* □, but it is really “*sheng*” that we are interested in here, rather than any stray implications of the English term “sage.” I am more concerned with the match between the semantic field of “coherence” and that of **(p.52)** “*li* □,” because using “coherence” helps me to express a particular interpretation of what “*li*” means. Still, our interest really lies with “*li*.” As for “virtue,” the situation is somewhat different because here we have reached a key point in my comparative enterprise: I care both about what Western philosophers have said about “virtue” and what the Neo-Confucians say about “*de*.” I therefore am using “virtue” as what Aaron Stalnaker has usefully labeled a “bridge concept.” A bridge concept is a “general idea … which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry yet [is] still open to greater specification in particular cases” [Stalnaker 2006, 17]. Bridge concepts are not “hypotheses about transcultural universals,” nor do they project a set of predetermined questions (and answers) onto their subjects. Used cautiously, bridge concepts allow us to put two authors, texts, or traditions into dialogue, but careful “analysis of each thinker's vocabulary … safeguards each side's uniqueness within the comparison” [Ibid., 18].[1]

Stalnaker deploys bridge concepts like “human nature” and “person” in order to develop fruitful comparisons between Xunzi and Augustine. The major objective of this chapter is to explore both the development and the range of the semantic field associated with *de* □, the Chinese term often translated as “virtue.” I will have much less to say about the development and diversity of the Greek idea of *aretê* (meaning excellence or virtue) and its later history in Latin and in modern Western languages, in large part because of excellent scholarship by others on which I can rely. It will be important to keep in mind that virtue-oriented ethics has been developed in a wide variety of ways through the Western philosophical tradition, and contemporary Western virtue ethicists are able to draw on these diverse meanings and approaches in their own work. There is not, in other words, a single paradigm of virtue ethics with which Neo-Confucianism either conforms or fails to count as a virtue ethics. Some philosophers today follow Aristotle in grounding their interpretation of virtue ethics on an idea of the good or flourishing life; Aristotle called this *eudaimonia*. Other contemporary philosophers develop different ideas in Aristotle, focusing on the capacities for perception and practical reasoning that are said to characterize the virtuous person, or *phronimos*. Still a third movement within contemporary virtue ethics looks to Hume and other “sentimentalists”; for these philosophers, virtue is to be found in the development of admirable sentiments. Nietzsche, Plato, the Stoics, and medieval thinkers like Aquinas are yet further sources for contemporary virtue ethics in the West.[2]

Diversity in the meaning of “virtue ethics” is perfectly compatible with the notion of a bridge concept, which is meant to be a general framework for discussion rather than a particular, fully specified understanding. In one way or another, all virtue ethicists emphasize the development of dispositions to respond well to one's circumstances. Such dispositions express a fine character, and offer a way of thinking about the moral life that does not rest in following rules. Rules of different kinds may be important, but in one or another way, nearly all virtue theorists agree that rules cannot be fundamental. Furthermore, the responsiveness that is so central to virtue ethics cannot be merely a matter of self-control or the exercise of willpower.[3] The inner traits of a virtuous person should be such **(p.53)** that he or she responds in a more spontaneous or automatic fashion.[4] We will see that the Neo-Confucians also focus their understandings of ethics around the development of dispositions to respond well to one's circumstances. There is a sense in which the ethically-cultivated person has a disposition to respond *correctly* to the world, but rules are still not fundamental. In addition, this disposition springs from a fine internal state rather than from self-control, and the ease (or spontaneity) with which a sage responds to ethically complex circumstances is a theme throughout Neo-Confucianism.[5]

3.2 Early “*De*”

Early uses of *de* have been extensively studied by scholars both in China and the United States. There is a certain amount of disagreement about its earliest appearances and meanings,[6] but a consensus has emerged on the following key features. All agree that the meaning of *de* evolves, beginning around the start of the Zhou dynasty (c. 1100 BCE) or even earlier, and developing through to the Warring States era (fifth through third centuries BC; we can also call the last period the classical era). This evolution is one in which an initial tight connection to religious worship and *tian* (“Heaven”) is loosened; over time, *de* increasingly is understood as an internal, individual accomplishment. Another aspect of the evolution is a move from an initial focus on the *de* of rulers to the *de* of admirable people more generally, though the paradigm of a ruler's *de* never disappears. An individual with *de*, whether a ruler or common person, manifests a kind of charisma or power to influence others.[7] Both early and later ideas of *de* □ are closely related to the cognate term *de* □, which means to receive or attain. Initially, we can say that one attains *de* □ as a result of certain sorts of good deeds (e.g., acts of generosity) and attitudes (e.g., humility), because these actions are favored by *tian*. In this case, the emphasis is very much on receiving *de* from *tian*.[8] Later, the emphasis is on what one attains (*de* □) within: that is, on inner psychological changes. For instance, one classical-era text says, about each kind of putatively admirable behavior, “If it is produced from inside, we call it virtuous conduct (*dexing* □□); if it is not from inside, we may call it common behavior.”[9] In other words, if the behavior is produced by external threat or ulterior motive, then even if it looks admirable, it is actually common. Only behavior that springs from one's inner heart counts as *de*.

For our purposes, the main issue in all of this is the mature classical view, rather than its pre-classical antecedents. Particularly in light of the kind of “attaining within” that we were just considering, it makes sense to think of *de* at this point in terms of “virtue.” As far as I can tell, all the scholars whose work I have canvassed would agree that—to echo terms I used above when introducing the idea of “virtue”—by this point *de* is understood as a disposition that springs from a fine internal state rather than from self-control. One interesting question, though, concerns the relation between *de* and more specific virtue terms, like Mencius's paradigmatic “humaneness, appropriateness, propriety, and wisdom.” Aristotle clearly thought of virtue as a state that could be analyzed **(p.54)** into a set of interrelated, yet still individual, *virtues*: in order to develop virtue, one developed virtues like justice, courage, and so on. Furthermore, although the details are somewhat contested, Aristotle also held that these virtues depended on one another in a deep way, such that to fully possess any one of them, one needed to possess them all. The scholar who has examined the corresponding issues most closely for the Chinese case is Chen Lai. Professor Chen notes that texts associated with the Spring and Autumn era—just prior to the Warring States—contain many lists of individual “*de*.” One texts lists the “Four *De*” as “wisdom, humaneness (*ren*), courage, and learning”; in a different text, the “Four *De*” are listed as “humaneness, faithfulness, devotion, and diligence (*min* □)” [Chen 2002, 34].[10] In all, Professor Chen enumerates thirteen lists of variously-numbered *de*, ranging from “Three *De*” all the way to “Twelve *De*.” The members of these lists tended to be understood as individual types of virtuous conduct (*dexing* □□), with relatively little focus on how they inter-relate or form a broader whole. When we get to the *Analects* and to the classical period, though, a significant change takes place. Professor Chen argues that the *Analects* is striking in its focus on the overall character of the “gentleman (*junzi* □□),” in its lack of lists of individual virtues, and in its stress on a single trait, *ren*, which Professor Chen characterizes as “complete virtue (*dexing* □□) transcending individual virtues” [Ibid., 37].

What is true of the *Analects* is true, at least for the most part, of other classical Confucian texts. They contain few lists of numbered “*de*.”[11] They focus on *ren* and on the *junzi*. Still, “*de*” itself remains a significant category. One striking passage in the *Analects*, to which we will return later when we examine Zhu Xi's understanding of *de*, reads as follows “The Master said, ‘Committed to the Way, based on *de*, close to humaneness, and acquainted with the arts.” [12] The gentleman's ethical progress, which this passage seems to describe, centrally involves cultivating *de*, but note that this is distinguished from the further accomplishment of attaining humaneness. As we shall have occasion to discuss elsewhere, “*ren*” is widely understood by scholars to be used in Confucian texts in two different senses, both as a specific virtue and as a broader term signifying the attainment of all the interrelated virtues. One might even translate *ren* here as “virtue,” seeing it as a further accomplishment that is built upon the foundation of *de*. The contemporary scholar Yu Jiyuan argues for a slightly different alternative, maintaining that in its general sense, *ren* should be understood as “what Confucius believes human *de* is or should be.” In other words, “[Confucius's] theory of *ren* is his version of the theory of *de*” [Yu 2007, 32].

What to make of all this? Chen Lai argues that theories like that of the *Analects* must be understood as going beyond a “narrow virtue ethics” because through *ren*, it offers a foundational “principle (*yuanze* □□)” instead of simply a list of virtuous dispositions or conducts [Ibid., 37]. He says that *ren* cannot simply be a form of *de* since it can be expressed in a rule-like way: “What he himself does not want, let him not do it to others.”[13] Briefly, I think we should agree with Professor Chen that classical Confucianism is not a “narrow virtue ethics” in the sense he intends. Still, I think there is good reason to conclude that it is a species of virtue ethics as I have defined that category above. As Professor Chen himself says, it **(p.55)** is an ethics that stresses the seeking of a good and complete human personality, thereby emphasizing concrete steps of moral education. In finding a role for certain kinds of rules, it does not actually differ all that substantially from Aristotle; more generally, as Rosalind Hursthouse has pointed out, rules can play an important—even if secondary—role for many varieties of virtue ethics [Hursthouse 1999, ch. 1]. In going beyond a mere list of virtues to discuss a unified personality, Confucianism also shares something with Aristotle, although unlike Aristotle the Confucians do not rest so much weight on “practical wisdom” as the enabler of the synthesis. In any event, my point here is not to stress similarities between Confucians and Aristotle. Aristotle, after all, only represents one type of virtue ethics, rather than defining the entire genus. Character and dispositions are foundational for classical Confucians; rules are not. We will shortly see that the same is true of Neo-Confucians.

3.3 Neo-Confucian “*De*”

Now let us skip ahead about a millennium, and look at Neo-Confucian discussions of *de*. I will draw on both Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, but pay special attention to the former, since his views are more thoroughly elaborated than Wang's. Readers will be familiar from the previous chapter with the Neo-Confucian doctrine that certain moral capacities already exist within each of us, although these capacities are typically obscured and need considerable effort to be realized. The effort in question—as we will see in subsequent chapters—entails the establishment of a disposition to view the world in a certain fashion. Here, I lay the groundwork for seeing that when it is mature, this disposition is *de* or virtue. In other words, the full attainment or concrete embodiment of this key disposition is what Neo-Confucians mean when they talk of *de*. Furthermore, Neo-Confucians hold that no explicit rules can fully capture what we are supposed to do in a given situation; instead, their focus is on the qualities of an agent that lead to the right responses. We can thus conclude that further dialogue between Neo-Confucians and contemporary Western virtue-ethical views are likely to be fruitful, since Neo-Confucianism itself is a virtue ethic.

I have already mentioned the classical-era gloss of *de* as “attain.” For Neo-Confucians, this idea of personal attainment is at the center of *de*'s importance. Personal moral commitment (*zhi* □) is crucial, and personal experience of living up to moral commitments helps to motivate further self-improvement. Similarly, reflection on the personal significance of the texts one reads helps one to truly make their lessons one's own, in a deep and lasting way.[14] At one point, Zhu explicitly says that *de* □ is just “attaining it for oneself (*zide* □□)” [Zhu 1997, 779]. Similarly, Wang Yangming says that “One calls the universal mandate (*tianming* □□) within me my nature; when I attain (*de* □) this nature, one calls this virtue (*de* □)” [Wang 1992, 1168]. Having “attained” one's nature means to have actually realized it as a firm disposition. Returning to Zhu Xi, to “realize *de* (*chengde* □□)” is therefore more than just responding correctly to one situation at a time, with respect to one dimension of virtue at a time; it is **(p.56)** to have attained a broad, interconnected, and spontaneous disposition [Zhu 1997, 778]. Zhu says that “If one is devoted (*zhong* □) today, but not tomorrow, then one hasn't attained it in oneself, and this cannot be called *de*” [Ibid.]. Rather, one has *de* when one's conduct has “matured (*shu* □).” He also emphasizes that *de* means not having to rely on external motivations: one has “attained it in one's body,” and so the motivation is now spontaneous, a reliable disposition [Ibid., 864].[15]

When asked what, exactly, one attains within oneself when one has *de*, Zhu responds as follows: “When the Way has been attained in one's heart-mind, we call that *de*” [Zhou 1990, 16]. The key difference between the Way (*dao*) and *de* is that *de* is a matter of our actualized selves, our actual feelings and dispositions: it describes the way our *qi* is arranged, and can be called “below form.” *Dao* (like coherence), on the other hand, transcends our physical selves: it is “above form,” as explained in the previous chapter. Zhu spills quite a bit of ink on the relation between *de* and coherence (*li*), prompted by many questions from students who are puzzled by a famous definition he gave of humaneness (*ren*). He says, “Humaneness is [both] the coherence of love and the virtue (*de*) of the heart-mind (*xin* □)” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 1]. But how can humaneness be both *li*—which functions like a norm governing the expression of love—and the embodied disposition of the heart-mind to respond with love? Synthesizing Zhu's various comments, he explains as follows. On the one hand, humaneness is the name of the valued coherence we discover in the realm of compassionate, loving responses to others [Zhu 1997, 101]. One can love too much or too little. Humaneness (from this perspective) is not loving itself, but the specific pattern of loving response which, in the given situation, leads to realizing the total coherence made available by the situation. (In subsequent chapters I will flesh out this abstract talk of “coherence” with the somewhat more helpful language of “harmony.”) On the other hand, it is possible to use “humaneness” to talk about the very loving responses themselves. In this sense, humaneness is a concrete virtue; as Zhu says, humaneness itself is love [Ibid., 413]. Talking of humaneness as “the virtue of our heart-mind” is thus to stress the origin of our actual, loving reaction: it comes from a heart-mind that has attained virtue (*de*)—which, recall, is a cultivated, consistent ability to respond correctly [Ibid., 101]. We might say that these two senses of humaneness relate to one another in the same way that a norm or goal relates to a concrete ability to realize that norm. Since we have no way of detecting and being moved by the norm (i.e., humaneness-as-coherence) short of cultivating the ability (i.e., humaneness-as-concrete virtue), we are still firmly in the realm of virtue ethics: the focus of Zhu's theory and teaching is on cultivating the proper disposition.

A second possible confusion engendered by "Humaneness is [both] the coherence of love and the virtue (*de*) of the heart-mind (*xin*)" is: what about the other dimensions of a proper moral response to the world, like appropriateness, propriety, wisdom, and so on? If *de* is "virtue," then shouldn't it have these multiple dimensions—which we would then call individual "virtues"—each of which would be simultaneously the name for a specific coherence and a disposition to actually respond appropriately with respect to some aspect of human experience? In fact, this is precisely Zhu's view, though it is complicated slightly by the fact **(p.57)** that he (like virtually all Confucians, whether classical or Zhu's contemporaries) uses "humaneness" to refer both to a general, all-encompassing idea of virtue, and to the more specific norm and trait of compassion.[16] Evidence that Zhu sees virtue as analyzable into multiple dimensions comes from the approval with which he cites the following well-known statement by an earlier Neo-Confucian:

> The virtue of loving is called humaneness, that of doing what is proper is called appropriateness, that of putting things in order is called propriety, that of penetration is called wisdom, and that of abiding by one's commitments is called faithfulness. One who is in accord with his nature and acts with ease is a sage.[17]

Zhu explicitly comments that "These five various aspects [i.e., humaneness, appropriateness, etc.] are [virtue's] manifestations (*yong* □)."[18] In other words, virtue (*de*) is really one, unified whole, just as coherence is ultimately a unified, all-encompassing whole. We saw in the previous chapter that coherence can also be spoken of in a "particular" way, highlighting a critical aspect of a thing or situation. (Think of "floating on water" as the coherence of a boat. This is only one aspect, albeit an important one, of the total coherence of a given boat.) In the same way, we can focus on one aspect of *de*—for example, "doing what is proper is called appropriateness"—even if our whole *de* is actually engaged.

I should remark here, in addition, on the connection made in the above passage to one's "nature"; in his comment, Zhu makes it explicit that nature is the "substance (*ti*)" of virtue [Zhou 1990, 16]. To make sense of this, recall from the previous chapter that Zhu has identified nature with coherence as part of his effort to explicate the constitutive role that humans play in articulating the overall coherence of the eternal life-giving activity of the Way. Similarly, we saw above that for each distinct aspect of virtue, there is both a distinct affective reaction (like love) and a norm of coherence for the reaction. Love that deserves the name "humaneness" is love that fulfills its promise in realizing the valuable coherence—or, in language I will prefer later, harmony—available in any given situation. This is our "nature" manifesting itself. As emphasized earlier, neither our nature nor coherence can be narrowly delimited: a key to the power of coherence is its ability to be rearticulated with respect to ever-larger contexts. We can ask about the coherence of a single interaction, or of a series of linked interactions, or we can even define the "situation" as the inter-related happenings of the entire universe. In this way Zhu Xi is able to expand his notion of both virtue and Way out to cosmological dimensions, and thus happily invoke the classical *Great Commentary* to the *Book of Changes* in its assertion that the “Great virtue of heaven and earth is life-giving activity (*sheng*)” [Zhu 1997, 78].[19]

3.4 Final Thoughts

It is time to take stock and review how the Neo-Confucian idea of *de* fits with the bridge concept of virtue that I sketched earlier in the chapter. I suggested that we could characterize virtue as a fine character with mature dispositions to **(p.58)** respond well to one's circumstances. When such a concept lies at the center of our ethical theorizing, the following of rules cannot be fundamental to the moral life. Finally, one's responsiveness should not be a matter of self-control or the exercise of willpower; instead, the inner traits of a virtuous person should be such that he or she responds in a more spontaneous or automatic fashion. For the most part, there should be little doubt that the idea of *de* discussed in the previous section matches with each aspect of this characterization, and so we are on solid ground thinking of virtue (thusly understood) as a bridge concept. It will enable us to pursue further dialogue between Neo-Confucians and Western virtue ethicists, notwithstanding any detailed disagreements they might have over their particular versions of virtue/*de*.

Two issues might lead readers to feel uncomfortable with this sanguine conclusion. First, unlike Western virtue ethicists, Neo-Confucians do not regularly talk about “the virtue of X” as opposed to “the virtue of Y”; *de* is rather overall, unified virtue that has a number of distinct aspects or dimensions. Depending on the particular situation, the proper response may primarily involve love, or putting things in order, or abiding by commitments: corresponding to each case, a particular aspect of virtue (humaneness, propriety, faithfulness, and so on) will be the primary dimension of one's response. As we will see later in chapter 6, Confucian discussions of moral conflicts lead us to see that situations are rarely unidimensional, so a typical *de* response will involve multiple aspects of *de*—or, to borrow the common Western phrasing, multiple virtues. Without any awkwardness we can say that *de* is, in the words of contemporary virtue ethicist Christine Swanton, the “disposition to respond well to the demands of the world” [Swanton 2003, 21]. A great strength of Swanton's view of virtue, in fact, is her stress on the multiple dimensions of virtuous responses: even seemingly simple situations evoke responses with complex “profiles” [Swanton 2003, 22 and *passim*.]. As I read him, Zhu Xi would have little trouble agreeing.

A second possible concern is the degree to which “coherence” serves as a norm that regulates our responses. In the previous section I said that *de* could be seen as the concrete disposition to realize the total coherence made available by a given situation. Does this put priority on the idea of “total coherence” in such a way that we have moved away from virtue ethics? My answer is no, because we have no fully independent access to the degree of coherence present, save what is made available to us through the process of virtuous perception-and-response. Neo-Confucians give no hint of a stand-alone “theory of coherence” that one might calculate, and attempt to follow, separate from one's actual reactions. A comparison with a structurally similar case from the history of Western virtue ethics may help clarify what I mean. Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) was a pioneer in a sentimentalist approach to virtue ethics, but he is also seen as an important anticipator of utilitarianism. Hutcheson believed that virtue leads one to judge that “that action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers” [Hutcheson 2006, 74]. Many subsequent thinkers came to think that the “greatest happiness” could be measured independently of our virtuous reactions, and the application of this rule of rightness came increasingly to be seen as more central to ethics than the cultivation of virtue.[20] The same cannot **(p.59)** be said for Neo-Confucian coherence, nor for its slightly less abstract stand-in, harmony. Thus far, in any event, they have resisted being deployed as the basis for rule-like calculations of which action is best. That said, and at the risk of sounding like I want to have my cake and eat it too, I believe there is something useful about knowing that one's virtuous responses aim at harmony. Some virtue ethicists believe we are able to say little more to guide action than “Do what a virtuous person would do.” If we can say instead “Aim to realize harmony,” we both provide better guidance and underwrite the possibility of some reasoning about what to do in hard or vexed cases. When I turn to questions of ethical education in chapters 8 and 9, I will revisit the role harmony can play for a novice learning what to do.[21]

The specific differences between Zhu Xi and Francis Hutcheson do not mean that my hope to use virtue as a bridge concept to put Neo-Confucians and contemporary Westerners into dialogue is hopeless. To the contrary, this brief foray into the issue of determining right action has suggested grounds on which dialogue is likely to be mutually stimulating and perhaps fruitful. Such possibilities, I believe, are the strongest justification for using bridge concepts to pursue comparative dialogue, rather than adopting an approach that emphasizes differences. Some philosophers have looked at Confucianism and Western virtue ethics and concluded that they are too different to speak significantly to one another. Confucian “role ethics” or a unique “unity of rule and virtue” ethics are contrasted with Western approaches. [22]To some degree, I believe these approaches are based on mistaken premises, such as collapsing all of Western virtue ethics into Aristotle (and perhaps also reading Aristotle very narrowly), or else believing there to be more of a difference concerning rules than is actually the case.[23] Perhaps more basic, though, is a difference over whether we should look for bridge concepts that enable mutually-challenging, open-ended philosophical dialogue. This book is an extended argument that such an approach is worthwhile. **(p.60)**

Notes:

(1.) Perhaps keeping in mind MacIntyre's criticisms of watered-down modern languages as inadequately capturing the richness of traditional moral discourses, Stalnaker adds: “bridge concepts are not conceived as junior versions of Esperanto that might come to fully articulate both vocabularies in a new, third idiom; they merely assist in the process of creating comparative ethical relations between distant ethical positions” [Ibid.]. For a somewhat different approach to comparing Western and Chinese ideas of virtue that depends on a distinction between “thick” and “thin” concepts, see Van Norden [2007, 15–21]; I offer some critical remarks on this approach in [Angle forthcoming a].

(2.) Good sources on disparate approaches to virtue ethics include Crisp and Slote [1997] and Welchman [2006].

(3.) My characterization of virtue ethics here is influenced by Swanton [2003, 19 and 26].

(4.) For most virtue ethicists, there is still room for reasoning about what to do. Some (following Aristotle) give reason a central place in their theories. Others (following Hume) do not, yet this does not mean that moral reactions are simply brute feelings, immune to discussion of which factors are (and are not) relevant to a proper reaction. For one discussion of these matters, see Hutton [2001].

(5.) It is certainly relevant that a number of scholars in recent years have argued that we should view classical Confucians as virtue ethicists. See, for example, Ivanhoe [2002, 2n6], Hutton [2001], Van Norden [2007], Yu [2007], and Sim [2007].

(6.) One difference is over how much continuity there is between graphs inscribed on Shang dynasty oracle bones and subsequent Zhou dynasty uses of *de*. Contrast Nivison [1996a], who sees considerable continuity; Chao [2006 2006], who sees more difference than Nivison yet still places this in a general process of the development of *de*; and Zhang [2006], who argues for a more decisive difference and break with previous terminology.

(7.) Scholars differ somewhat on how to deal with the fact that the kind of charisma represented by *de* is not always moral. All agree that *de* is primarily or in general ascribed on the basis of admirable behavior or character, even while noting exceptions; for example, Nivison [1996b, 33] cites a *Zuo Commentary* story in which it is used to refer to the power of a young woman's sexual attractiveness, and *Mencius* 4A:14, which is also discussed in Van Norden [2003, 119n14]. Zhang [2006] gently criticizes Chen [2002] for overemphasizing the degree to which *de* is genuinely neutral; Zhang argues quite successfully that nonmoral uses of *de* should be seen as conscious exceptions to the core meaning.

(8.) See Nivison [1996a], Ivanhoe [2000, ix–xiv], and Chao [2006 2006].

(9.) *Wu Xing Pian*, cited and discussed in both Chao [2006 2006, 180–1] and Chen [2002, 35]. The types of behavior discussed are humaneness (*ren* □), appropriateness (*yi* □), propriety (*li* □), wisdom (*zhi* □), and sagacity (*sheng* □).

(10.) The texts on which Professor Chen draws are the *Guoyu*, the *Yi Zhou Shu*, and the *Zuo Commentary*. Dating of these texts and their subsidiary sections is a vexed issue; some scholars will not be as confident as Professor Chen that all of his examples genuinely originate in the Spring and Autumn era, but firm conclusions are not yet possible.

(11.) The *Zhongyong* (ch. 20) says: “Wisdom, humaneness, and courage—these three are the universal *de* of the world.” This example is mentioned in Van Norden [2003, 119n15].

(12.) *Analects* 7:6; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 40], modified.

(13.) *Analects* 12:2 and 15:24; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 90].

(14.) For some telling examples of these ideas, see Zhu [1990, 103 (§2.17), 134 (§4.31), and 141 (§4.47)]. In addition to his frequent talk of "obtaining for oneself (*zide* □□)," Zhu also talks of "embodied comprehension (*tiren* □□)" and sometimes of "obtaining via embodied comprehension (*tirende* □□□)," as in the last passage cited.

(15.) Zhu is not completely consistent on this issue. I mentioned earlier *Analects* 7:6, which reads "The Master said, 'Committed to the Way, based on *de*, close to humaneness, and acquainted with the arts." In the context of the *Analects*, where *de* is a moral charisma that may well fall short of full *ren*, this statement is not problematic. But in light of Zhu's understanding of *de*, seeing *ren* as a further achievement, beyond *de*, is a bit tricky. Faced with this dilemma, he sometimes says that in fact *de* is not reliable without the still deeper achievement of *ren*, or that if one only has *de* and not *ren*, one can lose *de* [Ibid., 866, 870]. To be sure, there are differences between *de* and *ren*, as I discuss later. But I view the idea that *de* is unreliable as a mistake forced on Zhu by his commitment to harmonizing all classical texts, to the extent possible, into a single system.

(16.) This explains why Zhu can both deny that "appropriateness (*yi*)" is "the virtue of our heart-mind" in one place [Ibid., 414] and assert that appropriateness (along with propriety and wisdom) *are* "[aspects of the] virtue of our heart-mind" in another [Ibid., 418]. The key, which he makes explicit in the latter passage, is that humaneness alone can function as an inclusive term.

(17.) From Section 3 of Zhou Dunyi's *Tongshu*, this appears very near the beginning of the greatly influential anthology Zhu Xi coedited, *Reflections on Things at Hand*. Translation from Zhu and Lu [1967, 8], slightly modified.

(18.) [Zhou 1990, 16]. In light of the last sentence, note that the ease with which sages act virtuously is a major topic of this study, dealt with most directly in chapter 7. A final point worth noting is that at least once, Zhu Xi uses *de* to mean the very general virtue or excellence of a given faculty, when he says that "the *de* of one's ears is acuteness, the *de* of one's eyes is perspicacity, and the *de* of one's heart-mind is humaneness" [Zhu 1997, 104].

(19.) The contemporary scholar Huang Yong has argued that Neo-Confucian (his focus is on the Cheng brothers, but it applies equally to Zhu Xi and others) virtue ethics is an "ontological virtue ethics," grounded in the identity of virtue and nature, and that this basis for virtue avoids key problems that afflict standard Western discussions of virtue's connection to actual human psychology and to its normative status. I cannot consider here Huang's critique of Kantian and Utilitarian accounts of the relations between value and fact, but it is very relevant to my purposes to reflect on his positive account of the Neo-Confucian grounding of virtue in nature. The key move in Huang's argument is that for the Cheng brothers, facts about human nature are "rich with values," since our nature is itself virtuous, and therefore Neo-Confucians can derive "what a human person 'ought to be' … from what a human person 'is,' without committing the naturalistic fallacy."

Finally, “In the Cheng's view, we see human nature as good because of the value we have, and we have such a value because of the fact that human nature is good. So instead of an either-or situation, there is a reflective equilibrium between the two” [Huang 2003, 463–4]. I agree with quite a bit of Huang's account, including the idea that our natures are “rich with values.” However, I believe that the way Huang articulates the relation between our values and the goodness of nature is problematic: the way he puts it is not a “reflective equilibrium”—a concept that applies to quite a different sort of context—but a vicious circle. The way to save Huang's insight is to remember the identity between nature and coherence, and then to emphasize the constitutive role that human valuation plays in the articulation of coherence, as discussed in the previous chapter. We naturally fit with, contribute to, or enhance the coherence (harmony) of the universe, and this valuable, intelligible way that things fit together (to recall my more specific gloss for *li*) is centrally constituted by our valuing of and participation in life-giving activity. We do this, in turn, through the responsive dispositions collectively referred to as our *de* or virtue.

(20.) See Darwall [1995] and Schneewind [1990].

(21.) There is now considerable literature on virtue ethical approaches to the determination of right action. I expand on the ideas in this paragraph in Angle [forthcoming b], where I note that Swanton's account of a kind of reasoning process called “constraint integration” fits well with the general Neo-Confucian orientation I have developed.

(22.) Ames and Rosemont [2009] and Liu [2004] are examples of such an approach.

(23.) Rules, especially ritual rules that govern a wide range of activities, are certainly important in the daily practice of Confucianism. But we should not be misled by this into thinking that the rules have an equal status with specific, virtuous, perception-based reactions. It is the latter that provide the ultimate content for Neo-Confucian ethics, even if explicit appeal to such non-rulebound judgment is only necessary in relatively rare cases. Most of the argument for this claim will have to wait on later chapters, but the central point is that even when one simply follows a seemingly obvious application of a rule (in Confucian terms, this is *jing* 經), in the background is the perception of the situation as not requiring any unusual departures from the rule (i.e., *quan* 權). Recent work in Western virtue ethics has done a great deal to elucidate the ways that rules can play significant roles in our moral lives without being fundamental; see Hursthouse [1999].

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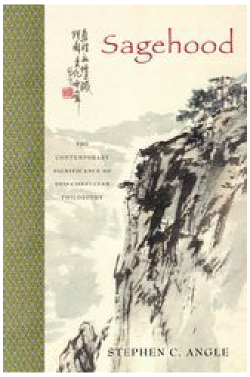

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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[−] Abstract and Keywords

The value of harmony, understood as a unity of complementary differences, lies at the center of the interpretation developed in subsequent chapters of Neo-Confucian psychology, ethics, epistemology, and education. It is also rooted in the distinctive metaphysical commitments of Neo-Confucianism, especially through the idea of “coherence”; these connections, in turn, are linked to the dynamic and creative aspects of harmony. This chapter provides the historical context necessary to understand harmony, as well as some initial efforts to flesh out the implications of harmony both for personal ethics and for broader politics. There is a particular focus on Wang Yangming and his doctrine that we “form one body with all things” in this chapter, though like some later chapters, its sources also go beyond strictly philosophical literature to encompass accounts of moral exemplars. In particular, the chapter considers ways that the experiences of physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer help to illustrate what the Neo-

Confucians mean by harmony.

Keywords: harmony, creativity, Wang Yangming, Paul Farmer

Harmony is an ancient value in China, yet is also a concept that lies at the core of Neo-Confucian philosophy. The goals of this chapter are to lay out some of its pedigree and to explore its connection to the idea of “coherence (*li*)” that was the subject of chapter 2. We will ultimately see that the link between harmony and coherence is a tight one; in subsequent chapters, I will exploit this connection as I explain and expand upon Neo-Confucian ethical and political philosophy. Here, I move fairly rapidly through classical sources, paying special attention to the role of harmony in the Confucian text *Zhongyong* (or *Doctrine of the Mean*) because of that text's influence on later thinkers. In the balance of the chapter I address the ways in which key Neo-Confucian thinkers interpreted classical references to harmony and elaborated their own, distinctive views.

4.1 Early Classical Sources

4.1.1 Complementary Differences

Early mentions of the term *he* □, which is quite aptly translated as “harmony,” tended to be in culinary or musical contexts, or at least to draw metaphorically on these frameworks.[1] Among the earliest uses of the term is the following song lyric, from the *Classic of Odes*:

> Sing praise to fervent ancestors;
> This benefaction, orderly and complete,
> Extends offerings to them, without bounds,
> That their presence may grace this place.
> We bring clear sacrificial wine,
> **(p.62)**
> That their thoughts toward us may bear fruit.
> We have as well a soup of harmony (*he*),
> With flavor both restrained and well balanced (*ping* □).[2]

A successful soup is one in which the various ingredients harmonize with one another; none overwhelms the rest. Restraint and balance are here associated with harmony, but the degree of restraint seems like it must be suited to the occasion, since the following lyric, from the same source, expresses a very different tone:

> Oh, fine, oh, lovely!
> We set up our tambourines and drums.
> We play on the drums loud and strong,
> To please our glorious ancestors.
> The descendant of Tang has come;
> He has secured our victories.
> There is a din of tambourines and drums;
> A shrill music of flutes,

> All balanced (*ping*) in harmony (*he*)
> With the sound of our stone chimes.[3]

Different instruments balance one another so as to create harmony. The need for a diversity of elements is emphasized in a passage from another early text, which reads: "There is no music with one note, no culture with one object, no satisfactory results with one flavor."[4] In both passages from the *Odes*, harmony is obviously a good thing, a mode of expression worthy of the glorious ancestors.[5] This positive evaluation of harmony is also explicit in the *Analects*' statement that "In the practice of ritual, harmony is to be esteemed."[6] In this case, we are to imagine the combining of disparate ceremonial elements to form a harmony.

We learn a good deal more about harmony in an important passage from the *Zuo Commentary* that contrasts *he* with "uniformity (*tong* □)."[7] Yan Zi is speaking to his lord, the Marquis of Qi, about the difference between harmony and uniformity:

> Harmony is like a broth, wherein water, fire, vinegar, minced meat, salt, and plum sauce are used to boil fish meat. Cooking it over firewood, the chef harmonizes it, proportioning it with flavor: adding to what falls short and taking away from what is in excess. The nobleman partakes of it and thereby sets his mind in balance (*ping*). It is likewise with a ruler and his ministers. Where there is something unacceptable in what the ruler deems admissible, the ministers point out to him what is unacceptable, so as to bring perfection (*cheng* □) to that which is admissible....It is thus that governance is balanced and yields no violation, and the people have no inclination toward struggle.... The proportionate blending of the five flavors and the harmonizing of the **(p.63)** five tones by the former kings was done for the purpose of setting their minds in balance and bringing perfection to their governance.... Now with Ju [i.e., another minister], it is not thus. What your lordship deems acceptable, Ju also calls acceptable; what your lordship deems inadmissible, Ju also calls inadmissible. If water were added to [enhance] water, who could make a meal of it? If the *qin* and *se* zithers struck the same [notes], who could [bear] listening to them? It is thus that uniformity is unacceptable.[8]

There are a number of important themes in this passage. Differences in appropriate balance with one another are essential to harmony; only when each makes its (or his) appropriate contribution to a given situation can perfection (or completion: *cheng*) be realized. Balanced governance means that none of the people will be inclined to struggle against their rulers. "Yes men" make bad ministers because they fail to play their crucial role of correcting leaders who are tempted to rule in a one-sided or selfish way. This same theme is expressed more succinctly in the famous *Analects* saying, "The gentleman is harmonious but not uniform (*tong*). The little man is uniform but not harmonious."[9]

4.1.2 Natural Patterns and Creativity

The idea that if harmony can be achieved, perfection will be realized, points to an important idea that may be lurking in the background of the *Zuo Commentary* passage at which we were just looking, namely the idea of natural patterns. In an agricultural society like China, observation of the natural world was of keen importance. Devices like gnomons were developed to measure the length of a day. The realm of music, too, yielded up natural patterns, as certain intervals between pitches seemed naturally more pleasing. Even cuisine may have been thought about in this way.[10] If our world is naturally patterned, then it makes sense to think that if we are able to fit in to, or respond to, our situation in just the right way—that is, the harmonious way—then the result can be perfect or complete (*cheng*). Without the idea of natural pattern, it is harder to see how the sense of finality—of having-gotten-it-right—that *cheng* invokes could be justified.

Two immediate qualifications are required, however. First, harmony was not understood to be static or passive; instead, it was dynamic and even life-giving. Here is a statement from the *Zuo Commentary* attributed to Shi Bo, an early royal scribe: “For harmony gives birth to things, while uniformity (*tong*) does not carry forth. To balance others with others—this is called harmony; thus it can yield plentiful growth and have things return to it. If uniformity is added upon uniformity, it will be discarded upon its exhaustion.”[11] It is striking that here harmony “gives birth (*sheng* □)” to things, rather than completing or perfecting (*cheng*) them. As contemporary scholar Scott Cook comments, Shi Bo's suggestion is that harmony is bound up in a principle of procreation: the union of opposites, like male and female, produces life. Indeed, the same is true of music: “The **(p.64)** balanced harmony of music is not something static, but rather, like the natural world it is modeled after, proceeds forward through a regular series of changes” [Cook 1995, 82]. “Finality,” therefore, must be used with caution since harmonies can be ongoing creative processes. It may be safer to speak of perfection of having-gotten-it-right.

My second qualification concerns the degree of creativity that harmony might invoke or inspire. How much does “natural pattern” constrain us? In an important series of books, Roger Ames and the late David Hall have argued that the classical Chinese worldview needs to be understood as revolving around the articulation of ongoing processes—processes that have no external, Godlike power behind them. They see this as the creation of an “aesthetic order” in our world, rather than the discovery of a “logical order.” “Aesthetic order,” they write, “is achieved by the creation of novel patterns” [Hall and Ames 1987, 16]. They contrast “power” to “creativity,” writing that “Power is to be construed as the production of intended effects determined by external causation. Real creativity, on the other hand, entails the spontaneous production of novelty, irreducible through causal analysis. Creativity is always reflexive and is exercised over and with respect to ‘self.’ And since self in a processive world is always communal, creativity is contextual, transactional, and multidimensional” [Hall and Ames 2003, 17].

References to “the creation of novel patterns” and “the spontaneous production of novelty” might sound very different from getting a natural pattern right. If we are to narrow this gap, it is critical to grasp what Ames and Hall mean by their references to “communal,” “contextual,” and “transactional.” Their idea is that who we are and what we do emerges, in significant part, from our context: from those people, institutions, natural environments, and so on with whom (or with which) we have come to form relationships. Learning about that context involves learning the patterns that structure it. Acting well in that context involves responding well to the opportunities it provides. Dewoskin's study of early Chinese aesthetics puts the issue this way:

> [Chinese] theories characterize the aesthetic process as bidirectional; art emanates from the resonating proximity of mind and nature. Nature does not bear on the mind; muses do not enter and "inspire." The *Book of Music* makes clear that the sounds that make music are always there. To hear them is to have music, which requires careful and skillful listening. What might intuitively be construed as a causal relationship is vitiated in the texts on theory by the use of such terms as *gan* (□), variously translatable as "move" or "be moved," "touch upon" or "perceive." [Dewoskin 1982, 183]

Natural patterns—whether they be sounds or human likes and dislikes—are critical to the production of a harmonious state, but we must do more than just discover a few principles and then follow them. We need to respond to our context in a way that resonates with (i.e., both moves and is moved by) all the patterns that define any given unique, particular situation.

Let me sum up. Harmony involves, according to Shi Bo, balancing "others with others"; Cook calls this the "complimentary pairing of opposites" [Cook **(p.65)** 1995, 78]. Rather than finding conflict or competition in difference, harmony involves a proportional balancing that is responsive to the contextually relevant natural patterns. In addition, harmony can be said to be "creative" in two senses. First, it is fruitful, in terms of what follows after this moment. Harmony leads to productive and constructive outcomes. Second, harmony can be novel. With imagination, we can see and achieve new points of balance. This kind of creativity is very important, and I will draw on it when discussing "moral imagination" in chapter 6. Still, we must be cautious about the word "creativity," because it is easy to misunderstand. One might even say that phrases like "the spontaneous production of novelty" are calling out to be misread. Thus I prefer to use the word "articulate": we articulate novel solutions, rather than create them. Novel solutions (which are often old ideas or practices applied to ever-changing, unique situations) then lead to a satisfying, "just-right" sense, which we can characterize as "aesthetic" but which also has a feeling of necessity. We might contrast this to another sense of "balance," in which a tool is used to measure things and determine that they objectively balance. We do not find harmony developed in terms of such objectivist images, but rather in terms of chefs, music masters, or skilled ministers perceiving a harmony among many ingredients. Even though it is fundamentally responsive to natural patterns, harmony is never the outcome of the simple application of an external standard: it is a singular achievement in response to a particular situation.

4.2 The *Zhongyong* ("Doctrine of the Mean")

In addition to the texts I have looked at so far, we must look at one other classical essay before moving on, both for its intrinsic interest and because it would prove to be the most influential statement on harmony in the eyes of later Neo-Confucians. The

Zhongyong, conventionally translated as the *Doctrine of the Mean*, is widely viewed as one of the most profound classical-era statements on the place of humans in the universe. In the Song dynasty, Zhu Xi selected it as one of the *Four Books*, the seminal texts that comprised the foundation of the Neo-Confucian program of education. The *Zhongyong*'s famous first chapter ends with the following lines, which immediately make clear the importance of harmony:

> The moment at which pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy have yet to arise is called equilibrium (*zhong* □); once the emotions have arisen, when they attain due measure and degree, that is harmony (*he*). Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world; harmony is the advancing of the proper way in the world. When equilibrium and harmony are fully realized, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish.[12]

The first thing to notice about this passage is its simultaneous embrace of individual psychology and cosmic ideal. Harmony is both an individual accomplishment and, presumably because of its role in advancing the proper way in the world, of the greatest significance to all things. "Fully realized" harmony goes **(p.66)** beyond any one individual, although the clear implication is that each person contributes to and helps to shape the ultimate, collective achievement.

How does this compare to the material we have already considered? The applications of harmony to both the psychological and the cosmological realms are new, but the core idea feels familiar. The tie to equilibrium (or "centrality," in another translation) and the explanation in terms of "due measure and degree" call to mind our previous discussion of proportionate balancing. The claim that full harmony leads heaven and earth to attain their proper order resonates strongly with our reflections about the role of natural patterns. If we look to other parts of the *Zhongyong*, we will see these various connections strengthened. Chapter 15 of the *Zhongyong* draws an analogy between a happy family and "the music of lutes and harps": neither is a simple unity, but instead depends on complementary differences.[13] The need for appropriate differences to be expressed, which Yan Zi put in terms of choosing harmony over uniformity, is expressed in chapter 10 as "the gentleman maintains harmony rather than following the common flow." As contemporary scholar Chenyang Li puts it, "Confucian harmonization is based on the [gentleman's] active and positive contribution to the process, not on merely going with the flow without contention" [Li 2004, 185].

The *Zhongyong*'s claim that the moment prior to emotions arising can be understood as "equilibrium" is a statement pregnant with possibility—possibilities that later thinkers, armed with more elaborate metaphysical theories, would subsequently exploit. The focus in the *Zhongyong* itself seems to be on what happens after emotions are stimulated. Ames and Hall put it nicely: "It is the human participation in bringing the world into meaningful focus and the human contribution to sustaining this equilibrium that establishes the human being as a full partner with other forces shaping the natural, social, and cultural environments" [2001, 86]. The idea that humans are "partners"—making distinctive but harmonious contributions to overall flourishing—is fleshed out in chapter 30 of the

Zhongyong:

> Confucius revered Yao and Shun as his ancestors and carried on their ways; he emulated and made illustrious the ways of Kings Wen and Wu. He modeled himself above on the rhythm of the turning seasons, and below he was attuned to the patterns of water and earth. He is comparable to the heaven and the earth, sheltering and supporting everything that is. He is comparable to the progress of the four seasons, and the alternating brightness of the sun and moon. All things are nurtured together and do not cause injury to one another; the various ways are traveled together and are not conflicted. Their lesser excellences are to be seen as flowing streams; their greater excellences are to be seen as massive transformations. That is why the heavens and the earth are so great.[14]

A sage like Confucius both draws on the ways of his predecessors, and models himself on natural patterns. In neither case is he simply mimicking, however; as said above, he is making an active, positive contribution to the realization of harmony. It will come as no surprise to readers of chapter 2 that Neo-Confucians **(p.67)** will find in this teaching a powerful source of ideas on "coherence (*li*)," the valued, intelligible way that things fit together.

4.3 Song Neo-Confucianism

In earlier chapters I have already made reference to the sea change that has taken place when we move from classical Confucians to the Neo-Confucians of the eleventh century and thereafter. Responding in various ways to major intellectual and social changes—not least of which is the role Buddhism has come to play in Chinese society—leaders of the Neo-Confucian revival have different understandings of metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, and self-cultivation than their classical forbearers. Some classical texts take on a more prominent status than they seem to have had during the classical era, in part because these texts mesh more easily with the newly developing metaphysical and other views of the Neo-Confucians. The *Zhongyong* is one such text. We will see that it becomes the chief source for Neo-Confucian theorizing about harmony. Through their discussions of the terms of the *Zhongyong*, we can readily see the ways in which Neo-Confucians link harmony with their most distinctive and original ideas.

An excellent example of this linkage can be found in the writings of Chen Chun, a prominent follower of Zhu Xi. Chen's *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained*, written in the early thirteenth century, is a thorough and systematic effort to explicate the ideas of Zhu Xi. In it, Chen draws on the *Zhongyong* to discuss harmony as follows:

> When [the emotions] are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, they can then be called harmony. Harmony means not to contradict. When the coherence (*li*) inside is manifested, one feels pleasure when there should be pleasure and is angry when there should be anger, without contradicting coherence in any way. That is attaining due measure and degree. Attaining due measure and degree is simply achieving the coherence of what should be, without any excess or deficiency, and not in conflict with coherence. That is why it is called

> harmony. [Chen 1986, 123], slightly modified.

Harmony, according to Chen, is realized when one achieves “the coherence of what should be.” As discussed in chapter 2, “coherence (*li*)” is a central term for Neo-Confucians; recall that my use of the word “coherence” means, more specifically, the valued and intelligible way that things fit together. Neo-Confucians characterized this norm in various ways, depending on the perspective from which it was viewed, but the essential idea is a harmonious, organic unity. Each thing is different, as arms are different from legs, but each is part of the whole. Harmony involves seeing that each element receives its due weight at each point in time. Organic is an apt characterization for harmony in another sense: Neo-Confucians saw their universe as vital, life-giving, and in constant motion. The “stuff ” out of which the universe is composed, *qi*, itself is dynamic **(p.68)** and interactive, always manifesting a changing balance of complementary forces, which at their most general are characterized as *yin* and *yang*.[15]

So harmony is the realization of coherence. But how are we to understand the contents of this assertion: what, more concretely, does it mean to realize coherence? In other words, when Neo-Confucians talk about realizing the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together, what do they have in mind? Here many Neo-Confucians would turn to a famous essay by one of the earliest Neo-Confucians, Zhang Zai (1020–77). Zhang's “Western Inscription” begins to flesh out the idea of interconnectedness that coherence and harmony involve. Its first lines resound with compassion:

> Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.
>
> The great ruler [i.e., emperor] is the eldest son of my parents [i.e., Heaven and Earth], and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the aged—that is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Show deep love toward the orphaned and the weak—this is the way to treat them as the young should be treated. The sage identifies his character with that of Heaven and Earth, and the worthy is the most outstanding man. Even those who are tired, infirm, crippled, or sick; those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands; all are my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to.… [Chan 1963, 497]

Zhang continues to expand on the theme of filial devotion in the rest of the essay, writing, for instance, “To rejoice in Heaven and to have no anxiety—this is filial piety at its purest.” He also cites several examples of ancient moral heroes, each of whom manifested his devotion to his parents in a different way. The differences among the examples are important, because Zhang's essay is not about the universal application of a single principle: it expresses an ideal of organic harmony in which all care for one another as is appropriate to the circumstance.[16] In Zhang's admittedly schematic terms, “respect” is appropriate to the elderly, and “deep love” to the young. At a higher level of abstraction, Zhang marks another difference: he regards all “people” as siblings, whereas all “things” are companions.

Subsequent Neo-Confucians celebrated Zhang's essay as brilliantly expressing what Cheng Yi labeled “Coherence is one, but simultaneously distinguishable into many.” This is indeed a central characteristic of coherence. I would argue that while Cheng Yi does not use the term “harmony” in his slogan, “harmony” nicely captures the combination of difference and unity at which he is aiming. Cheng writes that it is essential to include both unity and distinctiveness, as Zhang does in the “Western Inscription,” because otherwise one is faced with a dilemma: “The defect of [only recognizing] the many distinctions is that selfishness will dominate and humaneness (*ren*) will be lost. On the other hand, the **(p.69)** fault of recognizing no distinctions is that there will be impartial love for all without appropriateness (*yi* □).”[17] This last comment may strike readers unfamiliar with Confucianism as surprising, but it is similar to the insistence by many contemporary philosophers that “agent-relative” considerations be part of the content of morality. For both practical and theoretical reasons, Confucians insist that it is appropriate to care more about one's immediate family members than about those distant from one; but, as Cheng Yi also says, the “oneness” dimension of coherence ensures that selfish concern for one's relatives does not dominate. Indeed, Zhang makes it very clear that respect and care are owed to strangers, and even implies a kind of “fellow traveler” feeling is appropriate toward nonhumans when he says, “all things are my companions.” We will see this idea more fully elaborated in a moment.

4.4 Wang Yangming: Summary and Initial Engagement

So harmony is the realization of coherence, and realizing coherence means regarding that which fills the universe as one's body. Regarding all things as one's body, in turn, is to be understood via the combination of difference and unity I just discussed. Many subsequent Neo-Confucians discuss these same passages and ideas.[18] One of the most striking and full developments of Zhang's themes comes in Wang Yangming. In this section I invoke several passages by Wang in order to illustrate the power, and the problems, of the Neo-Confucian ideal of harmony.

4.4.1 Harmony, Coherence, and One Body

Let us look first at two passages which together express the ways in which harmony, as seen from the perspective of individual psychology, is a responsiveness to the contextually relevant coherence that structures one's situation. In the first passage, Wang responds to a student's telling him that the student was experiencing unbearable sorrow upon receiving a letter saying that the student's son was seriously ill. Wang says:

> This is the time for you to exert effort. If you allow this occasion to go by, what is the use of studying when nothing is happening? People should train and polish themselves at just such a time as this. A father's love for his son is of course the noblest feeling. Nevertheless, there is naturally a place of equilibrium and harmony within universal coherence. To be excessive means to have selfish thoughts. On such an occasion most people feel that according to universal coherence they should be sorrowful. They do not realize that they are already affected by worries

> and anxieties and their minds will not be correct. Generally speaking, the influence of the seven emotions is in the majority of cases excessive, and only in the minority of cases insufficient. As soon as it is excessive, it is not in accord with the original substance (*benti* **(p.70)** □□) of the mind. It must be adjusted to reach equilibrium (*zhong* □) before it becomes correct.[19]

It is critical not to mistake Wang's position here. He is not saying that feeling sorrowful for a son's suffering is selfish indulgence, nor that a sage would be indifferent to such plight. The student's difficulty is severe; he is suffering “depression and grief that he cannot bear” [Ibid.]. Wang's aim is to help him see that there is a vector of harmony in which all the concerns of his life and present situation complement one another—form a “coherent” whole—so that he can go forward. In terms from our earlier discussions, we might say that Wang's goal is to enable the student to understand the coherence of his own responses and to see new opportunities to articulate responses that are different from his past wallowing, that lead to more fruitful inner and outer states, and that bring him to a feeling of subjective rightness in his reactions. In chapter 6 I will expand on one of Wang's core insights here, namely that the coherent, harmonious response can contain strong negative emotions like sorrow and yet still feel—and be—right.

Because he believes that “the influence of the seven emotions is in the majority of cases excessive,” Wang's teachings about how to reach harmony often involve exerting effort to restrain one's feelings. I will explore the topic of concrete strategies of personal cultivation in subsequent chapters. Here, it is important to note that Wang allows himself considerable situation-specific flexibility via a distinction between excess, which is always bad, and extremity, which may be appropriate. In a letter to a different student, Wang writes, “There is harmony in sorrow. This refers to its taking rise from complete sincerity (*cheng* □) and being without any affectation. The excess of emotion is not harmony. The [bare] movement of our *qi* is not harmony. To be attached to selfish desires and stubbornness is not harmony. The infant cries all day without hurting his throat. This is the extreme of harmony.”[20] In other words, sorrow that is completely sincere, that manifests complete integrity with one's situation: such sorrow can be extreme and still harmonious.[21]

I turn now to another passage that will help me to flesh out both the appropriateness of different sorts of reactions, and particularly the vast scope of the Neo-Confucian ideal of harmony. Wang writes:

> That the great man can regard the Universe, Earth, and the myriad things as one body is not because he intends (*yi* □) it so, but because of the natural humaneness of his mind…. Even the mind of the small man is no different. Only he himself makes it small. Therefore when he sees a child falling into a well, he cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration.[22] This shows that his humaneness forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when he observes the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, he cannot help feeling an “inability to bear”[23] their suffering. This shows that his humaneness forms one body with birds and animals.

> It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as he is. But when he sees plants broken **(p.71)** and destroyed, he cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that his humaneness forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as he is. Yet, even when he sees tiles and stones shattered and crushed, he cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that his humaneness forms one body with tiles and stones. This means that even the mind of a small man forms one body with all.[24]

The passage contains two key ideas. First, all people already form “one body” with the myriad things, in the sense that we naturally, spontaneously experience the feelings that Wang describes, even though most of us will not reliably follow through on these feelings. Second, the feelings are different, depending on our relationship to the things in question. In other words, Wang's vision embraces both unity and difference, the hallmarks of harmony.

It is natural to want to hear more about how we move from the mere initial feelings that we are all said to have, to the fully developed reactions of a sage. Such topics are the concerns of subsequent chapters, though, so I will not linger on them here. More relevant to my present concerns—namely, the nature of the harmony ideal itself—is the amazing scope of that ideal. Zhang Zai's reference to seeing all “things” as one's “companions” is here made more concrete. We feel “regret,” Wang says, even upon encountering shattered roof tiles. Is this plausible?[25] Perhaps, one might grudgingly concede, we do sometimes feel regret, but is not this always a matter of projecting some human concern or other onto the situation? According to this line of thinking, our regret is not for the roof tile itself, but for those who live beneath the leaks and drafts it causes, those who were swindled by a salesman of shoddy tiles, or what have you. Perhaps the tiles are part of a dilapidated, but once-proud, landmark; in this case, our regret may be for the decline of our town or even our civilization. Even in these cases, though, what we regret is ultimately our own diminished state.[26]

At the core of this objection to Wang's expansive vision is an unwillingness to see ourselves as fundamentally a part of the world we experience. The objectors therefore feel that we can only react to the tiles insofar as we “project” our own interests onto them; this is seen as fundamentally discontinuous with our reactions to the threat faced by an innocent child or to imminent suffering on the part of a sentient being. Wang's response is to insist that we are not “projecting” anything onto the tile when we feel regret for any of the reasons cited above: the tile is not independent from those living beneath it, those who sold it, and so on. Each person, animal, plant, and tile has coherence as the thing that it is, and in turn exists in a web of interrelationship that structures the universe. In certain circumstances it is relatively easy to notice that in some particular way, coherence is disrupted and our world has tipped out of balance. Wang is attempting to articulate some of these paradigmatic situations in which our oneness with our world readily reveals itself, building on the examples already suggested in the *Mencius*.[27] One way to articulate the intuition driving the Neo-Confucian commitment to harmony is “Everything matters.”[28] To see how things matter, we sometimes have to look more carefully, or look from a different perspective, or recognize relationships and possibilities to which we had previously been blind.

(p.72) 4.4.2 A Contemporary Example

Those who have traveled some distance on the path to sagehood will of course see-and-react to more instances of disharmony than the rest of us.[29] Here is an example, again dealing with roofs, which will help us to see how recognizing interrelationships can bring us to react strongly to the plight of inanimate objects. Paul Farmer is a MacArthur Fellowship-winning physician and anthropologist who has devoted his life to helping the world's poorest citizens struggle against infectious diseases. He works at many levels, from treating individual patients, to implementing broad public health programs, to fighting against what he sees as the fundamental causes underlying his patients' suffering, namely poverty and extreme inequality. For many years the center of his efforts was Cange, Haiti, where he lived a good part of each year. Here is Tracy Kidder's account of Farmer's first encounter with Cange:

> Most of the dwellings were crude wooden lean-tos with dirt floors, constructed, it seemed, without much conviction, as a friend of his would later put it. Farmer noticed especially the roofs of these tiny hovels, roofs made of banana-bark thatch, patched with rags, clearly leaky. Back in Mirebalais the roofs of rusty, thin metal, of “tin,” had seemed to him like the emblems of poverty. “But,” he would say, “the absence of tin, in Cange, screamed, ‘Misery.’” [Kidder 2003, 77]

Farmer's reaction to the miserable roofs of Cange is stronger than “regret”: the roofs “scream” at him because of all they tell him about this corner of our world. An important reason that Farmer hears the roofs so powerfully is his acute sense of connectedness. One form this takes is recognizing the connectedness between roof and patient. In many ways, the poverty and lack of hope expressed by the roofs are connected to the many diseases suffered by those living under such roofs—with causality running in both directions.

Another, equally important kind of connectedness is that between those living in Cange and those living in (for instance) Boston, where Farmer works part of the year at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Kidder writes, “The transit between Cange and Boston used to jar Farmer back when he was a young medical student. He'd leave peasant huts full of malnourished babies and, arriving in Miami Airport, hear well-dressed people talk about their efforts to lose weight” [Ibid., 261]. Farmer gradually learned to make the transition more calmly, but he remains passionate about teaching people how much closer we are to one another than we allow ourselves to realize. Get on a plane at Logan International Airport in Boston, and seven hours later you can be standing in Cange. A recognition of this and the many other expressions of our connectedness—the many ways in which the world is getting ever smaller—is a crucial context for hearing the roofs of a place like Cange as loudly as Farmer does. Farmer's traveling, his working in Cange and in Boston, offers testimony to how close Haiti really is.[30]

(p.73) 4.4.3 Politics

There is a final dimension of Neo-Confucian harmony that we must take into account before concluding, namely the sociopolitical. The world of our human interactions is of course a vital part of any attempt to extend the ideal of harmony beyond inner psychology; indeed, we saw earlier that the sociopolitical realm was one of the earliest contexts in which harmony was discussed. A lesson there was that ministers must not be “yes-men” for the rulers they serve. While this is appealing to the modern ear, not every aspect of Neo-Confucian sociopolitical harmony sounds as positive. Here is a final passage from Wang Yangming, in which he describes his understanding of ancient educational practices:

> The task of the school was solely to perfect virtue. However, people differed in capacity. Some excelled in ceremonies and music; others in government and education; and still others in public works and agriculture. Therefore, in accordance with their moral achievement, they were sent to school to further refine their abilities. When their virtue recommended them to government positions, they were enabled to serve in their positions throughout life without change. Those who employed them desired only to be united with them in one mind and one character to bring peace to the people. They considered whether the individual's ability was suitable, and did not regard a high or low position as important or unimportant, or a busy or leisurely job as good or bad. Those who served also desired only to be united with their superiors in one mind and one character to bring peace to the people. If their ability matched their positions, they served throughout life in busy and heavy work without regarding it as toilsome, and felt at ease with lowly work and odd jobs without regarding them as mean. At that time the people were harmonious[31] and contented. They regarded one another as belonging to one family. [Wang 1983, 195 (§142)]; translation from Wang [1963, 119–20].

Under the leadership of the ancient sage-kings, people are at their ease in their various roles, which Wang believes to have been suited to each by his or her abilities. This is another, more concrete, expression of harmony: another combination of unity and difference. It is like a family, Wang says here; near the end of this same section, he goes even farther, writing, “There was no distinction between the self and other, or between the self and things. It is like the body of a person. The eyes see, the ears hear, the hands hold, and the feet walk, all fulfilling the function of the body. The eyes are not ashamed of not being able to hear. When the ears hear something, the eyes will direct their attention to it” [Ibid., 121].

When Wang says that there was “no distinction” between self and other, he clearly means no *fundamental* distinction: no distinction between those that matter and those that do not. In just this same sense, there is no distinction between our eyes and our ears. In general, there is a great deal in the picture Wang paints here that is familiar from our previous discussions of harmony.

(p.74) Differences complement and enhance one another, whether we are talking about eyes and ears working together, or farmers and ministers each making their distinctive contributions. People in their various roles partner with one another—and with their broader environments—to create a universe in which all flourish. Each experiences a subjective satisfaction, or sense of rightness, which Wang calls “contentment.” In a variety of ways the picture is based on a responsiveness to natural patterns, including the differing “capacities” of the people. There is no question that Wang is relying heavily on the idea of harmony as he depicts his political utopia.

There is also no question, however, that from a present-day perspective his picture has alarming political implications. It is no coincidence that one of the most difficult issues with which Confucian theorists in the twentieth century have struggled is democracy. As one contemporary analyst has put it, from a Confucian perspective, democracy seems to be premised on a severely limited human nature, the genealogy of which goes back to the idea of original sin [Zheng 2001, 11]. This flies in the face of mainstream Confucianism, which is committed to the ideas that we all have goodness within us, and that we all can cultivate ourselves so as to manifest that goodness. How, then, can we reconcile Confucianism and its core idea of sagehood with a political system that can merit legitimacy in our current age? This large question is the topic of the final chapters of my book, so I will not dwell much longer on it now. It does bear saying, though, that Wang may have failed to take advantage of all the resources that the ideal of harmony makes available. In particular, his picture is very neat and static, with each individual assigned to a single role for his or her lifetime. But properly understood, Neo-Confucian harmony is a dynamic ideal in which novel, imaginative solutions to particular situations play vital roles. It is certainly a challenge to imagine ways in which such an ideal can be adequately institutionalized; as Zheng says, institutionalized Confucian ethics has tended to be far too authoritarian [Ibid., 20–1]. But if we accept that Confucianism is a living philosophical tradition, able to contribute to and learn from global philosophical dialogue, then we should not prejudge the outcome of such conversations.

Notes:

(1.) For a more thorough cataloguing of early uses of “*he*” and related terms, see Guo Qi [2000].

(2.) Ode no. 302; translation from DeWoskin [1982, 159].

(3.) Ode no. 301; translation from Waley [1960, 225], slightly modified. See Cook [1995, 76n140] on the etymology of *ping* □.

(4.) *Guoyu* 16; cited in Tan [2004, 76].

(5.) The exuberant tone of the second ode suggests that the following statement by DeWoskin needs serious qualification: “Balance in art, like balance in human feelings, is a matter of restraint and minimalization. The sacrificial soup is a thin soup; ritual music is restrained” [Dewoskin 1982, 160]. But as we read in the *Analects*, sometimes extremes are appropriate to the occasion—and thus harmonious: “The Master said, … In ceremonies: than lavish, be rather sparing. In funerals: than detached, be rather moved.”

Analects 3:4; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 80]. See also the discussion below (Section 4.4.1) of Wang Yangming's statement that an infant's crying all day can be “the extreme of harmony.”

(6.) *Analects* 1:12; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 191].

(7.) The dating of passages from the *Zuo Commentary* is highly controversial. This particular section purports to recount events from 522 BCE. Some scholars investigating the development of ideas of harmony take the passage as indeed representing the standard, late Spring and Autumn period view [Guo Qi 2000].

(8.) *Zuo Commentary*, Zhao 20. Translation from Cook [1995, 67–71].

(9.) *Analects* 13:23; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 103], slightly altered. Strikingly, both Waley and Lau seem to miss the point of this passage, rendering *he* as “conciliatory” and “agrees with others [without being an echo],” respectively. See Confucius [1938, 177] and Confucius [1979, 122].

(10.) These four sentences draw heavily on Cook [1995, 77]. Cook notes that “Neolithic pottery vessels…. have been shown to have been crafted—we might assume quite consciously—into dimensions of exacting mathematical proportions” [Ibid. , 77n141].

(11.) Translation from Cook [1995, 80].

(12.) *Zhongyong* 1. My translation draws freely on Chan [1963, 98] and Ames and Hall [2001, 89–90].

(13.) See also Chenyang Li's discussion of this passage in Li [2004, 184], and more generally Li [2008].

(14.) Ames and Hall [2001, 111–12], slightly altered.

(15.) *Qi* has been translated in many ways, from “ether” to “material force” to Gardner's intriguing “psycho-physical stuff” [Zhu 1990].

(16.) By “single principle,” I have in mind something like the consequentialist maxim “Do that which maximizes good consequences.” That is, a “principle” is something that can be stated and applied to cases. This is certainly the most common understanding of “principle” in contemporary English-language philosophy, which is one reason why the old-fashioned translation of *li* as principle is so misleading.

(17.) [Cheng and Cheng 1981, vol. 1, 609]; see also Chan [1963, 550].

(18.) I discuss Cheng Hao's influential formulation of the “form one body with all things” idea in chapter 7, where I also review its relation to the idea of “humaneness.” Zhu Xi comments extensively on the *Western Inscription*, expanding on (among other things) Cheng Yi's idea that Zhang's insight is best understood through the lens of “Coherence is one, but simultaneously distinguishable into many” [Zhu 1997, 2269–70].

(19.) [Wang 1983, 82 (§44)]; translation from Wang [1963, 38–9], slightly altered.

(20.) [Wang 1984, *juan* 27, 13a]; translation from Wang [1972, 122], slightly modified. Ching notes that the example of an infant crying all day, and this being characterized as the “extreme of harmony,” comes from *Daode Jing* 55.

(21.) Wang makes the same point in a slightly different way when asked whether joy is present when one's parent has died and one is crying bitterly. Wang says: “There is real joy (*le* □) only if the son has cried bitterly. If not, there won't be any joy. Joy means that in spite of crying, one's mind is at peace. The original substance of the mind has not been perturbed” [Wang 1983, 343 (§292)]; translation from Wang [1963, 230].

(22.) A reference to *Mencius* 2A:6. Van Norden notes that Wang misquotes—or at any rate, alters—the original statement in *Mencius* [Van Norden 2007, 255]. These changes are related to the significant differences between Mencius and Wang Yangming, as discussed briefly by Van Norden and more extensively in Ivanhoe [2002].

(23.) Also from *Mencius* 2A:6, and see also *Mencius* 1A:7, wherein King Xuan exhibits similar feelings on seeing an ox being led to ritual slaughter. In addition, *Mencius* 7A:45 bears comparison with Wang: “A gentleman is sparing (*ai* □) with things but shows no humaneness toward them; he shows humaneness towards the people but not filial affection (*qin* □)” [Mencius 1970, 192, slightly altered]. The chief difference with Wang is that the underlying sense of continuity emphasized by Wang—since all the feelings he identifies are aspects of “humaneness”—is very attenuated in Mencius.

(24.) [Wang 1985, vol. 26, 2a]; Translation from Wang [1963, 272], slightly altered.

(25.) Michael Slote has observed (in conversation) that Wang's idea of forming one body with “mere” things takes it beyond the comparison that would otherwise seems apt between what Wang is saying and the idea of “empathy” as understood by contemporary psychologists, on which see Hoffman [2000]. The question of how Wang's claims fit with, are challenged by, or challenge the views of contemporary psychology is an important question that I cannot pursue here, but see Angle [2009] for some initial forays in this direction.

(26.) My thanks to several students in my Fall, 2005 “Sagehood” seminar, who pushed this objection with characteristic vigor.

(27.) Another similar claim, much discussed among Neo-Confucians, is the early Neo-Confucian Zhou Dunyi's explanation for why he refused to cut the grass growing outside his window: “[The feeling of the grass] and mine are the same” [Zhu & Lü 1983, 340]; translation from Zhu and Lü [1967, 302].

(28.) From the perspective of contemporary metaethics, there are at least two ways in which one might flesh out the idea that “everything matters.” One is a realist, objectivist picture according to which everything has a certain value. Perhaps God made the world that way. The root metaphor here is one of *discovering* values. The alternative picture is pragmatist, according to which humans work to *articulate* values in a dynamic world of which they are—together with everything else—continuous cocreators. Both of these views resist the antirealist idea that humans simply *construct* or *invent* values. There is much more that could be said here, including showing how the ideas under discussion relate to current debates in environmental ethics. For present purposes, I will only say that I do not believe we are forced to read Wang as a realist instead of a pragmatist, in the sense just alluded to.

(29.) "See-and-react" is meant to invoke the unity of knowledge and action, to be discussed at length in chapter 7.

(30.) Elsewhere, Kidder writes that Farmer saw "intimate, inescapable connections between the gleaming corporate offices of Paris and New York and a legless man lying on the mud floor of a hut in the remotest part of Haiti" [Kidder 2003, 218].

(31.) The Chinese term here is not "*he*," but "*xixi* □□." An argument could be made for translating "*xixi*" as "peaceful." Be this as it may, Chan's choice of "harmonious" is still quite reasonable, and—as I detail later—there is no question that the ideal in the background of this passage is harmony.

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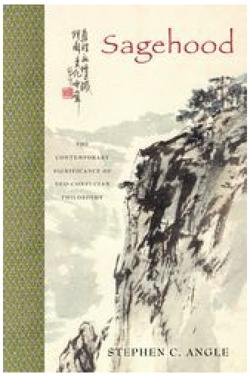

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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The Scope of Ethics: Dialogue with Slote and Murdoch

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Despite the differences between Michael Slote and Iris Murdoch—and between them and the book's Neo-Confucian sources—Slote and Murdoch make excellent conversation partners on the subject of harmony, offering important insights and clarifications, while at the same time they are rewarded with ideas from the Confucian tradition that complement or improve their own views. The key points of dialogue include the following: (1) Drawing on Slote, Confucians can distinguish between particularist and aggregative caring, which solves a long-standing problem about caring for strangers. (2) Drawing on the Confucians, Slote can better-ground his idea of “balanced caring” by recognizing the reverence we should have for what the Neo-Confucians call universal coherence. (3) After a few qualifications, Murdoch can help us (and Slote) to see how reverence for universal coherence can indeed play needed justificatory and motivational roles, but (4) Murdoch's appeal to a transcendent notion of Good needs either serious modification or rejection. Finally, (5) both Slote and Murdoch can learn from the Neo-Confucians about the proper ways in which we should value ourselves.

Keywords: Michael Slote, Iris Murdoch, harmony, reverence, balanced caring, strangers, transcendence, self-concern

My goal in part I was to introduce the background and key terms of Neo-Confucian philosophy, especially as they revolve around the idea of sagehood. It is time to begin building on this foundation. My approach from now on is somewhat less historical and more dialogical, although rootedness in the Neo-Confucian tradition remains important. In these next chapters, the dual meaning of “contemporary significance” in the book's subtitle becomes quite evident. Putting Neo-Confucians and contemporary philosophers into dialogue means opening up both sides to challenge and development. The current chapter further specifies the meaning and role of “harmony,” the relationship of Neo-Confucian philosophy to virtues and virtue ethics, and the motivation that can drive one to seek goodness and to be better. Together, these topics outline an expansive view of the scope and importance of ethics. By approaching these questions dialogically, I simultaneously draw on strengths and expose weaknesses in leading Western proponents of virtue ethics. In particular, I engage here with the work of Michael Slote and the late Dame Iris Murdoch. Both are well-positioned to engage constructively with Neo-Confucianism, even though their respective sources of inspiration and styles of argument could not be more different. The key points of dialogue include the following: (1) Drawing on Slote, Confucians can distinguish between particularist and aggregrative caring, which solves a long-standing problem. (2) Drawing on the Confucians, Slote can better-ground his idea of “balanced caring” by recognizing the reverence we should have for what the Neo-Confucians call universal coherence. (3) After a few qualifications, Murdoch can help us (and Slote) to see how reverence for universal coherence can play needed justificatory and motivational roles, but (4) Murdoch's appeal to a transcendent notion of Good **(p.78)** needs either serious modification or rejection. Finally, (5) both Slote and Murdoch can learn from the Neo-Confucians about the proper ways in which we should value ourselves.

5.1 Balance and Harmony in Slote's Agent-Based Ethics

5.1.1 *Caring, Humaneness (*Ren 仁*), and Empathy*

Michael Slote's *Moral from Motives* is an ambitious effort to articulate and defend what he calls a purely “agent-based” approach to virtue ethics.[1] Central to this account is the idea of “caring,” which he has elaborated further—specifically, by tying it to the idea of “empathy”—in his recent *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*. We will shortly see that Slote's insights about what he calls “balanced caring” lead to productive dialogue with Neo-Confucianism. First, though, we must pause to consider the Neo-Confucian understanding of humaneness (*ren* 仁). *Ren* is closely related to basic feelings like love, concern, and care, but one does not have *ren* itself unless these feelings are linked to a particular way of perceiving one's life and experiences—and thus to the settled dispositions that, as I discussed in chapter 3, are required for “virtue.” As noted there, Zhu Xi says that *ren* is “the coherence of love”: that is, it is love experienced as part of the valuable and intelligible way that all (relevant) things can fit together. Another way to put this is to say that one has *ren* when one is conscious of and embraces one's own life and responsiveness as part of a greater whole. In an influential passage, the early Neo-Confucian Cheng Hao describes *ren* as follows:

> In medical books, a paralyzed arm or leg is said to be unfeeling [literally, 'not *ren*']. This expression is perfect for describing the situation. The humane (*ren*) person regards all things in the universe as one body; there is nothing which is not a part of him. If he regards all things as parts of himself, where will his feelings not extend? But if he does not see them as parts of himself, why would he feel any concern for them? It is like the case of a paralyzed arm or leg: the life-force (*qi* □) does not circulate through them so they are not regarded as part of one's self. Therefore, widely conferring benefits and helping the masses is the task of the sage.[2]

Full-fledged *ren* is not just caring, not just sympathy, but warm and compassionate concern that extends, in an organic fashion, to all related and relevant aspects of one's context.[3] It is critical to Neo-Confucians that this concern is human concern, first nurtured in intimate family relations and then extended outward. This is not a neutral, equal love for all things; it rather expresses the felt human interconnection with all aspects of our environment. "Humaneness" is therefore a good translation for *ren*.

I cited Cheng Hao a moment ago as arguing that one feels concern for others because they are seen as parts of oneself. Michael Slote has recently noted that this idea (and its subsequent development by Wang Yangming) constitutes an important Chinese anticipation of what has come to be called "empathy" in **(p.79)** contemporary philosophy and psychology [Slote 2009]. Empathy occurs when one feels *with* others: paradigmatically, when one feels their pain. A number of contemporary psychologists and philosophers have begun to emphasize the centrality of empathy to our moral experience.[4] There is much that Neo-Confucians share with these current theorists, but here I want to highlight two significant differences. First, although *ren* (like *li*) is anthropocentric since it emerges from (and is partly constituted by) human valuation, its scope includes all things: not just other people and animals, but plants, roof tiles, and mountains. This is very different from most accounts of empathy, according to which we empathize only with other creatures. Second, *ren* includes one's care for oneself, but empathy has typically been seen as fundamentally about others. In Slote's case, for instance, this characteristic of empathy leads him to conclude that "morality" is concerned with our "sentimentalist" attitudes toward others, whereas our attitudes toward ourselves are governed by "rational self-concern" [Slote 2007, 113]. We will see below that this bifurcation can have important consequences for how one values oneself. For now, it is perhaps sufficient to note that on both Cheng Hao's account and on modern views of empathy, there is in fact only a single source of affective response, no matter whether the pain is one's own or another's. That is, when one feels another's pain *as if* it is one's own, one is feeling the pain oneself. Similarly, if one is (directly) pained by something, one feels the pain oneself. Admittedly, there are certain differences between the cases, but the motivation to do something in the latter (self-directed) case still seems like it should be continuous with the motive to do something in the former (other-directed) case. Indeed, this seems to be precisely the point of Cheng Hao's reasoning. If so, though, then the grounds for seeing empathy as distinct from self-directed concern start to seem less firm.

5.1.2 Two Kinds of Balance

Let us now look more directly at how Slote teases out the structure of "balanced caring," which we can then compare to *ren* as the coherence of love. He begins his discussion of balance with two complementary cases. In each, we are to imagine a father with "two children in their twenties, one independent and successful, the other dependent and handicapped." In the first case, we are to suppose that there really isn't much the father can do for the handicapped child; in the second case, we imagine that "the father might be in a position to do a great deal for the worse-off child and that the better-off one can manage fairly well (and without resentment) on her own" [Ibid., 67]. The key to Slote's discussion is his claim that if the father loves his children equally, "he will invariably make efforts on behalf of both and pay attention to both." In the first case, his efforts may deliver very little, whereas in the second case, consequentialist considerations of justice might demand that he spend all his time on the less-well-off child. But the loving father will not always do that which promotes the greatest aggregate good of his children; he will "*strike some sort of balance* between the concern or love he has for the one and that which he has for the other, and that means he will at least some of the time help and/or pay **(p.80)** attention to a much-better-off child, even though the time could be spent doing more good for the other" [Ibid., 68].

Balance is not, Slote emphasizes, an explicit moral principle guiding the father's behavior. "Anyone who needs to make use of some overarching principle or rule in order to act in a 'balanced' way toward his children can be suspected of an unloving, or at least a less than equally loving, attitude toward those children" [Ibid.].[5] Slote's contention is that by its very psychological nature, concern for children "tends to lead a person to allot efforts and attention in a somewhat balanced way." He suggests that the notion of "balance" in question is a specific, if nontechnical, idea. It is not the same as equality; instead, two considerations are balanced, in this sense, when neither dwarfs the other. The relation between them is not "disproportionate or lopsided" [Ibid.]. In addition, Slote says that it should be easy enough to extend these rough ideas to situations in which there are more than two concerns that we would like to balance.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the metaphor of balance is one on which Confucians drew as they elaborated the idea of harmony. I think we should follow them in thinking of harmony as a broader, more general concept than the simpler idea of balance, for at least two reasons. First, while I agree with Slote that his general approach can be extended to cases with more than two concerns, it seems that any clear idea of balance will rapidly lose its grip on us as the situation gets more complicated. In order to hold on to a notion of balance in such circumstances, I am afraid it will increasingly need to be thought of in quasi-arithmetic terms. The second reason takes off from my worry about balance being too prone to interpretation in arithmetic terms, since the most basic way two quantities can be said to balance is when they are equal. Harmony, in contrast, is explicitly about the complementary relations among differences. Even in the simplest cases (such as Slote's father and his two children) it may be hard to accept that significant differences in treatment can count as "balanced." In their review essay, for instance, Copp and Sobel ask:

> One might wonder what a father who loves both of his children is to do if keeping one child alive through to adulthood literally requires an amount of attention that will leave no time or only a little time for the other child. It seems in such a case that Slote's idea of balanced caring cannot give us much guidance. It is clear that the father would have to save the child whose life is most threatened. To account for this, Slote must interpret balanced caring in such a way that the father will count as expressing a balanced caring even while taking care of the children in a lopsided way. [2004, 522]

From this conclusion, Copp and Sobel derive various consequences that they take to be problematic for Slote. Is the extreme situation imagined here really different, though, from the case with which Slote dealt explicitly, in which the father "will at least some of the time help and/or pay attention to a much-better-off child, even though the time could be spent doing more good for the other"? Copp and Sobel have tried to push the circumstances to an unlikely extreme, but in doing so they have missed Slote's essential point, which is that relative to a **(p.81)** given set of circumstances, even very different treatment will not be "lopsided," so long as there are still ways in which the father's love for the better-off child can be expressed.[6] An important part of what has led Copp and Sobel astray, I think, is the difficulty of seeing very different treatment as nonetheless balanced. While we can stretch the meaning of "balance" far enough to cover cases like this, I believe a better solution is to follow the Confucians, and speak of harmony.

Now let us turn to a second kind of balance that Slote discusses, namely balancing our care for intimates with our concern for strangers, or for humanity as a whole. It is important to note that various contemporary critics have charged that Confucianism has a problem when it comes to our responsibilities to strangers.[7] Given its focus on the ties between responsibilities and roles (e.g., of father to son, and vice versa), one might think that Confucianism can offer us little advice on how to act toward those with whom we do not have a specific relationship [Ci 1999; deBary et al. 1994]. Confucians have, from classical times on, objected to the idea that we should love everyone the same, in part because they feel that such an attitude is psychologically impossible. Still, insofar as they characterized the ruler as "father and mother of the people," they seem to be committed to an implausible extension of parental affection.[8]

I believe that Slote's remarks about concern for humanity as a whole can help us solve this difficulty. He argues that while loving concern for particular, known individuals tends to allocate itself not in an "aggregative" but in a balanced way, humanitarian concern does operate aggregatively. Slote explains:

> For example, a person may wish the people of Bangladesh well and even make

> charitable contributions toward their well-being, without knowing, much less loving, any particular individual in that country. And such a humane or humanitarian attitude of caring tends to yield or embody utilitarian-like aggregative thinking of the sort love rules out. Given such an attitude, the moral concern one feels for an unknown Bangladeshi (whose name one has perhaps happened to hear) is fungible, so to speak, within the larger humanitarian concern one feels for the Bangladeshi people or Bangladesh as a whole…. When concerns are thus fungible within some larger concern(s), considerations of overall utility or good apply to them, and this means that when one acts in a humanitarian fashion, one doesn't, as with love, feel the need to help any given individual… at some cost to considerations of overall or objective good. [2001, 69]

Slote's combination of relation-based and general types of compassion seems readymade to solve the Confucian dilemma.[9]

5.1.3 The Motivation for Overall Balance

For Slote's solution to work, though, it needs to be able to explain how caring for intimates relates to humanitarian concern. His solution is to again invoke the idea of balance. In this case, though, "the balance is not between the concern the moral individual has for any given intimate and the concern she has for any **(p.82)** unknown other person, but rather between the concern she has for her intimates *considered as a class* and the concern she has for all (other) human beings *considered as a class*" [Ibid., 70]. The idea is that a good individual might strike this balance in different ways, often with a balance in which we do more for those we love most even though we could be doing more for humanity as a whole. Exactly how we balance will depend on our sense of "integrity"—that is, I take it, what gives our lives a feeling of integrity or wholeness.[10] Slote says that "If one's integrity, one's deepest identity, is privatistic or narrow enough, then a morality of balanced caring will not find it acceptable" [Ibid., 73].

It seems correct to say that one might be too narrow—Confucians will immediately speak of selfishness—in the way Slote outlines, but at this point we need to do some work to discover what the justification for such a criticism might be. Why is "balance" so important, and who decides when things are out of balance? Let us first return to the case of love among intimates. In talking of ways in which being overly-partial to one child can be unfair, Slote says that this unfairness is not ultimately based on a moral principle, but "on our understanding of what love is and on our intuitive sense of the moral value of love" [Ibid., 68n6]. When we reflect on normal, healthy relationships among intimates, we see that we naturally apportion our love in the balanced way Slote has described. We humans are a sort of creature that cares for intimates in this way; to put it another way, what love means, to creatures like us, is to care for others close to us in a balanced fashion.[11]

Suppose we are satisfied with this as a justification for balance as a norm for love among intimates. Can the same argument be extended to justifying the need for balance between care for intimates and aggregative, humanitarian care for humanity? Slote seems to think so: “The force impelling us to be concerned with the welfare of (the whole class of) [friends and relations] *will not be of a different order* from the impulsion toward general humanitarian concern for others that arises from deeply appreciating our common humanity (our common roots and destiny) and the vastness of human suffering and of human problems worldwide.”[12] To say that the force “will not be of a different order” means, I take it, that we are still talking about species of care or compassion: we have not moved to the realm of conscientious adherence to some externally imposed obligation. Slote's claim thus echoes Mencius's famous argument that morality must have “one root” instead of two, and that the root in question lies in our human psychology.[13] Still, there seems to be a crucial difference between intimates and strangers. We do not have to work to appreciate anything about our children to love them, whereas in Slote's formulation, the impulsion for humanitarian concern “arises from deeply appreciating our common humanity.” In order to generate the distinctive species of compassion that drives humanitarian concern, we need something that we do not automatically have.

Slote is rather blasé about this need: “I am not sure whether what is appreciated here is objective facts or something relative to our conative/emotional nature (or both). That is a metaethical issue we needn't get into” [Ibid., 90]. In order to justify balanced caring, though, he needs to be able to say more. What exactly is the overly narrow person missing, when we say that he or she has not **(p.83)** deeply appreciated our common humanity? There are two aspects to this question: the attitude (“deeply appreciating”) and its object (“common humanity”). In the spirit of dialogue, I want to offer a Neo-Confucian answer and see what difference this might make to Slote. I will argue that just as Slote's discussion of balance—reframed in terms of harmony—has much to offer contemporary Confucians, so Confucian ideas can serve Slote well.[14]

If we asked a Neo-Confucian theorist which attitude, toward which object, the overly narrow person is missing, the immediate response would be: reverence (*jing*) for coherence (*li*). As discussed in chapter 2, the concept of coherence encompasses the commonality of all things in the universe, since the distinct ways that individual things can valuably and intelligibly fit together are simultaneously unified into ever-larger patterns of possibility and co-flourishing. Recognizing one's common humanity with an unknown inhabitant of Bangladesh would certainly be part of having the proper attitude toward coherence; recognizing one's commonalities with unknown fish swimming in the Indian Ocean, or with unknown roof shingles in a neighboring town, is also part of having the proper attitude. “Commonality” is not identity, of course; each of what the Confucians call the “ten thousand things” jointly contributes to the functioning and potential flourishing of the universe, but not all in the same ways. Neither do Confucians subscribe to a notion of karmic rebirth: the issue is not that we once may have been a fish. Thus as we saw in the previous chapter when discussing Wang Yangming's vision of “forming one body with all things,” different responses are appropriate to different types of things.

With Slote's distinction between intimates and strangers on board, we can now add that these various gradations of attitude can be applied both to familiar things and, in an aggregative way, to fish or roof shingles we have never “met.” When Wang speaks of feeling “regret” on seeing “tiles and stones shattered and crushed,” he has in mind a particular encounter with specific tiles and stones, but we can supplement this with the idea that a more generalized form of regret is generated by the thought that houses are crumbling in Bangladesh. The type of object for which we care, and the existence (or lack) of a specific relationship with that object, are two different dimensions that together characterize the kind of caring involved in a given situation. In fact, we can make this thought more subtle. Between “intimates” and the broad, vague groups of others to which “humanitarian” caring applies, there is a large middle ground. Slote actually notes that his morality of caring may have to deal with “gradations in between” the two extremes he considers [Ibid., 65]. Perhaps the best way to characterize the middle ground is: those who are not well known to one, but who are still individuated. This includes “strangers,” insofar as we are talking about one specific stranger rather than another. I would argue that non-aggregative balance (or harmony) applies to this group, albeit perhaps in a more attenuated form than applies to intimates. In short, our various and varying connections to everything, up to and including the whole universe—not just to that part with which we are familiar—provide the complete context within which our love and sympathy need to be balanced or harmonious.

(p.84) 5.1.4 Agent-Basing

So far we have been ignoring a distinctive aspect of Slote's approach. He considers all virtue-ethical theories to be “agent-focused,” since evaluations primarily depend on qualities of the people we are evaluating (“aretaic” considerations), rather than on whether their actions match a certain rule (“deontic” considerations). Slote's own approach, though, is a special subset of this broad category, which he labels “agent-based”: “An agent-based approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as *entirely derivative* from independent and fundamental aretaic… ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals” [Slote 2001, 5, emphasis added]. He says that agent-basing is purer than more common approaches to virtue ethics; Plato, for instance, puts great weight on an agent's properly appreciating and being guided by the Form of the Good, which is external to the agent himself or herself.[15] Given the importance placed on character traits like humaneness in the Confucian tradition, it seems clear that Confucianism is agent-focused. There is considerable talk of abiding by the rules of propriety (*li* □), but it is clear from early on in the tradition that customary rules provide a context within which we can exemplify the virtuous character traits of propriety and humaneness, rather than simply needing to follow external rules.

The Neo-Confucian emphasis on seeing and following coherence (*li* □) might sound more deontic, especially if *li* is translated as “principle.” I have already suggested that “principle” is problematic as a translation of *li* for just this reason, because in fact *li* is not a single principle that can be applied to cases. Instead, *li* is the valuable, intelligible way that things in a given situation fit together. Since we are always part of whatever situation in which we find ourselves, our own reactions are partly constitutive of the *li* of the situation. *Li* is not a wholly transcendent, external ideal, and so I believe we should consider Neo-Confucianism as agent-based.[16] To bolster this idea, let us attend to Slote sounding a rather Neo-Confucian theme: “If some pattern of balanced caring for individuals and larger units is the morally best individual motivation, then the morally best kind of individual is one who is motivated in just this way” [Ibid., 101]. Recall also that Slote characterized the sort of commonality that had to be deeply appreciated as “objective facts or something relative to our conative/emotional nature (or both).” Coherence, on the Neo-Confucian account, is objective: we cannot simply decide for ourselves what pattern best harmonizes all the various interacting aspects of a given situation. At the same time, coherence is intimately related to our emotional nature, and in favored cases at least (i.e., those cases in which we are seeing the situation well), we are best guided by our emotional responses. However much most Neo-Confucians emphasized the importance of learning from classic texts and teachers, coherence is never reducible to one or more specific principles that one can simply apply to cases. The contribution made by the individual moral agent, in a particular situation, via his or her perception and reactions, is partly constitutive of coherence. After all, an unavoidable consequence of the idea of “forming one body with all things” is that we each are individually part of that joint “body”: that means that our perceptions and reactions are part of the **(p.85)** ever-changing psycho-material stuff (*qi*) out of which the universe is made, and whose coherent interactions are *li*. Slote argues that Aristotle should not count as an agent-baser because, at least on one reading, the good that the virtuous person needs to perceive seems to be independent of, or prior to, the good person's perception itself [Ibid., 5]. On the Neo-Confucian picture I have been developing, in contrast, the good (i.e., coherence) is in no way independent of, or prior to, the good person's interaction with a particular situation. Despite the fact that the good person's reactions are in many ways constrained by objective features of the situation, therefore, I feel comfortable concluding that my Neo-Confucian picture fits Slote's category of agent-based ethical view.

5.1.5 Reverence

Let us now turn to the question of our attitude toward coherence. I believe that this attitude plays a critical role in justifying and motivating our overall commitment to harmony (i.e., to what Slote thinks of as the balance between intimates and strangers). I will further argue that the Neo-Confucian notion of “reverence” is better able to serve these critical functions than Slote's somewhat vague notion of “deep appreciation.” “Reverence” is more appropriate than “deep appreciation” because the latter is too limited—I am tempted to say too resolutely empirical—in its implied worldview. For Neo-Confucians, universal coherence points to the real possibility of perfection, of perfect harmony among all the ten thousand things. The wonder of this ideal draws us toward it, though at the same time our own imperfections are always recognized with great humility. The realization of universal coherence is an ideal for this world, for our world, for us; it is not separated from us by cycles of rebirth or by the need for a heavenly savior, nor does it exist only in the realm of pure ideas. Paul Woodruff has recently written an incisive account of reverence drawing in part on classical Confucianism, and much of what he says resonates strongly with Neo-Confucian ideas. Woodruff emphasizes that we feel reverence for things that are in some sense beyond us, and that this fosters the appropriate experiences of awe, respect, and shame. He writes:

> Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. [2001, 3]

In terms of the objects of reverence, Woodruff specifies that one “must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: it cannot be changed or controlled by human means, is not fully understood by human experts, was not created by human beings, and is transcendent” [Ibid., 118].

(p.86) Woodruff's discussion helps to flesh out the motivating and justifying role of reverence for *li*, even though not everything he says fits comfortably with Neo-Confucianism. I have been emphasizing the constitutive role that we individual humans play in the determination of *li*: it is not completely transcendent, belonging solely to some different ontological realm.[17] Be this as it may, *li* is clearly greater than us or beyond us. According to *Zhongyong* 12, “… even sages in trying to penetrate to [the Way's] furthest limits do not know it all” [Ames and Hall 2001, 93]. Zhu Xi comments: “The Way is… so distant that even sages cannot… comprehensively understand it…. But the coherence (*li* □) that is the reason for things, though hidden and not visible, can nonetheless be known and acted upon” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 2, 8]. What we find in our hearts is the compassion and empathy about which Zhang Zai, Wang Yangming, and the others have written so movingly. These feelings point us outward, toward our relationships with things outside ourselves.[18] This interrelated universe will always remain beyond our ability to fully understand or fully control, though, and it is this sense of being beyond us that gives it a sense of mystery and wonder; this sense of being beyond us, then, leads to awe.

Awe is the powerful sense of there being something normatively important that lies beyond oneself; it both motivates and justifies moral action. My argument is that for the Neo-Confucians—and for Slote, at least once we have turned his “deep appreciation” into “reverence”—the “awe” aspect of reverence helps to push us to see things in terms of harmony or balance. Seeing things this way leads us, to use Slote's language, to resist allowing one type of caring—for intimates, or for strangers—to “dwarf” the other. Caring should not be “lopsided.” Given how complex our worlds can be, I prefer to follow the Confucian talk of harmony, rather than Slote's simpler image of balance, but the two metaphors are really quite compatible. Is “awe,” though, enough to motivate us? In an insightful essay on Wang Yangming, David Nivison has written: “One did not reorient one's life totally in the way that Wang and his disciples did unless one is powerfully drawn to *something*, and his reflective reader comes to realize that the goal state of being a ‘sage’ is one that has just as much pull as any kind of religious conception of salvation in ‘Heaven’” [Nivison 1996c, 219]. I believe that Nivison is on the right track here, but we need to be cautious about whether there is a “thing” toward which reverence draws us. We should also recognize that one does not immediately or automatically feel the full force of awe. Reverence is a practice that takes time and effort to enact. Neo-Confucian ideas of moral education—which I will discuss more fully in chapters 8 and 9—recognize that our innate concern for others is not enough, on its own, to push us toward self-improvement. Entering into dialogue with Iris Murdoch will help us to further our understanding of the motivation that can drive us to become better.

5.2 Murdoch on the Importance of a Transcendent Good

5.2.1 Unity, Mystery, and Faith

Michael Slote is not the only contemporary philosopher whose work points in the direction of a reverent concern for something like the Neo-Confucian idea of *li*, **(p.87)** and thus toward finding a central place for harmony. Iris Murdoch writes of the ultimate object of our "loving attention" in ways that are at times extremely resonant with my foregoing discussion. Murdoch's metaphysical assumptions, however, differ dramatically from those of the Neo-Confucians and of Slote. A strong notion of transcendence that she derives from Plato permeates her work. Nonetheless, I want to argue that her vision is more compatible with my reading of Neo-Confucianism than it first appears. This argument is important because it helps to ground all of the things, both here and in subsequent chapters, that I hope to draw from Murdoch, including her powerful articulation of the importance that attaches to our belief in the possibility of ultimate harmony. I will conclude this section's dialogue, finally, by turning to an issue where Murdoch goes importantly wrong and Slote is at best ambivalent: the question of our love for ourselves.

Iris Murdoch draws attention to several aspects of our moral life that are best explained, she thinks, by appeal to an idea of the Good that is quite close to Plato's vision. It also tracks some of the characteristics often assigned in the Western tradition to God, which allows it to incorporate some of that tradition's insights into "a world without God" [Murdoch 1970b, 55]. Murdoch readily acknowledges that "metaphysical unity" is not apparent in our lives. All is subject to "mortality and chance." And yet, she continues, morality has a way of displaying a kind of unity. Not initially, but as we deepen our familiarity with virtues we encounter relationships and hierarchy. "Courage, which seemed at first to be something on its own, a sort of specialized daring of the spirit, is now seen to be a particular operation of wisdom and love. We come to distinguish a self-assertive ferocity from the kind of courage which would enable a man coolly to choose the labor camp rather than easy compromise with the tyrant" [Murdoch 1970c, 95]. Murdoch ties this to Plato's description of a soul gradually ascending through stages of enlightenment, "progressively discovering at each stage that what it was treating as realities were only shadows or images of something more real still." In Plato's picture, "complete unity is not seen until one has reached the summit, but moral advance carries with it intuitions of unity which are increasingly less misleading" [Ibid., 94–5].

Murdoch also emphasizes the ways in which the "dream of unity" [Ibid., 94] can motivate us to carry on. She writes, "The notion that 'it all must make sense,' or 'there is a best decision here,' preserves us from despair" [Murdoch 1970b, 57]. She immediately adds, however, "the difficulty is how to entertain this consoling notion in a way which is not false.” Her answer seems to lie in emphasizing the distance, or even inaccessibility, of the perspective of Goodness in terms of which all would indeed make sense. That is, perfection and unity are in fact beyond us, but still make a kind of sense and thus can still help us to avoid despair. Murdoch again turns to Platonic metaphors, speaking of the barrier that lies between us and true Goodness: “good lives as it were on both sides of the barrier and we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement within our limitations” [Murdoch 1970c, 93]. She says that the “dream” of unity and the only-partial experience of goodness play important parts in our moral lives, especially since, in the absence of religion, **(p.88)** “the background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience” [Murdoch 1970b, 74].

One objection that might be raised against Murdoch's picture is broadly Nietzschean: isn't this just a comforting picture to console the weak? They can “dream” all they want about unity and so on, but that does not make it true. Perhaps we should despair! In fact Murdoch herself was well-aware of such a response, and took considerable pains to inveigh against the ways that we humans naturally are drawn to “fantasy” and “illusion” that falsely “console” us.[19] Neo-Confucians sound similar themes, as we will see. Both Murdoch and the Neo-Confucians nonetheless insist that we have ample ability to recognize the signs of Goodness (or of universal coherence), and that these signs are enough to ground a practice of moral education and resolute efforts at moral betterment for the world. Murdoch focuses in particular on the role that art can play, as well as on our affective/perceptual capacity of “attention.” Neo-Confucians spell out their own set of practices, which we will examine in coming chapters. What Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming share with Murdoch, at base, is the recognition that we *can* see intimations of the way—the way the world can make sense, have value—and so we *should* cultivate our ability to do so with ever more acuity and reliability.

Murdoch's remarks about the ways in which the inter-relatedness of morality reveals itself as we work more deeply into it seems both true and reflective of Neo-Confucian ideas; as we saw in chapter 3, “virtue (*de*)” is ultimately a unitary notion for Zhu Xi and others, even while it has various different aspects. Given our subsequent exploration of the notion of harmony, though, it might be better to think of harmony than unity. Unity suggests both connectedness and sameness, whereas harmony involves connectedness and difference. To talk of unity implies that every aspect of our moral lives—using the term “moral” here very broadly, in keeping with my slogan that “everything matters”—lines up. Saying that “there is a best decision here” in such a framework implies that when properly, deeply understood, all our commitments, judgments, virtuous responses, and moral emotions point in the same direction. But this mischaracterizes our moral lives. No matter where on the path of moral development we find ourselves, we are constantly faced with a shifting multitude of different considerations. The relatively uncultivated feel torn in different directions. Those closer to sagehood are more at ease since they see harmony amidst the complexity, but the complexity never goes away. As the Neo-Confucians say, coherence is always both one, and distinguished into many (*li yi er fen* *shu*).[20]

The motivational role that an idea of Goodness or an intuition of harmony can play also seems important, though I am tempted to qualify Murdoch's expression of this idea in terms of faith. Her “mysticism,” glossed as “a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience,” is very close to the idea of “reverence” that I have been developing. Reverence is essentially connected to the idea of mystery: the fullness of *li* is forever shrouded in mystery. Even the strongest claims from within the Neo-Confucian tradition about the ability of sages to grasp *li* are themselves cloaked **(p.89)** in the language of mystical, incommunicable experience.[21] At the same time, “faith” suggests an existential leap rather than a reasoned and cultivated attitude grounded in our own feelings and self-understanding. Neo-Confucian reverence is not “occasionally connected with experience,” but fundamentally grounded in our experience.[22]

In the various ways I have qualified my endorsement of Murdoch's insights, I have already hinted at another side of my reaction to her remarks about Goodness. I want to resist the talk of transcendence that underlies her Platonic metaphors, both because it fits poorly with Neo-Confucianism and because I find it to be an unnecessary and problematic metaphysical complication. Sometimes Murdoch talks about transcendence in such a nonmetaphysical way that it is completely acceptable to me: “‘Good is a transcendent reality’ means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is” [Murdoch 1970c, 93]. In addition, many of the things she takes to be marks of transcendence—mystery, perfection, indestructibility—work very well as comments on the nature of *li*, but Neo-Confucians have an understanding of the universe that does not require their positing a separate metaphysical realm for *li*. Even if (as we saw in chapter 2) Zhu Xi sometimes leaned too far in the direction of reifying *li*, there is a consistent strand of Neo-Confucianism according to which *li* is simply the “*li* of *qi*.” Now if “transcendence” just means that certain aspects of our interaction with the universe point beyond our individual selves—that is, push us toward seeing many kinds of connectedness with a “whole” whose dynamic shape we cannot fully discern—then transcendence is fine. If that which we (partly) discern when we are cognizant of these connections is reified into an independent realm or entity, though, then talk of transcendence has gone farther than is necessary to make sense of reverence, harmony, and the motivation to be moral.

5.2.2 Selflessness

To make clear what is at stake in this talk of transcendence, I will highlight one of the most important consequences of embracing a Neo-Confucian ideal of coherence and harmony, rather than Murdoch's nondogmatic faith in a transcendent Good. Following Plato and a long line of Christian thinkers, Murdoch's approach leads to a denial of the self. In contrast, though Confucians are very concerned to root out selfishness, they think the self and its legitimate interests should always be recognized as part of universal coherence.[23] Here, in contrast, is Murdoch: “The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they really are” [Ibid., 104]. Let me be clear.

Murdoch writes with great insight about what she calls techniques to defeat the ego, techniques of “unselfing.” Neo-Confucians would happily endorse her assertion that “the chief enemy of excellence in morality… is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes are dreams which prevent one from seeing what is there outside one” [Murdoch 1970b, 59]. I will explore these ideas, as a way of expanding on Neo-Confucian teachings about self-cultivation, in subsequent chapters. Driven by her understanding of Goodness as external to—as transcending—our **(p.90)** human world, though, Murdoch goes too far, and this excess has practical implications. It is wrong to see oneself as nothing.[24]

Unlike Murdoch, Slote is unsure of the importance of self-concern; he implies that it may be a matter of differing cultural presuppositions, in part because he seems to admire Victorian ideals of self-sacrifice. He believes his theory can handle approaches that endorse or reject self-concern [Slote 2001, 77–8]. I find the notion that we should exclude ourselves from consideration as we work toward balance or harmony to be deeply counter-intuitive; in Slote's own terms, it results in “lopsided” imbalance of concern toward others, while neglecting the person with whom one is most intimate (i.e., oneself).[25] Such an exclusion will always, I speculate, ultimately be based on metaphysical views like those of Plato, Murdoch, or Slote's Victorians. Consider for instance the case of Zell Kravinsky, who has given away virtually all of the millions he made in real estate, and donated a kidney to a stranger, but still feels deeply pained by his inability (and his society's unwillingness) to do more [Parker 2004].[26] In an interview he said, “What I aspire to is ethical ecstasy. *Ex Stasis*: standing out of myself, where I'd lose my punishing ego. It's tremendously burdensome to me” [Ibid.]. There is much to admire about Kravinsky, but his aspiration sounds much closer to Susan Wolf's notion of a utilitarian “moral saint,” discussed in chapter 1, than to a Neo-Confucian sage.[27] Rather than disconnecting from oneself, Neo-Confucians want us to build on the connectedness we sense. No Neo-Confucian could say, as Kravinsky does, “I don't know that two children should die so that one of my kids lives” [Ibid.]. I do not want to exaggerate the differences between Kravinsky and Neo-Confucians. Neo-Confucians certainly do talk a lot about getting rid of selfishness. Indeed, for all their emphasis on family, I suspect all Neo-Confucians would agree with Kravinsky that “the sacrosanct commitment to the family is the rationalization of all manner of greed and selfishness. Nobody says, ‘I'm working for the tobacco company because I like the money.’ They say, ‘Well, you know, I hate to do it, but I'm saving up for the kids.’ Everything is excused that way. To me, it's obscene” [Ibid.]. In Slote's terms, declaring the family “sacrosanct” expresses an imbalanced sense of compassion; for Neo-Confucians, it expresses a failure to genuinely revere *li* and thus to seek harmony. Whatever Slote would make of “ethical ecstasy,” though, we can be sure that Neo-Confucians would frown on the idea.

Some similar issues arise for Paul Farmer, the physician–humanitarian already introduced in the previous chapter. A month after his daughter was born, he had tried but failed to save a full-term baby whose mother was suffering from eclampsia. When the baby was stillborn, he broke down and had to excuse himself. Reflecting on what was affecting him so strongly, he realized that it was connected to relief that his daughter was alive, which led him to say to himself, “So you love your own child more than these kids. I thought I was the king of empathy for these poor kids, but if I was the king of empathy, why this big shift because of my daughter? It was a failure of empathy, the inability to love other children as much as yours” [Kidder 2003, 213]. When Farmer relates this episode to Tracy Kidder, Kidder pushes him: “Some people would say, ‘Where do you get off thinking you're different from everyone and can love the children of others as **(p.91)** much as your own?’” “Look,” Farmer replies, “All the great religious traditions of the world say, Love thy neighbor as thyself. My answer is, I'm sorry, I can't, but I'm gonna keep on trying” [Ibid.].

According to Neo-Confucianism, to love yourself or your child no more than you love a neighbor—or worse, to love yourself less—is a mistake, based ultimately on a metaphysical error. In an important sense, Farmer embraces a Neo-Confucian orientation through his refusal to abandon his direct, lived connection to the people of Cange. He does his best to care about everyone, but it may be that he could do more good, measured in Kravinsky's way, if he were to stop living much of his time in Cange and become a pure international public health bureaucrat. However, to do so would throw his life out of balance and in all likelihood undermine important parts of his motivation and satisfaction. Kidder writes, “embracing a continuity and interconnectedness that excluded no one seemed like another of Farmer's peculiar liberties. It came with a lot of burdens, of course, but it also freed him from efforts that many people make to find refuge and distinction from their pasts, and from the mass of their fellow human beings” [Ibid., 219].[28] The contrast with someone like Kravinsky is quite telling: Kravinsky seems to see those close to him as burdens, keeping him from doing as much good as possible, while those he aids are in almost all cases complete strangers. As a result, there seems to be little joy in his life. Responding to one of his friends who was worried that he always seemed sad, Kravinsky said, “I don't think of it as something that's joyful.… It's not enlightenment.… It's the start of a moral life” [Parker 2004].

A final way of looking at these questions arises from an objection that Copp and Sobel make to Slote's assertion that reflection on our intuitions about admirable states of character will lead us to endorse his idea of balanced caring. They write: “if admirability is at issue, then it seems to us that it is much more admirable to care for strangers than to care for intimates such as our children and friends. There would be something appalling about a person who did not care about the well-being of his children, but such caring is expected and is not especially admirable” [Copp & Sobel 2004, 520]. Whatever plausibility this statement has, though, comes from its failure to attend to issues of detail and quality. Being a good parent, sibling, child, friend, and so on is not as easy or simple as Copp and Sobel suggest. We do admire *good* parents, and try to learn from them. We admire those who care for themselves *well*, and strive to emulate them. In both cases keeping in mind issues of balance and harmony are critical. If someone's idea of what was needed to care for him or herself involved near-constant dieting and exercise, to the exclusion of engagement with others (near or far), we would surely say “there must be a *better* way than that!”

5.3 Conclusion: The Scope of Ethics

A distinction between morality (as other-directed) and prudence (as self-directed) is deeply enmeshed in the development of Western ethical thinking. In addition to offering friendly ground in which ideas of selflessness can grow, the distinction **(p.92)** can make it difficult to recognize the distinctive importance of our relationships with those close to us. One reason that "virtue ethics" is called a kind of "ethics," as opposed to a kind of "morality," is to recognize that for its Greek originators, there was no sharp distinction between morality and prudence. Many theorists today still talk of "moral virtues" as opposed to "non-moral virtues." Benevolence might be an instance of the former, while wit is often put forward as an example of the latter. Once the distinction is made, then we have to answer questions about how these different kinds of virtues relate to one another, what to do if they conflict, whether the moral kind always "trump" or outweigh the nonmoral kind, and so on. It becomes possible, furthermore, to worry that a "moral saint" might exemplify a bad kind of life to live from some less-narrow perspective, as we saw Susan Wolf argue in chapter 1.

Such questions do not arise in the Confucian tradition in large part because there is no morality-versus-prudence distinction. Instead, everything matters. The style and form with which one acts are important, though not in a way that can be detached from other aspects of the situations in which we find ourselves. There is, to be sure, a great emphasis on avoiding selfishness. But when everything matters, we are included: it is appropriate that we matter to ourselves, though we must be careful that we do not become so focused on our own immediate concerns that we view things in a skewed way. The same logic applies to those with whom we have relationships. As Michael Slote has helped me articulate, they matter in a special kind of way, but still only as part of the overall harmony of the Way. A particular relationship is not necessary for things to matter.

It is not only people—whether intimates or strangers—who matter. The universal coherence sought by Neo-Confucians encompasses everything from mountains and trees to boats and rooftiles. Neo-Confucianism offers a human-centered environmental ethics. The idea is not that there is a pre-ordained role for each thing; the centrality of "change" in Confucian metaphysics makes such an idea incoherent. Rather, the more we dig into the details of our dynamic situations, the more we come to see ways in which things matter. Murdoch powerfully articulates the pull that intuitions of unity can have on us; in Neo-Confucian hands, these become glimpses of harmony. The next two chapters offer much more detail about how it is possible to see and react to these possibilities for harmony despite the many complexities of our world.

Notes:

(1.) See Section 5.1.4 on the idea of "agent-based" ethics.

(2.) [Cheng and Cheng 1981, vol. 1, 15]; translation from Ivanhoe [2002, 28], slightly modified.

(3.) Zhu Xi discusses this theme at length in Zhu [1997, 100–1]. He relates *ren* to "warm and harmonious" intentions, to feelings of love and sympathy, and to life, birth, and the renewal that comes at springtime.

(4.) Psychologist Martin Hoffman's work is particularly seminal; see Hoffman [2000]. Slote has been at the forefront of recent philosophical attention to empathy, though he notes that Hume's concept of "sympathy" is fundamentally similar to what we now call "empathy" [Slote 2007].

(5.) To anticipate the discussion of sagely moral perception that will come in chapter 7, we can flesh out Slote's remark that we are not following "moral principles" when expressing balanced caring as follows. In an easy case, when one is seeing rightly—for instance, not viewing more favorably the child that is more like oneself—then we can leave the mechanism of love to itself: it will function in a balanced fashion automatically. But in harder cases, we need to see better (less selfishly, etc.) rather than unfeelingly follow principles. Slote spends considerable time arguing that good people should not be motivated by conscientiousness. "Someone who is worried about the moral character of his or her actions will count as less *directly* involved with others and less (purely) benevolent than someone who is simply occupied or absorbed in helping others" [Ibid., 46]. As we will see, for a range of reasons Neo-Confucians would certainly agree.

(6.) If the situation is so extreme that in order to save the worse-off child, the father must completely abandon the better-off child—thus courting disaster for the latter's well-being —then we may be in the territory of the (putative) moral dilemma, which I will discuss in chapter 7.

(7.) Strikingly, some proponents of a contemporary, feminist-inspired "ethics of care" also worry that their theories cannot accommodate obligations to strangers. See Slote [2001, 64].

(8.) Chapter 10 discusses some Neo-Confucian efforts to answer these concerns via the promotion of relatively impersonal institutions. As we will see there, however, such efforts are ultimately inadequate.

(9.) For anticipations of the solution I draw here out of Slote, see Chan [1993] and Tao [2000]. Both distinguish between "relationship love" and "general love" as aspects of *ren* in classical Confucian theory. Chan helpfully develops the idea that an "engaged perspective" is more apt than speaking of a "personal perspective," because only the former captures critical aspects of the relationships within which one's care is manifested. Chan has little to say, though, about how the two types of love are to relate to one another [Chan 1993, 4 and 336]. Tao makes some promising preliminary remarks, but I believe the views I develop in the next section go considerably farther. Finally, both Chan and Tao briefly address the possibility of a tension between the two types of love (or two perspectives). Their ideas partly anticipate my argument in chapter 6, especially when Tao mentions that Confucian sages may sometimes feel "regret" [Tao 2000, 236].

(10.) Slote sees it as a strongpoint of his theory that its requirements appear to fall in between Singer's extremely demanding consequentialism, and Williams's extremely loose theory of moral integrity [Slote 2001, 73].

(11.) For instance, Slote says, “The father who loves both his children deeply will, by virtue of the very psychology of what it is to love, tend to allocate concern, efforts, attention, money toward his two children in a somewhat balanced fashion” [Ibid., 89]. He adds that the father's feeling “doesn't just fall into place out of the blue. It reflects the father's sense of what it means to be a parent …” [Ibid.].

(12.) [Ibid. 90, emphasis in original]. He also provides a second, distinct argument for “balanced caring,” namely that it makes more sense than the “inverse-care law,” which is the idea that we should care less for those farther away, according to some mathematical formula [Ibid., 74]. I agree that balanced caring beats this highly implausible rule (which Slote also calls “aggregative partiality”), but this on its own does little to justify a choice of balanced caring over, say, narrow focus on intimates.

(13.) See *Mencius* 3A:5.

(14.) Based on the direction of his most recent work, I suspect that Slote would now say that a person with “fully developed empathy” is someone who would deeply appreciate our common humanity in the needed way (or at least that fully developed empathy is a necessary condition) [Slote 2007, 34–5 and 99]. Since the exact meaning of “fully developed empathy” is a bit unclear—Slote connects it both to a statistical notion of normality and to certain “natural” dispositions—I will put off evaluating the success of such an idea's justifying balanced caring until another occasion.

(15.) [Slote 2001, 7–8]. See also Ibid. [5–7] for discussion of alternative interpretations of Aristotle, none of which make Aristotle out to be a pure agent-baser.

(16.) Indeed, the relation that Neo-Confucians urge us to have toward *li*—which we will discuss in some detail later—bears comparison to the role of God in the Christian ethics of agapic love, and Slote acknowledges that since love is an inner state, this version of Christian ethics may count as agent-based. Whether it does or not depends on details that need not concern us here; see Slote [2001, 8–9].

(17.) I discuss the relation between transcendence and reverence, particularly as it applies to classical Chinese thought, in Angle [2005].

(18.) This is true even for Wang Yangming, notwithstanding his stress on finding the *li* within one's own mind, because the “things (*wu* □)” on which Wang instructs us to focus are relational. As he says, “wherever one's intention is directed is a thing. For example, when one's intention is directed toward serving one's parents, then serving one's parents is a ‘thing’” [Wang 1983, 37 (§6)]; translation modified from Wang [1963, 14].

(19.) One example: “[The human psyche] constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of the self or through fictions of a theological nature” [Murdoch 1970c, 79].

(20.) The problems raised by putative moral dilemmas are discussed in the next chapter.

(21.) For some discussion, see chapter 8.

(22.) Readers who feel this dismissal of "faith" is too quick are asked to turn to chapter 9, which contains considerable discussion of faith, belief, spirituality, and their relations to contemporary exemplary lives.

(23.) Admittedly, this was sometimes a difficult distinction for Neo-Confucians to maintain. See Angle [2002a, ch. 4].

(24.) This wrongness has been influentially explored by Carol Gilligan in her landmark book, *In a Different Voice*. She writes "Although from one point of view, paying attention to one's own needs is selfish, from a different perspective it is not only honest but fair. This is the essence of the transitional shift toward a new concept of goodness, which turns inward in acknowledging the self and in accepting responsibility for choice" [Gilligan 1993, 85]. According to Gilligan's developmental approach, the latter perspective is more mature, "representing a more complex understanding of the relationship between self and other" [Ibid., 105]. This is not to say that Gilligan's view, or feminist "care ethics" more generally, is identical to Neo-Confucianism. A good place to start in exploring these differences is Julia Tao's insightful essay about difference between classical Confucian and feminist conceptions of care; see Tao [2000].

(25.) In Slote's most recent work, his understanding of empathy as central to morality and necessarily other-directed reinforces the possibility that it might make "moral" sense to exclude oneself from consideration [Slote 2007, ch. 7]. However, as noted in Section 5.1.1, the basis of empathy in feelings that one has, which must be of the same order as those feelings one has about oneself, makes the ground for the limitation of empathy and moral concern to others quite problematic.

(26.) Tessman [2005] discusses with great subtlety the pain that can come with heightened sensitivity to global suffering.

(27.) Kravinsky's comfort with the dependability of numeric ratios—unlike messy relationships between humans—leads him to success in real estate finance and to a very utilitarian approach to moral questions.

(28.) For a very similar sentiment in which a shouldering of burdens and a feeling of joy are combined, see Zhu Xi's reading of *Mencius* 2B:13, discussed in chapter 6, Note 31.

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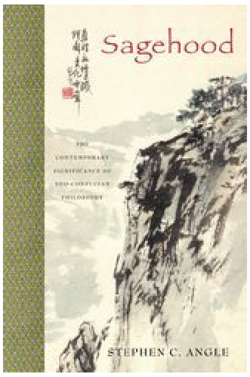

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Challenging Harmony: Consistency, Conflicts, and the Status Quo

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter is organized around challenges from Martha Nussbaum, Karen Stohr, and Diana Myers. Does a commitment to harmony entail an unhealthy desire for consistency and unity in one's life and relationships? Along similar lines, can a commitment to harmony be squared with the existence of moral conflicts? Finally, does such a commitment push one toward a state of "emotional vanilla" in which one cannot mount dramatic challenges to the status quo? The chapter argues that a contemporary Neo-Confucian understanding of harmony has the resources to rebut all these concerns. In particular, the role of imagination in overcoming moral conflicts is stressed; this is illustrated through consideration of famous passages concerning potential conflicts from the *Mencius*. Particular attention is paid to the role of anger. The chapter argues, though, that both classical and Neo-Confucians too often leave grief out of account, even though it can fit well into their picture.

Keywords: Martha Nussbaum, Karen Stohr, Diana Myers, unity, moral conflict, moral dilemma, imagination, Mencius, grief, anger

As we have now seen, harmony is a central value both to the historical Confucian tradition and to efforts to develop a contemporary Confucian philosophy. This chapter explores several challenges that can be raised against giving harmony such a central importance. Does a commitment to harmony entail an unhealthy desire for consistency and unity in one's life and relationships? Along similar lines, can a commitment to harmony be squared with the existence of moral conflicts? Finally, does such a commitment push one toward a state of “emotional vanilla” in which one cannot mount dramatic challenges to the status quo? In response to these challenges, I explicate and develop Neo-Confucian views of the roles played by imagination and various emotions in moral decision-making. The result is a more nuanced picture of harmony and sagehood that not only has the resources to rebuff all these challenges, but also stand out as attractive contemporary position from which philosophers East and West can learn.

6.1 Nussbaum and Stohr Against “Harmony”

Contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that moral decision-making takes place in a world of multiple, incommensurable values. Much of her approach resonates with the understanding of sagely vision and action I am developing in this chapter and the next. However, some aspects of her picture appear to fit poorly with my contemporary Neo-Confucianism. Nussbaum argues that to seek “consistent harmony” is to reason like a “fearful child” rather than a mature adult. She fleshes out this claim via **(p.94)** a transformation that takes place in the life of Maggie Verver, one of the protagonists in James's *Golden Bowl*. According to Nussbaum, in the first part of the novel,

> Maggie has made a great point of conceiving of all the claims upon her as homogenous along a single quantitative scale. Financial imagery for ethical value has been prominent, expressing this reductive strategy. Even when she is not using this strategy, she is continually showing, in a number of ways, her determination not to acknowledge conflicting obligations, not to waver from “that ideal consistency on which her moral comfort almost at any time depended.” This involves her, repeatedly, in one or another sort of reinterpretation of the values with which she is concerned, so as to ensure they harmonize with one another, are “round” rather than angular. A claim will be acknowledged only to the extent to which it consents to fit in with other claims that are held fixed; but this involves Maggie in considerable neglect of the separate nature of each distinct claim. [Nussbaum 1990a, 89]

By the end of the novel, in contrast, Nussbaum sees Maggie as approaching complex moral situations in the more particularistic fashion that Nussbaum prefers. “Maggie shows her recognition that commensurability in particular, consistent harmony in general, are not good aims for the rational deliberation of an adult woman. She allows herself to explore fully the separate nature of each pertinent claim, entering into it, wondering about what it is, attempting to do justice to it in feeling as well as thought” [Ibid.].

Before beginning my response to Nussbaum, it will be useful to put another example on the table. Karen Stohr has recently suggested that many contemporary virtue ethicists subscribe to what she calls the “harmony thesis,” namely that “a virtuous agent's feelings should be in harmony with her judgments about what she should do,” and so “she should find virtuous action easy and pleasant” [Stohr 2003, 339]. Stohr argues that the applicability of the harmony thesis is actually quite limited, though, and so it cannot be part of a general characterization of virtue: “The usefulness of the harmony thesis is limited to cases in which there is no conflict of genuine goods. Life, however, has a distressing tendency to present us with situations in which we cannot help but act against something that we rightly hold dear. In finding such situations agonizing, we simply prove that we see the world correctly” [Ibid., 363]. At the core of Stohr's argument against the harmony thesis is the intuition that when faced with a conflict of genuine goods, we *ought* to feel the difficulty and find it painful to choose one option instead of the others. Stohr illustrates her case with the example of a small business owner:

> She has a number of employees, all of whom have worked for her for years and all of whom are capable and dependable. Since the company is small, she has gotten to know her employees relatively well and she has developed genuine affection and concern for them. Due to a recent downturn in the economy, demand for the company's products has declined and the company is in financial trouble. After agonizing **(p.95)** over the books, the owner of the company has decided that there is no alternative but to lay off several of her employees. She has already taken every other cost-cutting step possible and this is the last remaining option. If she does not perform any layoffs, the company will certainly go under and *all* her employees will lose their jobs. [Ibid., 342–43]

Stohr then goes on to describe how the owner will naturally be fair in choosing whom to fire, will break the news in the softest way she can, and so on. We are further to imagine that the owner's sympathy for employees leaves her “anguished by the knowledge that she will be causing them pain and distress” [Ibid.]. Being sympathetic, that is, makes it harder for her to perform the correct action. Contrary to the harmony thesis, Stohr says that in a case like this, “it seems to be a requirement of virtue that she finds it hard” [Ibid.].

Both Nussbaum's and Stohr's arguments rest on the idea that there are a plurality of genuine values that cannot be simply reduced to a single underlying ur-value. Nussbaum sees Maggie's early difficulties as expressions of her immature belief that all values can be lined up in a consistent, “harmonious” fashion; her later, more mature outlook recognizes that we are sometimes “forced to forgo some genuine value” [Nussbaum 1990a, 63]. Nussbaum says that when one is in such a situation, choosing which action to take is often the least of our worries; the greater challenge can be other dimensions of our response to the situation, whether they be expressions of remorse, reparative efforts, or feelings of deficiency [Ibid., 62–63]. Stohr makes the related point that part of being virtuous in such a situation seems to include performing the right action reluctantly and feeling bad about doing it at all.

How would a contemporary Confucian, whose central value of harmony seems to be challenged by these two cases, respond? Certainly no Confucian would think in terms of reducing all value to a single mathematical scale.[1] It seems likely therefore that the notion of harmony we have been developing may be rather different from the idea that is here challenged. Admittedly, as we will see in a moment, classic Confucian treatments of moral conflicts say little or nothing about the agent's mixed emotions or difficulties. Nonetheless, Neo-Confucian thinkers' discussions of these early passages will offer us the materials to elaborate a satisfying account of how the Neo-Confucian commitment to harmony meshes with the insights of Nussbaum and Stohr.

6.2 Imagination

A good place to start is with the emphasis in both classic passages and later Neo-Confucian discussions on viewing a situation imaginatively so as to avoid an either/or choice.[2] Consider the following passage, in which Mencius discusses how the sage-king Shun treated his villainous stepbrother, Xiang:

> Wan Zhang said, "Xiang devoted himself every day to plotting against Shun's life. Why did Shun only banish him when he became Emperor?"
>
> **(p.96)**
> "He enfeoffed him," said Mencius. "Some called this banishment."
>
> "Shun banished [various villains].... Xiang was the most wicked of them all, yet he was enfeoffed in You Bi. What wrong had the people of You Bi done? Is that the way a humane man behaves? Others he punishes, but when it comes to his own brother he enfeoffs him instead."
>
> "A humane man never harbors anger or nurses a grudge against a brother. All he does is to love him. Because he loves him, he wishes him to enjoy rank; because he loves him, he wishes him to enjoy wealth. To enfeoff him in You Bi was to let him enjoy wealth and rank. If as Emperor he were to allow his brother to be a nobody, could that be described as loving him?"
>
> "May I ask what you meant by saying that some called this banishment?"
>
> "Xiang was not allowed to take any action in his fief. The Emperor appointed officials to administer the fief and to collect tributes and taxes. For this reason it was described as banishment. Xiang was certainly not permitted to ill-use the people." [*Mencius* 5A:3; Mencius 1970, 140–41, slightly modified]

Here we have a situation that looks rife with conflict. The passage suggests that at least three values are involved: love for one's brother, a more general compassion for the people of You Bi, and just or equitable treatment for criminals. Shun's solution is certainly not to add up the importance of each of these on a single scale and act accordingly: the well-being of the people is not traded off against his love for Xiang. Instead, he sees a harmonious solution—one that will honor all the relevant aspects of this particular situation. In saying this, we should recognize the way in which Shun has dealt with Wan Zhang's complaint about the injustice of the solution. Shun clearly does not recognize the applicability here of a “treat like cases alike” principle, because the cases are not alike: we have different relationships to our close kin than we have to others. So far as we can tell from this example, then, a prima facie conflict has been imaginatively resolved without regret and without the perceived forgoing of any genuine value.

It is instructive to compare this case with one involving a non-sage. In one of the *Mencius*'s most famous passages, King Xuan asks Mencius about virtue. As part of his response, Mencius relates the following anecdote he has heard about the king:

> The King was sitting up in the hall when someone passed below it leading an ox. The King noticed this and said, “Where is the ox going?” “The blood of the ox is to be used for consecrating a new bell.” “Spare it. I cannot bear to see it shrinking with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution.” “In that case, should the ceremony be abandoned?” “That is out of the question. Use a lamb instead.” …
>
> **(p.97)**
> [Mencius comments:] “The heart behind your action is sufficient to enable you to become a true King. The people all thought that you grudged the expense, but, for my part, I have no doubt that you were moved by pity for the animal.” …
>
> [Mencius continues:] “There is no harm in this. It is the way of a humane man. You saw the ox but not the lamb. The attitude of a gentleman towards animals is this: once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen.” [*Mencius* 1A:7; Mencius 1970, 54–55, slightly modified]

Here, the values in conflict are compassion for the ox and the ritual necessity of an animal being sacrificed. The king's people mistook his compassion for miserliness, and in fact the king himself did not understand his own feelings, telling Mencius that “though the deed was mine, when I looked into myself I failed to understand my own heart” [Ibid.]. Unlike the Shun case, the king experiences some uneasiness and confusion. Although his imaginative leap to substitute an unseen sheep for the miserable ox enabled a solution to the conflict, the messiness of the solution seems to have left some residue.

Reflecting on the case of King Xuan, Zhu Xi writes that “Among the affairs of the world, one can find oneself in difficult situations (*nanchu* □□); in such cases, one must have an ingenious (*qiao* □)[3] solution (*daoli* □□) in order to deal successfully with it” [Zhu 1997, 1092]. Zhu spells out the potential conflict between compassion for the ox and the king's commitment to the importance of the ritual, and says that if a “way to handle the situation (*cuozhi* □□)” had not been found, the king would have had to suppress his compassionate reaction (by sacrificing the ox), which would have interfered with the larger goal of cultivating his compassionate heart.[4] I submit that Zhu's talk of ingenuity and of finding a way to handle the situation connects directly to imagination and creativity.[5] Since situations are unique, we cannot rely on cookie-cutter solutions to all of them. When faced with a conflict, one's reaction should never be to simply weigh the value of the opposed values and choose the greater; instead, imagination should lead to a harmonious solution in which all values are honored.[6] It is worth emphasizing again that King Xuan is far from a sage, which helps to explain his evident awkwardness with the situation and Zhu's labeling of it as a “difficult situation.” In fact, when discussing another case in which Shun avoids a prima facie conflict, Zhu comments: “If scholars examine this and gain something from it, then without having to compare, calculate, debate, or weigh, there will be no situations they find difficult” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 190]. In King Xuan's case, we should imagine a pause as the king thinks through and feels out the contours of the situation in which he has found himself. In the end, he comes up with a good way to handle the situation, but it would have been better still if he had seen everything clearly from the beginning, thus not finding it difficult to begin with. This, Zhu implies, would have been the reaction of a sage like Shun.[7]

(p.98) One more issue before moving on: what of Mencius's provocative comment that “the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen”? How can purposely limiting one's contact with animals to be slaughtered mesh with talk of broad imagination, much less the Neo-Confucian emphasis on forming one body with all things? Looking first at Mencius and classical Confucianism in general, we find there a fairly realistic sense of the limits on human malleability. In another passage, Mencius extols the ancient practice of having sons educated by foster parents, because “in the nature of things (*shi* □),” the need of a teacher to correct his pupil will undermine the love between father and son, if the father attempts to serve as teacher [4A:18; Mencius 1970, 125]. A similar sentiment is expressed in Xunzi's treatment of the transformative power of ritual: prior to burial, we are to adorn corpses and keep a certain distance from them, because if we do not, they will become “hideous” and we will feel no grief [Xunzi 1988–94, 65]. The design of our institutions and educational goals, in short, must keep in mind the natural effects of various situations on human beings. In this context, keeping one's distance from the kitchen seems less *ad hoc*. Along similar lines, Mencius elsewhere worries that certain professions will naturally harden one's heart.[8]

What of a Neo-Confucian like Zhu or especially Wang, who places such emphasis on forming one body with all things? The key thing to remember here is that while Wang certainly believed that our compassion does and should extend to all things, he is resolute in maintaining distinctions among things. He even says, in a passage I will discuss at length later, that we can tolerate butchering animals to provide for religious sacrifices: that is, compassion for the animals does not make such a choice unbearable.[9] This is to accept our nature as creatures whose lives must be shaped by rituals derived from tradition. At the same time, our compassion for all things would ensure that we think imaginatively about the best way to carry out the rituals and that we see to it that no animals suffer needlessly. Keeping one's distance from the kitchen, then, cannot be interpreted as a justification for complacency. In a manner I will discuss more fully later, when the world is structured in such a way that even the most harmonious possible solution is still one that leaves behind a residue of grief, sages (and the rest of us) should rely on this grief as a spur to imagining ways in which the world can be different—even if the grief is something that we can bear, given the way the world is today.

6.3 Maximization

We have already seen quite clearly that neither classical Confucians nor their Neo-Confucian inheritors viewed moral decision-making as involving an effort to maximize some single ur-value. When understood somewhat differently, though, “maximization” can be a helpful device to think about how to arrive at a harmonious solution to a seemingly conflictual situation. In his analysis of the example of Shun's enfeoffing his brother Xiang, Zhu Xi shows that we should do our best along all dimensions of value that are relevant to a given situation. Recall that according to *Mencius* 5A:3, Shun both expressed his love for his brother by **(p.99)** honoring him, and kept Xiang in careful check by giving others the actual power over Xiang's nominal subjects. Zhu Xi says that this solution was “the extreme of humaneness (*ren zhi zhi* □□□) and the utmost appropriateness (*yi zhi jin* □□□)” [Zhu 1997, 1213]. In other words, thanks to Shun's imaginative solution to what would otherwise have produced a conflict between humaneness and appropriateness, both values received maximal expression. In his study of Wang Yangming, Warren Frisina makes a similar point when he says that according to Wang, sages “maximize the harmonic possibilities within any given situation” [Frisina 2002, 85].[10] We must be careful, though, to guard against two ways in which this talk of maximizing could be misleading. First, maximal humaneness does not mean to abandon all restraint in indulging another's desires. We are familiar with stories in which love for another causes one to lose one's bearings. Zhu in fact cites the case of a former emperor's indulgence toward his younger brother, saying that because the emperor went too far, his feelings cannot be called “humane” [Zhu 1997, 1213]. While humaneness is rooted in feelings of love and compassion, if these feelings are out of balance, they do not count as humaneness.

Second, we should not conclude from the juxtaposition of humaneness and appropriateness that harmony is defined by maximizing humaneness without diminishing appropriateness. That is, harmony is not a trade-off between two competing values. Zhu makes this clear when he comments on the common saying, “Humaneness and appropriateness bend and break each other.” Zhu says that the “extreme of humaneness and the utmost of appropriateness” are only possible when there is no favoring of one over the other, and then adds that the “extreme of humaneness” and the “utmost of appropriateness” are independent of one another, implying that each is defined by the whole situation, rather than by a specific trade-off against the other value [Ibid.].[11]

This idea can be clarified if we think back to the culinary and musical metaphors with which the concept of harmony was first developed. It is certainly true that a cook needs to take into account the amounts of pepper, broth, and so on in his soup as he decides how much salt to add. His goal, though, is an appropriate saltiness—the perfect contribution to the overall harmony—rather than maximizing the amount of salt he can put into the soup without compromising the other ingredients. Once he finds the harmony, we are not tempted to say that some saltiness was sacrificed in order to preserve the right amount of pepper.

Nussbaum is concerned that in conflictual situations we will be forced to forgo genuine values. Clearly a soup is not such a case, and this is not because there is one, underlying value (perhaps “taste”) to which all other values are reduced. It is perfectly cogent to think about salt and pepper as distinct, incommensurable values, and to aim at a balance or harmony between them. Similarly, Zhu's analysis of Shun's treatment of Xiang seems to be that no values are forgone. Humaneness is not traded off against appropriateness; instead, each is perfectly (or maximally) expressed, relative to the possibilities afforded by the situation. Zhu Xi and his fellow Neo-Confucians would of course characterize the “possibilities afforded by the situation” in terms of “coherence (*li* □).” Realizing **(p.100)** coherence means to find the valuable and intelligible way in which things can fit together. So, when discussing the statement in *Analects* 13:18 that “fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers” when one has done something wrong, Zhu says that this is “the extreme (*zhi* □) of universal coherence and human feelings” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 98]. Varying specifications of context always provide the framework within which one can talk about “perfect” or “extreme” (or maximal) expression of values. Indeed, Yu Kam Por has argued that even when only one value is mentioned, determination of whether one goes too far, falls short, or is perfectly apt in one's expression of the value is always implicitly relative to (at least) one other value.[12]

6.4 Residue

6.4.1 Complicating the Picture

So far, the account I have been developing looks like this: at least when viewed by sages, cases of conflict are always only apparent. With adequate moral imagination, one can see a way to maximally realize all relevant values. It sounds like the Confucians are denying the theses of Nussbaum and Stohr, namely, that there are frequent cases of conflicts in which genuine values are forgone; that we should feel badly even about making the best choice; and that after our choice is made, reparative efforts (starting with expressions of remorse, but perhaps going much further) are necessary. In fact the Confucian picture is quite different from either Nussbaum's or Stohr's, but in this section I modify the Confucian view in two ways that will help to account for the most compelling aspects of Nussbaum's and Stohr's views. First, both classic accounts and Neo-Confucian commentaries sometimes omit or ignore important parts of their subjects' reactions to prima facie conflicts. Second, Wang Yangming, at least, demonstrates some awareness of this deficiency, and furthermore the Neo-Confucians have materials ready-to-hand with which to elaborate a more satisfying account of the residue left by these apparent conflicts.

Mencius 7A:35 speculates on what Shun would do if his father had killed someone. Mencius says that Gao Yao, the proper judicial authority, should apprehend Shun's father (who is known as the Blind Man). Shun should not interfere with Gao Yao because he is performing his correct role; although Mencius does not make it explicit, Gao Yao's apprehending the Blind Man is a matter of “appropriateness (*yi* □).” Mencius continues, however, as follows: “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 1970, 190]. In his commentary on this passage, Zhu Xi emphasizes that Shun would not have felt he was forgoing some value, saying that Shun simply “was aware of his father, and that is all.” Gao Yao, in contrast, in his role as minister “was only aware of the law; he was not aware of [Shun's] father as someone he should respect.” The reactions of both Shun and Gao Yao manifested the “extremity (*ji* □) of universal coherence and the extreme (*zhi* □) of human relations,” from which we can **(p.101)** conclude that as far as Zhu is concerned, both humaneness and appropriateness were fully realized [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 190].

The solution Mencius offers, and Zhu endorses, is certainly clever. It meets the criteria we have already seen: an imaginative solution is found that maximizes the relevant values and dissolves the conflict. No regret or other residue is mentioned. But think about what Mencius is leaving out. Shun's father is imagined to have killed someone, and since we are told that the Blind Man would be appropriately apprehended, there is no reason to think that the murder was in self-defense or in some other way mitigated. Should not one feel badly if a loved one commits such a crime? Furthermore, how is Shun able to cast aside his responsibilities to the people of the Empire so easily? What of his compassion for the people he had served so ably: how can it disappear so completely and immediately? Indeed, if it did so, should not we wonder whether Shun's commitments and feelings were genuine in the first place? Zhu Xi's implication that both humaneness and appropriateness are fully realized—the former by Shun, the latter by Gao Yao—only works if we see each character in the story as playing a single role. Shun is the son; he acts humanely. Gao Yao is the minister; he acts appropriately. But the genius of Confucian role ethics is that we each inhabit many roles: canonically, as father or son, ruler or subject, husband or wife, older or younger brother, and friend. Neither Mencius nor Zhu Xi mentions any of these other relationships, except to imply that the feelings Shun has for his subjects instantly evaporated. Is this realistic or desirable?

At least one philosopher in the Chinese tradition endorsed the idea that one's feelings should shift in a frictionless way, conforming to whatever situation one encounters. This is the great classical Daoist, Zhuangzi. The theme of responding flexibly to one's context recurs throughout the *Zhuangzi*, most famously in a scene describing the aftermath of the death of Zhuangzi's wife. When an acquaintance finds Zhuangzi singing and questions the propriety of such a reaction, Zhuangzi acknowledges an initial feeling of melancholy, but reflection on her participation in the ongoing process of cosmic transformation leads him to conclude, “If I were to have followed her weeping and wailing, I think it would have been out of keeping with destiny, so I stopped” [Zhuangzi 1994, 169]. After a brief moment of grief, Zhuangzi's feelings flexibly reoriented themselves to the new situation; there seems to be no residue.[13] However, while it has been argued that the Neo-Confucians might have learned various things from the *Zhuangzi*, we can be sure they part company with him over the issue of grief. The *Analects* records Confucius as saying, “In funerals: than detached, be rather moved” [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 80; 3:4]. Zhu Xi comments that the feeling of grief is the core substance of the funeral; while both this substance and its “patterning (*wen* □)” as ritual are needed, the feeling has priority [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 14].[14] This does not mean to give oneself over to self-indulgence; Zhu's comments specify that one's feelings should match up with the harmony of universal coherence. Readers may recall that Wang Yangming emphasizes this same point in a letter cited in Section 4.4.1. Among the advice he gives to a student experiencing unbearable grief upon learning of his son's illness, Wang says: “Generally speaking, the influence of the seven emotions is in the majority **(p.102)** of cases excessive, and only in the minority of cases insufficient. As soon as it is excessive, it is not in accord with the original substance of the mind. It must be adjusted to reach the mean before it becomes correct.”[15]Feeling appropriate grief or sorrow is central to the Neo-Confucian worldview. Admittedly, Wang cautions against excessive feelings, but Wang is not suggesting that his student should leap to Zhuangzi-style celebration of his son's role in the great transformation of all things.

6.4.2 Grief versus Regret

Returning to Shun and his father, I want to suggest that Mencius and Zhu Xi have both mistakenly left grief out of the picture.[16] Grief is a vital human emotion, as appropriate to sages as it is to the rest of us.[17] Feeling grief does not make Shun's reaction to his situation into a trade-off among competing values; it is simply part of the overall, appropriate response. To feel grief is to feel bad because someone or something has suffered or died. Grief is purest—unmixed with other feelings like regret or shame—when the suffering or death was inevitable, or at least beyond one's control. Grief is thus linked to our finitude, and bears some relation to awe and reverence. Grief is always something that we gradually work through: if one's grief diminishes too rapidly, we show inadequate respect and raise questions about the genuineness of our compassion toward the person or thing prior to its demise. Since grief is linked so closely, even for sages, to the notion of our limited ability to affect the world, it can be terrifying and threaten to consume us, as the passage earlier from Wang Yangming suggests. Both classical and Neo-Confucians embrace rituals like funerals and the three-year mourning period as a means to express and work through our grief in appropriate ways.[18]

Wang Yangming suggests some of the underlying dynamic behind grief in an important passage that also bears on situations of apparent conflict:

> [A student said,] “The great man and things form one body. Why does the *Great Learning* say that there is relative importance (*hou bo* □□) among things?”
>
> The Teacher said, “It is because of coherence that there is relative importance. Take for example the body, which is one organic entity (*yi ti* □□). If we use the hands and the feet to protect the head, does that mean that we go too far in treating them as less important? This simply accords with their coherence. We love both plants and animals, yet we can bear (*ren* □) nurturing animals with plants. We love both animals and men, and yet we can bear butchering animals to feed our parents, provide for religious sacrifices, and entertain guests. We love both

> parents and strangers. But suppose here are a small basket of rice and a platter of soup. With them one will survive and without them one will die; there is not enough to save both parent and stranger. We can bear preferring to save the parent instead of the stranger. In each case, these all accord with coherence. As to the relationship between **(p.103)** ourselves and our parents, there cannot be any distinction of…greater or lesser importance, for being humane to all people and feeling love for all things comes from this affection toward parents. If in this relationship we can bear any relative importance, then anything can be borne. [Wang 1983, 332 (§276)]; substantially altered from Wang [1963, 222–23].

This is a vital passage because, though it does not mention grief explicitly, it helps us to see that Wang recognizes the emotional complexity attending to many of the situations with which we are faced. The context for Wang's statement is formed by two famous passages from *Mencius*: first, that “all people have a heart that cannot bear the suffering of others,” and second, “For all people there are things they cannot bear. To extend this to what they can bear is humaneness.”[19] The basic idea is that we should extend our compassion from simple and clear situations to those that are more distant or complex—the latter being cases in which we currently can, but should not, bear others' suffering because we do not yet attend carefully to them. Wang makes no suggestion, though, that Mencius's idea of extending humaneness applies to cases like those he is considering. It would *not* be more humane to be unable to bear feeding one's parent instead of a stranger; in this case, as in each of the others, the universe is patterned in such a way that we should and must bear choosing parents over strangers, sacrifices over animals, and so on.

By using the word “bear,” though, Wang signals that pain or sadness attend to such choices. In the simplest case, it hurts to protect our head with our arms. But it is the right thing to do, and we can bear the pain. It is one of the things that arms are for.[20] The same goes for each of the other cases. Of course we feel grief as a stranger starves to death: this is a natural and appropriate part of our reaction to the situation Wang describes. It may take us some time to get over our grief; the process of working through our grief may involve redoubling our commitment to ending world hunger or establishing a relationship with the dead person's family. We certainly wish things had been otherwise, but I believe Wang would insist that while grief is appropriate, regret is not. By “regret,” I mean feeling bad because one did not respond to a given situation in some alternative way. Non-sages should often feel regret, reflecting that if only they had been better people—better cultivated, better able to see a harmonious solution—the situation would have been resolved differently. When Zhu said, in a passage discussed earlier, that unlike non-sages, sages do not encounter “difficult situations (*nanchu* □□),” he meant that sages' reactions never lead to regret.[21] Of course, assuming that one might be able to become a sage, one will in all likelihood have done regrettable things before becoming a sage.[22] The sage will think of him or herself, though, as in some sense a distinct person from the self that would have responded in these regrettable ways. He or she may have previously unacknowledged griefs stemming from these past events to work through, but regret should no longer play any forward-looking role in his or her psychology.[23]

Returning once again to Shun and his father, I believe that Shun should feel grief. The "and they lived happily ever after" implication of Mencius's tale is **(p.104)** too pat, ignoring the complexities of the situation.[24] As I will discuss in the next section, the commitment of both classical and Neo-Confucians to harmony goes hand in hand with a (often grief-stricken) recognition of the flaws and suffering found in our world as it stands. Some readers may find it more natural to say that we "regret" the imperfect state of the world and sometimes "regret" the degree of suffering occasioned by even the best possible reaction we might make to a given situation. So long as this is another way of saying that we are saddened or grief-stricken, and we distinguish this second sense of regret from the way I have been using it earlier, then talking of "regret" in this way is perfectly acceptable.[25] If we think back to Nussbaum and Stohr, we can now see that the Neo-Confucian response will be to insist on harmony, while (1) clarifying that harmony does not require a trade-off among our various values, but instead honors them all, and (2) acknowledging that in many contexts, part of the sage's response will be a heartfelt grief. Stohr's business owner is right to feel bad. If she is a sage, though, she will not wallow in self-recrimination, but will continue to live her life in a way that expresses her connection to her current and former employees, their families, and ultimately to everyone and everything in the world—to one degree or another.[26]

6.5 Dimensions of Dilemmas

To this point I have referred to the situations we have been pondering as cases of apparent or prima facie conflict. I have avoided the more common phrase "moral dilemma" because that has meant so many different things to different people. Before moving on to the chapter's final topic, though, it would be well briefly to see how my Neo-Confucian account of these issues squares with recent discussions of "dilemmas." I find Rosalind Hursthouse's typology of dilemmas particularly clear. She distinguishes, on the one hand, between the resolvable and irresolvable, and on the other hand, between the tragic and non-tragic. An irresolvable dilemma is one in which there are no moral grounds favoring the choice of one course instead of the other [Hursthouse 1999, 63]. A tragic dilemma may or may not be irresolvable, but in either case "even a virtuous agent cannot emerge [from such a situation] with her life unmarred" [Ibid., 74]. She elaborates: "If a genuinely tragic dilemma is what a virtuous agent emerges from, it will be the case that she emerges having done a terrible thing, the very sort of thing that the callous, dishonest, unjust, or in general vicious agent would characteristically do—killed someone, or let them die, betrayed a trust, violated someone's serious rights. And hence it will not be possible to say that she has acted *well*" [Ibid.].

What should a Neo-Confucian say about these notions of dilemma? To begin with, it is clear that many situations come to be understood as conflictual at all—not to mention as potentially irresolvable—only because of a lack of imagination.[27] In addition, Zhu Xi's comment that properly cultivated people will not encounter "difficult situations" could be read to deny that sages face irresolvable dilemmas. But if this is what he meant, I believe he should not make such a **(p.105)** blanket claim. "Irresolvable," again, simply means that no one option is clearly favored over the other. So be it. Why must we insist that there is always a better choice? The Confucians are right to insist that there very often is a better choice than we see, but why must one option always stand out above every alternative? When two alternatives are in effect tied for first, we simply “plump” for one or the other.[28]

David Nivison recounts an intriguing legend about Wang Yangming that bears on such cases: “His enemies at court were trying to assassinate him. He went into hiding and was warned that his enemies' anger might turn upon his father. In this extremity Wang Yangming had recourse to divination and was bidden to turn aside from his journey to his assigned post and return to his father. Here legend pictures Wang as finding the conflict of obligations an impossible one, and his solution is a paradigm of Sartrean ‘bad faith’: he resolves his distress by seeking an oracle, thus entrusting his decision to Heaven” [Nivison 1996c, 245]. Nivison makes this remark in the context of an essay reflecting on the ways that Wang is, and is not, an “existentialist.” He goes on to say that Wang lived in a “Heaven-saturated world” that was “friendly to right (*really* right) decision, if one learns not to obstruct or resist it. The Western existentialist … lives in an outer world that is utterly indifferent to the ‘rightness’ of one's decisions and an inner world which just is those decisions” [Ibid.]. We cannot know for sure whether Wang saw divination as a means to the right answer or as a way of plumping for an option, faced with an irresolvable dilemma. Nor should we necessarily think of Wang as a sage. Still, the legend does offer one way of thinking about how Confucians might deal with irresolvable dilemmas.

Tragic dilemmas are another matter. Hursthouse says that these are cases in which one does the best one can in a given situation (which may or may not be “irresolvable”), but nonetheless does something “terrible,” with the result that one's life is “marred.” Consider Wang Yangming's case of giving food to a parent instead of a stranger, with the result that the latter dies. Surely this is, in a certain sense, a terrible thing. If one does it lightly, or feels no grief, or dithers so long that one's parent suffers too much or even dies as well, or fails to have seen a better solution that was in the offing—in any of these cases, one has done badly, has cause for deep regret, and is obviously not a sage. But supposing a sage sees that it is the right thing to do, does it with an appropriately heavy heart, feels appropriate grief, and works through the grief in ritually appropriate ways, is his or her life “marred”? We might readily agree that the person's life would have been better had this situation not arisen, though any decision about this would have to examine the details of an actual case (for instance, if he or she were not there to offer the food, would both parent and stranger have died?). It is hard to see how or why we should conclude that the sage himself or herself has been marred, though.[29] The sage might have a strong emotional reaction to such an experience, such as anger in addition to grief; I will look at the question of such strong emotions in the last section of this chapter. But ex hypothesi the sage does not wallow in guilt, cease to care about others (because it hurts too much to do so), or in any other way suffer a marring residue from the incident. A saying by the early Neo-Confucian Cheng Yi speaks directly to such a situation: **(p.106)**

> At the time of difficulty, if the gentleman (*junzi* □□) has done his best but cannot avoid it, that is decreed (*ming* □). He should investigate to the utmost his decree in

> order to fulfill his commitment (*zhi* □). Understanding the necessity of the decree, his mind will not be disturbed by poverty, obstacles, or calamity. He will merely enact his [virtue of] appropriateness. If he does not understand the decree, he will be afraid when he encounters danger and difficulty and stumble when he suffers poverty, and what he holds on to will be lost. How can he fulfill his commitment to do good?[30]

The “decree” is what happens in the world, outside of one's control. It bears some comparison to the notion in the Western philosophical tradition of “moral luck.” To say that one's mind “will not be disturbed” does not mean that one is indifferent to the suffering of oneself or others; as I have argued, one may feel a wide variety of negative emotions. Cheng Yi should thus be understood as saying that sages will not be marred, even as they experience these crises and emotions. For sages, there are no tragic dilemmas.[31] Returning once more to Stohr's business owner who had to make layoffs, we can now see that it is often important, when expressing the complex balance of feelings the sage has, to display the complexity, so that “ease” may not always be publicly manifested as unconcern, disinterest, or equanimity. The public face of our reactions is a critical aspect of the way in which we communicate moral responsibility to others.[32] Nonetheless, the actions flow from virtue rather than continence, as Stohr would have had it. It is not that sages see an external duty and force themselves to conform to it, but rather that they simply see and react as the situation requires.[33]

6.6 Emotional Vanilla?

6.6.1 Meyers's Challenge

Most of this chapter has been concerned with challenges to the ideals of harmony and sagehood that emerge from considering cases in which values at least appear to conflict. In this final section, I turn to a different sort of challenge, although one that will similarly allege that sagehood and harmony present too neat a package, missing out on messy emotions that form an essential part of our moral world. Several feminist philosophers have maintained that strong emotions like anger can serve critical moral functions [Tessman 2005, 116–25]. Here I will concentrate on a particularly interesting version of this argument, in which Diana Meyers argues that “rancorous emotional attitudes” can function much more effectively in the perception of injustice or oppression than a temperament that is serene, trusting, and genial. After rehearsing Meyers's argument, I will look at what Neo-Confucians said about sages and anger as a starting point for my own response.

Meyers believes that our perceptions are importantly shaped by what she calls our “emotional attitude”: that is, “the affective stance (or stances) through which one meets the world and which shapes one's interpersonal encounters” **(p.107)** [Meyers 1997, 197].[34] Following Nussbaum and others, she posits that openness and responsiveness to others would undergird reliable moral perception. Since “unpleasant subjective states would distract one from other people and interfere with moral perception,” she suggests that the most fitting emotional attitude would be “emotional vanilla.” Bland rather than vacant, emotional vanilla is “serene, trusting, and genial” and “seems to embody a generosity of spirit and a sense of personal security that are conducive to insightful moral perception” [Ibid., 202].

The problem is, according to Meyers, that when combined with the prejudicial repertory of moral concepts that we inherit from our culture, emotional vanilla in fact “establishes a moral outlook that renders moral perception virtually impervious to culturally unacknowledged, yet pervasive forms of injustice and oppression.” Emotional vanilla compounds an independently existing tendency not to acknowledge one's victimization, so that people with what had seemed like an ideal emotional attitude for moral perception will actually “find it nearly impossible to see that employers, teachers, or peers at work or at school are oppressing them” [Ibid., 203]. Meyers recognizes that some philosophers are aware that traditional moralities must be critically scrutinized, but responds that Nussbaum's effort to account for this in terms of civic love and compassion, for instance, “prescribes an emotional attitude that is simply unrealistic to expect people to adopt in a world of competing interests and historical animosities between social groups” [Ibid., 204].

Meyers' solution is to endorse the usefulness of what she calls “rancorous emotional attitudes,” feelings like hypersensitivity, paranoia, anger, and bitterness. Both Meyers and I focus on anger; I will set aside the question of whether the other attitudes she mentions might also serve constructive roles. It is important to keep in mind that Meyers is discussing “emotional attitudes,” not occurent feelings; as we will see, the issue between Meyers and the Neo-Confucians is not over whether one should ever be angry, but whether one should respond to situations from an antecedent state of emotional turmoil or emotional balance. Meyers' paradigm case is the poet Audre Lorde, who calls her chronic anger “a molten pond at the core of me,” an “electric thread woven into every emotional tapestry upon which I set the essentials of my life” [Ibid., 208]. While both Meyers and Lorde herself acknowledge that such chronic anger can be dangerous and damaging, Meyers argues that when such an emotional attitude is a reaction to “being subjected to a devastating injustice (or series of injustices) or to disabling systematic oppression,” it can render its subjects “preternaturally sensitive to unjust practices and oppressive conditions”—just the things that one with emotional vanilla is most likely to miss. Emotional vindaloo can reveal wrongs in two slightly different ways. Some people may be able to live much of their lives in emotional vanilla, but shift into emotional vindaloo when they find themselves in circumstances that tend to produce problems. On the other hand, emotional vindaloo will only help to disclose wrongs in novel situations if one is in such a state all the time, or at least when one happens to encounter a situation in which the previously unrecognized (within one's moral community) wrong is taking place [Ibid., 210–11].

(p.108) The conclusion of Meyers' essay is not that we should all strive to be angry all the time. Often the best approach will be to shift into a rancorous mode only when circumstances call for it. Meyers also acknowledges that emotional vanilla often is the best basis for moral perception, even occasionally for insight into systematic oppression [Ibid., 213–14]. Her overall view can be summarized this way: (1) There is no single moral outlook that ensures insightful moral perception in all kinds of situations. (2) Rancorous emotional attitudes do a better job than emotional vanilla in detecting oppressive conditions. (3) "It is a fact that rancorous individuals exist, and some of them are ahead of their vanilla peers. If they are ostracized, their prescient insights will be suppressed" [Ibid., 213]. (4) So we ought to recognize and value more than one emotional basis for insightful moral perception, not just because a plurality of approaches will serve us better, but also because it is a more "egalitarian" and, for many members of subordinated social groups, a more "attainable" conception of insightful moral perception.

It should be clear that Meyers has raised several challenges to the ideals of harmony and sagehood. Rancorous emotional attitudes are very different from the emotional harmony that Neo-Confucians believe characterizes the sage. If sages are accurately characterized as emotionally "vanilla," are they in fact inferior moral perceivers, at least in some respects, to those with roiling anger? Will sages be systematically blind to culturally endorsed yet oppressive situations? Would our efforts at moral education and personal betterment be more successful if they were more egalitarian—and in particular, embraced extreme, rancorous attitudes?

6.6.2 Neo-Confucians on Anger

The first step toward answering these challenges is to consider what Neo-Confucians had to say about anger. Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming were particularly struck by three passages on anger bequeathed to them by the classical tradition. One comes from the *Analects* 6:2, in which Confucius is cited as commending his favorite student, Yan Hui, for "not transferring his anger." Zhu Xi explains the intuitive idea as not getting angry at one person because of what someone else did, and endorses an earlier Neo-Confucian's more abstract explanation that "the anger is in its object, rather than in oneself."[35] In other words, Yan Hui was not roused into a general state of anger, which anger could spill over onto people other than the appropriate object of his anger. This is tantamount to endorsing Yan Hui for not being subject to anything like Audre Lorde's chronic anger.

The second passage echoes the *Analects*' suggestion that it can be appropriate to be angry. As I discussed in chapter 4, the famous opening of the *Zhongyong* says very clearly that so long as the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are manifested harmoniously, they are perfectly apt. However, Neo-Confucians were quick to juxtapose this with a third passage that stresses the difficulty of such harmonious manifestation. The *Great Learning* states that when the mind is affected by "fondness, wrath, vexations, or fear," it will not be correct.[36] The following two sections from Wang Yangming's *Record for Practice* help us flesh out when **(p.109)** and how anger can be appropriate. In Section 218, Wang replies as follows to an official who worries he cannot pursue Wang's program for learning because his duty of presiding over litigations leave him no free time:

> … You should pursue learning right in those official duties. Only then will you be truly investigating things. For instance, when you interrogate a litigant, do not

> become angry because his replies are impolite or glad because his words are smooth; do not punish him because you hate his effort to solicit help from your superiors; … do not decide the case carelessly on the spur of the moment because you are busy with your own affairs…. To do any of these is selfish. You need only follow what you know in yourself. You must carefully examine yourself and control yourself, lest your mind become in the least prejudiced and distort who is right and who is wrong. [Wang 1963, 197–98, slightly modified]

We can juxtapose this instance of when not to be angry with the following discussion of improper wrath and proper anger:

> I asked about the statement, “Whenever one is affected by wrath to any extent [one's mind will not be correct].”
>
> The Teacher said, “How can the human mind not experience wrath? It's just that one cannot have this mind.[37] In every case wrath involves attachment to personal ideas, one's anger is excessive, and one's mind is no longer the original substance that is broad and impartial. Therefore, whenever one is affected by wrath to any extent, one's mind will not be correct. Now with regard to wrath, if one can only respond to all things spontaneously as they come and not attach any personal ideas, the nature of one's mind will be broad and extremely impartial and will naturally attain the correctness characteristic of its original substance. Suppose we go outside and find some people fighting. We all feel angry in our minds at the party who is wrong. However, although we are angry, our minds are broad and our vital force (*qi* □) is not perturbed in the least. This is the way to be angry at people. Only in this way can we be correct.” [Ibid., 204–5, substantially modified]; see Wang [1983, 308–9 (§235)].

Wrath comes from an inappropriate personalization of the situation. In the first passage, the official's role is to impartially determine rightness and wrongness among the litigants. He should not get caught up in demanding deference, just as he should not reward sycophancy. Similarly, exigencies of his own affairs cannot be allowed to intrude on a fair decision. In the case of the second passage's fight, one would be wrong to get angry at one party simply because he or she reminded one of some bully from one's childhood. That would be wrath. Proper anger, says Wang, is broad and impartial, a response to significant violations of the way—that is, to situations that are strongly unharmonious. Zhu Xi agreed **(p.110)** that sages can and should be angry, and furthermore should show it on their faces: in such cases, a smiling countenance would be wrong [Zhu 1997, 2197].

Wang's claim that in proper anger, we feel “angry in our minds” but “our vital force (*qi*) is not perturbed in the least,” is striking and requires comment. It is crucial to remember that while I have often been translating “*xin* □” as “mind,” *xin* is the seat of cognitive and conative consciousness for Chinese thinkers, and thus the source of both intellectual and emotional reactions. Thus in Wang's example, we really do “feel” angry and react—by intervening, calling for help, or whatever is appropriate. Our reaction comes out of an initial “vanilla” state, rather than from a smoldering anger against bullies; and our reaction itself is focused and constrained. Like Yan Hui, we do not “transfer” our anger. The upshot of this is that while sages can and do react with anger, their anger and what we normally think of as anger can be quite different. Sages are looking for harmony, not for revenge or an opportunity to vent frustration. Most of the time we react angrily to a situation, we can hear Wang saying, there is at least an element of wrath involved. We would be better, and our reactions more likely to conduce toward harmonious outcomes, if our reactions were less personalized.

6.6.3 Conclusions

Some readers may react to this by thinking, “See? Meyers was right. Sages will seek quiet compromise rather than explosive confrontation, and this bland response will never succeed in identifying, much less uprooting, deep-seated oppression.” To respond, let us first distinguish perception from action. It is one thing to say that without chronic, personalized anger of the kind Neo-Confucians clearly reject, we will not be able to perceive wrongs. It is another to suggest that only explosively angry—wrathful, in Wang's terms—responses will have any traction against oppressive practices. Meyers would acknowledge that the first of these claims is too strong. In the penultimate paragraph of her essay, she writes:

> I am not claiming that no conscientious, reflective individual could possibly discern the wrongs that hypersensitivity, paranoia, anger, and bitterness disclose.[38] … Nussbaum discuss[es] fictional characters who are so “finely aware and richly responsible” (to echo Nussbaum's appropriation of Henry James's phrase) that they are able to engage fruitfully with novel repertoires of moral concepts. Indeed, I myself have argued elsewhere that an individual's moral outlook can be enriched through empathy with others. Although I think childrearing and educational practices should be designed to cultivate capacities that support individual sensitivity, I also think it is incumbent on us to realize how rare such sensitivity is. [Meyers 1997, 213–14].

Wang and the Neo-Confucians, through the doctrine of forming one body with all things, put great stress on empathy.[39] It is also striking that as far as education goes, Meyers endorses ideas that fit well with the Neo-Confucian method of learning to be a sage (to be discussed in later chapters). No one will dispute that capacities approaching full, sagely perception are very rare. In short, despite Meyers' **(p.111)** explicit denial that there is “some ideal moral outlook that ensures insightful moral perception in all kinds of situations” [Ibid., 211], her final remarks are relatively friendly to the idea of sagehood.

With regard to action, two issues remain. First, are responses that aim toward harmony less constructive than wrathful ones? Of course, Meyers has not even tried to argue for this conclusion, which I think is quite implausible on its face. Whatever plausibility it may have comes from understanding “harmony” too narrowly—essentially as not rocking the boat. But we have seen that from the earliest writings on harmony, Confucians distinguished it from “uniformity (*tong*),” which meant to go with whatever the prince said. An intervention aimed at harmony can be quite strong if it is being inserted into a context that seriously denies that we all form one body.[40] Second, even if Meyers does not reject the sage ideal as strongly as it sometimes sounds, she does want to insist that rancorous non-sages have important contributions to make—and, given the paucity of sages or near-sages, that we may have to rely rather heavily on contributions from people like Lorde, the chronically angry poet.[41] I think that Neo-Confucians can largely agree with this. We should not aim at rancor, but we should be ready to empathize with and learn from the roles that many different people and perspectives can play in the complex moral ecology of our actual, non-sagely lives. Indeed, this is precisely what sages would do.

The primary motivation of this chapter has been to defend the Neo-Confucian emphasis on harmony and sagehood from several challenges. The result has been not only a defense, but also a further articulation of Neo-Confucian ethics. The roles played by imagination, various emotions, and harmony are now clearer. This helps us to better understand Neo-Confucian philosophy itself and might also enable broader cross-tradition philosophical construction. In the terms introduced in the introduction, developing Neo-Confucian ethics in light of challenges from Nussbaum, Stohr, Meyers, and others counts as "rooted global philosophy." When we take the distinctive Neo-Confucian positions and use them to challenge Western philosophers, we are undertaking "constructive engagement." In the next chapter, I continue to pursue both these strategies with respect to issues of moral perception and the kind of "ease" with which a sage acts. **(p.112)**

Notes:

(1.) Neo-Confucian sages should thus be seen as entirely different from R. M. Hare's "archangel," whom Nussbaum takes as exemplifying what it would be like to experience all moral problems the way that Maggie initially tries to. While I disagree with her offhand comment that we need more "proles" than "archangels"—given what Hare means by "prole"—her general argument here is well-taken, as is her point that even Aquinas believed that angels were "poor guides for getting around in this world, however well off they might be in heaven." See Nussbaum [1990a, 66] and Hare [1981, 44–5].

(2.) Mark Csikszentmihalyi provides important background to this idea that sages can avoid either-or choices in Csikszentmihalyi [2004]. He cites some early examples of individuals faced with dilemmas who do not find good solutions; early commentaries on these stories invoke the phrase "both advancing and retreating are problematic" [Ibid., 4]. However, a theme of Csikszentmihalyi's book is the emergence of the idea of perfect sages who can sythesize or (in my language) harmonize the various relevant virtues. His focus is on the physical-cum-psychological "material virtue" underlying this and other developments.

(3.) "*Qiao*" often has a somewhat negative connotation, like "clever," but Zhu makes it explicit that he has a positive notion in mind. For a somewhat different reading of Zhu's interpretation, see Shun [1997, 64–5].

(4.) Elsewhere Zhu says this is an example of the method of “cultivating this heart, so as to broaden the reach of one's humaneness” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 9].

(5.) On “creativity,” see Section 4.1.2.

(6.) I will explore some of what might allow us to do this in subsequent chapters. One excellent treatment of related themes, albeit without reliance on Chinese traditions, is Rorty [2004]. Another recent theorist whose work resonates with Neo-Confucianism is Christine Swanton. On her account, “honoring” the various values relevant to a situation is only one of the forms of “moral recognition” that a virtuous person should enact. Her “constraint integration” view of ethical problem solving, therefore, involves numerous dimensions of, and relations to, value. See Swanton [2003].

(7.) The key difference between a perfect, sagelike response and an imperfect response may not be immediacy. A spontaneous reaction is certainly better than a labored one, just as a smooth, flowing response seems better than an awkward and hesitant one, but if important details are unclear, I do not think that sages should be seen as having superhuman abilities to immediately disambiguate such matters. See also the next chapter, on sagely “ease.”

(8.) See *Mencius* 2A:7, which reads in part, “The maker of arrows is afraid lest he should fail to harm people, whereas the maker of armor is afraid lest they should be harmed … . For this reason one cannot be too careful in the choice of one's calling” [Mencius 1970, 83]. Interestingly enough, when discussing the case of her business owner having to tell employees they have been fired, Stohr adds that for some people who must regularly deliver such news, a certain degree of coldness may not be a failing [Stohr 2003, 344n12]. Mencius would disagree, as I think would the Neo-Confucians, as I explain in the next paragraph. I would like to thank Sharon Sanderovitch for stimulating discussion of matters relating to these ideas, on which see also her Sanderovitch [2007].

(9.) See Wang [1963, 222–3 (§276)].

(10.) Frisina grounds this interpretation of Wang in passages like the following: “The man of humanity regards heaven and earth and all things as one body. If a single thing is deprived of its place, it means that my humanity is not yet demonstrated to the fullest extent” [Wang 1963, 56 (§93)].

(11.) In two insightful essays, Yu Kam Por has found evidence in classical and Han dynasty texts for a view very much like the one I am developing here. For instance, he notes that according to the *Analects* 6:18, “the deficiency of one value cannot be compensated for by additional qualities of another value” [Yu forthcoming, 63]. Commenting on this *Analects* passage, Zhu says both that “Only when students reduce what is excessive and supplement what is deficient can they attain complete virtue” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 40], and that if either value “wins out over the other, coherence cannot be adequately [attained]” [Zhu 1997, 727]. Even more strikingly, Yu has found a passage in the *Yi Zhou Shu* that explicitly names the synthetic, harmonious point at which we should aim: “If there is an *in-between* (*zhong* □), it is called *three*. If there is no *in-between*, it is called *two. Two* struggles with each other, and results in weakness. *Three* constitutes harmony, and results in strength.” Yu adds, “*three* is not another claim that competes with the *two*, but a synthesis of the two” [Yu 2009, 17, emphasis in original].

(12.) [Yu forthcoming, 61]; Yu bases his argument on classical and Han dynasty rather than Neo-Confucian writings, but his reasoning and examples are still extremely relevant.

(13.) Another famous passage with a similar message occurs in *Zhuangzi* 6, when two friends sing and rejoice upon a third friend's death. See Zhuangzi [1994, 60]. For a striking evocation and analysis of such attitudes, see Yearley [1983, esp. 135].

(14.) Zhu expresses this basic idea many times, for instance when he says that grief is the “root” of a funeral [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 20].

(15.) [Wang 1983, 82 (§44)]; translation from Wang [1963, p. 38–9], slightly altered.

(16.) In conversation, one of the leading contemporary Chinese interpreters of Confucianism, Professor Guo Qiyong of Wuhan University, agreed that the “whole situation” to which Mencius refers is actually more complex than Mencius tells us. But Prof. Guo argued that rather than saying Mencius is “mistakenly” leaving things out, we should conclude that in his particular dialogical/pedagogical context, Mencius emphasized certain things and not others. For the purposes of my project, this interpretive stance is perfectly congenial, since it still allows for sophisticated contemporary development.

(17.) According to *Zhongyong* 1, “grief (*ai* □)” is a natural emotion which, when one feels it to the right degree, is part of a harmonious response.

(18.) This connection to ritual is another way in which grief is closely related to reverence. See Woodruff [2001, esp. ch. 6] on ritual and reverence.

(19.) *Mencius* 2A:6 and 7B:31, respectively. See Mencius [1970, 82 and 200].

(20.) Contrast Wang [1983, 319 (§254)], in which Wang discusses cases in which we “bear” things that we should not, and thus “harm coherence.”

(21.) Kwong-loi Shun and Bryan Van Norden make a related point when they say that sages are not of “two minds,” vacillating between two courses of action. Instead, sages are characterized by “motivational harmony.” It is striking that Shun defines “motivational harmony” in almost the same terms that Karen Stohr defines her “harmony thesis.” Here is Shun: a person exhibits motivational harmony when his “inclinations are well-aligned with his moral judgments, and [his] moral actions are therefore not actions against recalcitrant inclinations” [Shun 1986, 42]. Here, for comparison, is Stohr's “harmony thesis”: “a virtuous agent's feelings should be in harmony with her judgments about what she should do,” and so “she should find virtuous action easy and pleasant” [Stohr 2003, 339]. In light of my discussion here, we can see that the key difference lies in Stohr's assumption that “harmony” means that virtuous action will be “easy and pleasant." See also the related discussion in Van Norden [1997, 249].

(22.) In conversation, Daniel Bell has posed the following challenge to the idea that sages do not feel regret: "A sage may be feeling tired and take a nap and let his child play under what would normally be safe conditions, but if something unlucky happens to the child that could have been prevented if the sage had not taken a nap, it seems that regret is an appropriate emotion to experience." I believe it is perfectly sensible to maintain that a genuine sage, whose choices—including those that led to him or her being tired—have manifested universal coherence, would of course be saddened by such an unlucky occurrence, but need not "regret" in the sense I am using the term. Bell also suggested that "there's something arrogant—and wrong—about believing that one can't make any mistakes in the future." My response is that no one should take him or herself to be a sage: that is a failure of humility. A sage can and should be confident and appropriately forceful in each given case, but should not be arrogant in the way Bell describes.

(23.) My thanks to Elise Springer for discussion of these murky matters. Interestingly relevant to these questions is Aaron Stalnaker's discussion of the differences between Xunzi and Augustine on whether our past sins have such momentum that we can never truly overcome their influence [Stalnaker 2006, 135].

(24.) In contrast, *Mencius* 5A:1 recognizes the complexities caused by multiple values. Shun weeps because he cannot please his parents, but he does not wallow in grief. My student Ben Brewer has noted an intriguing parallel between *Mencius* 5A:3 (discussed above, in which Xiang is simultaneously enfeoffed and banished) and 7A:35 (in which Shun flees with his father): Could we not consider the latter case to involve the banishment of the Blind Man? Shun gives the Blind Man his son's full love and attention, but at the same time removes him from society. We typically see the removal from society as a matter of safeguarding the Blind Man from arrest, but does it not also protect others from the Blind Man? This reading of 7A:35 helps it to better accommodate all the relevant values.

(25.) I appreciate P. J. Ivanhoe's help on this point. See also the further discussion of the sage's mixed feelings, and sadness at the state of the world, in the next section.

(26.) Although working from very different premises, Swedene [2005] arrives at an interestingly similar conclusion to mine; he argues that our moral educational practices should be designed such that in response to putative moral dilemmas, "negative self-assessing emotions ought to be discouraged in favor of emotions such as grief and sadness, which are negative and self-conscious, but not self-assessing."

(27.) Hursthouse herself echoes this idea, when she writes that "A too great readiness to think 'I can't do anything but this terrible thing, nothing else is open to me' is a mark of vice" [Hursthouse 1999, 87n23].

(28.) Blackburn [1996] argues that such situations are quite common, and offers useful discussion of "plumping," which in some circumstances might be quite lighthearted, in others weighty and ritualized.

(29.) The difference between a *life* being marred—in the sense of "too bad it happened in that life"—and a *person* being marred was suggested to me by Kelly Sorenson, who has my thanks.

(30.) [Zhu & Lü 1983, 207]; translation from Zhu and Lü [1967, 188 (§13)], significantly altered. See also the similar sentiment in Section 23, later in the same chapter: "There is only one way to handle one's difficulty or danger. After he has done all he can, he should calmly leave it alone."

(31.) Another classic passage that bears on the present point is *Mencius* 2B:13, especially as interpreted by Zhu Xi. Mencius has left the state of Qi, having failed to convert its ruler to the Way. He appears saddened, and a disciple questions whether a *junzi* should have such a reaction: it goes against Mencius's famous teaching of the "unmoved heart." Mencius responds rather cryptically that *Tian* apparently did not wish a true king to arise at this point; why should he be unhappy? Zhu Xi's commentary is insightful, and whether it is the correct reading or not, reveals his own thinking quite clearly. "We can see here the simultaneous presence, without contradiction, of the sage's commitment to worry on behalf of the world, and the complete sincerity of his taking joy in *Tian*" [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 58]. Worry or concern or sadness can be combined in the sage's breast with joy: Mencius is suffering no "regret" in my technical sense. For an insightful and pathbreaking discussion of this passage, see also Ivanhoe [1988].

(32.) Elise Springer is writing insightfully on the complex process of both taking on moral responsibility, and passing it on to others who may have more traction on the issues at hand. I have learned a great deal from her work-in-progress, "Criticism and Moral Concern."

(33.) Michael Slote's critique of "conscientiousness" is quite relevant here; see Slote [2001, 51–8].

(34.) Meyers discusses similarities and differences among emotional attitudes, occurent emotions, and standing emotions. Emotional attitudes seem closely related to temperament and character, though there is room for more work to unpack these relations. In light of the Neo-Confucian "one body with all things" teaching, we also might want to expand Meyers' definition beyond "interpersonal encounters."

(35.) [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 35], citing Cheng Yi.

(36.) *Great Learning* 7. "Wrath" is "*fenzhi* □□," more or less synonymous with the standard term for anger, "*nü* □," but clearly used by Neo-Confucians as a technical term for errant anger. "*Nü*" is a neutral term which can be appropriate or not, depending on how and when it is manifested.

(37.) Wang is alluding to the well-known distinction between the "human mind" and the "*dao* mind": the former represents our selfish attachments; the latter, our all-encompassing (though not self-denying) reactions.

(38.) Remember that, as discussed earlier and also in the next chapter, sages are not “conscientious,” but spontaneous in their perception of disharmony and in their reactions thereto.

(39.) See Section 5.1.1 on different views concerning whether we can empathize with “mere things.” Also relevant here are Bridget Clarke's arguments, based on elements of Iris Murdoch's picture which have strong corollaries in Neo-Confucianism, that virtuous people will be able to identify patterns of discrimination and oppression. See Clarke [2003, esp. ch. 4].

(40.) I elaborate on this idea, with attention to the possibilities of someone committed to harmony nonetheless standing up for his or her rights, in Angle [2008, 88]. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Confucians tend to see direct confrontations as less useful than more indirect criticism. Discussing the gradual and indirect means by which Shun eventually led his brother to reform his wicked ways, Wang Yangming says: “If one criticized [a wicked person's] mistakes, it would aggravate his bad nature. At first Shun brought about the condition in which Xiang desired to kill him because he was too anxious for Xiang to be good. This was where Shun was mistaken. After some experience he realized that the task merely consisted of disciplining himself and not of admonishing others. Consequently, harmony was achieved” [Wang 1983, 345 (§296)]; translation slightly modified from Wang [1963, 232].

(41.) A striking, Confucian example of rancorous attitudes comes from Zheng Jiadong's portrait of twentieth-century New Confucians like Mou Zongsan. Zheng writes that these men were “embittered by the fact that so few people in the mundane world responded sympathetically to their views, and so their ideas failed to secure nurturing and corroboration.… They loathed the ways of the world, were aloof and acrimonious, full of anger, and readily abusive. They opposed and criticized reality; it would be difficult to say that in any real sense they were constructive” [Zheng 2005, 85].

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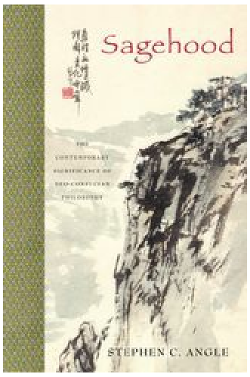

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Sagely Ease and Moral Perception

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

How is it possible that a sage can act with ease? According to the *Analects*, Confucius was able to “follow his heart's desire without overstepping the bounds” by the time he reached age seventy. The chapter explores what Wang Yangming means when he says that sages have a “mature commitment” and the relation this bears to his famous doctrine of “the unity of knowledge and action.” This interpretation then provides the grounding both for a novel understanding of Wang Yangming's philosophy itself, and the key to Neo-Confucianism's insightful account of moral perception. The chapter draws on contemporary philosophers like Murdoch and Blum to help flesh out the Neo-Confucian picture, including showing how Murdoch's famous example of a mother and her daughter-in-law (M and D) can help us to better understand the critical Neo-Confucian orientation of “looking for harmony.”

Keywords: sagely ease, Confucius, Wang Yangming, commitment, unity of knowledge and action, moral perception, Iris Murdoch, Lawrence Blum

In what is probably the most famous description of a sage in all of Chinese philosophy, the *Analects* tells us that when Confucius reached the age of seventy, he was able to “follow his heart's desire without overstepping the line” [*Analects* 2:4]. It seems that Confucius came to be able to act properly without even trying. Presumably, at least some of the time, acting properly is easy for most of us. When not faced with a difficult choice or temptation, perhaps we get along fine. The *Analects* is nonetheless making a very strong claim. Confucius, we may assume, did find himself faced with difficult choices or temptations, and still he was able to follow his heart's desires. The implication is not that Confucius was lucky not to be challenged, but that successfully meeting any challenge was easy. We can think also of the legendary sage-king Shun, who is described in the *Mencius* as able to feel genuine filial love, and act accordingly, even for a father who was trying to kill him [*Mencius* 5A:1–3]. It is apparently easy for a sage to act correctly, even in the most difficult circumstances.[1] How is this possible?

In chapter 3 we saw that in both Western traditions and in Confucianism, “virtue” is tied to having a disposition to respond well to the situations one encounters. Such responses are meant to be automatic rather than forced, although the different traditions offer varying roles for reflective or deliberative pauses. chapter 1 has already introduced the idea from early in the Confucian tradition that the sage has distinctive perceptual capacities. My focus here will be on the ways in which these early ideas are developed by Neo-Confucians in terms of an active, perceptual engagement with the world. This will help us to flesh out the dispositions required for virtue. In short, the argument of this chapter is that sagely ease is the result of sagely perception, and **(p.114)** that sagely perception, in turn, grows out of an ever-deepening commitment to view the world as susceptible to harmony. My point of departure will be Wang Yangming's insightful reading of *Analects* 2:4, and I will rely on Wang throughout the chapter, though the themes I develop here also resonate strongly in Zhu Xi's writings.[2]

7.1 Wang Yangming on *Analects* 2:4; the Centrality of “Commitment”

Let us then turn to Wang's commentary on *Analects* 2:4. Wang is recorded as having had the following conversation with a student named Tang Xu:

> Tang Xu asked, “Does establishing one's commitment (*li zhì* □□) mean to always preserve a good thought, and to do good and remove bad?”
>
> [The teacher] replied: “When a good thought is preserved, that is universal coherence.… This thought is like the roots of a tree. Establishing one's commitment is nothing other than nurturing this good thought. To be able to ‘follow one's heart's desire without overstepping the line’ is simply when one's commitment has reached maturity (*shu* □).”[3]

At the core of Wang's understanding of *Analects* 2:4 is the idea of “*zhì* □,” which I translate as “commitment.”[4] Before going further into how Wang would have us understand sagely action, let us take a few moments to examine *zhì*.

7.1.1 Commitment in Classical Texts

A frequently cited classical definition of *zhì* is “where the mind is going.”[5] It is sometimes translated as “intention” or “will,” but as I will show, these translations make *zhì* more transient than it really is. There is a continuity to *zhì*, as well as a varying level of personal involvement, that make “commitment” a good gloss. We can see both these aspects by comparing two early *Analects* passages:

> 4:4 The Master said, If once he is committed to humaneness, he will have no hatred.[6]
>
> 4:9 The Master said, If an officer is committed to the Way, but is ashamed of having bad clothes or bad food, he is not worth taking counsel with.[7]

The contrast between these two passages is stark: 4:4 describes a moral exemplar, while 4:9 pictures someone who has made a verbal commitment that he is apparently unable to live up to, and thus is in no sense an exemplar. We are forced to see two different levels or types of commitment: 4:4 shows genuine, full-fledged, **(p.115)** or (to follow Wang Yangming) mature commitment; the officer in 4:9 falls short of these, though he, too, in some sense merits talk of “commitment.”[8]

In other ways, the *Analects* supports the idea that the depth, and thus effect, of *zhì* can vary. In 2:4, in fact, we are told that Confucius's moral development began with *zhì*: “At fifteen, I was committed to learning.” This is obviously still a long way from his eventual achievement at age seventy. Other passages suggest that a person's *zhì* can be even more speculative than this: both 5:26 and 11:26 involve disciples sharing with Confucius their *zhì*. One student boldly tells Confucius, “If I were to administer a state of a thousand chariots, situated between powerful neighbors, troubled by armed invasions and by repeated famines, I could, within three years, give the people courage and a sense of direction” [Confucius 1979, 110]. In this case, I find myself in sympathy with one translator's rendition of this person's *zhì* [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 150][9] as merely his “wish.”[10]

7.1.2 Commitment in Wang Yangming

Let us now return to Wang Yangming.[11] Recall that he explained Confucius at seventy by saying that one can “follow one's heart's desire without overstepping the line” when “one's commitment has reached maturity.” To say that commitment can reach maturity (*shu* □) is obviously to say that after one has made a commitment, that commitment can deepen, or mature, over time.[12] *Zhì* is therefore a characteristic that one's mind can come to take on. One can come to be committed—in a sense that I will develop later—and this will mean that one's mind recognizes-good-thoughts-and-develops-them, or recognizes-bad-thoughts-and-stops-them.[13] My hyphens are meant to emphasize that to the degree one has *zhì*, the recognition and development (or stopping) are part of a single process. As we will see, Wang emphasizes the intimate relation between the two sides of this process in his famous doctrine of the “unity of knowledge and action.”

To make a commitment is to seek to develop something: the disposition, we might say, to “know-and-develop” good thoughts and “know-and-stop” bad ones. This returns us to the two senses of *zhì* we saw in the *Analects*: on the one hand, the verbal commitment not (yet) backed up by a disposition to follow through, and on the other hand, a full-blown disposition. To say that Wang is talking of commitment in this sense, though, looks initially to run headlong into P. J. Ivanhoe's well-established argument that whereas talk of “development” is appropriate to the self-cultivation model of a classical Confucian like Mencius, according to whom we begin with rudimentary moral tendencies that must be developed if we are to improve morally, Wang Yangming's understanding of self-cultivation is very different. Wang focuses on the idea of “discovery” of an already existing moral capacity, our *liang zhī* □□, which Ivanhoe translates as “pure knowing.” This capacity needs no development—it comes fully formed—although we must discover it within ourselves and clear away various obstacles to its functioning.[14] In fact, however, my talk of dispositions and commitments fits better with Ivanhoe's model than it first appears, since it is precisely by solidifying our commitment that we are able to give our *liang zhī* its proper role in our moral lives.

(p.116) Ivanhoe argues persuasively that unlike Mencius, the growth of moral feelings does not figure in Wang's understanding of human nature or self-cultivation. Ivanhoe points to Wang's use of metaphors like the sun obscured by clouds, pure gold which can be tainted, and a perfect mirror marred by dust: all suggest that a fully formed moral faculty lies within each of us, though in each case its functioning is impaired [Ivanhoe 2002, 48–50]. Passage 30 of Wang's *Record for Practice*, however, poses a challenge to Ivanhoe's interpretation. It reads, in part:

> Establishing a commitment and applying effort are like planting a tree. When the tree first sprouts there is still no trunk. Then there is a trunk, but there are still no branches. After there are branches, then there are leaves. After there are leaves, then there are flowers and fruit. When one first plants the root, one should only be concerned about nourishing and caring for it. Do not think about the branches. Do not think about the leaves. Do not think about the flowers. And do not think about the fruit. How does dreaming about these things help in any way? Do not neglect the work of nourishing and caring, fearing that there will be no branches, leaves, flowers, or fruit.[15]

It seems obvious that this describes a process of development, but Ivanhoe proposes that the simile employed here masks the crucial difference between Wang Yangming and Mencius. This contrast between Mencius's “developmental” model and Wang's “discovery” approach means that we must be careful, Ivanhoe argues, about how we read Wang's deployment of the tree simile: “For Wang, the extension of pure knowing is the application of knowledge one already possesses. One seeks and gains nothing in the process; the goal is to lose one's delusions. For Mencius, our innate moral tendencies aren't *like* sprouts—they *are* sprouts” [2002, 104].

If moral knowledge is not something that grows, though, Ivanhoe finds himself at a loss as to what Wang's invocation of the tree simile can mean. He writes:

> How is ‘establishing a commitment’ like planting a tree? Wang didn't believe in the growth of the moral sprouts. From his descriptions, ‘establishing a commitment’ seems like lighting a fuse or starting a fire. Mencius has moments in which he insists we must simply make ourselves follow a certain course of action, but Wang's entire enterprise seems to consist of repeated acts of sheer will. [Ibid., 105]

The best Ivanhoe can do with Wang's simile is to see it as expressing the great time and effort it can often take to remove the selfish obstructions keeping one from awakening to one's pure knowledge. He cites Wang from another passage as follows: “In the early stages of growth, [a tree] will produce many branches, and these must be cut off. Only then can the roots and trunk grow large. In the early stages of study, the same is true. Thus in establishing a commitment, singleness of purpose (*zhuan yi* □—) is to be valued.”[16] Ivanhoe emphasizes that Wang's discussion of trees focuses on pruning rather than on growth because **(p.117)** he argues that eliminating selfish desires through acts of sheer will is the whole content of Wang's program of self-cultivation: “This is the only response available to him; he did not believe in the *growth* of the moral sense, and so he could not hope for progress from any other quarter” [2002, 103].

7.1.3 Deepening Our Commitment

I agree with many aspects of Ivanhoe's reading of Wang, but his conclusion that Wang “could not hope for progress from any other quarter” underplays an important aspect of Wang's picture. Ivanhoe thinks that the only sort of growth that is relevant to self-cultivation is development of our moral sense(s), but Wang also looks to the deepening or maturation of our *zhì*, our commitment.[17] Trees mature and grow; so must our *zhì*. Many of the passages in which Wang discusses *zhì* make explicit that it is something that admits of degrees; it can deepen over time. Admittedly, Wang is after something quite different from Mencius: Ivanhoe is absolutely correct that there is a “discovery” aspect to Wang's model of cultivation. Consider the following passage:

> [A student] asked about “establishing commitment.” The teacher said: “It is simply to want to preserve universal coherence in every thought. If one does not neglect this, in time it will naturally crystallize in one's mind. This is like what the Daoists call “the congealing of the sage-essence.” If the thought of universal coherence is always preserved, then the gradual steps to the levels of beautiful person, great person, sage, and spiritual person are all but the cultivation and extension of this one thought.[18]

What needs to grow, in other words, is the consistency with which we “want to preserve universal coherence in every thought”: this consistent disposition is *zhì*. Universal coherence itself and our ability to identify it—topics I will take up later—do not develop. We must discover the ability to articulate universal coherence, and thus ultimately coherence itself, within ourselves. The process of deepening our commitment is certainly related to increasing the purity with which our *liang zhī* shines forth. In addition, there are two active aspects to cultivating one's commitment, which I see as two sides of a single coin. One is the negative aspect on which Ivanhoe has focused, namely pruning selfish desires. I believe he has missed the positive aspect, though, which serves to bind the whole process together (and make it considerably more plausible).[19]

The flip side of removing selfish desires is to look actively for harmony in the universe. It will take me some time before I can fully flesh out this claim, and explain how it connects to other aspects of Wang's vision. As a first step, let us recognize how important harmony is to Wang. For instance, Wang was once asked to comment on an earlier Confucian's doctrine that one should "devote one's effort to the area of human feelings and human affairs." Wang agreed, noting that the course of our human affairs depends on our human feelings, and concluded that "The important point is to achieve the state of equilibrium and harmony, and achieving equilibrium and harmony depends primarily on being **(p.118)** watchful over oneself when alone."[20] Wang refers repeatedly to equilibrium and harmony in his conversations and letters, drawing on terminology from the classical-era text *Zhongyong*. In the first instance, harmony refers to the situationally appropriate expression of emotions. Perhaps the best illustration of this comes in a passage, already discussed in chapters 4 and 6, in which Wang responds to his student's telling him that the student was experiencing terrible sorrow upon learning of his son's illness. Recall that Wang says, " … A father's love for his son is of course the noblest feeling. Nevertheless, there is naturally a place of equilibrium and harmony within universal coherence. To be excessive means to have selfish thoughts."[21] This nicely expresses the idea that finding harmony and avoiding selfishness go hand in hand.

Before moving on, it would be well to note that although Wang's discussion of harmony focuses on the harmony of one's feelings with one's situation, Wang agrees with the *Zhongyong* that such harmony has far-reaching consequences. In response to a student's question about whether one should focus on inner cultivation or on institutional reforms, Wang argues for the former, but concludes: "When equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, a proper order prevails in the universe and all things attain their full growth and development. That is the full development of the nature and the fulfillment of the decree."[22] Our own harmony, that is, relates intimately to a broader harmony, namely the proper order that characterizes universal coherence.

7.2 Connecting "Commitment" to "Unity of Knowledge and Action"

We now turn to Wang's teaching that knowledge (*zhī*) and action can and should be unified; we will see that it is commitment (*zhì*) that makes the unification possible. This, in turn, will allow us to get further toward an understanding of the ease of sagely action (as suggested in *Analects* 2:4), both via the "unity of knowledge and action" doctrine itself, and through connections between Wang's teaching and discussions in the Western philosophical tradition of moral perception. The notion of commitment will not only let us make good sense of Wang's challenging claims, but also shed important light on issues of significant cross-cultural interest.

Let us begin with some text. In his most important discussion of the subject, Wang responds to a student who cannot understand how knowledge and action can be said to be unified. The student gives the following example to Wang: “There are people who know that their parents should be served with filial piety and elder brothers with respect but cannot put these things into practice. This shows that knowledge and action are clearly two different things.” Wang responds:

> The knowledge and action you refer to are already separated by selfish desires and are no longer knowledge and action in themselves. There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who **(p.119)** are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know. When sages and worthies taught people about knowledge and action, it was precisely because they wanted them to restore [knowledge and action] in themselves, and not simply to do this or that and be satisfied.

Pause here and focus for a moment on the last sentence. Wang is emphasizing that the goal of cultivation is not simply to act correctly now and again; it is to transform oneself—to become Confucius at seventy—so that one always acts correctly. Wang continues:

> Therefore the *Great Learning* points to true knowledge and action for people to see, saying they are “like loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors.” Seeing beautiful colors appertains to knowledge, while loving beautiful colors appertains to action. However, as soon as one sees that beautiful color, he has already, automatically loved it. It is not that one sees it first and them makes up one's mind to love it.[23]

True knowledge and true action[24] are as closely connected as loving beautiful colors. “Loving” here must mean to have an immediate favorable response to the color, although of course one might decide, on balance, that it is not the right color for one's new car, or house, or what have you.

The idea, in other words, is that when we see a color *as beautiful*, we thereby love it. But we can go farther than this. Wang is not just making a descriptive prediction, to the effect that those who see beautiful colors will tend to love them. His claim is really that we *should* love beautiful colors: part of what it is to be a beautiful color is for it to be an appropriate object of our love. In fact, the appropriateness of “loving a beautiful color” is even more apparent in Chinese, since the words that the *Great Learning* text uses to express “beautiful color,” namely “*hao se* □□,” could also be rendered as “lovable color.” To “love a beautiful color,” that is, is to “*hao*” a “*hao*” color.[25] Wang often uses the image of a mirror to capture the way we should respond to our situation: so long as the mirror is not dirtied by selfish desires, we will accurately reflect/respond to the situation. What we can now see is that such responses are not merely perceptual, but affective as well. If someone agreed that a particular color was beautiful, but did not feel any love for it, we would have to wonder whether such a person shared our concept of beautiful.

Another possible case is someone who disagrees with us over whether the color in question is beautiful, and thus lovable, but who recognizes many colors as beautiful and loves them. There are really two different issues here. On the one hand, we might imagine a situation in which one party to the dispute claimed to have a superior sensitivity or judgment: he or she is an aesthetic expert, and rejects the common view that some particular color is beautiful. On the other hand, perhaps the disputants find themselves in wholesale disagreement about which colors are beautiful, with only seemingly random overlaps between the sets of colors each identifies (and loves). Wang would certainly deny that the second of these two cases represents a genuine dispute. He is no relativist, and so would conclude, plausibly enough, that the disputants were talking past one **(p.120)** another: they must mean different things by “beautiful.” As for the first case, claims about superior expertise seem perfectly possible.[26]

Finally, imagine someone for whom seeing and loving are disconnected, in just the way Wang's last sentence denies. One “sees it first and then makes up one's mind to love it.” Is this really possible? Here again we need to distinguish two cases. Perhaps it is not initially clear to one whether the color is beautiful. The light is bad, or one needs to see more clearly the colors with which it is juxtaposed. Then one makes up one's mind, coming to see it as indeed beautiful, and thereby loves it. I think that Wang should acknowledge that such cases are possible.[27] What Wang denies is the possibility of a different sort of hesitation, wherein one sees the color as beautiful first, and then decides whether (or not) to love it. Consider the following case, to help flesh out what Wang is denying. Might not I hate a beautiful woman? Wang should respond in the affirmative, but note that this “hate” would be an all-things-considered judgment, a judgment that takes into account more than her mere appearance. Insofar as one sees the woman as beautiful, there will always be a “love” aspect to that perception/judgment. In ways that I will explore in more detail later, moral judgments depend on seeing more broadly than just looking at how attractive someone is. Whether we look narrowly or broadly, though, we cannot separate out the seeing and the reacting.

This discussion of loving beautiful colors is only by way of analogy to the main subject, which is ethical knowledge and action. Directly after his discussion of loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors, Wang continues:

> Suppose we say that so-and-so knows filial piety and so-and-so knows brotherly respect. They must have actually practiced filial piety and brotherly respect before they can be said to know them. It will not do to say that they know filial piety and brotherly respect because they show them in words. Or take one's knowledge of pain. Only after one has experienced pain can one know pain.[28]

To a reader with contemporary Western philosophical sensibilities, this passage—particularly the bit about pain—makes it sound like Wang is emphasizing what have come to be called “qualia”: one cannot know what pain is unless one knows how it *feels*. But this is not Wang's point, just as his point regarding beauty is not that one must know how a beautiful color *looks* in order to truly know what beauty is. Rather, he maintains that one must *react* to beauty by loving it; similarly, one must react to pain by avoiding it (all else being equal).[29] Not to react in this way is to fail to grasp the normative import of identifying something as pain. Again, Wang is making more than a descriptive prediction about people's reaction to stimuli here. His emphasis is instead on the conceptual point about the meaning of “pain” or “beauty.”

We might feel tempted to conclude that there is an important failure of analogy between the beauty case and the filial piety case. In the former, Wang says that knowing something as beautiful is to “love (*hao*)” it, which I have been glossing as having a positive attitude toward it. In the filial piety case, Wang says that only if we have actually “practiced (*xing* □)” it can we be said to know it. **(p.121)** “Practice” or *xing* is the same word that is translated as “action” in the slogan “unity of knowledge and action.” *Xing* seems to be about more than just feelings, but then how can Wang think that the two cases are analogous? Either the analogy is dangerously misleading, or else either: (1) Wang's “love” must encompass more than mere positive attitude, and/or (2) Wang's “practice” must not be as full-blooded as it currently seems.

7.3 Cua on Commitment to Realizing a Harmonious World

7.3.1 Active Moral Perception

There is now a considerable body of contemporary Western philosophical reflection on the nature of moral perception, much of it building on ideas found in Aristotle.[30] This literature is very relevant to the ideas we are now considering. It can elaborate on ideas we have seen already, as this quote from the contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum suggests:

> Perception is not merely aided by emotion but is also in part constituted by appropriate response. Good perception is a full recognition or acknowledgment of the practical situation; the whole personality sees it for what it is. The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say, in addition, that a part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person doesn't really, or doesn't fully, *see* what has happened…. We want to say that she is merely saying the words, “He needs my help” or “She is dead,” but doesn't yet fully *know* it, because the emotional part of cognition is lacking. [Nussbaum 1990a, 79]

Wang Yangming would clearly agree that perception is in part constituted by appropriate response. Nussbaum's reference to one who merely says the words without feeling the response sounds remarkably like Wang's “It will not do to say that they know filial piety and brotherly respect because they show them in words.” We might also find in Nussbaum's reference to “acknowledgment” a hint of what still needs development, both for her account and for Wang's, namely, something more about the active contribution an agent must make to a situation in order not just to “know,” but to “acknowledge.” That is, what Wang and Nussbaum are discussing goes beyond standard models of cognitive knowing, but it is not enough to mark the difference by talking of “true” knowledge, as Wang does, or by italicizing “*know*,” like Nussbaum. We need a fuller account.

I believe we can draw on A. S. Cua's treatment of perception and commitment in Wang's thought in order to better understand both Wang and the sort of issues raised by Nussbaum and others. Cua's writing on this subject is dense but insightful, and will repay the effort it might take to understand. Here is a key assertion: **(p.122)**

> As a mind-in-action, moral reflection is a form of mindfulness. It is selective attention to the distinctive features of a situation informed by the agent's sense of importance. The appreciation of an occurrent situation presupposes an evaluative judgment.… Since moral reflection is directed at *li* as an organic unity, it is also mindful of the *gestalt* of the situation. Following Matson, we may say that it is an activity of *apperception*, i.e., the distinctive features of the organic whole are "not only perceived, but are united and assimilated to a mass of ideas already possessed, and so comprehended and interpreted." Given a commitment to *ren*, thinking in light of *li* is principally an apperception based on a *moral* interest.[31]

There is a lot packed into this passage that I will be exploring hereafter. Of particular importance are the related ideas that moral perception is mindfulness of whole situations—of the relatedness among various particulars, as well as among these particulars and "ideas already possessed"—and that this is so because "moral reflection is directed at *li* as an organic unity," which itself depends on a "commitment to *ren*."

Li, or coherence, and *ren*, or humaneness, are ideas we have discussed extensively in previous chapters. By "coherence," recall, Neo-Confucians mean the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together. When one sees-and-feels a beautiful color, this is to see it as valuable in that context. In a small way, one is perceiving coherence. Coherence does not point at individual things alone, but at their relations; the fundamental idea is of a harmonious, organic unity. Each thing is different, as arms are different from legs, but each is part of the whole. Harmony involves seeing that each element receives its due weight at each point in time. "Organic" is an apt characterization for the harmony in another sense: Neo-Confucians saw their universe as vital, life-giving, and in constant motion. The "stuff" out of which the universe was composed, *qi* □, itself is dynamic and interactive, always manifesting a changing balance of complementary forces, which at their most general are characterized as *yin* and *yang*.[32]

It is thus not too much of a stretch to see the universe as living and responsive. When one is conscious of and embraces one's own life and responsiveness as part of this greater whole, one can be said to be *ren* □ or humane. As explained in Section 5.1.1, humaneness is warm and compassionate concern that extends, in an organic fashion, to all related and relevant aspects of one's context. This concern is human concern, first nurtured in intimate family relations and then extended outward. This is not a neutral, equal love for all things; it rather expresses the felt human interconnection with all aspects of our environment. Still, recall from Section 4.4.1 that Wang Yangming's utopian-sounding "form one body with all things" does not mean that everything must be treated equally. He talks of commiseration, pity, and regret as distinct, and each owed to different sorts of things. Things are not equivalent, just as the various parts of one's body are not equivalent. To feel humaneness for all is to care for all (or to be "unfeeling" to none), each in its own way or to its appropriate degree. What this way or degree is, though, must depend on the overall context.

(p.123) Here we return to Cua's claims that moral perception (1) is mindfulness of whole situations and (2) thanks to a commitment to *ren*, is directed at *li* as an organic unity. Wang believes that to some degree, we cannot avoid experiencing *ren* and perceiving *li*; here again, the "form one body" passage discussed in Section 4.4.1 is relevant. But unless we develop a commitment to *ren*, we will fall short. This is to say that our perception must not be passive, but rather directed toward the realization of harmony. Commitment to humaneness is commitment to *li*, which in turn simply is a commitment to harmony. Cua argues that:

> [Adopting] *ren* as a governing ideal of one's life does not imply a determinative conception of the ideal to be realized. It is to adopt an attitude and to resolve, with one's heart and mind, to *look at things and events in such a way that they can become constituents in a harmonious unity* without the unity being specified in advance of experience of man's confrontation with the changes in the natural world. Thus, to adopt this ideal attitude is to see human life in its morally excellent form, as possessing a coherence in which apparently conflicting elements are elements of an achievable harmonious order. The presence of conflicting elements is in experience a fact to be acknowledged. Acknowledgment brings with it a task of reconciliation.… Since the desired coherence of the moral order is not spelled out *a priori*, harmonization of the conflicting elements in experience is essentially a creative endeavor on the part of both the Confucian moral theorist and the agent. [Cua 1998, 124–25], emphasis added.

I find Cua's articulation of the active nature of moral perception to be compelling. We need to do more than just passively notice moral features: we must commit to seeing "human life in its morally excellent form, as possessing a coherence in which apparently conflicting elements are elements of an achievable harmonious order." This idea certainly needs spelling out, and several immediate objections spring to mind (for instance, does this just mean being naively charitable to everyone?). But I believe it can be sustained, and I believe it offers the prospect of both fitting together disparate aspects of Wang's vision, and illuminating the idea of sagely moral action more generally.

7.3.2 Creativity Revisited

One of the key ideas Cua puts forward is the commitment to an ideal of resolving apparent conflicts. A second important aspect of his position is that these resolutions are "not spelled out a priori," from which he concludes that harmonization is "essentially a creative endeavor." Both of these themes have been treated at length in the previous chapter. In order to see more specifically what Cua has in mind, we can return to a passage from Wang discussed in chapter 2. Wang is speaking about the ancient sage-king Shun, who agreed to marry the sage-king Yao's daughters without first getting permission from his own parents, **(p.124)** who would have denied permission, since they were intent on seeing that Shun's younger brother prospered, rather than Shun himself:

> As for Shun's marrying without first telling his parents, was there someone before him who did the same thing and served as an example for him, which he could find out by looking into certain records and asking certain people, after which he did as he did? Or did he search into the innate knowledge in an instant of his mind's thought and weigh (*quan*) all factors as to what was proper, after which he could not help doing what he did?[33]

The conclusion of this passage—that upon weighing all factors, Shun "could not help doing what he did"—is certainly relevant to an understanding of Wang's "unity of knowledge and action" doctrine. Our principal interest here, though, is in the appearance of conflict and the explicit statement that no resolution is spelled out a priori. Should Shun ask his parents' permission, or should he marry in order to provide them with grandchildren? Wang insists that neither prior texts nor exemplars could answer this for Shun.

How, then, was he to deal with the situation? Cua's gloss would be that since Shun was committed to the ideal of *li*, he had to find a way to see the conflictive elements of the situation as amenable to the creation of a harmonious whole. He weighs all factors, sees a solution, and acts. It would be wrong to say that Shun simply came to see that in all cases, it is better to provide one's parents with grandchildren than to ask their permission for marriage. Such a rule could easily turn into a convenient excuse for children to systematically disobey their parents. Wang avoids such a formulaic reading of the resolution when he says: "If Emperor Shun's mind was not sincere about [avoiding leaving his parents with] no posterity, … then [his] marrying without telling his parents … would be a case of the greatest filial impiety" [Ibid.]. Perhaps more importantly, though Wang does not mention it, the case of Shun and his parents is not confined to one, isolated decision. *Li* is about patterns through time and space, so we should expect a harmonious resolution to be more like a process than a single action. Indeed, it should pick up on and incorporate preexisting tendencies and past events, as well as looking to future ramifications.[34] Often it will primarily be by looking to these broader dimensions of situations that we will be able to see possibilities for harmonious resolution.

I am agreeing with Cua, in short, that seeing a situation morally is at least sometimes to engage in an act that has a creative dimension. Rather than following an antecedently existing rule, one sees the possibility for harmony in a way not described by any rule. This is not to say that rules are unhelpful; all of us rely on various kinds of rules most of the time.[35] And even when appreciating a particular situation as amenable to harmony does not involve the application of existing rules, the sort of creativity in question is not the "anything goes" of unconstrained choice. It is beyond my scope here to comment on whether artistic creativity ever feels unconstrained, but the kind of moral creativity under discussion never feels that way. To the contrary, by all accounts it feels like there is but one choice to make. Shun, in the passage cited earlier, "could not help doing **(p.125)** what he did."[36] This returns us to the conclusion of Section 4.1.2, where I suggested that it might be safer to talk of articulating novel answers to a problem, rather than adverting to the language of creativity.

7.4 A Fuller Picture

Let us take stock. From our starting point in a classic description of the ease of sagely action from the *Analects*, we have worked through Wang Yangming's ideas of maturing commitment; organic, harmonious coherence and universal humaneness; and what we might loosely call the unity of knowledge/perception and feeling/practice. Roughly, the idea is that a mature commitment to realizing harmony means actively seeing the world in value-laden terms ripe for harmonizing, and seeing the world this way is to interact with the world this way.

Two aspects of this summary cry out for better explanation and defense, which it is the task of this final section to provide. First, what does it mean, after all, for commitment to mature? Aren't we back to a stark picture of paring away all traces of the "self" through sheer acts of will? Second, why are seeing and interacting the same? As Lawrence Blum observes, "Seeing a situation in moral categories does not entail seeing one's moral agency as engaged by that situation. People often see a situation as involving a wrong but do not regard themselves as morally pulled to do anything about it" [Blum 1991, 708n9]. This is related to the question that I left dangling earlier, namely, whether Wang's "loving beautiful colors" example was really a non-sequitur, since the feelings with which it is concerned seem importantly different from the practice (of filial piety) about which his interlocutor is asking him.

7.4.1 Murdoch on M and D

Considerable light can be shed on both these issues if we reflect on a famous example from the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. She writes:

> A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for the purpose of the example that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way….
>
> Thus much for M's first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging word) by the **(p.126)** cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters…. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. And as I say, *ex hypothesi*, M's outward behavior, beautiful from the

> start, in no way alters. [Murdoch 1970a, 17–18]

At first blush this might seem irrelevant to the questions now on the table; Murdoch emphasizes that “M's outward behavior, beautiful from the start, in no way alters,” but aren't we worried about cases of correct feeling without correct action? I want to suggest that Murdoch's case, which we can characterize as (initially) correct action without correct feeling, is actually importantly similar to the feeling-without-action case, and that the solution to both lies in maturing commitment, which Murdoch's example will also help us to understand.

It is very tempting to wonder whether M really could live up to the standard of perfect action that Murdoch grants her without genuinely seeing D as meriting it: might not some situations arise in which her sense of what is ‘correct’ fails to guide her properly? Murdoch constructs the example as she does, though, to emphasize that moral philosophers of her day were paying too little attention to things other than overt behavior. My contention is that Murdoch's understanding of both *why* M's attitude (though not action) toward D needs revision, and much of her account of *how* M goes about changing herself, resonate with and illuminate Wang's sometimes mysterious statements about knowledge and action.

M's problem is that her actions lack sagely ease. She is able, somehow, to get herself to act beautifully toward D, but not without psychic cost. She works to resolve this tension by “giving careful and just *attention*” to D, as well as to her own predispositions and expectations. Later in her essay, Murdoch writes, “I have used the word ‘attention’, which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent” [Ibid., 34]. This is both structurally similar, and different in significant detail, from the Confucian picture I developed earlier. To say that it is “characteristic and proper” is to say that it should be an ongoing undertaking, or in other words, one's commitment as an active moral agent. Indeed, looking for harmony is precisely the *activity* of the committed moral agent, on the Confucian view I have been developing. A loving gaze is very close to a humane one, especially since Murdoch's language (“upon an individual reality”) allows for the possibility that the love be addressed to nonhuman objects (think of Wang's broken tiles). Two salient differences should also be noted. First, a “just” gaze is not the same as looking **(p.127)** for harmony. Depending on exactly what one means by justice and by harmony, readers may feel that one or the other of these sounds more appropriate, or perhaps that neither sounds promising. Second, Murdoch's focus on “an individual reality” sounds very different from the Confucian's attention to the interrelated patterns of whole situations.

7.4.2 Intrusions of the Self

There is another important similarity between Murdoch's analysis and Wang's: to the extent that things are not as they should be, both put primary diagnostic weight on the intrusions of one's “self.” This similarity may not be readily apparent, because where Wang, in the passages we have examined, has been resolutely abstract, Murdoch's discussion of M is extremely concrete. Wang says that shallow knowledge and action are "already separated by selfish desires and are no longer knowledge and action in themselves," while Murdoch tells us that M reflects to herself: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous." When we think about the various characteristics that M lists, though, we can see that Wang and Murdoch are thinking along similar lines. If one is prejudiced, narrow-minded, snobbish, and jealous, one is not seeing the relevant aspects of the world in a fair, objective, balanced way. One's "knowledge" is distorted by selfish, parochial considerations. To say that M is jealous of D is to acknowledge that D looks worse to M than she really is because of M's resenting the attention that her son is paying to D, despite the fact that his shifting of some of his concern from his mother to his wife is natural and appropriate. As Murdoch puts it in another essay, "The chief enemy of excellence in morality … is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one" [Murdoch 1970b, 59].

Wang is similarly concerned with the ways that intrusions of self can shatter objectivity so that we see and respond to the world incorrectly. He said, "The [feelings] of pleasure, anger, joy, and sorrow in themselves are naturally in the states of equilibrium and harmony. As soon as one attaches a bit of one's own idea to them, they will be excessive or deficient, they will be selfish."[37] The problem with attaching one's own idea to one's spontaneous responses is elaborated in another passage:

> When a ruler folds his arms, sits erect, and is at leisure and at peace, and his six chief ministers attend to their duties, the world will be in order. The mind should command the five sense organs in the same way. But if when the eye wants to see, the mind itself pursues the color, or when the ear wants to hear, the mind itself pursues the sound, it will be as though the ruler himself went and occupied the position of minister of personnel when he wanted officials selected, or the position of the minister of military affairs when he wanted an army transferred. When he does so not only is the substance of the ruler gone, but the six ministers cannot carry out their duties, either.[38]

(p.128) What does it mean to say that the eye wants to see, but the mind pursues the color? The idea seems to be that the mind usurps the eye's role, so that one sees what one's mind wants to see, rather than what is really there. This is clearly a disruption of the natural functioning of one's faculties, but I suspect more is at stake than a concern about political or psychological micromanagement. Why might a ruler take over the job of selecting officials? To ensure that his favorites are selected. But this is not acting properly as a ruler. By undermining the state bureaucracy's ability to provide itself with qualified personnel, it jeopardizes the whole government.

Wang believes, in other words, that the mind's selfish desires can somehow interrupt the natural unity of stimulus and response. This must be like coming up with excuses not to do something: one ignores the real situation because it is easier or convenient at the moment. One can often talk oneself into not seeing the world as it really is. Or—more relevantly—aspects of one's background can intercede unconsciously. Returning to Murdoch's M, it is not necessarily a bad thing to be old-fashioned. But if one's old-fashioned predilections are causing one to see another person wrongly, uncharitably, then they count as prejudice or narrow-mindedness. The task M sets herself need not be to lose her old-fashioned ways and become hip, but she must work to see D fairly. In the M and D example, Murdoch gives us little guidance on how this is supposed to work; recall that she says only: "Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters."[39] In fact Murdoch has quite a lot to say about what she calls "unselfing," both in her philosophical writings and in her novels; I draw on some of this in my accounts of Neo-Confucian moral education and moral therapy in the following two chapters.[40]

7.4.3 "True Vision Occasions Right Conduct"

For now, though, let us set aside the question of *how* we should try to remove selfishness from the equation and concentrate on the prior question that we have been tracking: are perception, feelings, and action really as closely linked as Wang asserts? Murdoch believes that seeing correctly is essential for feeling correctly, and thus for acting with ease. Once M comes to see D rightly, she need not struggle to treat her daughter-in-law as she "knows" she should. She has achieved, at least in one small area of her life, real goodness of action, since Murdoch says that goodness is the "perfection of desire"—an idea that cannot but remind us of Confucius at seventy.[41] But surely Murdoch has an easier case to make than Wang does. It is one thing to say that someone who is *already* doing the right thing can do it more readily—and that this should count as a moral improvement—if she can change the way she sees the world. It is a stronger claim to insist that seeing the world rightly is itself enough to both feel and act rightly. This is to say that proper perception (Wang's "knowledge") is itself sufficient for good action, even if it is not always necessary (as M shows us, by being able to act rightly even prior to reexamining D).[42]

Even though the case of M does not exemplify this stronger claim, Murdoch does endorse it when she says, "true vision occasions right conduct" [Murdoch **(p.129)** 1970b, 66]. I think we should just see M as a special case of the more general idea that coming to see situations rightly means that we will act rightly and with ease. Perhaps the right seeing is by humanely looking for harmony; perhaps it is through loving and just attention. In either case, what I want to emphasize is the active and, in the sense discussed earlier, imaginative nature of this looking or attending. It is not merely a passive perception. This difference is crucial for understanding the link with action, as can be seen if we consider an example offered by Lawrence Blum, an important contemporary theorist of moral perception:

> Tim, a white male, is waiting for a taxi at a train station. Waiting near him are a black woman and her daughter. A cab comes by, past the woman and her daughter, and stops in front of him. Tim, with relief, gets in to the cab.
>
> Tim's relief at having gotten a cab might block from his full awareness the cab

> driver's having passed up the black mother and child in favor of him. What is salient in Tim's perception might simply be the presence of the cab.
>
> But suppose that once in the cab Tim, idly ruminating, puts the pieces of the situation together and comes to see it now (in retrospect) in a different way. He sees the driver as having intentionally passed up the woman and child. Suppose he also infers that the driver did this out of racism.… Whether Tim is correct in this inference is not so important as whether the inference is a plausible one, which I am assuming it to be. This perception of racism becomes his “take” on the situation. He now sees an issue of injustice in the situation in a way he did not at first.… Prior to any action Tim might take in the situation, it is (ceteris paribus) a (morally) better thing for him to have recognized the racial injustice than not to have done so. [Blum 1991, 706–7]

Blum then adds in a footnote that for all the importance of perception, its link to action is still poorly understood:

> Note that seeing a situation in moral categories does not entail seeing one's moral agency as engaged by that situation. People often see a situation as involving a wrong but not regard themselves as morally pulled to do anything about it. For example, even when Tim comes to see injustice as having taken place, he may think of that injustice as over and done with and not implying anything for him to do about it. The issue of what makes a moral being see her sense of agency as engaged by a situation—and how perception fits into this—deserves further exploration than I can undertake here. [Blum 1991, 708n9]

In short, while the example of M shows that one can act rightly without the ease claimed for Confucius at seventy, the example of Tim shows that one can see a situation in moral categories and yet not act.

(p.130) It is worth dwelling for a moment on what Tim might be feeling. Is he too tired after a long trip to work up the indignation that might otherwise move him to act? Or perhaps he is furious, but too confused about what it makes sense to do? Too shy to interfere? On the other hand, he may see the situation, for all its wrongness, as simply not his problem. Maybe he sees the world as full of injustice, with no hope for improvement; or maybe he is less pessimistic than this, but still sees such problems as the concern of (some specific, or a vaguely general) “others.”

As I am reading him, Wang says that the route to sagely ease is maturing one's commitment to looking for harmony in one's world. It is easy enough to see this slogan as variously connecting up with the different possible states of Tim's mind and heart that I have just canvassed, but the complex range of possibilities serves to emphasize that “maturing commitment” cannot be a simple or single process. A thorough account of Confucian (or Murdochian) self-cultivation will need to take this complexity into account. As we explore Neo-Confucian ideas of self-cultivation in the next two chapters, we will have to keep these cautions in mind.

What I want to emphasize here is that while Tim makes progress in focusing enough on his situation to see it in moral terms, he is still far from exemplifying Wang's “mature commitment.” That commitment entails a kind of active effort to realize harmony in both the cognitive and actualizing senses of “realize”: to see how it might emerge from the present configuration of people, relationships, and so on, including one's own position in the web of events and relations making up the situation; and, by realizing one's dynamic position, move toward actualizing the harmonious possibilities inherent therein. When a commitment of this kind has matured, one has a settled disposition to look to realize harmony, which involves (among other things) seeing what one's “sense of moral agency” can contribute to realizing the harmony. Such a settled disposition, of course, is precisely what Zhu and Wang characterize as “virtue (*de*),” as discussed in chapter 3. As with “realize,” “seeing what one can contribute” combines Wang's knowledge and action. With mature commitment, that is, there is no mere noticing that the world can be viewed in moral terms; one views the world actively, looking for appropriate configurations into which events can resolve themselves. And since this looking is active, we have answered the central challenges of this section: namely, we have seen how perception and action can be linked in the way that Wang (and Murdoch) claims.

Exactly which further actions follow from looking to realize harmony in a given situation depend on the details of the situation. If we imagine Tim with the commitment and sagely ease of a seventy-year-old Confucius, we can point out some of the things that would have been different. Tim-the-sage might be tired after a business trip, but would surely see the mother and daughter as he stepped up to the curb, and this seeing would not be a mere noticing, but an acknowledging. Here we are together, his smile would say. Perhaps some banter about her charming daughter—the appropriate ritual for the situation—and then up comes the cab, past the mother, and stopping in front of Tim. Tim speaks to the driver, offering a charitable gloss on the driver's action—as the “teaching” most likely to **(p.131)** make a difference in this context[43]—and beckons the others to take their rightful seats. With a wave at the departing girl and her mother, Tim stands back to wait for another cab, reflecting on how far his society still needs to improve.

This, then, is sagely ease.[44] It comes from mature commitment. This commitment does not simply involve paring away all traces of the “self” through sheer acts of will, both because the “self” does not disappear—individuals retain their distinctiveness and personal projects—and because the paring away of selfishness is not unsupported. On Wang's picture, the commitment is, put positively, humanely to look for harmony. Paring away selfish perspectives is the negative side of the coin; looking for harmony is the positive side. We are not asked to make unsupported acts of will because (1) there is a process through which we can build up our abilities to do these two things, and (2) the two sides of self-cultivation are mutually reinforcing. There is clearly much more to be said about this process, and much to be learned from reflecting on the differences among Wang's, Zhu's, and other alternative models. In part III of this book, I take up these issues of moral education along with their larger political context. **(p.132)**

Notes:

(1.) Other classic descriptions of sagely ease include *Xunzi* 8, on which see Stalnaker [2006, 190], and *Zhongyong* 20.

(2.) Many connections are apparent, for instance, with Zhu's remarks in Zhu [1997, ch. 9], which is partly translated in [Zhu 1990]. Sarkissian [2007] is a thought-provoking effort to understand *Analects* 2:4 that resonates in certain ways with my account. In part because of differences between his classical and my Neo-Confucian sources, however, Sarkissian reaches the conclusion that the ability to “read minds”—by which he means detecting others' emotional states—can never be perfect.

(3.) [Wang 1983, 89 (§53)]. Contrast Chan's translation, which effaces “*zhì*” completely [Wang 1963, 43].

(4.) Two words both Romanized “*zhi*” feature prominently in this chapter; I will distinguish them by adding tone marks (and, where needed, the Chinese characters). “*Zhì* □” is “commitment”; “*zhī* □” is “know” or “knowledge.”

(5.) See Graham [1992 1992, 61] for Cheng Hao's invocation of this definition. For the definition itself, see Xu [1981, 502a].

(6.) Translation based on Brooks and Brooks [1998, 14], slightly modified. Another interpretation of the second half of this sentence is “ … he will have no flaws” (see [Yang 1984, 36]). For my purposes, this interpretive dispute does not matter, because in either case, the person described has reached a high level of ethical attainment.

(7.) Translation based on Brooks and Brooks [1998, 15], slightly modified. The Brooks have “dedicated” for *zhì*, where I put “committed.”

(8.) In a personal communication, Chenyang Li has argued for strongly distinguishing between the first stage of commitment—which he would translate as “set one's will on …”—and a second stage in which one works to live up to one's commitment. But 4:4 and 4:9 suggest that both stages must be understood continuously, in terms of “*zhì*,” which therefore cannot be understood as “will.” In addition, Wang's explicit claim that *zhì* can “mature” requires seeing it as more than just the initial act of willing or committing.

(9.) See also their rendition of [5:26], also using “wish” [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 149]. Lau translates *zhì* in both of these passages as “have your heart set on.” See Confucius [1979, 80, 110–11].

(10.) Discussions of *zhì* in the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* that fit well with my argument here can be found in Van Norden [1992] and Stalnaker [2006], respectively.

(11.) Zhu Xi's views are not substantially different. Qian [1989, vol. 2, 364–78] is a classic study of Zhu Xi's notion of *zhì*. Qian Mu emphasizes that the continuity Zhu argues for between *zhì* and reverence (*jing* □) is a way of synthesizing the insights of Cheng Yi and Lu Xiangshan. A recent essay on Zhu Xi whose perspective on *zhì* fits extremely well with my discussion here is Marchal [2007, esp. 10–11].

(12.) See also Wang [1972, 63] in which Wang invokes the image of maturation from *Mencius* 6A:19.

(13.) I allude here to Wang's comments in Section 71 of *Record for Practice*.

(14.) See Ivanhoe [2002, ch. 5] and Ivanhoe [2000]. Ivanhoe describes Zhu Xi's approach to self-cultivation as “recovery” and Bryan Van Norden has argued that Zhu Xi combines a “discovery” model of with elements from “development” and “reformation” models [Van Norden 2007]. These both contrast with the pure “discovery” model they see at work in Wang Yangming. I am suggesting here that Wang, too, must be seen as more of a mixed case.

(15.) [Wang 1983, 68 (§30)]; translation from Ivanhoe [2002, 104].

(16.) [Wang 1983, 136 (§115)]; translation from Ivanhoe [2002, 106], slightly modified.

(17.) Zhu Xi makes a similar remark, saying that when our conduct has matured, we have “virtue (*de* □)” [Zhu 1997, 778]. See the discussion in Section 3.3.

(18.) [Wang 1983, 57 (§16)]; translation from Wang [1963, 25], slightly modified. On “congealing of the sage essence,” see Wang [1983, 58]. The terms “beautiful person,” etc., come from *Mencius* 7B:25.

(19.) Wang emphasizes the gradual nature of moral development in Section 65 of *Record for Practice*. See Wang [1983, 95–6].

(20.) [Wang 1983, 73 (§37)]; translation from Wang [1963, 34].

(21.) [Wang 1983, 82 (§44)]; translation from Wang [1963, 38–9], slightly modified.

(22.) [Wang 1983, 151 (§127)]; translation from Wang [1963, 84], slightly modified. Wang's first sentence here refers to the ending of the *Zhongyong*'s first chapter. Let me add that Wang does not totally discount institutional reform, only saying that it should not be one's “main objective.”

(23.) [Wang 1983, 33 (§5)]; translation from Wang [1963, 10], slightly modified. Wang refers to the beginning of Section 6 of the *Great Learning*: “What is meant by ‘making the intention (*yi*) sincere’ is allowing no self-deception, as when we hate a bad smell or love a beautiful color” (translation from Chan [1963, 89], slightly modified). The *Great Learning* text thus agrees with Wang that allowing the self to deceive one is akin to failing to love a beautiful color.

(24.) Wang never uses the term “true action,” but it seems natural to distinguish two senses of action, along the same lines he distinguishes two sense of knowledge. Shallow, non-true action would encompass random movements or perhaps cases in which one would say one did not know what one was doing. Wang comes close to making a distinction in this area when he refers to people “acting on impulse (*renyi qu zuo* □□□□)”

[Wang 1983, 11 (§5)].

(25.) Strictly speaking, these terms are pronounced slightly differently depending on whether they are used verbally (*hào*) or adjectivally (*hǎo*).

(26.) As discussed earlier, for Wang, the superior expertise—at least with respect to moral matters—will need to come from a lack of selfish obstacles to the functioning of one's *liang zhī*, rather than from something like the development of more highly sensitive feelings. For a discussion of the rather different model of expertise found in *Mencius*, see Hutton [2002]. Interestingly, Hutton argues that Mencius's idea of moral connoisseurship "is primarily a connoisseurship of intuition, which consists in deepening one's sensitivity to one's spontaneous impulses and in rooting out what one 'really wants' by nature" [Ibid., 175].

(27.) The issue of when and why someone might pause to reflect or look again is complex and depends, in part, on how closely the person has approached sagehood. Zhu Xi is critical of a certain sort of deliberateness that always involves pausing to measure cost and benefit, rather than acting directly. On the other hand, he acknowledges that a pause is sometimes apt, though whether this is by way of acknowledging the weightiness of the situation, or because extra caution against error is needed, is not clear. See Zhu [1997, 211], Zhu [1990, 188], and Tillman [1982, 149]. My discussion of the different reasons that sages might engage in dialogue is also quite relevant; see chapter 9. In addition, full consideration of this question should take into account Swanton's discussion of the difference between times when automatic processing of problems is apt, and when critical reflection needed. She says that experts do not dispense with the latter, and indeed they deploy it more systematically than novices when encountering a novel or hard problem [Swanton 2003, 259]. Swanton's notion of "critical reflection" can be usefully compared with the felt need for a "pause" in deliberation that is sometimes experienced by the contemporary exemplary figures studied in Parks Daloz et al. [1996, 133].

(28.) [Wang 1983, 33 (§5)]; translation from Wang [1963, 10].

(29.) The parable of the tiger, cited by both the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi—but not by Wang—makes this point explicitly. Here is Cheng Yi: "There is a difference between true knowledge and everyday knowledge. I once saw a peasant who had been wounded by a tiger. When someone said that a tiger was attacking people, everyone was startled, but the peasant reacted differently from the rest. Even a child knows that tigers are dangerous, but it is not true knowledge; it is only true knowledge if it is like the peasant's. So when men know evil but still do it, this also is not true knowledge; if it were, decidedly they would not do it" [Graham 1992, 80].

(30.) Wiggins [1980] is one important source of this literature: Wiggins emphasized that for Aristotle, practical deliberation is partly constituted by the "unfinished or indeterminate character of our ideals," leading him to emphasize "situational appreciation" [Ibid., 233–4]. See also the following: McDowell [1979], Sherman [1989], Nussbaum [1990a], and Blum [1991]. Murdoch [1970a and b] are also critical sources on moral perception, though more indebted to Plato than to Aristotle.

(31.) [Cua 1998, 133]. The same passage also appears in Cua [1982, 64]. Cua refers to Matson [1976, 151].

(32.) See Section 2.3. Huang [2003, 458–9] is very good on the Cheng brothers' view of *dao* and *li* as “life-giving activity.”

(33.) [Wang 1983, 182 (§139)]; translation from Wang [1963, 109–10], slightly altered. For an early discussion of this story, see *Mencius* 5A:2.

(34.) Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the similarities between creative response, in much the sense I am describing, and improvisational rather than score- or script-based performance, is helpful here. “The salient difference between acting from a script and improvising is that one has to be not less but far *more* keenly attentive to what is given by the other actors in a situation.” “[She] must suit her choice to the evolving story, which has its own form and continuity.” As in jazz improvisation, Nussbaum continues, “The perceiver who improvises morally is doubly responsible: responsible to the history of commitment and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context; and especially responsible to these, in that her commitments are forged freshly on each occasion, in an active and intelligent confrontation between her own history and the requirements of the occasion” [Nussbaum 1990a, 94].

(35.) Compare the discussion of rules in chapter 2. In addition, the considerable literature that exists on Aristotelian practical reasoning is relevant here. See the references cited in Note 30 of this chapter.

(36.) See also Murdoch [1970a, 40] on the feeling of “necessity” that attends moral vision.

(37.) [Wang 1983, 92 (§58)]; translation from Wang [1963, 44], slightly altered.

(38.) [Wang 1983, 100 (§70)]; translation from Wang 1963, [48–9], slightly altered.

(39.) Students in my Spring 2008 “Neo-Confucianism” class pressed a nice objection when I presented them with the argument of this paragraph. How do we know, they wondered, that M's motive is not simply to lessen discord within her family? Has she shifted to an inflexibly—and equally problematic, from an ethical point of view—sanguine view of D? My view is that Murdoch's text does not suggest that this is what has happened, but no judgment can be final: our efforts at commitment and self-improvement are open-ended and fallible.

(40.) For insightful discussion of this theme, see both Antonaccio [2000, ch. 5] and Gordon [1995, ch. 2].

(41.) [Murdoch 1992, 344]; cited in Antonaccio [2000, 142].

(42.) As just suggested, right seeing and feeling—Murdoch's “perfection of desire”—

might be necessary for the best kind of action, or for demonstrating the most moral worth.

(43.) See Wang's discussion of Shun in *Record for Practice* (§296).

(44.) In light of my discussion in chapter 6 of the emotional complexity that can accompany sagely "ease," note that Tim's reflecting on how far his society needs to improve will be tinged with sadness or grief; this does not alter the ease with which Tim-the-sage responds to the situation.

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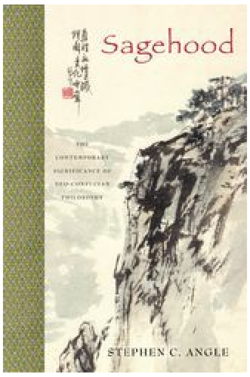

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Learning to Look for Harmony

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

One recent trend in contemporary philosophy is thinking about the significance of the ancient practices that Pierre Hadot has labeled “spiritual exercises.” Just as philosophy was a “way of life” for ancient Western thinkers, so was Neo-Confucianism about much more than theories. This chapter explores Neo-Confucian teachings about the practice of ethical development from two perspectives. First, it considers the stages that an individual can go through on the way toward sagehood, including both “lesser learning,” with its central role for ritual, and “greater learning.” Brief attention is paid to relations between Neo-Confucian understanding of stages and those of contemporary psychologists studying moral development like Martin Hoffman and Lawrence Kohlberg. Second, it discusses the particular practices that were recommended by Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and others. Among the practices the chapter examines, it puts particular focus on those related to “attention,” and especially on the central practice of “reverence.”

Keywords: Pierre Hadot, spiritual exercise, ethical development, stages, lesser learning, ritual, attention, reverence

Ethical education is one of the areas in which my two main Neo-Confucian sources, Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, had the most explicit disagreements. As in previous chapters, though, my goal is not simply explicating one or the other of their positions, but to develop—in dialogue with contemporary voices—a charitable, synthetic position that is well-positioned to make a powerful intervention in our world today. While I will thus need to avoid combining Zhu and Wang in mutually-contradictory fashions, I will demonstrate that their core insights about how we can learn to look for harmony are both consistent and fruitful. In this chapter, I focus on my Neo-Confucian sources; in the following chapter, I critically engage with these same themes. The present chapter is divided into two sections, first focusing on the idea of "stages" through which one can hope to progress, then turning to the specific practices that Neo-Confucians recommend.

8.1 Stages of Ethical Education

It was commonplace among Neo-Confucian philosophers to assert that ethical education and ethical development proceed through a series of stages. Sometimes they referred to specific practices, like Zhu Xi's discussion of the progressive stages involved in reading classic texts; sometimes the stages are more general, for instance in the frequent references to a "lesser learning" for children that precedes the "greater learning" more appropriate for young adults. In addition, as we saw in the previous chapter, Wang Yangming and others recognized the need for both the establishment of a commitment toward becoming a sage, and its gradual blooming into a mature commitment. The idea **(p.136)** of stages is important because it offers a way to connect learners to the lofty ideals of sagehood; as Zhu Xi repeatedly says, when aiming at such a difficult and long-term goal, one must know "where to begin" [Zhu 1990, 103].

8.1.1 Lesser Learning

In the Preface to his commentary on the brief classic text called *Great Learning*, Zhu Xi explains the difference, at least as he understood it, between the two levels of school found in antiquity:

> At the age of eight all the male children, from the sons of kings and dukes to the sons of commoners, entered the schools of lesser learning; there they were instructed in the chores of cleaning and sweeping, in the formalities of polite conversation and good manners, and in the refinements of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics. At the age of fifteen the Son of Heaven's eldest son and other imperial sons on down to the eldest legitimate sons of dukes, ministers, high officials, and officers of the chief grade, together with the gifted among the populace, all entered the school of greater learning; there they were instructed in the way of probing coherence, setting the mind in the right, cultivating oneself, and governing others. [Zhu 1990, 88–89, slightly altered]

Like other Neo-Confucians, Zhu was a strong critic of most educational practices in his day. Zhu has long been identified with text-based learning and with the civil service examination system, preparation for which dominated the education of countless children until its abandonment in 1905.[1] As we will see later, Zhu did believe that reading plays a critical role in personal cultivation. However, he also worried that "preparing for the examinations has ruined so many people" [Ibid., 191]. All too many students merely learn to express the ideas of the sages on paper, rather than making them matters of "personal concern" [Ibid.]. Zhu believed that preparation for the examinations could take place alongside a commitment to self-improvement, so long as one's commitment to self-improvement occupied the lion's share of one's effort.[2] In practice, this meant developing educational curricula that would focus on the individual's dispositions, commitment, and understanding, rather than on filling students' heads with memorized texts and endless facts. As Zhu put it, "The ancients simply attended to the mind, and this culminated in the good governance of the empire—everything flowed from the mind. People today only attend to the [many] matters" [Ibid., 89].

As can be seen from the passage with which I introduced this section, Zhu believed that the ancients had correctly understood that education must proceed in stages. Lesser learning instructs students in activities ranging from cleaning and etiquette to the "six arts" of the ancient noble culture. To some degree these matters are important in their own right, but their real significance lies in their role in a broader process. Zhu says: "Lesser learning is the direct understanding of a given affair. Greater learning is the investigation of a given coherence—the reason why an affair is as it is" [Ibid., 90]. In a similar vein, he says that "Lesser **(p.137)** learning is the study of affairs—such as serving one's ruler, serving one's father, serving one's brother, and dealing with one's friends. It teaches one to behave according to certain rules. Greater learning illuminates the coherence behind these affairs" [Ibid., 93].

These two passages are both revealing and complementary. As one first begins to learn the proper way to perform rituals, to engage in polite conversation, to clean and sweep, one follows explicit instructions. Often one is awkward and rigid, only knowing to follow the precise instructions one has been given and unsure how to proceed if one finds oneself in a slightly novel situation. Your father's papers are strewn around his desk; do you straighten them in order to dust? Your mother's colleague has asked you some rather personal questions at dinner; do you have to answer? Gradually, one develops a "direct understanding (*zhi lihui* □□□)" of the activities so that one can begin to perform them more flexibly. Zhu says that "the lesser learning of the ancients instructed people in affairs and therefore nurtured their minds naturally; without even becoming aware of it, they became good" [Ibid., 93].

These passages raise two important issues, however. First is the question of what sort of nurturing is going on: is it really that only through lesser learning are the students *becoming* good? This sounds very different from the idea discussed in the previous chapter that according to Wang (or, in his own way, Zhu Xi), our natures and ethical feelings are fully formed and good—needing no development. In these passages, in fact, Zhu can sound a great deal like Aristotle, who emphasized that young people need to develop appropriate habits in order for virtue to have a proper foundation. A second question is what, exactly, greater learning adds. Zhu's talk of “the reasons behind the affairs” can make it sound like greater learning produces a theoretical understanding, on the basis of which fully cultivated individuals can make correct judgments of how to act. But isn't this extremely different from the picture of ethical perception and sagely ease that we discussed in the previous chapter?

I will put off the second question until sections 8.1.2 and 8.1.3, which tackle greater learning directly. As for the kind of development that takes place during lesser learning, let us begin with the sense in which our natures are fully formed and good. As we saw in the previous chapter, Wang believed that our possession of *liang zhi* □□ means that we can always detect and be motivated by the satisfying harmony of a proper reaction to some situation—if only we can properly attend to the situation, clear away selfish obstacles to seeing the situation rightly, and so on. One may also need particular intellectual knowledge in order to properly understand the significance of what one is seeing. We see hints of this “good nature” in our spontaneous reactions to certain paradigm circumstances, such as Mencius's famous example of our feeling empathy at the sight of a baby about to crawl into a well. According to Neo-Confucians like Wang, these are not rudimentary reactions that need to be grown, but windows into our *liang zhi*. We need to develop dispositions to look for harmony rather than developing our ability to detect and feel satisfied by harmony itself.

This is not the place to assess the relative merits of Mencian versus Neo-Confucian approaches to our natures. Instead, notice the even greater contrast **(p.138)** between Wang's approach and that of Aristotle. According to Aristotle, childhood education is critical to our ethical development because it is as children that we can be habituated into taking pleasure in the right things, in the right way. We can acquire a taste for things that are noble. Miles Burnyeat argues persuasively that according to Aristotle, it is through habituation that we come to learn (for the first time) what is noble and just [Burnyeat 1980]. We acquire what Aristotle calls “the that,” namely, personal understanding and elementary dispositions which constitute a kind of second nature for us. On the basis of this second nature, we can go on to explore “the because”: namely, the intellectual underpinnings of goodness. This exploration is philosophy, and through it we develop our ability to reason. But Aristotle believes it will be lost on anyone who has not first developed an appropriate second nature.

I do not want to exaggerate the differences between Aristotle and Wang. Aristotle believed that there was a natural fit between humans and the second nature into which we can, with proper training, be habituated: we can learn to take pleasure in nobility because nobility is indeed pleasurable. Burnyeat writes that according to Aristotle, you need “to be guided in your conduct so that by doing the things you are told are noble and just you will discover that what you have been told is *true*. What you begin by taking on trust you can come to know for yourself. This is not yet to know *why* it is true, but it is to have *learned that* it is true in the sense of having made the judgment your own, second nature to you” [Ibid., 74]. An Aristotelian learner can come to take pleasure in the right things, if guided properly. But he or she does not start out taking pleasure in the right things (or perhaps does so only in a scattered, arbitrary fashion). Wang, following the general Neo-Confucian development of earlier Confucian insights, argues that we do not need to learn to take pleasure in the right things. Instead, we need to attend to our surroundings and to our selves in proper ways, so that pre-existing ethical feelings (our *liang zhi*) will engage and direct us.

This difference means both that the underlying metaethical justification for the content of proper human interaction with our social and natural environments will differ, depending on whether one is Aristotelian or Neo-Confucian, and also that the content and point of early stages of ethical education will differ, even if there remain many similarities. I have at least begun to deal with the first of these questions in chapter 5, earlier; here I will continue my discussion of lesser learning by asking: if lesser learning is not about being habituated into a “second nature,” a la Aristotle, then what is it for?

Lesser learning has several related functions. First, it provides a structured context in which we are helped to see those of our natural reactions to which we might not otherwise attend adequately. Training in rituals is especially useful here, as I will discuss later. For many contemporary Western philosophers, the idea that our ethics is based on our natural emotional reactions will bring Hume to mind. In the context of practices like lesser learning, there is actually an even better contemporary Western analogue: the work of psychologist Martin Hoffman on moral development resonates strongly with certain Neo-Confucian themes. Hoffman points out the value of a practice he calls “induction” for strengthening the role that empathy plays in an individual's psychological economy.[3] Hoffman **(p.139)** argues that empathy on its own is often not enough to motivate a prosocial reaction after one has caused another's distress. Unlike “bystander” cases, children in “transgression” cases typically require the intervention of an adult; one of Hoffman's key contentions is that parental “inductions,” in which parents “highlight the other's perspective, point up the other's distress, and make it clear that the child's action caused it,” are the most constructive and important type of disciplinary encounter [Hoffman 2000, 143]. Hoffman argues that in general, induction has better long-term consequences than “power assertion” or “love withdrawal,” which are the other two types of disciplinary encounters he considers. Inductions enable the creation of internal “scripts” leading from transgression to induction to empathetic distress and guilt, and then to reparation. After these scripts are formed—based on the ability of children to experience empathy—the children come to be able to activate the scripts themselves without parental intervention. Once this internalization has taken place, children are much better motivated to either avoid transgressions, or at least to feel guilty and make reparations afterwards.

There are numerous opportunities for dialogue afforded by the juxtaposition of a developmental psychologist like Hoffman and Neo-Confucian teachings concerning lesser learning (and ethical education more broadly). Among other issues, Neo-Confucians will push Hoffman to think more carefully about the constructive roles played by ritual as a form of “discipline,” which so far he has ignored. For his part, Hoffman's detailed, empirically based account of psychological development will challenge Neo-Confucians to further justify their view that *liang zhi* does not need to grow (even though, to be fair, they maintain that our commitment to attend properly to the world *does* need to mature). I hope to be able to participate in some of this research in the future.

For now, let us return to Neo-Confucian lesser learning. A second function it serves is to keep us from what I will call “moral danger”: not only does lesser learning put us into positive contexts, but it also keeps us from negative ones in which temptations to selfish behavior abound. Third, through the practices introduced in lesser learning we are initiated into (and actually help to recreate) critical communities that will help to sustain our ethical education—even as we help to articulate the precise shape and point of these communities through our participation in them. Fourth, lesser learning begins the process of disciplining our physical-cum-emotional selves. From the classical period on, Confucians have seen body, mind, and heart as continuous with one another. Neo-Confucians expressed this through the theory of “*qi* □,” “matter-energy” or “psycho-physical stuff.” We are made up of *qi*, parts of which can be more or less “pure.” The key point to notice here is that the theory of *qi* is not best understood as establishing a dualism between good mind (or soul) and bad body. Rather, mind-hearts (*xin* □) are embodied, and the body has both good reactions (*liang zhi*) and, at least at the beginning of one's cultivation, bad or inapt reactions.[4] Zhu Xi thus says that “only if they are taught to regard reverence as central and to discipline their bodies and minds will they be capable of making the proper effort” [Zhu 1990, 93].

Finally, the fifth function we can assign to lesser learning is rousing our intention to cultivate ourselves. Wang Yangming emphasizes this quite explicitly. **(p.140)** His writings on lesser learning complement Zhu's, making similar remarks about the role of ritual but adding some insightful remarks about cultivating natural motivation:

> The ways to raise and cultivate [young boys] are to lure them to singing so their intentions (*yizhi* □□) will be roused, to direct them to practice ritual (*li* □) so their demeanor will be dignified, and to urge them to read so their intellectual horizons will be widened…. [Singing] is also to release through singing their [energy as expressed in] jumping around and shouting, and to free them through rhythm from depression and repression.” [Wang 1963, 182–83 (§195), slightly altered]

In short, Wang says that through lesser learning, children “steep themselves in equilibrium and harmony without knowing why” [Ibid.].

A final remark to make about lesser learning is that Zhu and Wang do not necessarily see it as a fundamentally distinct phase that must come before anything that could count as “greater learning.” Some of their comments and some of the content of lesser learning suggest a degree of overlap, especially as it regards the practice of reverence (*jing* □). Reverence is critical to greater learning, but its gradual development can also play a valuable role in lesser learning. Thus Zhu says, for example, that in these benighted days without explicit instruction in lesser learning, “only if [students] are taught to regard reverence as central and to discipline their bodies and minds will they be capable of making the proper effort” [Zhu 1990, 93]. Wang's discussion of what a lesser learning school should be like is replete with references to the serious, respectful, concentrated demeanor with which students shall be taught to carry themselves, all of which can be seen as outer training for the inner practice of reverence that is to come [Wang 1963, 184–85 (§§196–99)].

8.1.2 Establishing a Commitment

The way Zhu Xi tells it, one graduates from a school of lesser learning and then begins the process of "greater learning": "the investigation of a given coherence—the reason why an affair is as it is" [Zhu 1990, 90, slightly altered]. Greater learning, in other words, is more explicit and perhaps more theoretical than lesser learning. I will divide greater learning into two distinct phases, first "establishing a commitment," then "matur(ing) commitment." We have already seen in chapter 7 that "mature commitment" is Wang Yangming's gloss on sagehood; mature commitment is what Confucius had at age seventy. Under the rubric of "establishing a commitment," I discuss the first explicit steps one takes as one begins consciously to take part in one's own ethical education. "Matur(ing) commitment," in turn, will give me a place to discuss more advanced cultivation, as well as differing views on how one might make the transition to actual sagehood.

Both Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming repeatedly emphasized that students must establish a commitment. Here is Zhu Xi:

> Students must firmly establish their commitment. What is meant by "commitment" isn't to overwhelm other people with one's bearing. **(p.141)** It's just simply the desire to study Yao and Shun.… To establish their commitments, students must make themselves resolute, then as a matter of course they should make progress. The students' greatest failing is that their commitments are inadequate to make progress.[5]

In a similar vein, Wang Yangming explains that those without a "sincere commitment to becoming a sage" and who do not "devote themselves to being discerning and single-minded" may remain confused during their whole lives without understanding why.[6] In contrast, "a scholar who has already committed to becoming a sage, in order to gain insight, needs merely to extend his *liang zhi*, in its intelligent and conscious aspects, to the uttermost, proceeding gradually and naturally day by day. He does not need to worry about externals and details" [Ibid., 94, slightly modified].

It is appropriate to represent establishing a commitment as a second phase in ethical education because it goes beyond lesser learning in crucial ways, even while it builds on that foundation. Commitment is explicit and chosen. One does not really understand the underlying point of lesser learning while one is undergoing it. Greater learning begins when we start to become conscious authors of our own cultivation. Still, ethical education on the Neo-Confucian understanding is never simply an individual project. Shared rituals; shared relations with parents, teachers, and other role models; immersing oneself in a shared cultural tradition; and shared study with fellow students all help one to gradually deepen one's commitment.

The Neo-Confucian idea of establishing a commitment, coming as it does at the beginning of one's explicit education in the ideas and teachings of the tradition, might remind one of the Buddhist “thought of awakening” or *bodhicitta* (*putixin* □□□). According to various Mahayana Buddhist teachings, one reaches the point when one can generate this moment of selfless determination, whereupon one can take bodhisattva vows. The parallels are interesting—especially given other influences and relationships between Chinese Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism—but I would urge that we not push this analogy very far. For one thing, the idea that a commitment plays an important role in Confucian self-cultivation goes all the way back to the *Analects*; in passage 2:4, Confucius is said to commit himself at age fifteen to learning. For another, the nature of the commitments differ substantially: never, I would argue, do Neo-Confucians urge on themselves “selflessness.” Finally, as far as we know there was no specific ritual or vow attending the Confucian commitment. Instead, the commitment is something that one attempts to live out in everyday life as well as in moments of explicit ethical education.[7]

I will discuss later many of the practices of cultivation that go along with this stage in one's education. The one general thing to say at this point is the importance of “effort (*gongfu* □□)” [Zhu 1990, 102 f]. Learning—a broad category that very much includes ethical development—is something to be taken seriously, both in the sense of not being arbitrary, and in the sense of devotion. “Effort” here means to work within a framework so that one “knows where to begin” and is able to proceed without confusion. It also means to push oneself; in Cheng Hao's famous phrase, “learning requires directing the whip towards the inner **(p.142)** self.”[8] Part of the motivation for structured effort comes from within; recall that Wang stressed the ways in which lesser learning develops one's intention (*yi* □ and *yizhi* □□) and desire to improve. But no one assumes that students will naturally have enough motivation to improve solely on their own. Another part of the needed motivation comes from others. Many of Zhu's sayings seem intended primarily to motivate his students (for instance, “Don't wait!” [Ibid., 106]). In a variety of ways, loved and/or respected role models can move us to work harder to achieve goals they endorse.

Before moving on to the phase of mature commitment, let us pause for a moment to reflect on a possible problem with the idea of establishing a commitment in the first place. The following statement by Cheng Yi argues that purposeful “effort”—which sounds just like what Zhu and Wang are recommending—is problematic. Cheng said that,

> People say we must practice with effort (*li xing* □□). Such a statement, however, is superficial. If a person really knows that a thing should be done, when he sees anything that should be done, he does not wait for his intention (*yi* □) to be aroused. As soon as he artificially arouses his intention, that means selfishness. How can such a spirit last long? [Zhu and Lu 1967, 63, slightly modified]

Zhu Xi also noted that the only difference between Yan Hui (Confucius' favorite disciple) and Confucius himself was that Yan had intentions/purposes (*yi*) [Zhu and Lu 1967, 291].

There are thus two worries about purposeful or forced ethical action. First, as Cheng Yi mentions, it is only temporary.[9] Second, it may actually lead to selfishness. Doing something because one is afraid of punishment or damage to one's reputation, or even just because one wants to become a sage (as in Yan Hui's case), stresses oneself at the expense of the rest of the universe. This is selfishness—the same sort of selfishness with which Neo-Confucians regularly charged Buddhists, since the Buddhists withdrew from society and sought their own enlightenment. The answer to both of these challenges rests on the Neo-Confucians' assertion that one's commitment to sagehood can mature over time, because the more mature one's commitment is, the more spontaneously one puts it into practice. In a way, Cheng Yi's criticism is unfair. The idea of "practicing with effort" comes from chapter 20 of the *Zhongyong*, wherein it is said to be "close to humaneness." In other words, even in that classic text, it was understood that making conscious effort was a preliminary stage. So long as proper practice will lead to the commitment's becoming automatic—that is, conscious commitment becomes spontaneous disposition—we need not worry about its being only temporary nor about selfishness.

8.1.3 Matur(ing) Commitment

All Neo-Confucians agree that ethical education is a long, gradual process. All agree that sagehood is at least in principle an attainable state toward which ethical education aims. Beneath this agreement, though, different strands of the **(p.143)** tradition pull in different directions. For some, sagehood—or mature commitment, or sincerity (*cheng* □)—is attained through a sudden leap. For others, sudden moments of clarity (enlightenment) may occur, but do not signal arrival at some new, lasting state of consciousness. Another important difference is whether introspection and "quiet sitting" can lead to a mystical, transcendent insight, or instead play roles in a more this-worldly process. Both of these differences, in turn, tend to be linked to which of two homophonous terms one emphasizes in one's practice: "quiescence (*jing* □)" or "reverence (*jing* □)."

The view I develop here draws primarily on Zhu and Wang, building on those aspects of the tradition that view this stage of ethical development as ongoing and open-ended. This is the mainstream view of the matter within Neo-Confucianism. To the extent that "enlightenment" experiences occur or quiet sitting has a role, they represent parts of a larger process rather than ends in themselves. On my favored view, key questions to be explored both in Section 8.2 and in chapter 9 include: how do we gradually make a transition from pushing ourselves to look for harmony, to doing it more spontaneously? What place does the "self" have in a relatively mature student, and how do we get ourselves there? A critical idea is that practices must be simultaneously accessible to a non-sage, and yet also part of the process of becoming ever-better. One reason why this combination is possible is that, as emphasized in chapter 7, our ability to identify harmony or coherence does not need to develop. What needs to mature is our disposition to look for harmony; our capacity to notice it once we look is always already in place.

Zhu Xi is a particularly interesting—or perhaps I should say complicated—source for thinking about maturing commitment. In his early years, his teacher Li Tong (1088–1158) taught him that quiescence and quiet sitting could reveal to one the universal coherence in one's “unactualized (*weifa* □□)” mind.[10] Zhu was not wholly convinced that such direct intuition was possible, however, and eventually rejected it in favor of the practice of “reverence” that we will explore at length later. Quiet sitting remained part of his personal practice and his pedagogy, but simply as a “subsidiary element” of his broader teaching of “apprehending coherence in things (*gewu* □□)” and “making reverence the master (*zhujing* □□).”[11] It will also be important to keep in mind that, while Zhu emphasizes that maturing commitment is a gradual and lengthy process and probably would be willing to acknowledge that virtually no one will actually complete it, he does at times write about experiences that are tantamount to completion.[12] Sagehood is, after all, a genuine possibility.

Compared with his teacher Li Tong, Zhu Xi had already de-emphasized quiet sitting as a practice; Wang Yangming moves further away from giving it a central role. He worries that a focus on meditation leads students to develop “fondness for tranquility and disgust with activity” [Wang 1963, 217]. His teaching consequently emphasizes activity; it is through activity that we can develop the disposition to look for harmony that Wang characterizes as “mature commitment.”[13] There are a variety of indications throughout Wang's corpus that ethical development is a long and gradual process—and one to which he himself sees no end in sight. In a letter, he writes, “My idea is that … when one already has **(p.144)** a little bit of enlightenment, one ought to wish at once to share this little bit of enlightenment with others” [Wang 1972, 20]. Enlightenment comes in degrees, not all at once.

These brief paragraphs on Zhu and Wang have only scratched the surface of Neo-Confucian attitudes toward the gradual maturation of commitment. Many thinkers make reference to specific enlightenment experiences: sudden moments of clarity in which one perceives—cognitively and conatively—the harmonious unity of all things with unusual clarity and force. The most common (and most plausible) interpretation of these experiences has already been suggested by Wang's reference to a “little bit of enlightenment.” The clarity fades, though perhaps it leaves one somewhat changed for the better, with a stronger sense of direction and commitment. One of the most famous discussions of such an experience comes from the late Ming dynasty thinker Gao Panlong (1562–1626). For our purposes, the following passage is telling: “My endowment is most deficient and I lack a long period of strict regimen. Even if I come upon some great insight, what use is it? Fortunately, ever since my true self was revealed, every time I try to spur myself I am back on the right track” [Wu 1990, 140]. The revelation of his true self was not the end of a process for Gao, but one sign of progress, with more hard work to follow. I thus find that Neo-Confucians generally agree with the contemporary scholar Liu Shu-hsien when he declares that “the discipline of becoming a sage is an endless process” [Liu 1988, 269].[14]

8.2 Practices of Self-Improvement

It is now time to turn more directly to the question of what one is supposed to do during the stages I have just discussed. Neo-Confucian philosophers taught their students a host of practices designed to support or channel the students' efforts. In this section we will examine them under three categories: ritual, reading, and attention. Ritual and reading each have their roles for most every Neo-Confucian thinker, though their exact importance was quite contested within the tradition. "Attention" is a broad and critical category, encompassing several of the Neo-Confucians' most distinctive approaches to self-improvement; we will also see that the category of attention provides the most direct links to our ability to look for harmony, and thus to sagehood.

8.2.1 Spiritual Exercises

To lay some groundwork for our reflection on the meaning of these practices today that will come in the next chapter, before turning to the Neo-Confucian practices themselves I first want to discuss an important development within Western ethical philosophy. Over the last two decades a number of Western thinkers have raised the topic of ancient Hellenistic practices of *askesis*, a term that has most influentially been translated as "spiritual exercise." Several related concerns have driven this interest. Modern moral theory seems to have "severed itself from the lived experience of actual moral agents," such that "the study of **(p.145)** ethics has too often been reduced to the analysis of general rules, principles, and codes of conduct while ignoring the formation of persons in particular moral contexts" [Antonaccio 1998, 72]. These concerns are certainly related to those motivating the broader interest in virtue ethics; even virtue ethicists who have paid little attention to ancient spiritual exercises have expressed interest in better understanding the actual development of virtues and ways in which we might better support such developments [Slote 1992, 260–61]. In this context, the realization that for ancient Western philosophers, the practice of self-improvement was arguably more important than debating the theories on which such practices rested, has attracted widespread notice.

One pathbreaking scholar has been Pierre Hadot. He sums up the Hellenistic idea of philosophy as "philosophy as a way of life," and describes spiritual exercises as practices by which "the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspective of the Whole" [Hadot 1995, 82]. In a recent comparative study of spiritual exercises in Xunzi and Augustine, Aaron Stalnaker gives the following gloss on Hadot's usage: "[Hadot] means certain methodical practices that engage thought, imagination, and sensibility; that have a significant ethical component; and that ultimately aim at a broader transformation of vision, a metamorphosis of the whole personality" [Stalnaker 2006, 40]. Stalnaker is clearly sympathetic to Hadot's argument that such practices have real significance for us today, even though he criticizes Hadot for too breezily suggesting that moderns can practice ancient spiritual exercises by simply jettisoning the underlying theoretical views that justified them [Ibid., 34]. Several other scholars have combined a sympathetic account of spiritual exercises with concern over the possibility of their contemporary retrieval.[15]

I will return to the question of the modern relevance of specific earlier practices in the next chapter. Certainly those of us aiming to take the Confucian and Neo-Confucian traditions seriously as contemporary philosophy can benefit from thinking through these discussions of Hellenistic (and subsequent) “spiritual exercises,” because Confucian practices bear a variety of similarities to them. Like Western spiritual exercises, we will see that Neo-Confucian practices of self-improvement are intimately tied to philosophical theory, broadly understood. Neo-Confucian practices aim to change the way we view the world, as previous chapters should have led us to expect. They aim to shape our desires and motivations, as do their Western counterparts. Finally, they have a kind of perfection as their ultimate aim, just as do Hellenistic spiritual exercises. However, we should not move on to the Chinese practices themselves without noting that there are also important differences dividing them from those studied by Hadot and others. Where Hadot emphasizes that Hellenistic exercises involve universal reason restraining—indeed, eliminating—passions, Neo-Confucian practices proceed through different mechanisms and do not strive to eliminate all feelings or even all desires.[16] As previous chapters have already discussed, the notion of perfection operative in the different traditions is also importantly different. Hadot's subjects, and Augustine's too, strive for a “divinity” which is, in the end, always beyond their grasp; whereas for Neo-Confucians, sagehood is a humanly **(p.146)** attainable goal, at least in principle.[17] Relatedly, the very term “spirit” has questionable relevance to a Chinese context. I have chosen, therefore, to refer to Neo-Confucian “practices of self-improvement” rather than to spiritual exercises.[18]

8.2.2 Ritual

In the first section of this chapter, we saw that various ritual practices formed an important part of the “lesser learning” stage of one's overall process of personal development. For virtually any Confucians of any era, rituals will be a part of their understanding of how we are to shape our behavior and our characters; for some, rituals will be absolutely central. In Stalnaker's recent account of Xunzi's spiritual exercises, ritual and the closely-related idea of musical performance form two out of Xunzi's three “principal techniques of personal formation” [Stalnaker 2006, 179]. For Xunzi, rituals both help us stay out of moral danger, in the sense described earlier, and play critical roles in transforming our characters so that we come to be able to respond appropriately, regardless of circumstance.[19]

In contrast to Xunzi, mainstream Neo-Confucianism does not see ritual as the core of its regime of personal development. Lesser learning is an important stage in which ritual figures prominently, but ritual has a more modest role in greater learning, which makes up the lion's share of the overall process of ethical education. Instead, we should think of ritual, and lesser learning more generally, as supporting one's ability to focus and attend to both one's immediate situation and its larger context. As we will see shortly, both individual and context are vital to the proper practice of Neo-Confucian attention. When we turn in subsequent chapters to the political realm and to the question of what role the state may have in promoting values and individual development, we will again see ritual playing an important role. Both Zhu and Wang authored famous documents describing how local communities should be structured, and in each of them rituals have major roles. In each case, though, these documents correspond to lesser learning—which is, in effect, all that the state can demand of individuals. To go beyond lesser learning, we must find teachers and commit ourselves to the process.

There are various indications that ritual is less important for Zhu Xi than it had been for Xunzi. One is a consistent emphasis on the need to adapt old rituals to the changed circumstances of Zhu's day [Zhu 1997, Sections 84–91, passim]. This is not to do away with rituals, but it does put into the foreground the values in terms of which the new rituals need to be designed or assessed. Zhu also explicitly criticizes his predecessor Zhang Zai for over-emphasizing rituals.[20] Most tellingly, Zhu did not see ritual as providing a distinctive, necessary means toward one's transformation. In a characteristic passage, he cites classical passages that evoke the idea of ritual (e.g., “Go out as if you were seeing an important guest”) as one in a list of passages that stress other ideas (e.g., “Preserve your heart and nourish your nature”). He then concludes, “There is only a single coherence in all of these, and we need only put forth our effort in one place and the rest will be included. The way of sages and worthies is like a room: although all the doors are different, you can enter through any one of them.”[21] **(p.147)** Clearly ritual is here not thought to be necessary, and I would argue that without a recognition of its having some distinctive utility, it becomes quite secondary.[22] We should not read this passage as emphasizing ritual's potential role as a “sufficient condition” for entering the room, that is, but rather see this as downplaying its contribution to greater learning.

8.2.3 Reading

The reading of “classic” texts has been part of Confucian understandings of self-cultivation from the Warring States period: the *Analects* records Confucius as instructing his students to read the *Book of Poetry*, and Xunzi makes explicit that the Confucian tradition is transmitted by “classic (*jing* ▯)” texts, and thus stresses the importance of studying them [Stalnaker 2006, 161]. Within the Neo-Confucian tradition there are famous controversies about how, exactly, one should approach reading and the classics, with Zhu Xi's stress on reading and on a particular curriculum as one focal point, and his contemporary Lu Xiangshan's assertion that “The Six Classics are all my footnotes” as another. As many scholars have recognized, however, when one looks beneath the slogans one finds considerable overlap and agreement, and this will ground my effort here to articulate the general goals of reading as a practice of self-improvement.

Let me begin with a summary of changing views on reading among the Neo-Confucians. Early thinkers like Zhang Zai and the Cheng brothers saw reading as an important technique of cultivation, and put forward general views both about what should be read (e.g., history and literature were of minimal value, according to Zhang Zai, while the *Analects* and *Mencius* were well-suited to beginners) and how one should read: namely, use the words as pointers toward the meaning and truth behind the text, rather than getting bogged down in detailed exegesis [Kasoff 1984, 83–84]. The potential downside to any stress on reading, of course, is that in practice, admonitions to look for meaning can be ignored as students focus on memorization for its own sake—especially given the role played in Song dynasty society by success on the civil service exams. Lu Xiangshan's statement quoted earlier, emphasizing that the classics are not an authority independent of one's own cultivated ethical judgment, is surely a reaction against overly-wooden approaches to reading that were common in his society. Zhu Xi's reaction was different. He sought to make more explicit through his writing, teaching, and commentarial work how and what one should actually read. The tension between the ideal of reading-as-cultivational-practice and the all-too-common reality of reading-as-means-to-success remained, however. Wang Yangming gives us yet another effort at articulating the proper role of reading. As we will see, he continues to see it as playing an important role, and even agrees with Zhu that preparation for the exams is not automatically a problem. The point of reading, though, must be its role in helping one to perceive the coherence that unites events, past and present, with the judgments of one's own *liang zhi*.

Since Zhu Xi's view of reading is particularly detailed and widely influential, it makes sense to explore it in more detail.[23] We can best understand Zhu's teaching if we break it down into four stages: recitation, reflection, **(p.148)** embodiment, and going beyond the text. I will discuss these in order. Zhu repeatedly emphasizes the importance of reciting texts over and over again, becoming “intimately familiar” with what one reads; it is better to read less, but truly “personally experience” it, than to read widely yet shallowly [Zhu 1990, 132]. This level of familiarity is necessary because, as we will see, the goal of book reading is not just the acquisition of information. To be sure, it is useful to learn that sages can act with ease and can find harmonious solutions to situations in which others see only conflict. But one needs to do more than learn to say these words. One needs to discover their personal relevance, which is much more than merely “knowing” these teachings. Zhu offers many pieces of concrete advice on how to best carry out recitation: “concentrate fully, without thought of gain”; “make a truly fierce effort” on the short passages you choose; do not do too much at once, and rest as needed; avoid skipping around as you read; and so on [Ibid., 132 f]. Perhaps most importantly, Zhu says to “keep your mind glued on the text”: we can approach the text with an “open mind” so long as we “keep it focused on the text” [Ibid., 145–46]. As I will elaborate later, the focus and concentration discussed here also relate to other practices of “attention.”

As a second step toward accomplishing the aims of reading, one moves from recitation to reflection. Zhu says we need to “never stop thinking, turning over and over in our minds what's already become clear to us.” In a similar vein, “Once our intimate reading of it and careful reflection on it have led to a clear understanding of it, we must continue to question. Then there might be additional progress. If we cease questioning, in the end there'll be no additional progress” [Ibid., 133, 135]. Zhu stresses the importance of “doubts”: we should both cultivate them and then seek to remove them. We should, in particular, doubt our own views and not just those of others [Ibid., 151]. One way to think about the goal of ongoing reflection is to move toward a point at which we find ever-greater coherence: coherence among the text, our own reactions to the situations described, and our own sense of our contemporary situations. All these must ultimately fit together as part of one coherent whole. The text, our world, and ourselves all need to make sense to us in several ways: cognitively, in terms of our value-laden reactions, and, ultimately, in terms of vision. As discussed in the previous chapter, coming to look for and react to possibilities for harmony is at the core of development toward sagehood.

But I am getting slightly ahead of myself. A critical function of reflection is—together with focused attention—to help our minds be open and unbiased, which in turn helps us see possibilities for coherence. Our "progress" is not an entirely linear process. The need to re-reflect on things that were already clear suggests that there is a fallibilist tone to self-improvement. With respect to the idea that one's commitment may continue to mature indefinitely, as discussed earlier, it is worth noting that Zhu mentions a moment of "enlightenment" in the context of reading without it seeming like the end. It is just another step in a process [Ibid., 134].

All of this "turning over and over in our minds," has another function, more like digestion. The result of thorough reflection is that we move on to Zhu's **(p.149)** third stage of embodiment. Working with texts as Zhu recommends—chewing them, finding their "taste," just as one does with fruit [Ibid., 134]—cannot leave us unchanged. Again, this is not just a process of learning facts. Through the intimate encounter with the sages' words, in which Zhu says we should "rub" against the texts (translated suggestively by Gardner as "making the reading relevant to oneself"), one comes to internalize them [Ibid., 147]. As the texts are embodied, one's vision alters.

Finally we come to the fourth step, in which we go beyond the texts. Zhu says that our goal was never limited to the surface meaning of a given text [Ibid., 129]. The texts are a vehicle through which we can encounter and be shaped by the intentions (*yi*) of the sages. This will ultimately lead us to see the possibilities for coherence wherever we look, and at this point we no longer need to rely on the texts. Zhu in fact begins his two-chapter discussion of reading with the statement that "Book learning is a secondary matter" [Ibid., 128], and later adds that "When we read the Six Classics, it should be as if there were no Six Classics. We're simply seeking the coherence of the Way within ourselves" [Ibid., 152, slightly modified]. He concludes his discussion of reading thus:

> Because we have commentaries to the Classics, we understand the Classics. Once we have understood the Classics, there is no need for the commentaries. We rely on the Classics simply to understand coherence. Once we have grasped coherence, there is no need for the Classics. [Ibid., 157].

These passages help us to put Zhu's lifelong devotion to commentary into perspective. The texts are never ends in themselves, but means toward personal self-improvement and transformation.

Given that a division within Neo-Confucianism between the putative schools of "Cheng–Zhu" (Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi) and "Lu–Wang" (Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming) is deeply imbedded in both Chinese and Western historiography, we might expect Wang to side with Lu Xiangshan in Lu's debate with Zhu Xi over how to approach self-improvement. As already mentioned, Lu promoted introspection over book learning. Strikingly, Wang Yangming's views on this controversy are nuanced and relatively charitable to Zhu. In both his letters and his famous *Record for Practice*, he approves of the external investigations (especially book learning) championed by Zhu, so long as they are balanced by more introspective "honoring the virtuous nature (*zun de xing* □□□)" [Wang 1972, 71 and 75]. Book learning is fine, says Wang, so long as one approaches it with a firm commitment toward personal improvement, rather than as a means to worldly success [Wang 1972, 43]. Wang favors repeated recitation for many of the same reasons Zhu discusses: as part of what I am calling lesser learning, such work “steeps one in equilibrium and harmony without knowing why” [Wang 1963, 183, slightly modified]. Like Zhu, Wang believes that “In reading, the value does not lie in the amount but in learning the material well” [Ibid., 185]. He also stresses that in terms of our ultimate aim of illuminating coherence, the Classics fall away just as would Histories [Ibid., 23].

(p.150) I would not want to leave the impression that there were no differences between Zhu and Wang on reading. Zhu promoted a specific curriculum, felt that reading in a particular order was essential to progress, and put forth extraordinary labor over his long lifetime to provide a consistent commentarial approach to the Classics that would enable students to get to the point at which they no longer needed its support. Wang had a different temperament, lived at a different time, and devoted his energies to different goals. (Unlike Zhu, he held many high civil and military offices over his career.) Especially in his late writings, he comes across as having little patience with lengthy, systematic approaches to cultivation that dwell overmuch on the Classics, focusing increasingly narrowly on his teaching of “extending *liang zhi*.”[24] Be this as it may, his own classical erudition continues to shine through in his writings and comments to students, and one can only assume he expected his students to thoroughly understand the sources of his allusions. In short, than can be little doubt that reading forms a key part of Neo-Confucian practices of personal self-improvement.[25]

8.2.4 Attention—First Steps

The establishment and maturation of commitment is critical, according to Wang Yangming, if we are to move toward the goal of sagely ease. In an important discussion of this topic, Wang says, “As he who grows a tree must nourish the roots, so he who cultivates virtue must nourish his mind…. When the tree first begins to grow, it shoots forth many branches. These must be cut before the roots and trunk may grow large. This is also true when one begins to learn. Therefore in establishing commitment, single-minded focus (*zhuan yi* □□) is highly valued” [Wang 1963, 72–73 9(§115), slightly altered]. We can juxtapose this comment of Wang's, emphasizing the role of “single-minded focus” in early stages of cultivation, with the following statement by Zhu: “If one succeeds in preserving reverence (*jing*), one's mind will be clear and universal coherence will be bright. At no point is the slightest effort exerted, and at no point is the slightest effort not exerted.”[26] In other words, “reverence” is said to be the key to finally achieving sagely ease—that state in which without exerting effort, one still does all one should do. My point in beginning with this pair of remarks is to gesture toward the large, complex, but ultimately quite unified area of practice that we can label as “attention.”

There are a wide range of technical terms that I will argue fall into the category of practices related to attention. A list might be helpful:

- Reverence (*jing* □)
- Making reverence the master (*zhujing* □□)
- Preserving reverence (*cunjing* □□)

- Making single-mindedness the master (*zhuyi* □□)
- Focus single-mindedly (*zhuanyi* □□)
- Solitary cautiousness (*shendu* □□)
- Honoring virtuous nature (*zun dexing* □□□)
- Apprehending coherence in things (*gewu* □□)

(p.151)

- Exhaustively seeking coherence (*qiongli* □□)
- Extending knowledge (*zhi zhi* □□)

Some of these concepts are narrow and specific; others are broad or multivalent. Many of these terms originate in classical texts, particularly the *Great Learning*. The meaning of some were matters of considerable controversy within the tradition. Nonetheless, my effort to view this range of ideas in a unified, coherent fashion is aided by the fact that Zhu, Wang, and many of their colleagues regularly made statements suggesting that various of these terms are equivalent or different sides of the same process. (Indeed, it might well be possible to expand this list still further.) I will also argue that certain secondary practices (such as “restraining the self [*keji* □□]” and “quiet sitting [*jingzuo* □□]”) get their value, at least in part, from their role as supports for the development of attention. Even ritual and reading could also be characterized this way, but there is enough to say about them on their own that I have given them separate sections.

“Attention” is an apt term to capture the central goal of these multifarious ideas for three reasons. First, it is helpful to have a term that is not one of the tradition's own core terms in order to bring out what the tradition's own concepts and practices share with one another. Second, “attention” is an important category in cross-cultural studies of ethics and in comparative religions, and also figures importantly in Iris Murdoch's ethics, already used earlier to help flesh out the ideas of “unity of knowledge and action” and sagely ease. Use of the category of “attention” here—as another instance of Stalnaker's idea of bridge concept—thus facilitates further discussion of what the Neo-Confucians are, and are not, seeking. Finally, “attention” is simply a good term to label the type and goal of these practices of self-improvement, which I will argue is to attend to each “thing” (in a sense to be specified later) in itself and in its entire relevant context—or in other words, to see each “thing” in its distinctiveness and its interconnectedness.

8.2.5 Reverence

Not all of the members of my list are equal: *jing* □, which I translate as “reverence,” is quite clearly the most important. Unlike most of the other ideas, it has rather specific outer manifestations, as seen in things like one's posture, expression, and behavior. As a result, the beginnings of reverence can be part of early stages of cultivation. For instance, Zhu Xi said:

> “Sit as though you were impersonating an ancestor, stand as though you were performing a sacrifice.” The head should be upright, the eyes looking straight ahead, the feet steady, the hands respectful, the mouth quiet and composed, the bearing solemn—these are all aspects of reverence.[27]

The following passage imparts a similar message, while also making an explicit connection to other practices: **(p.152)**

> To explain "holding on to reverence (*chijing* □□)" doesn't require many words. Just appreciate fully the flavor of these phrases [of Cheng Yi]—"be ordered and solemn," "be dignified and grave," "change your countenance," "set your thoughts in order," "regulate your dress and dignify your gaze"—and make a concrete effort [at doing what they say]. Then what is called [by Cheng Yi] "straightening ourselves within (*zhi nei* □□)" and "making single-mindedness the master" naturally will require no additional measures: the mind and body will become solemn, and the manifest and hidden will become one. [Ibid., 171–72]

In his discussion of lesser learning, Wang Yangming urges very similar ideas on students, though he does not explicitly identify them with reverence. Pupils should be "tidy in appearance and calm in expression"; they should "listen respectfully with a solemn expression"; as they practice rituals, they should "be clear in their minds and solemn in their thoughts" [Wang 1963, 184–85, slightly altered]. For Zhu Xi, instructions like these are part and parcel of "reverence" itself, though they are not its deepest sense. It is less clear whether Wang sees such behavior as "reverence" itself, but since my argument is that reverence connects up with other, supportive practices to form a unified body of practice aimed at cultivating "attention," it ultimately does not matter whether Wang and Zhu agree on classifying things like solemn bearing as part of reverence or as a mere means to it.

For Zhu, at least, these physical-cum-emotional manifestations are part of reverence. They are certainly related to the more specific requirements of ritual, which as I discussed earlier, also has an important role in early stages of ethical development. What makes reverence so important, though, is less these specific behaviors than their ability to deepen into a broader, multifaceted aspect of our character. Several modern analysts have noted the multidimensional nature of reverence. The great twentieth-century intellectual historian Qian Mu, for example, argues that Zhu Xi's notion of reverence contains six aspects: fear and respect, restraint, focus, cautiousness, clearheadedness, and tidiness and solemnity [Qian 1989, vol. 2, 298 f]. A contemporary scholar lists a different set of six aspects: "single-mindedness and freedom from distraction"; "always keep mindful alertness"; "always examine yourself"; "be attentive"; "be orderly and dignified"; and "stand in awe," which he also connects to caution and fear [Choi unpublished]. My argument here is that we begin to see the unity of the concept—and to see how it can be a crucial virtue, as Choi also argues—when we see how its outer manifestations relate to its two central (inner) aspects, namely the way reverence both reveals interconnections and motivates us.

The outer aspects we have been tracking are both preparation for, and (eventually) expression of, a special sort of unified consciousness of one's situation at the moment. For some Neo-Confucians, the key to ethical development is to come to see and grasp the pure goodness within one—often, at least in part, via meditative techniques—and to find a way to manifest this pure goodness in one's every feeling and action. Zhu Xi himself was tempted by such an approach, but subsequently came to see a fundamental problem with it. As he says in his famous “First Letter to the Gentlemen of Hunan,” “the unactualized (*weifa* □□) **(p.153)** state cannot be sought and the state after we are conscious [of feelings] permits no manipulation.”[28] What this meant was that one could not experience feelings that had not yet been actualized—there is no introspective end run around this conceptual truth—and yet once one has already responded to a situation, it is too late to really fix things. To be sure, one can try to suppress bad reactions and conscientiously push oneself to do the right thing; the initial reactions of Iris Murdoch's “M,” from the previous chapter, offer an example of this. However, such conscientiousness is clearly not the attitude of sagehood that Zhu has been urging all to seek.[29]

What, then, is Zhu's solution? He (and many other Neo-Confucians, including Wang Yangming) felt that the key was to work on the way one sees the world. If one alters the mental framework into which our feelings flow, then one can ensure they manifest themselves correctly. We have already seen quite a lot in the previous chapter about what the results of such an alteration—mature commitment, sagely ease, and so on—are supposed to be. Here, our concern is with how to do it. Perhaps Zhu's most straightforward statement about the inner correlate of outer solemnity is the following: “Don't think of reverence as some matter [outside yourself]. It's simply to collect your own mental energy and focus single-mindedly here” [Zhu 1990, 174, somewhat altered]. Similarly, Zhu says that reverence is to “make single-mindedness the master without distraction” [cited in Choi (2005)].

So far, so good: focus or concentration lies at the heart of reverence. But if we stop here we would need to face two questions. First, why would single-minded focus be associated with feelings like “awe” (or perhaps “fear”) and expressed via “solemnity”? Doesn't this seem like an oddly worshipful attitude to take toward whatever particular thing one happens to be concentrating on? Second, elsewhere Zhu says that “If one continually practices reverence without interruption, then one will be unbiased and unreliant [on external things]; if one is always this way, one has achieved equilibrium.” [Lao 1980, vol. 3A, 299]. But how is it that concentrating on a single thing, to the exclusion of all else, is supposed to have the result that one is unbiased? It might be more natural to think one would be so focused on that particular thing as to think nothing else mattered in the world: for example, in a given moment, perhaps all one is aware of is the delicious flavors of one's sandwich.

One possible answer to both these questions would be that what one is concentrating on is not the sandwich itself, but on one's feelings and other reactions that are prompted by the sandwich; and that what one is solemnly, fearfully trying to avoid is any hint of selfishness. Any thought like “ah, I'm really glad I got the last piece of left-over turkey, instead of Dad—it is really delicious!” must be instantly squashed. Zhu says some things that lend themselves to such an interpretation, and analysts have sometimes read him in this way.[30] I think that Zhu does see the value of squashing such reactions, which he tends to discuss (as I will elaborate later) under the category of “subduing the self (*keji*).” But this is not what reverence itself is really about. One way to see this is from Zhu's various statements about what follows from reverence. In a particularly revealing passage, Zhu says: **(p.154)**

> Observe [and model yourself on] the disposition (*qixiang*) of straightening the inner with reverence. When reverent, your inner aspect will be unified, orderly, and straight; from top to bottom, there will be no selfish defects. If you are not reverent, then your inner aspect will be full of comparisons of all different kinds of things; when you act, you will always be partial [to one side or another]. Wanting to benefit A, it will be necessary to harm B, or vice versa. How could you thusly make anyone content? [Zhu 1997, 1022]

Rather than being “full of comparisons,” the “inner aspect” of someone advanced at reverence is unified, such that one can respond to a situation without being partial to one side or the other. This echoes the passage discussed earlier that connects reverence to being “unbiased” and thus achieving “equilibrium”; both of these passages, in turn, resonate strongly with the way that sages are able to perceive harmonious resolutions to even vexed situations, as I detailed in chapters 6 and 7.

If reverence is not fearfully keeping watch on one's emerging feelings, though, what is it? I submit that it is attending single-mindedly to a particular thing or matter before one, in all of its distinctness, which will simultaneously include being aware of the interdependence of that thing or matter with its entire context. Only by seeing it in such a thoroughly contextualized manner can one perceive the ideally harmonious response to a given stimulus; only thus does one avoid “bias.” One is “single-minded” not in the sense of tunnel vision, but in the sense of being undistracted and focused. If we look at some famous, related passages, we can begin to get more of a sense of how one is to attend to particular situations in the fashion Zhu wanted. For instance, here is a statement by Cheng Hao that Zhu endorsed:

> By calmness of nature we mean that one's nature is calm whether it is in a state of activity or in a state of tranquility. One does not lean forward or backward to accommodate things, nor does one make any distinction between the internal and the external. To regard things outside the self as external, and force oneself to conform to them, is to regard one's nature as divided into the internal and external. [Zhu and Lu 1983, 34–35]; translation from [Zhu and Lu 1967, 39].

In a comment on this letter, Zhu says that “nature” here should be understood as “mind”: one should not make a distinction in one's mind between internal and external. Similarly, he cites Zhang Zai's injunction that we should avoid having a “mind that [recognizes things as] outside itself (*you wai zhi xin* □□□□)” [Zhang 1978, 24]. Zhu comments:

> Someone asked what a “mind that [recognizes things as] outside itself” was. Zhu answered: That's having personal intentions (*si yi* □□), which renders inner and outer incompatible. All such a person sees is their own self. No things are

> interrelated with their self. That's “a mind that [recognizes things as] outside itself.” [*Quanshu*, vol. 44, 13a]

(p.155) When one attends to particular things, in short, one must see them in all their interrelationships.[31]

8.2.6 Further Implications

I will have occasion later to expand on how one achieves the particular kind of attention that Zhu has in mind. For the moment, note two things. First, seeing things (or matters, events, relationships: all these could be referred to by “thing [*wu* □]”) in their interrelationships and interdependence means seeing them amidst, or constituted by, the patterns of coherence. Coherence operates at many levels, and ultimately even the most trivial situation is interrelated with universal coherence itself. More on this subject presently. Second, it would be helpful here to recall our discussion in chapter 7 of Wang Yangming's idea that we form one body with all things. This did not mean, remember, that all things are equivalent, even though they are all related in the continuum of coherence. Similarly, for Zhu (or the earlier Neo-Confucians on whom he drew) to say that there is nothing outside the mind—nothing external to the self—is not for him to say that one should regard all things as equivalent. One focuses on interrelationships without losing sight of distinctness: that is the route to harmony.

Another advantage of understanding reverence as attending to the particular thing in its full embeddedness within universal coherence is that we see why Zhu talks of “reverence” rather than merely “focus,” and why “awe” (which can sometimes feel like fear) is also part of reverence.[32] In Section 5.1.5 I have already explained in a preliminary way how reverence motivates us, though keep in mind that the discussion in chapter 5 draws considerably on Paul Woodruff's notion of “reverence” which is only partly inspired by the Confucian tradition, and on Iris Murdoch, whose notion of the “good” is even more distant from Confucianism (as noted there). Here, therefore, let us look at what Zhu has to say; in the next chapter, we can reflect on how this relates to Woodruff, Murdoch, and to the role that something like reverence plays in some actual, contemporary “lives of commitment.”

Zhu is quite explicit about the importance of this affective dimension of reverence, saying at one point that “Reverence is just the word ‘awe (*wei* □)’” [Zhu 1997, 188]. He similarly describes reverence as “single-minded focus on each matter as it arises, with solemn circumspection and awe, never relaxing” [Ibid.]. The best elaboration I have found on what Zhu means by “awe” comes in his commentary on a passage from the *Analects* in which Confucius says that the superior person stands in awe of the commands of heaven. Zhu comments that “awe (*wei* □) means majestic fear.” It is an unavoidable reaction to seeing the proper coherence that heaven has ordained because one sees that realizing this coherence is one's responsibility, and yet this burden—which cannot be set aside—is very great.[33] Attention leads one to see things in all their interrelationships, which in turn means seeing the broader possibilities for “coherence”: the life-affirming possibilities for harmony. Zhu calls this focused engagement with one's world “reverence” because one is fearful and yet devoted to the tasks that naturally arise. As argued in chapter 7, one should not be merely noticing **(p.156)** possibilities for harmony, but be spontaneously looking for them. The closer one comes to sagely ease, the less one needs to devote effort to revering every instant. For most of us, though, maintaining the proper, engaged attitude takes serious effort. Zhu says to one student,

> It's not that certain matters in particular distract your thinking—just enjoying the scenery leads your mind far away. How can this compare to maintaining it within at all times? To have absolutely no interest in the inconsequential matters of the world may seem unfeeling at first, but, in fact, it is best if this is the case. [Zhu 1990, 174]

Nature itself can be an object of our reverence, but distraction by scenery at the wrong moment is something to be avoided.

What do I mean by saying that nature itself can be an object of reverence? My answer will take us briefly into the most debated of all Neo-Confucian attentional practices, namely "*gewu* □□," which I translate as "apprehending coherence in things"; a more literal translation might just be "reaching things," and its standard translation has been "investigation of things." *Gewu* is controversial in large part because of Wang Yangming's criticism of what he took to be Zhu Xi's interpretation of the idea. Apropos our question about nature, Wang famously spent three days trying to learn something about *li* by concentrating on a single bamboo plant. His failure ultimately led him to develop his own distinctive teaching that emphasized an inner focus on one's individual *liang zhi*. Rather than exploring the intricacies of Wang's argument with Zhu, which is based at least in part on misunderstanding, it will be more constructive to look quickly at what Zhu actually meant and at what Wang, in his turn, felt *gewu* should signify. *Gewu* is important to both of them principally because according to the *Great Learning*, it is the very first step of the process of self-cultivation. Connecting it to some of his other favored terms, the canonical statement of Zhu's interpretation of *gewu* reads: "What is meant by 'the extension of knowledge lies in fully apprehending the coherence of things' is, that if we wish to extend our knowledge to the utmost we must probe thoroughly the coherence of those things that we encounter."[34] In short, in order to follow the *Great Learning*'s admonition to extend our knowledge, we should "probe"—which Zhu elsewhere defines as "giving your entire attention to it" [Gardner 2007, 120]—the coherence of things we encounter.

8.2.7 Reverence and Coherence

It certainly sounds like there is a close relationship between reverence, as the effort to unify one's consciousness through being "fully responsive to the matter before one" [Gardner 2004, 103], and probing the coherence of objects one encounters. Indeed, Zhu emphasizes that they mutually rely on one another. He says that reverence is inner-focused and counts as nurturing of the self, while probing is outer-focused and aimed at extending knowledge. But:

> In the midst of nurturing there is naturally also effort devoted to probing coherence; one probes the coherence that is being nurtured. **(p.157)** In the midst of probing coherence there is naturally also effort devoted to nurture; one

> nurtures the coherence that is being probed. These two processes are inseparable. As soon as one sees them as two different endeavors, nothing will be achieved. [Zhu 1997, 135; cp. Zhu 1990, 118]

Recall that coherence is the interrelationship among parts of a thing (or event, or whole situation) in accord with which it makes sense, in terms of human values, and also coheres with larger configurations of things (or events, or situations). One can talk of the coherence of a table, and one can probe it (and/or seek to apprehend it). In doing so, one might start with its fittedness to human meals, especially to those in which families dine together. In a Chinese context, the fit between round tables and inclusive social groupings might come to mind, though rituals also exist (who sits where, who eats first) to mark out hierarchical relations of reciprocal responsibility. Note that as one is doing this, one is focusing both on the distinctive coherence of the table, and on its nestedness in broader coherences. One is calling to mind the importance of the human relationships tables are meant to help foster, and thus one's own responsibilities. This work will help one to respond more attentively and appropriately to table-related situations that arise in the future. Nurturing, which we can also understand in terms of the maturing of one's commitment to looking for harmony, and probing go hand in hand.

Wang Yangming similarly felt that reverence and exhaustively seeking coherence were deeply interrelated: “Dwelling in reverence is exhaustively seeking coherence in its aspect of single-minded focus, and exhaustively seeking coherence is dwelling in reverence in its aspect of thoroughness and care” [Wang 1963, 74, slightly modified]. Nonetheless, he was worried that Zhu's attention to the coherence in “things” we encounter was a mistake. Perhaps also influenced by Zhu's voluminous writing, Wang told his students that “later scholars [like Zhu] insist on describing coherence in its minute details, leaving out nothing, and prescribing a rigid (*ding* □) pattern for action” [Ibid., 43]. In a letter, he complained about Zhu's notion that each thing has “a settled coherence (*dingli* □□)” [Ibid., 98], which would ultimately mean that coherence was out there in things, rather than in one's mind. Wang felt this was ridiculous—would the coherence that is filial piety toward one's parent disappear when the parent dies? In addition, he charged that rigidity like Zhu advocated would lead one to be “occupied with fragmentary and isolated details and broken pieces, such that [one's] task will have no solution” [Ibid., 75]. Instead, Wang proposed that “thing (*wu*)” be understood as the direction of one's intentions. Thus, when one is concerned with serving one's parents, then serving them is the “thing” whose coherence is to be “apprehended” (*ge* □) [Ibid., 14]. This way one does not look for coherence in external things, cut off from one's mind, but in one's mind itself.

I argued in chapter 2 that while Zhu's slogan “nature is coherence” already expresses some of the subjectivity that is intrinsic to coherence, Wang's competing “mind is coherence” emphasizes this dimension even more.[35] With respect to *gewu*, we can also see that Wang puts more emphasis than Zhu on getting a grasp on coherence via pure introspection. If we step back and reflect on their **(p.158)** respective positions, we can see that they each have a point. The strength of Zhu's method is that it assists us to see situations in all their relevant contexts. By focusing our reverent attention on various things we encounter, we are led to notice, and eventually to expect and look for, interdependencies. Wang charges that all this attention to external things will lead to fragmentation—as indeed it will, if we are not able to perceive the interdependencies and, ultimately, make the connection back to ourselves. In Zhu's defense, he stresses that reverence is supposed to help us avoid comparisons of value (A vs. B), and instead lead us to seeing that nothing is really “outside the self,” in Zhang Zai's phrase. We can also relate this to Zhu's emphasis on making things personally meaningful when we read, and eventually to embodying the values and then going beyond the texts.

On the other hand, the strength of Wang's method is to put the unity of coherence into the foreground, by emphasizing the role of one's mind in articulating “things” and downplaying any need to attend to aspects of the world that we do not already have “in mind,” so to speak. The danger of the approach is that it might lead us to an overly subjective, and thus mistaken, sense of what is at stake in a given situation. Wang recognizes that it is possible to mistakenly believe that one's feelings and thoughts (*yi* □) are *liang zhi*, but in response he simply instructs his students to apply more effort to introspecting the difference [Wang 1972, 114]. This weakness inspired many criticisms in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties of Wang and his followers for being no different from Chan Buddhists. Without wanting to enter into that debate, I think we can see two things: that Zhu and Wang are not as far apart as has often been thought, and that a balanced approach to Neo-Confucian ethical practice will need to take both of their concerns very seriously.

8.2.8 Self-Restraint and Quiet Sitting

Finally, I should say something brief about two other practices that Wang and Zhu both recognize as helpful though of secondary importance, namely self-restraint (*keji* □□) and quiet sitting (*jingzuo* □□). I would be mischaracterizing my sources if I didn't acknowledge that the theme of self-restraint—which I understand as conscientious effort to suppress improper reactions as soon as one notices them—sometimes seeps into discussions of reverence, or attention more broadly. One particularly interesting way this happens is that both Zhu and Wang sometimes emphasize the liminal moment just as feelings are beginning to be expressed (or enter one's consciousness), which they refer to as *ji* □; this appears to them to be a particularly opportune moment to suppress problematic thoughts or feelings. As I argued earlier, I do not believe that self-restraint can be the core idea of reverence, nor the main function of attention; if it were, it is hard to see how sagely ease would be possible. But self-restraint can function unproblematically as a support for deeper kinds of attention. Reverence is certainly not an all-or-nothing affair. One is supposed to gradually mature through steady practice. Part of getting better at reverence would mean relying less on self-restraint.

(p.159) Quiet sitting is a technique employed by most Neo-Confucians to one degree or other. Those who believe it possible to directly access one's pure, tranquil nature often invest considerable importance in quiet sitting; as I discussed earlier, though, neither Zhu nor Wang takes this route, and I find it philosophically unpromising. Zhu's own remarks about quiet sitting make clear that he thinks of it as an auxiliary. He rather approvingly cites the advocacy of quiet sitting by earlier scholars, including his own teacher. He also says: “In practicing quiet sitting, you mustn't sit in Chan-like contemplation, cutting off all thought. Just gather the mind; don't let it run wild with idle thought, and it will be at peace and of itself concentrated” [Zhu 1990, 176]. While Zhu did say at one point that one should spend half one's day reading and the other half quiet-sitting [Zhu 1990, 48n51], he also cautioned against over-reliance on it: “If you practice quiet-sitting for a long time, you'll become muddled and weary, incapable of thinking. When you get up, you'll feel agitated and won't think calmly” [Ibid., 179]. On balance, we can see quiet sitting as playing a supportive role, perhaps apt for some people, and some stages of practice, more than others.[36]

8.2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed at achieving two types of synthesis. First, I have shown the many ways in which Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming share a great deal when it comes to theories of ethical education, notwithstanding their famous differences. They both underwrite the synthetic position articulated here. Second, we need to synthesize both the stages of ethical education and the practices through which ethical education takes place in order to arrive at a robust account. This latter synthesis is facilitated by the fact that the stages and practices often overlap. The way that reading, for instance, comprises both a rote, simple stage and more advanced phases points toward the way in which all aspects of the chapter hang together. The same can be said for reverence: we saw both basic, behavioral manifestations that fit within lesser learning, and much more developed practices that signal the later stages of greater learning. These two dimensions of synthesis are critical because they allow me to make good on a claim first articulated back in Section 1.3.1, namely that Neo-Confucians had to explain how there is adequate continuity between average people and sages. If the Neo-Confucians could not do this, then we average people would have little reason to care about the doings of sages, and certainly no reason to commit ourselves to sagehood. Although I will explore some aspects of this question further in Section 9.2, I have answered the continuity challenge: we have seen a picture of education according to which what we are able to do now is part of a process that can, in principle, lead to sagehood. The fact that reaching the highest stages is highly unlikely cannot serve as a principled obstacle to taking further steps.

I said in chapter 7 that personal development is a two-sided process involving both (negatively) the removal of selfish perspectives and (positively) looking for harmony. In titling this chapter “Learning to Look for Harmony,” have I neglected the former side of the coin? I believe not. A theme of this chapter has been the secondary, supportive, or preliminary nature of those practices whose **(p.160)** explicit point is the removal or suppression of selfishness. To be sure, a *result* of the many types of attentional practice we have discussed is that individuals will be less selfishly biased. But the explicit pedagogical focus of these practices is positive rather than negative. The self is enlarged rather than denied.

Finally, let us consider again the question of wherein one finds the motivation to engage in ethical education. Do the Neo-Confucians just assume that we all want to be better people? What if someone does not want to study the sages? My answer has two parts. First we need to note the difference between Neo-Confucian education and “moral education” considered as an add-on, separate from the rest of one's education. In fact, there may be something misleading about my referring to this chapter's subject as Neo-Confucian ethical education. When Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming talks of “learning” they are speaking inclusively. One way to put this might be to say that their educational program is not just about learning to act like a sage or feel like a sage: one is striving to write and speak like a sage, and even to subtract and multiply like a sage, plan a military campaign like a sage, and run a business like a sage. So the “better person” at which Neo-Confucian “learning” aims is a broad-based ideal. Still—and this is the second part of my answer—the Neo-Confucians do not assume that we will all automatically work toward becoming better people. They do believe that we all have capacities that educators can hook into or bring out in order to motivate us. Part of the point of lesser learning is to help these abilities to be made manifest in ways that will push us toward further education. But greater learning is still premised on the idea of commitment. Because of the continuity between our current selves (at whatever stage) and sages, the commitment after which Neo-Confucians strive is not a groundless leap of faith, but it is still a choice. To further interrogate this idea of commitment and the practices of self-improvement more generally, in the next chapter I bring more contemporary voices into the conversation. What sense can we make of these Neo-Confucian claims today?

Notes:

(1.) Beginning in 1314, some 114 years after Zhu's death, his commentaries became the authoritative interpretations of many of the classics for the purposes of the examination system [Liu 1986, 526].

(2.) Zhu says that 70 percent toward self-improvement and 30 percent toward examinations should be fine, though he adds that “What the Sage [i.e., Confucius] taught others was nothing but self-improvement” [Zhu 1990, 191].

(3.) For some discussion of the relations among caring, humaneness, and empathy, see Section 5.1.1.

(4.) The most sophisticated discussion of these themes within Neo-Confucianism comes during the famous Korean “Four-Seven Debate.” All the relevant documents are beautifully translated in Kalton [1994].

(5.) [Zhu 1990 , 104–5]. Gardner consistently translates “*zhì* ” as “will” where I have “commitment.” I have already argued in chapter 7 at length for understanding *zhì* as “commitment,” so I will not pursue the issue very far here. I trust that my discussion in this section will further solidify my reading. Also note that Gardner makes explicit that Zhu is following Cheng Hao in glossing *zhì* as follows: “Where the mind is headed is what is meant by ‘*zhì*” [Ibid., 105]. But this is precisely my point: *zhì* is not an independent faculty that directs one (that is, a will), but rather an orientation or direction one adopts, and endeavors to live up to, for one's mind (i.e., a commitment).

(6.) [Wang 1972, 102, slightly altered]. Ching translates *zhì* here as “determination,” which is essentially synonymous with “commitment.” I change it to “commitment” simply for consistency.

(7.) For further comparative discussion of “commitment,” see Section 9.1.

(8.) Quoted in Wang [1972, 6; see 7n5].

(9.) A later commentator on the *Reflections* added to the passage from Cheng Yi just cited that “momentary arousing of one's intention (*yi*) is unreliable” [Chan 1967, 63].

(10.) The “unactualized” and “actualized (*yifa* □□)” phases of the mind's operation are an important aspect of neo-Confucian psychological theory. See Metzger [1977], Wittenborn's discussion in Zhu [1991], and Angle [1998].

(11.) Zhu's realization that Li Tong's approach was untenable, and his elaboration of an alternative that draws heavily on Cheng Yi, have been the subject of considerable scholarship. The famous “First Letter to the Gentleman of Hunan” in which he announces his new view is translated at Chan [1963, 600–2]. [Taylor 1990, 79–80] is helpful on the relevance to quiet sitting; more generally, see [Liu 1988].

(12.) One good example comes in the remarks he adds to the *Great Learning*: “… After exerting himself in this way for a long time, there will come a moment when he clearly penetrates everything. The manifest and the hidden, the subtle and the obvious qualities of all things: all will be available to him. The whole substance and vast operations of the mind will be completely illuminated. This is called ‘apprehending coherence in things (*gewu*).’ This is called ‘the extremity of knowledge (*zhi zhi zhi* □□□)’ ” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 1, 6]; translation substantially modified from Zhu [1990, 118].

(13.) In a helpful essay on Neo-Confucian self-cultivation, Rodney Taylor characterizes Wang's focus on activity as the pursuit of “existential confirmation of the individual's metaphysical nature” [Taylor 1990, 83]. I believe this is partly correct, but it neglects the gradual maturation process that I have been emphasizing. One possible reason for this is Taylor's explicit goal in that essay of finding a way to apply the “sudden/gradual” paradigm to Neo-Confucianism; the proper conclusion to his essay is that such a model is not helpful in understanding Neo-Confucianism. See Taylor [1990, 83].

(14.) Liu here echoes his teacher Mou Zongsan's views; see Mou [1991, 127]. For considerably more on Gao Panlong, see Taylor [1990].

(15.) Kline [2007] worries that Stalnaker himself is too sanguine about the contemporary relevance of the ancient practices he discusses. Antonaccio [1998] argues that there are difficulties with three contemporary efforts of retrieval (by Hadot, Foucault, and Nussbaum), then puts forward an alternative approach to spiritual exercises, based on the ideas of Iris Murdoch, which she believes can avoid such difficulties.

(16.) Stalnaker has stressed that for Augustine, too, more is involved than reason restraining passions. Augustine and Xunzi share what Stalnaker calls a “chastened intellectualism,” according to which increasing intellectual commitment and changed inclinational tendencies go hand in hand [Stalnaker 2006, 278].

(17.) Antonaccio stresses the significance of retaining a notion like divinity, arguing that for Murdoch the tension between our deepest selves and true good “remains a constant possibility within the moral life” [Antonaccio 1998, 86]. She criticizes Martha Nussbaum for relaxing this stress on perfection in Nussbaum's retrieval of Stoic “therapy of desire.”

(18.) For Hadot's reasons for using “spiritual,” see Hadot [1995, 82]. Stalnaker discusses related issues with care and insight; his discomfort with “self-cultivation” (the typical translation of *xiu shen* □□) as both too individual and too rooted in an agricultural metaphor inapt for Xunzi lead him to prefer spiritual exercise [Stalnaker 2006, 43].

(19.) Xunzi's account of rituals thus offers an intriguing answer to the “situationist” challenge to virtue ethics, since he can both accept that character traits are often not robust across different situations (thus the need for rituals to keep us from moral danger) and still maintain that transformation toward a robust moral character is possible. For further discussion, see Angle [2007].

(20.) See Zhu and Lü [1967, 49], and discussion in Kasoff [1984, 82n52].

(21.) Zhu [1991, 154], slightly modified. The classical citations are *Analects* 12:2 and *Mencius* 7A:1, respectively.

(22.) Later Confucians revive the distinctive importance of ritual, and criticize Zhu and others for neglecting it. See Chow [1994].

(23.) For a particularly thorough discussion of Zhu Xi's recommended method of reading, see Peng [2007].

(24.) See especially the later letters collected in Wang [1972]; for instance, Ibid. [119–20].

(25.) Although not discussed by Neo-Confucians as far as I know, reading about people different from ourselves also can aid in ethical education. It enhances our concern for these others in two ways: by helping us to feel that they are “like us” and therefore within the ambit of our care; and by inducing empathetic responses to their sufferings. Richard Rorty emphasizes these ideas as part of what he calls “sentimental education” [Rorty 1993].

(26.) Translation adapted from Chan [1963, 606–7].

(27.) Zhu [1990, 172], slightly altered. The quotation and content of the second sentence are both from the *Book of Rites*, 1.8a and 30.23a–b, respectively.

(28.) [*Wenji*, vol. 64, 28b–29b]; translation adapted from Chan [1963, 601].

(29.) For Zhu's changing attitudes, see Liu Shu-hsien [1988]; for considerable discussion of Zhu's understanding of the psychological background to this problem, and an earlier effort at analyzing his solution, see Angle [1998]. I have greatly benefited from Choi's subtle critique of my earlier analysis.

(30.) See, in particular, Zhu's analogizing reverence to someone guarding a door [Zhu 1990, 119–20]. Donald Munro writes that this image "suggests an ever alert state in which one is always mindful of the prospective mesh between an emerging sentiment and the demands of the rules of conduct" [Munro 1988, 127]. See also Choi [unpublished] and my earlier discussion in Angle [1998]. There is evidence in this very passage against understanding Zhu as straightforwardly telling as to guard the door, however, since he says that ideal reverence will have the result that there are no "depravities" against which to guard, no "self" to be subdued. But how can this be, if reverence involves the post-facto suppression of problematic feelings as they emerge into consciousness?

(31.) For relevant discussion, see Cheng [1991, 382–8]. Wang Yangming says something very similar, though he emphasizes interconnectedness so much that the unique thing drops out of the picture almost entirely: "Concentrating on one thing means the absolute concentration of the mind on universal coherence" [Wang 1983, 56 (§15)]; translation from Wang [1963, 25]. For a passage that notes the continued presence of particulars, depending on their relevance to the situation, see *Record for Practice* (§63).

(32.) Some scholars have in fact translated *jing* □ as "seriousness" or "inner mental attentiveness," both of which miss this aspect of the concept. See Chan [1963] and Zhu [1990]. Gardner believes that "attentiveness" captures "reverence"; see Gardner [2004, 116n12].

(33.) See *Analects* 16:8. Zhu's comments are in Zhu [1987, Pt. 3, 124]. In an illuminating discussion of Confucian religiosity, Chung-ying Cheng suggests some differences with various Western conceptions, and specifically that "there cannot be found any holy terror or dread in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism." See Cheng [1991, 475].

(34.) Zhu felt that part of the classical commentary on the *Great Learning* was missing, and so wrote his own, which then circulated as part of the original. See Daniel Gardner's discussion in Zhu [1990, 104], which is also the source of this translation, though I have modified it slightly.

(35.) See also the more extensive discussion in chapter 2 regarding the idea of "settled (*ding*) coherence."

(36.) See Section 8.1.3.

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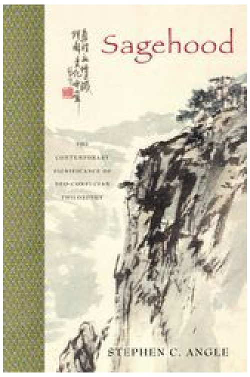

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Engaging Practices

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

The renewed philosophical attention to ancient "spiritual exercises" has generated a consistent critique: how can these practices have any relevance today, when the traditions and communities that sustained them no longer exist in anything like the same ways? The present chapter responds to this challenge by looking at Neo-Confucian practices in light of recent, narrative-based studies of exemplary lives by Colby and Damon, Bateson, and others. The methodologies and precise goals of these studies vary widely. Some make efforts to apply fairly rigorous social science methods, including the use of control groups; others focus on historical figures or groups. Together, they provide challenging perspectives on the Neo-Confucian self-cultivational practices explicated in the previous chapter. Subjects examine the nature of commitments, the accessibility of sage-like ideals, the difference between imagination and fantasy, the importance of dialogue, and the roles of attitudes like faith and belief.

Keywords: Anne Colby, William Damon, Mary Catherine Bateson, spiritual exercises, moral exemplars, commitment, imagination, dialogue, faith

Moral education has long been a particular concern not just of the Confucian tradition, but also of the strands within the Western moral tradition that we label these days as “virtue ethics.” Indeed, it is often said to be a strength of virtue ethics that it focuses on understanding and cultivating good people, who then will actually act well, rather than on offering abstract theories prescribing what one should do but offering no reliable way to see that people are motivated to act as prescribed. I suspect that almost any philosophical advocate of virtue ethics will acknowledge, though, that this advantage that virtue ethics might be thought to have over its rivals is harder to press in our era of professionalized philosophy. For students of the Neo-Confucians and for members of the Hellenistic schools, perhaps, philosophy could be said to be a “way of life” [Hadot 1995]. These days, however, there is little connection between the teaching and publishing of professional philosophers, on the one hand, and anyone's effort to actually become better, on the other. Even if the self-help genre is mostly trite, at least it professes to aim at changing people's lives for the better; few philosophical works claim that.

There are exceptions, to be sure. One can find considerable literature, some of it quite focused and practical, on both professional moral education (e.g., business ethics) and moral education curricula for primary and secondary schools. Each of these areas corresponds to a diverse realm of practices that may, one hopes, be making some difference in individual moral development.[1] Psychologists studying moral development also contribute to practical efforts to work with both “antisocial” and mainstream populations. Some philosophers have made efforts to connect to, and contribute to, these interdisciplinary areas of research.[2] But a consistent theme within **(p.162)** these subfields is a recognition that much of the work is exploratory, and much of it is seriously contested, and so there is a considerable distance yet to go before we could be confident of its importance.[3] A second exception to my generalization above is the emerging interest in ancient and medieval “spiritual exercises” on the part of scholars in both philosophy and religious ethics. This is so far quite a modest development, but—as I hope to have suggested in my last chapter—nonetheless one that has some promise.

A third category of exceptions is what might be called narrative-based studies of exemplary lives. The methodologies and precise goals of these studies vary widely. Some make efforts to apply fairly rigorous social science methods, including the use of control groups; others focus on historical figures or groups. Philosophers have both contributed to this genre and made use of it—especially, but not exclusively, philosophers interested in virtue ethics.[4] I have found that a number of these works connect well with my own interests here, helping to provide challenging perspectives on the Neo-Confucian self-cultivational practices explicated in the last chapter. In addition to various contemporary philosophical voices, therefore, I will draw in this chapter on Anne Colby and William Damon's *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment*, Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Life*, and the jointly authored *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, among others. All of these are based on the lives of contemporary Americans. Though I will comment later on some of the biases this may introduce, there is no general problem in drawing on such limited sources as we think about the challenges faced by contemporary Confucian practices of personal improvement. To the contrary, this is perfectly consistent with my “rooted global” approach. Still, let me register one caveat before we begin: it is important to remember that there is not just one kind of exemplary life. Of course individuals differ from one another, but we can also distinguish broad types. Those whom we might understand as having made progress toward Confucian sagehood may well be very different from other sorts of admirable personality types. We will have to keep this in mind as we proceed. Partly for this reason, I hope in the future to be able to identify studies of exemplars that are based on contemporary Chinese individuals, and see what perspectives their stories might contribute.

9.1 The Nature of Commitments

In their study of “contemporary lives of moral commitment,” Colby and Damon find that some of their subjects are driven by “a personal quest—a quest to live well in an ethical sense, to do what is right, to achieve a sense of inner harmony, to live out their most deeply held values.” Nonetheless, Colby and Damon add, “for most of the exemplars, self-improvement per se was not an important goal” [Colby and Damon 1992, 282–83]. Many of them do seem to have improved over time, in a sense that Neo-Confucians would recognize; we can say that their moral commitments deepened and matured [Ibid., 304]. But this took place as **(p.163)** their conscious attention was on living their lives and on their moral tasks, rather than on their own development.[5] What should a Confucian say about this?

First of all, for no one does the process start with conscious commitment. Colby and Damon, as well as the other contemporary analysts, all stress that important steps of moral development had already occurred in their subjects' childhood, and all stress various ways in which parents, teachers, and early mentors played significant roles. I found *Common Fire* particularly interesting in its emphasis on what the authors call “a home with open doors.” While they acknowledge that their subjects lived in a range of childhood situations, they write that “common to most was a core of love surrounded by a kind of porous boundary allowing interchange with the wider world, planting seeds for participation in an enlarged sphere” [Parks Daloz et al. 1996, 28]. They discuss the role of “public parent,” in which the involvement of at least one parent in the wider community helped to make the border between home and community porous. Some subjects recalled childhood evenings “listening from the stairway” to adult conversations; for others, neighbors might have served as “threshold people” who nurtured the children's sense of connection to broader community. I know of no specific discussions within Neo-Confucian sources of these themes, but they resonate very well with central Confucian goals. We can add that these contemporary subjects also experienced, as children, a variety of more formal sorts of education, including (in many cases) religious education. I will discuss later some issues related to “religion”, but suffice it to say for now that a combination of conscious and unconscious “cultivation” led these children to a point where, as they continued to mature, they began to make more explicit moral commitments. This fits well with the Neo-Confucian idea of lesser learning transitioning to greater learning.

One of the reasons that Colby and Damon say that for most of their subjects “self-improvement per se was not an important goal” is that for one member of their sample it *was* an explicit goal. Jack Coleman had a deep commitment to personal growth, which led him to pursue a variety of experiences that ultimately led to a deepening of his core moral values. Coleman is an economist and former president of Haverford University. He has spent time living and working as a ditch digger, garbage collector, and short-order cook; over two periods, he went as far as to live as a homeless person and as a prison inmate. As Colby and Damon put it, “Jack's tendency to put himself into situations that would test the limits of his own effectiveness illustrates the active role he played in the process of his own development” [Colby and Damon 1992, 145]. In some ways, we might say that Jack particularly mirrored Confucian development, as he developed an extraordinary empathy—which is critical, as we have seen, to the perspective-synthesizing perception of a sage—by putting himself into such a variety of circumstances. As noted in Section 8.1.2, one would have to be careful about focusing too much on one's personal development for its own sake; recall Cheng Yi's warnings about the double role “intention (*yi*)” can play. But a Confucian might want to conclude that Jack showed some distinctive striving-to-be-a-sage concerns.

In addition, many of the exemplars experienced tradition-mediated personal development, which no doubt shaped their sense of personal goals and development. Many, in particular, are committed members of organized religious **(p.164)** movements, and practice a variety of reading and other ritual practices that partly resonate with Zhu Xi's recommendations. This takes us close to the topic of “is Confucianism a religion?”, which I will explore more thoroughly later when I discuss the issue of what sort of “faith” or belief contemporary Confucians might need. For now, it suffices to emphasize that Neo-Confucians did not see the lifelong quest for sagehood, nor the various practices of personal improvement that they taught, as in conflict with living a rich life in which one's maturing commitment would be expressed through many forms of involvement with one's community. Paradigmatically, they saw Confucian commitment and government service as going hand in hand, but many other life-paths also allowed one to develop and express one's commitment to sagehood.

A second and related issue concerns the nature of the “quest” that Colby and Damon speak of and that our Neo-Confucians have emphasized. Mary Catherine Bateson has written movingly of the dangers of commitments that are too unilinear, commitments that become dependencies on continuity. She calls this a quest model, according to which one's goal is specific, even if not fully known from the beginning. Thinking in the first instance about careers or marriages, she writes that according to the quest model, “the real success stories are supposed to be permanent and monogamous” [Bateson 1989, 6]. She believes that such ideals fit poorly with the times in which we now live, often characterized by dislocations and unexpected challenges. According to Bateson,

> It is now time to explore the creative potential of interrupted and conflicted lives, where energies are not narrowly focused or permanently pointed toward a single

> ambition. These are not lives without commitment, but rather lives in which commitments are continually refocused and refined…. The circumstances of women's lives now and in the past provide examples for new ways of thinking about the lives of both men and women. [Ibid., 9]

In a world "in which we are increasingly all strangers and sojourners," she adds, "the knight errant, who finds his challenges along the way, may be a better model for our times than the knight who is questing for the Grail" [Ibid., 10].

To a significant degree, Bateson's call for flexibility and for growing as a result of challenges, rather than being "burdened by broken assumptions of continuity" [Ibid., 8], are actually endorsed by both Colby and Damon, and by Neo-Confucians. The former emphasize that their subjects "show great capacities for growth and change, even late in life" [Colby and Damon 1992, 167]. Though Colby and Damon detect stability in commitment to underlying values, it is accompanied by what they call the "transformation of goals through social influence," which means learning and growing as a result of interactions within a changing set of relationships. This continued openness to change, and the related way in which exemplars draw heavily on people around them (who may well think of themselves as "followers"), constitute central insights that Colby and Damon derive from their research. And for Neo-Confucians, it is essential that one's commitment is to the Way, not to a particular teacher or doctrine. Taking the words of the sages as authoritative does not dramatically restrict one, for **(p.165)** three reasons. First, the lives and points of emphasis of exemplars in the classical texts are themselves various. Second, the diversity (and, often, vagueness) of the classics allows for a range of interpretations. Third, Zhu and others emphasized the need to make the sages' meanings one's own: to find a way to realize these meanings in the unique context of one's own life. If we think of the actual lives and "careers" of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, they themselves dealt constructively with setbacks and sudden turns of fortune, not seeing "success" as defined by a single, predefined goal.

Another way to put this is in terms of reverence. It is appropriate—indeed, essential—to have reverence for ideals like harmony. But reverence for a particular human is misplaced. We should love and respect other people, but not revere them. I believe this allows contemporary Neo-Confucians to see the wisdom in Bateson's idea that good people may well have to "salvage a capacity for commitment as we become aware of the flaws of institutions and indeed of the individuals who seemed to embody those commitments" [Ibid., 197]. She calls this "commitment without dependency."

Be all this as it may, I do not want to shy away from the critical potential of Bateson's remarks. It is no coincidence that she suggests that women's lives, in particular, might have lessons to offer men and women of today: alone among the studies I have examined, hers focuses on different patterns of exemplary lives of women. The other studies also include women among their subjects, to be sure, but Bateson takes away from her exclusively female subjects the need to learn how to balance multiple commitments and to integrate these various commitments with the differences created by change. That is what she calls "composing a life" [Bateson 1989, 59 and 166]. I find her emphases on change, on balance, on seeking harmony within the situations in which one finds oneself, and on the importance of interdependent relationships, all to be extremely congenial to what I would expect a contemporary Confucian to see in our world. Insofar as one is tempted to think of Confucianism as teaching that differences among us are unchanging and that we must pursue set and static goals, though, then Bateson indeed offers a significant critique.

9.2 Stages and the Accessibility of Sagely Ideals

Another related clarification we might draw from contemporary sources is the idea that changes in our lives, whether planned or unplanned, can necessitate renewing our commitments or undertaking moral education in a different way. The *Analects* does allude to this in passage 2:4, wherein we hear about Confucius's gradual development throughout his life.[6] Studies of contemporary exemplars make such ideas more explicit and less linear. Having children, losing a loved one or mentor, or achieving new success can all challenge one's commitment, each requiring a different sort of response. In some cases, we may need to learn anew how harmony can be striven for in our changed context. Still, some sense of underlying consistency is critical if we are to have a possibility of development over time—as the Neo-Confucians clearly believed possible, and **(p.166)** expressed through the metaphor of stages. From the vantage point of Colby and Damon, or of the authors of *Common Fire*, one can definitely see a continuity and development, even when it is more spiral than linear. Sometimes Bateson makes it sound like the only thing we develop is the skill of reconstructing a new identity, of making oneself part of a new community [Ibid., 214]. On balance, though, she says that as we try to “compose lives that will honor all [our] commitments and still express all [our] potentials with a certain unitary grace… gradually we become aware of the balances and harmonies that must inform all such compositions” [Ibid., 232]. I would not say that this is exactly Confucianism, but the sense that we become more deeply aware of both the potential for, and the need for, harmony certainly resonates strongly with the themes of this book.

Before leaving the topic of how our commitment matures, let me address the question of what we might call the pull and push sides of Neo-Confucian stages of development. The general idea of stages that we examined in the previous chapter is not new with Neo-Confucianism. Thus, despite the fact that he is writing about the classical Confucian Xunzi, Aaron Stalnaker's comments about the role stages play in Confucian moral development are still quite apt. For one thing, he says that although Xunzi has a clear idea of “general human excellence,” Stalnaker's analysis has shown how “moral formation may rest on rather different sorts of virtues, reflecting different stages in this ongoing process, so that looking only at perfected virtue would miss much of importance” [Stalnaker 2006, 252]. The work one must do as one matures ethically is partly distinct from the goal at which one is ultimately aiming. Sagehood is not, ultimately, about having memorized large swaths of classical texts. But a concerted effort to read in the ways that Zhu Xi recommends is nonetheless part of the—or at least a—path to sagehood. There is a relationship between focused attention to one's reading and the development of reverence, itself a kind of attention to the distinctiveness and interconnectedness of one's situation. A key to Zhu's teachings about reading, in fact, is getting beyond the texts. But it is nonetheless useful not to conflate the two kinds of attention entirely. What we do when learning to read is more accessible than jumping straight to full-fledged reverence.

So the idea of linked stages of moral growth helps us to put lofty goals into context, to see ways in which one can begin. At the same time, Stalnaker sees that stages also help to keep relatively advanced individuals from complacency. “The rare possibility of perfection… is real for Xunzi. This possibility serves to chasten the virtuous to remain dissatisfied with themselves and continue striving to enact the Way flawlessly, not just well” [Ibid., 191]. We can say precisely the same thing for Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. There is always a way to get on the path, wherever you are at the moment, and there is always further to go, no matter how far you have progressed. Thus we can say that there is a critical kind of continuity between the average person and the sage. This is saying more than the oft-repeated Confucian chestnut that everyone is, deep-down, fundamentally like a sage: it is explaining the way in which trying to emulate a sage makes sense for average people. One cannot become a sage just by “willing” it.[7] One can, however, become more like a sage through a process of stages, through a variety of practices; and these stages and practices can make sense within many different specific life contexts.

(p.167) It is appropriate, before concluding this section, to recall Christine Swanton's argument that I mentioned near the end of chapter 1, to the effect that we should cultivate “perfectionism” as a virtue. Most basically, this just means to be “well disposed with respect to striving for excellence,” but Swanton combines this with the injunction that one should not be “virtuous beyond one's strength” [Swanton 2003, 206]. Direct attempts to emulate the supremely virtuous are both likely to fail and, in many cases, expressive of vice (e.g., of arrogance) rather than virtue. Swanton's subtle account of the factors that go into determining when perfectionist striving is virtuous fits extremely well with the Neo-Confucian idea of working gradually, in stages, but also adds useful psychological dimensions that a contemporary Confucian can see as fleshing out some of Zhu Xi's metaphors for proceeding too rapidly.[8]

9.3 Attention Revisited

In a significant article on Zhu Xi's idea of *jing* □ (which I have been translating as “reverence”), Daniel Gardner has emphasized its role in ridding our minds of distractions. There is much I agree with in Gardner's discussion, and his emphasis on the relation between *jing* (which he translates as “inner mental attentiveness”) and “attention” has been productive for my own thinking. However, two related aspects of his argument could be construed as objections to the approach I developed in chapters 7 and 8. First, I believe he goes too far in conflating *jing* with various other approaches to being “fully in the moment,” ranging from Zen to Hinduism to Sufism to Hasidism. As a result, second, he ends up viewing *jing* as too passive. Or rather, he would question whether I can justify giving *jing* what I am calling a more active reading.

It is attractive to see the Neo-Confucians as exemplifying cross-cultural insight into the mind's ability to “shed itself of its routine modes of perception and see the world in a new and clearer way” [Gardner 2004, 100], and I agree that an important aspect of *jing* is the way it enables us to “put the noise and distractions of the world aside”; but we have to be very careful about how we understand these phrases. Neither Zhu Xi nor Wang Yangming would accept that the sage's perception is *fundamentally* different from an average person's. All of us see-and-react to the possibilities for harmony in the world some of the time. And we are not supposed to put “the world” aside; rather, we are supposed to attend in a balanced way to all those aspects of the world that are relevant, and to give them their due. When Zhu or Wang speak of “pruning” away selfish desires as distractions from seeing the world properly, the goal is not a meditative quiescence but an active—albeit balanced and unbiased—engagement.[9] When Zhu or Wang do speak of “quiescence (□),” they are referring to the balanced way we are to perceive-and-react to our world.

Readers will recall that I first introduced the idea of “attention” in chapter 7 via Iris Murdoch's claim that through loving attention a mother could come to better see her daughter-in-law. Since then I have explored what I have labeled as Neo-Confucian practices of attention, the most important of these being reverence. **(p.168)** I now want to bring one more voice into the conversation, in part because Christine Swanton can help us to bring out a crucial element of “attention,” and in part because her analysis can be deepened as a result of this encounter.

First of all, an insightful element of Swanton's development of virtue ethics is her recognition that virtuous responsiveness to a particular situation can take place in a variety of “modes.” Some examples are promoting (value, as when one brings about benefit for someone), honoring (value, as when one does not promote justice unjustly), appreciating, loving, respecting, creating, being receptive to, and so on [Swanton 2003, 21]. Virtuous responses will often, she says, involve more than one of these modes of acknowledgment. She has fascinating discussions of many of them, but for present purposes we can skip directly to her discussion of “attention.” While it is not itself one of her modes of acknowledgment, Swanton seems to recognize it as something broader, as a nexus at which receptivity, loving, and appreciating are combined with wisdom to form something that is “required in virtue” [Ibid., 112, 115]. The key to Swanton's analysis is her asking how we know that “D,” the daughter-in-law in Murdoch's example, is not really “vulgar”? How do we know that when M comes to view her as “refreshingly simple,” this is not “blind charity motivated by a fear of conflict”? The answer is that “loving attention” is not blind adoration, but a combination of receptivity or openness with a wise and cultivated appreciation for real value. Receptivity is developed, according to both Swanton and Murdoch, by removing the “falsifying veil” of psychological defenses (like narrow-mindedness, snobbishness, and jealousy) that would otherwise distort one's perception. Swanton says less about appreciation, other than suggesting some connections to connoisseurship and Hume's discussion of “taste,” but we can be sure that for Neo-Confucians, at least, “appreciation” would mean coming to see and appreciate harmony, coherence, and the Way. When both Murdoch and Confucians talk about the awe one feels at the mysterious unity of the good (or at universal coherence), they are adverting to what Swanton calls appreciation.

Still, there are some significant differences between Murdoch's framing of loving attention and Neo-Confucian ideas of reverence and the sagely combination of knowledge and action. Murdoch's Platonism means that “objectivity” requires the transcendence of self in a more radical way than Neo-Confucians teach. We can see this hinted at in the following passage, which speaks of the extraordinary way Murdoch believed art and natural beauty can help to “unself” us:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage to my prestige. The suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but the kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. [Murdoch 1970c, 84]

This is a powerful idea, but no matter how much Neo-Confucians want us to lose our “selfish desires” and the many distortions brought by selfish attachments, **(p.169)** reverence is ultimately about seeing our place within a harmonious, interrelated world. It does not teach us to disappear. Murdoch writes that “the humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are” [Ibid., 103–4]. For Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, there is no world apart from ourselves.[10]

To conclude our discussion of attention, consider two images. One is a young scholar doggedly focusing on an ancient text, determined to work out its meaning, so concentrated as to be unaware that the stack of commentaries and reference books he has piled haphazardly on his desk is teetering on the edge of collapse. The other is his wife two rooms away, holding “the phone with one hand while she checks the pot with the other and watches the toddler playing across the kitchen” [Bateson 1989, 168]. Which better exemplifies Confucian reverence? Before answering, consider the following argument from Mary Catherine Bateson:

> In the film *High Noon*, the hero is applauded for refusing to be distracted from his duty as a marshal by his love for his new bride, but she abandons her commitment to nonviolence for love of him. Women have been regarded as unreliable because they are torn by multiple commitments; men become capable of true dedication when they are either celibate, in the old religious model, with no family to distract them, or have families organized to provide support but not distraction, the little woman behind the great man. But what if we were to recognize the capacity for distraction, the divided will, as representing a higher wisdom?…. Perhaps the issue is not a fixed knowledge of the good, the single focus that millennia of monotheism have made us idealize, but rather a kind of attention that is open, not focused on a single point. Instead of concentration on a transcendent ideal, sustained attention to diversity and interdependence may offer a different clarity of vision, one that is sensitive to ecological complexity, to the multiple rather than the singular. Perhaps we can discern in women honoring multiple commitments a new level of productivity and new possibilities of learning. [Ibid., 166]

Several features of Bateson's favored picture mesh well with a Neo-Confucian perspective, even if some of her language (“abandoning” a commitment, capacity for “distraction,” new level of “productivity”) sits less well with Confucian sensibilities. Finding ways to harmonize multiple commitments, and even to recognize when emotions like grief are apt, has been a central part of my understanding of Neo-Confucianism. Keeping one's loving commitment to one's family in mind is another core Confucian orientation. Being sensitive to interdependence, to ecological complexity, sounds precisely like what reverence aims at: to see coherence, rather than just isolated “things.”[11] If we return, then, to the husband and wife of my examples, mightn't we wonder whether he has blocked out key features of his overall context—perhaps it is his turn to make dinner, and his wife has a meeting she has to prepare for?—in his single-minded devotion to his work? Elsewhere Bateson talks about “responsiveness and interruptibility” [Ibid., 179], which can be good things as long as they fit within an understanding of interdependence. **(p.170)** There are senses of “distraction” and “interruption” that are rightly seen as problematic, I believe, but these are different from the responsible and responsive orientation toward one's context that leaves one poised for apt interruptions.[12] While there are certainly tasks that require sustained, uninterrupted attention, they are compatible with true Neo-Confucian reverence only insofar as one prepares a context in which such focus can be appropriately sustained.

9.4 Imagination and Fantasy

In the Neo-Confucian approaches to putative cases of moral conflict discussed in chapter 6, I stressed the role of imagination. Instead of viewing situations as structured by dichotomous, either-or choices, imagination allows one to see other possibilities: to view the situation from other perspectives and thus to notice other ways of honoring the values involved. The same sense of imagination figures implicitly in the argument in chapter 7 that moral maturity involves a disposition to look for harmony: successfully looking for harmony relies on an imaginative ability to see possibilities that may not be obvious to others. I would say that imagination is again implicitly present in chapter 8 that presents Neo-Confucian practices of moral education, especially in Zhu Xi's emphasis on *gewu*, apprehending coherence in things. Each and every thing we encounter can teach us about that coherence which is ultimately one-and-the-same with the coherence of our own heart-minds. Coming to see this involves seeing interdependencies and harmonies that are not obvious at first, and thus relies on imagination.

Even if imagination does play a role in Neo-Confucian cultivational practices, though, reflection on some of my contemporary sources makes it possible to wonder whether it plays enough of a role, at least for the complex world in which we live today. For example, Bateson points to the importance of venturing outside one's own culture. She describes how experiences on a summer project in Africa led one of her subjects to look at illness as a societal rather than individual problem. Furthermore, Bateson notes her subject's recognition that “In order to develop treatment or prevention strategies for a particular population, it is necessary to first learn to see them and then to become sufficiently visionary to imagine that their lives might be different. There is a whole structure of assumptions that must be overcome” [Ibid., 65–66]. Experience in a different culture allowed her to imagine what was at stake in illness differently, and her subsequent emphasis on social context required her to continue to foreground the importance of imagination (i.e., being "sufficiently visionary"). The authors of *Common Fire* also stress imagination, even calling it a "'meta' habit of mind" that lies behind the dispositions they saw repeatedly in their subjects [Parks Daloz et al. 1996, 132].[13] Where does this ability come from? According to the authors of *Common Fire*, a critical source is what they call "a constructive, enlarging engagement with the other" [Ibid., 63]. Their subjects consistently described "some event or experience of 'otherness' that jolted their idea of who they were and where they stood in the world" [Ibid., 65]. Sometimes these involved experiences in another culture or with people from another ethnicity or nationality; in other **(p.171)** cases the "otherness" was disability or mental illness. "Whatever its particular form, the encounter challenged some earlier boundary and opened the way to a larger sense of self and world" [Ibid., 65–66].

How should contemporary heirs of Neo-Confucianism react to these claims about imagination? For three reasons, I believe contemporary Confucians should welcome a stress on otherness as a critical practice aimed at developing a powerful moral imagination. First, it is plausible to think that such practices are even more important today than they might have been in Zhu and Wang's day, given the complexity and diversity with which we are faced in the contemporary world. Second, in a variety of ways Zhu, Wang, and many of their fellow Neo-Confucians did engage with otherness in their own lives. For instance, both Zhu and Wang had sustained engagement with Buddhist and Daoist teachings, especially in their early lives, and both of them remained at least sometimes sympathetic to aspects of what they found there. Third, Confucians explicitly criticize the notion of fixed boundaries between "self" (or internal) and "other" (or external), as we saw in the previous chapter. Talk of challenging a preexisting boundary, such that one attains a "larger sense of self and world," seems tailor-made to fit with Confucian ideas of extending one's sense of self as one sees ever-broader possibilities for harmony.

Nonetheless, I think we still must admit that Neo-Confucian teachings were not always equally open to the "other" and that a certain degree of insistence on a "home" or "self" should continue to be important to contemporary Confucians. If ritual and textual practices lose their moorings in tradition, they cease to have the same kind of meaning. Relatedly, I have emphasized that the Confucian ideal of forming one body with all things is not equivalent to dropping all distinctions between self and other, to losing the ability to care more for one's parents or children than for a stranger. However, it is extremely easy to use these considerations to erect barriers where there should only be a sense of distinction.[14] For a variety of complex reasons, Neo-Confucianism became increasingly institutionalized and increasingly concerned with defending an "orthodoxy."[15] Today, intellectuals have sometimes criticized Confucianism as undergirding, or at least providing an excuse for, the degree of corruption that one finds in Chinese society [Liu 2007]. Confucians today will surely see that the answer lies in finding ways to embrace live traditions without static traditionalism, to keep our distinctive connections to one another while expanding our sense of overall relatedness. Confucians today will also see that such goals represent real challenges, especially at the level of actual, widespread practice. From school curricula and public rituals to the more personal goals we set for ourselves and our children, Confucians will have to find ways to pursue the needed balance. I address some of these questions from the perspective of a contemporary "sagely politics" in chapter 11.

The other repeated theme related to imagination that I find in my contemporary sources is a stress on the difference between imagination and fantasy. In a famous passage, Iris Murdoch inveighs against fantasy:

> The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and **(p.172)** dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.... We see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of the self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world. [Murdoch 1970b, 59]

Fantasy, for Murdoch, is a construal of our situation that is "consoling": we find a way to see our situation according to which nothing is our fault, we have no responsibilities, and we can pursue our hopes and pleasures as we see fit. In *Common Fire*, the distinction between imagination and fantasy is drawn differently, but we can see some similar ideas at work:

> It is important to distinguish imagination from fantasy, since we are prone to conflate the two. Fantasy is the activity of the mind by which we associate, combine, and juxtapose previously uncombined things. It keeps the mind open and limber; it can entertain; it can be a means of experimenting; it can help us do the important work of building new wholes. But fantasy need have no necessary relationship to "reality" and hence can end in its own subjective pleasure or horror. Imagination incorporates fantasy, but… its highest function is to find relationships that are truthful. The work of the imagination is to create the real. The imagination seeks to put things together which belong together. [Parks Daloz et al. 1996, 132]

Perhaps the best way to see the difference between fantasy and imagination, drawing on both sources, is to say that fantasy can be dangerous because it does not incorporate responsibility to our actual context, our reality. Remember that coherence is not invented, but seen; it is not the product of fantasy. I have said in earlier chapters that harmony and coherence are often not obvious, and may need to be "articulated" in new ways when we face novel contexts. The skills that the authors of *Common Fire* associate with fantasy are helpful here, and I believe that Confucians should endorse the idea of cultivating such skills, but they will simultaneously find ways to insist that we understand the limits of pure fantasy. Many Neo-Confucians were insightful and powerful poets, which is one route to seeing that imagination—or responsible fantasy, if you like—should be a core capacity or virtue for Confucians today.

9.5 Dialogue

A striking theme in the contemporary studies of moral exemplars that I have studied is the importance of dialogue and collaboration. According to these analyses, habits of mind that are rooted in dialogue are key to moral development, and reliance on dialogical interaction with others is crucial even for extremely advanced individuals whom we might have imagined would simply be leading—setting standards—rather than relying on others. It would be natural to think that dialogue cannot have the same kind of centrality in a philosophy built on **(p.173)** Neo-Confucianism. When we picture the sage spontaneously bringing out the harmonious possibilities in every situation he or she encounters, dialogue and reliance on others are nowhere to be seen.[16] In this section I will nonetheless argue that dialogue has more importance in Neo-Confucianism than we have realized to this point. For one thing, some roles that dialogue can play are, in fact, recognized in historical sources. By putting these into the foreground and by reflecting on what we can learn from various contemporary works, I will demonstrate that contemporary Confucians should endorse the significance of dialogue.

Let us begin with some of the specific points made in studies of contemporary exemplars. According to the authors of *Common Fire*, a central predicament of contemporary life is its very complexity. “The diversity of viewpoints and the complexity of contemporary conditions create an ambivalence that gnaws at the edge of our consciousness, eroding our conviction. Familiar ways of thinking no longer work.… Faced with competing perspectives and partial knowledge, we hesitate” [Parks Daloz et al. 1996, 107]. According to the authors, though, their subjects are relatively good at responding to these challenges. “The people we interviewed are not immune to being overwhelmed, discouraged, and bewildered, but they exhibit certain *habits of mind* that steady them in turbulent times and foster humane, intelligent, and constructive responses to the complex challenges that we face” [Ibid., 107–8]. Several of the habits they discuss resonate strongly with virtue ethics and with Neo-Confucian themes we have already seen, but for present purposes I will concentrate on the first and most basic habit, “dialogue.”[17] Skill in dialogue means being able to speak “passionately but without animosity.”[18] Whether it comes from childhood presence at, and partial participation in, discussions around the dinner table, or from imagined conversations with characters in books, the exemplars studied in *Common Fire* have been able to “hold steady in the face of complexity because they have learned to balance the dialogue between self and other well.” One subject says: “my way of coping with global complexity in all of its senses has been to call in others and say, ‘Let's talk about this thing which is bigger than us all’” [Ibid., 109–10]. More than just being good *at* dialogue, these individuals are shaped in deeper ways by their engagement in dialogue. It promotes an openness to and empathy for other perspectives, and it can help to nurture the idea that there are possibilities for synthesis, if only one can sustain the conversation long enough.

Another way in which dialogue can be important is highlighted by Colby and Damon in *Some Do Care*. To their surprise, they found that the moral development their subjects underwent was, to a significant degree, “collaborative.” In other words, “even exemplars who are widely regarded as leaders take formative guidance from others close to them, and even those noted for independence of judgment draw heavily upon the support and advice of groups close to them" [Colby & Damon 1992, 168]. This is quite a different dynamic from the more standard picture of moral beginner being inspired by moral exemplar: though Colby and Damon also find plenty of this latter kind of influence, their emphasis is on the ways in which peers or supporters play critical roles in shaping and sustaining a given individual's moral development. In this context, they stress **(p.174)** that what we might call a dialogical personality is key to the success of such collaborations: "If the quality of a person's continuing interactional style is open, reciprocal, generative, truthful, and self-reflexive, the social relations engendered by that manner will promote and sustain the person's moral growth" [Ibid., 196–97]. Even for leaders, a group setting that is supportive yet critical, always looking for ways in which members can learn from one another and help one another to take further steps, is of great value.

There are two images of sages that fit poorly with these emphases on dialogue and collaboration: the sage spontaneously, automatically responding to some situation; and the sage as teacher, expounding on the meaning of the classics. In the latter case, our picture may also include reverent students hanging on the master's every word. There are a variety of reasons, however, for thinking that these images are too simple—and thus that there is more room for dialogue within Neo-Confucianism than these images suggest. To begin with, consider what we can learn about Neo-Confucian teaching from collections of conversations and from letters by Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming.[19] The fundamental mode of these genres is questioning. To be sure, sometimes the questions are of the form "Master, tell us about… "; this is simply a request for instruction rather than a deeper form of dialogue. But more frequently the questions are probing, even challenging. Teachers are challenged to make sense of apparent contradictions among different classical texts, or among various statements of their own. Sometimes all we hear is a short, definitive-sounding answer, but in other cases the conversation carries on for some time. The initial challenge may be ramified, or else someone (sometimes the teacher, sometimes the student) may suggest a connection or formulation that had not been previously made explicit. We have to read between the lines to sense where and when the teacher is learning right along with the student, but sometimes it certainly feels like this is taking place. In exchanges of letters—especially in a series of letters over time—the growth can be even more explicit.[20]

Another interesting source of information on dialogue and questioning is Zhu Xi's reaction to a famous passage from the *Analects*:

> The Master entered the Great Shrine, and at every stage asked questions. Someone said, "Who says this son of a man of Zou knows ritual? At every stage he asks questions." The Master said, "*That* is the ritual."[21]

Zhu offers two practical reasons why Confucius should ask questions. First, even while he understood the general principles of the rituals to be carried out, the particular implements to be used in this particular shrine were unfamiliar to him, so naturally he asked about them.[22] Second, we are all prone to lapses if we do not focus our attention, so asking questions was a way of exhorting himself (and perhaps the others in the shrine?) to focus. In addition, asking even when one knows the answer "is the ritual" because it expresses respect for the other participants.[23] I suppose it may be tempting to say that ritually asking when one already knows the answer is a paradigm instance of "mere" ritual, an empty and meaningless action. To the contrary, rituals like this are part of genuine respect **(p.175)** for others. It is appropriate to respect the authority of the shrine's own staff, rather than usurping control of the situation for oneself.[24] In addition, one who is thoroughly disposed to react in ritually proper ways is poised to respond to unusual situations in ways that will tend toward harmony.[25]

A third window on dialogue comes from the classical text *Zhongyong*, which tells us that even the sage-king Shun looked to the views of others:

> Great indeed is the wisdom of Shun! Shun likes to ask [the views of all kinds of people] and to investigate the words of those who are close to him. He omits the bad and propagates the good. He holds fast the two ends (*duan* □)[26] and uses [their] harmony (*zhong* □) for the people. This is what makes him Shun![27]

This striking passage puts consultation into the foreground, but in light of the *Analects* passage we have just seen, we should be careful when we interpret Shun's behavior. Is Shun relying on others to teach him what is good and bad? No: the passage makes clear that he is able to judge for himself what is good and what is bad. He asks, I submit, for the same reasons that Confucius asks: because there are factual details with which he is unfamiliar, and because asking expresses respect.[28] For non-sagely rulers, in addition, asking is critical because it brings whole perspectives into view that one may have missed; this will be a key point in chapter 11 when I develop arguments for political participation in a Confucian "sagely politics."[29]

It is time to take stock. How well can a contemporary Confucian account for the importance that dialogue and collaboration apparently play in the lives of exemplars? Based both on the specific evidence I have just examined, and the larger picture that I have been developing throughout this book, I think we can see three ways in which dialogue figures importantly for Confucians. First, the questioning, openness, humility, clarity, and so on that constitute good dialogic practice are important parts of Neo-Confucian education. Second, dialogue—especially seeking out and then listening carefully to others' perspectives, and offering one's perspectives, in turn—is critical to non-sages not just as a developmental tool, but also as a means of arriving at the best, most harmony-enhancing reaction to a given situation. Non-sages will rarely be able to respond with the natural "ease" of a sage, but by doing their best to discover and then attend to all relevant perspectives, they may be able to work out and then undertake an apt action. Finally, even for sages, we have seen that listening, questioning, openness, and humility are all still important. Dialogue also seems to have been a favored method of teaching, even if we do not assign Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming to the category of "sage." It can broaden a sage's understanding of relevant facts. Most importantly, engaging others in dialogue shows respect for them. This ritual dimension of dialogue is its most distinctively "Confucian" characteristic, and seems to me to have both important positive dimensions (as discussed earlier) and potential drawbacks, insofar as there might be a tendency for insincere “ritual dialogue” to become little more than the trading of empty slogans. Contemporary Confucians will need to find ways to guard against this, and perhaps to learn more about dialogue from detailed views like Swanton's. In general, **(p.176)** though, we can safely conclude that Confucian perspectives are much closer to those of our contemporary exemplars than it first appeared.

9.6 Faith and Belief

In chapter 5 we first addressed questions relating to faith, spirituality, and religion. I argued that something more was needed to motivate one toward harmony than Slote's notion of “deep appreciation” for common humanity, and suggested that Neo-Confucian reverence for universal coherence would serve admirably. I also discussed and partly endorsed Murdoch's contention that the “dream” of perfect, unitary Goodness is critical to motivating moral agents. Recall that Murdoch maintains, “the background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience” [Murdoch 1970b, 74]. My response in chapter 5 to her use of “faith” was as follows: “faith” suggests an existential leap rather than a reasoned and cultivated attitude grounded in our own feelings and self-understanding. Neo-Confucian reverence is not “occasionally connected with experience,” but fundamentally grounded in our experience.

It is now time to return to the question of whether faith, belief, or some other attitude is necessary for moral development because the topic comes up repeatedly in the studies of contemporary exemplars that I have examined. According to Colby and Damon, the capacity of their subjects to live out their moral commitments rests on their integration of reflection and action (of course recalling the “unity of knowledge and action” discussed in chapter 7), which in turn relies on:

> …a unifying belief that must be represented in all the cognitive and behavior systems that direct a person's life choices.… The belief must be so compelling that it both preserves the stable commitments and guides that dynamic transformation of each system. Many of our exemplars drew upon religious faith for such a unifying belief. In fact, as we noted in the previous chapter, this was the case for a far larger proportion of our exemplars than we originally expected. But even those who had no formal religion often looked to a transcendent ideal of a personal sort: a faith in the forces of good, a sustaining hope in a power greater than oneself, a larger meaning for one's life than personal achievement or gain. [Colby & Damon 1992, 310–11]

The authors of *Common Fire* emphasize the role of a broad sense of “religion” and “faith”:

> We found that in the majority of the people we studied, religion played an important role in the formation of commitment, a finding similar to those of other studies.… We use “religion” here not in its narrow ideological sense but rather in the broader sense conveyed by the word **(p.177)** “faith.” In contemporary usage,

> faith is often used synonymously with intellectual belief, dogma, or creed; yet when the phenomenon of human faith is examined across cultures, faith means something much closer to trust. [Parks Daloz et al. 1996, 141]

The common thread here is the idea that certain relations to ideals undergird ethical commitment, and thus need to be cultivated. Sometimes this is pure "faith," an attitude of ultimate confidence resting not on any evidence, even in principle, but on an existential leap. And sometimes the ideal in question may be very specific, particularly for one whose theological faith, based in revealed scripture, contains clear descriptions of God's will or of humanity's ultimate destiny.

The authors of both studies, though, clearly want to make room for attitudes and ideals that are different from pure faith in revealed truth. This comes out in Colby and Damon's references to "faith in the forces of good" and "sustaining hope in a power greater than oneself." It comes out even more clearly in *Common Fire*, both in the authors' insistence that they really mean "trust" and in the anecdotes with which they illustrate what they have in mind. For example:

> Chris Anderson, an engineer, told us that his early religious experience had taught him to see the universe as ultimately harmonious. It provided a critical backdrop that enabled him as a corporate executive of a major company to build more integrated systems. Always deeply confident that there was some way of doing things that could work more effectively as an interdependent whole, he forged new relationships between finance and manufacturing, and developed new benchmark models of managing diversity in the workplace, transcending narrow patterns of departmentalization and socialization within the company. [Ibid., 143]

In language that strikingly recalls Neo-Confucian themes, the authors of *Common Fire* say that at the core of the attitudes driving their subjects, they "heard a thrumming concern for a future in which life, 'the most basic, bottom stuff' could flourish—as though they were responding to some call from Life to realize Itself more fully through them" [Ibid., 197].

Combining what we have now heard from contemporary exemplars with Murdoch's earlier argument, we can now see a range of attitudes that might undergird commitment. Insofar as they involve ideals, all of them ultimately outrun our current evidence, but only what I am calling "pure faith" is uninterested, in principle, in evidence and instead relies on the existential leap of "conversion."[30] We saw in the previous chapter that early stages of Neo-Confucian moral development do not involve anything like a conversion, and so it should not be a surprise that pure faith does not figure into a Neo-Confucian account. Indeed, specific beliefs figure less into the motivation of Neo-Confucians than the gradual cultivation of a way of seeing, and the related feeling of reverence for harmonious interconnections. At many points the Confucian program generates empirical feedback that further deepens one's commitment to it: one *can* increasingly come to see possibilities for harmony, and these possibilities can, **(p.178)** at least sometimes, be realized. There are even moments in which one can see flashes of the interconnections that constitute universal coherence: these are “enlightenment (*wu* □)” experiences that many Neo-Confucians report. As discussed in the prior chapter, such experiences do not (at least for the strand of Neo-Confucianism I am endorsing) constitute the arrival of sagehood, nor the end of the process of development, but they do help to push one further along the path toward sagehood.

For both contemporary Confucians hoping to further develop Neo-Confucianism, and for non-Confucians hoping that Neo-Confucianism will stimulate further development of their own thought, we can now conclude that there are powerful reasons to endorse the distinctive Neo-Confucian attitude of reverence for universal coherence, for the Way, or for the harmonious generation and regeneration of life, all of which come to the same thing. In chapter 5, I argued that an attitude like this was necessary in order to motivate the proper sort of balanced view toward the diverse goods in our world; in chapter 8, we saw the centrality of reverence in Neo-Confucian practices of personal development; and here in chapter 9, we have seen the role of something like reverence in motivating the moral development of contemporary exemplars. As we turn now to the question of the relations between Neo-Confucian ideals and contemporary politics, we will again have occasion to reflect on the ways in which such ideals can be both important and practical in our modern world.

Notes:

(1.) My daughters' public elementary school takes part in what is, according to its own Web site, the largest moral-education curriculum in the U.S., “Character Counts.” See http://www.charactercounts.org. I am afraid to say that it is hard for me to see how this program of occasional afterthoughts—at least as it is implemented at this one school—can make much of a difference to anyone.

(2.) See, for example, Nancy Sherman's contribution to Damon [2002], or Noddings [2002]. Many philosophers have also drawn on the debate between Kohlberg and Gilligan over how to understand moral development; see, in particular, Blum [1991]. Martin Hoffman has developed another of the leading research program in moral development; see Slote [2007] for an important philosophical effort to build on Hoffman's work.

(3.) Among this literature are a few studies that focus specifically on moral education in contemporary Greater China. A preliminary study with a Confucian focus is Doan et al. [1991]. More recently, the *Journal of Moral Education* devoted an issue (33:4, 2004) to moral education in contemporary Greater China, and its essays and book reviews are of consistently high quality. For a preliminary effort to put Confucians and contemporary psychological theorists into dialogue, see Angle [2009].

(4.) Philosopher Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* is a modern classic [Hallie 1979]. Contemporary philosophers who have drawn on narrative studies include Blum [1988] and others.

(5.) One focus of Colby and Damon's analysis is on the ways in which, for almost all their subjects, they have “seamlessly integrate[d] their commitments with their personal concerns” [Colby and Damon 1992, 300] in a fashion that Confucians would for the most part endorse. I hesitate to say that Confucians would fully endorse the way in which moral and personal are unified for Colby and Damon's exemplars because the one difficulty that some experienced—the one regret several felt—was attending adequately to their families [Ibid., 298].

(6.) “The Master said, At fifteen I was committed to learning, at thirty I was established, at forty I had no doubts, at fifty I understood the commands of Heaven, at sixty my ears were obedient, and at seventy I may follow what my heart desires without transgressing the limits.” Translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 110].

(7.) Admittedly, *Analects* 7:30 reads: “The Master said, Is humaneness really far away? If I want humaneness, then it is already there” [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 44], slightly modified. But this is at most about a momentary achievement. It is clear from many other passages in the *Analects* that ethical improvement is a lengthy and demanding process.

(8.) For instance, Zhu Xi says “If he doesn't have a good foundation for himself, it's foolish of him to buy wood today to build the house.” [Zhu 1990, 100]. Swanton writes: “Whether perfectionist strivings should be seen as marks of virtuous perfectionism depends on a host of factors, including depth motivations, intentions, degree of wisdom, … self-knowledge such as knowledge of one's strength and talents, seriousness of effects on others and the extent to which one has responsibilities to those others, the worthwhileness of the ends to which one is devoted, and the likelihood of one's success in achieving them, even with effort” [Swanton 2003, 209].

(9.) For instance, Gardner cites a passage from Zhu Xi that he translates in part, “Let us strip away the things covering over the mind and wait for it to come out and be itself” [Zhu 1990, 104]. Read in its original context, though, the emphasis of this passage is not on passivity but on gradually developing the ability to naturally look for harmony, rather than—to any degree—forcing oneself to do so. When the mind can thus naturally function, it actively looks around. See Zhu [1997, 183].

(10.) Among other things, this means that Neo-Confucians should be much more interested in Swanton's way of talking about “objectivity” as *appropriate* (i.e., balanced and duly limited) self-transcendence, which can go wrong in both “hypersubjective” and “hyperobjective” directions. See Swanton [2003, ch. 8].

(11.) In chapter 8 I emphasized that one aspect of reverence is seeing things as interdependent, rather than merely obsessing with a single thing. Compare the following exchange: “One student concentrated too much and he became somewhat haughty. Master Zhu remarked: He thought of the idea of reverence as one thing and tried to preserve it to the exclusion of all else, and therefore this defect resulted. If we realize that reverence is merely self-examination and self-reflection … then there will be no more such defects” [Zhu 1974, 94]; translation adapted from Zhu [1991, 102].

(12.) Zhu has the following to say about interruption: “Someone asked about our reverence being easily interrupted. Master Zhu replied: Once you believe that it is interrupted then it is already continuing [i.e., no longer interrupted]. Practice this until it matures and all will be connected [without interruption]" [Zhu 1974, 93]; translation adapted from Zhu [1991, 102].

(13.) I will talk about some of the specific "habits of mind" they identified in the next section.

(14.) Although he was certainly not a Confucian exemplar, it may be useful here to recall Zell Kravinsky's comment, cited in chapter 5: "the sacrosanct commitment to the family is the rationalization of all manner of greed and selfishness" [Parker 2004].

(15.) One side of this story is the vexed relations, on both social and intellectual levels, between Confucianism on the one hand and Buddhism and Daoism on the other; another side is the efforts of Confucians in the Mongol Yuan Dynasty to preserve their culture in very trying times.

(16.) Swanton acknowledges that at first blush, it appears that virtue ethics and dialogic ethics are in significant tension with one another [Swanton 2003, 251]. As we will see later, though, she then argues that "virtues of dialogue" actually form a significant part of overall virtue.

(17.) The five habits, which are "closely linked and developmentally sequential," are: (1) dialogue; (2) interpersonal perspective-taking; (3) critical, systemic thought; (4) dialectical thought; and (5) holistic thought. For further elaboration, see Ibid. [108 and 111–24].

(18.) Swanton believes the core "plight" driving ethics is that "in addressing the demands of the world, each of us, even the most virtuous of us, is limited in his or her perspective" [Swanton 2003, 250]. This leads her to frame her understanding of virtue ethics in a way that is much more congenial to "dialogic ethics" than may have been thought possible. Solving disagreements, she argues, requires "virtues of practice," among which are dispositions to engage well in, and learn from, dialogue. More broadly, the virtues of practice aim at facilitating problem-solving via "constraint integration." She writes: "The process of integration is not a process of choosing to ignore certain constraints while focusing on others; of choosing one horn of a supposed dilemma over another. Rather, the process is one of transformation of a problem" [Ibid., 254]. She describes in detail how "progressively specifying and respecifying the constraint structure of a problem" leads the problem to become more tractable, because "the transformed specifications open up a richer range of possibilities for their satisfaction" [Ibid., 255].

(19.) Also relevant here is the classical text "On Education (*Xueji*)," included as part of the *Liji*, which clearly emphasizes the importance of asking questions, raising doubts, and having conversation partners. I thank Yu Kam Por for this information.

(20.) The best example of this process is the Korean Neo-Confucian "Four-Seven

Debate”; see Kalton [1994].

(21.) *Analects* 3:15; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 83].

(22.) Wang Yangming makes this same idea even more explicit. “Things in the world, such as the names, varieties, and systems, and plants and animals, are innumerable. Although the original substance of the sage is very clear, how can he know everything? … What he should know, he naturally asks others, like Confucius who, when he entered the Great Shrine, asked about everything” [Wang 1963, 201], slightly altered.

(23.) [Zhu 1997, 560]; see also Zhu [1987, Pt. 3, 17].

(24.) Perhaps this is what Zhu means by “When [a sage] asks despite knowing, we see the ways in which sages are not self-sufficient (*zi zu* □□)” [Zhu 1997, 560].

(25.) See Tan [2004, 84]: “Polite and nonconfrontational postures, facilitated by ritual acts understood by all, even in situations of a serious conflict of interests, are not always simply hypocrisy; they are, in fact, powerful means of increasing the chances of an outcome acceptable to all.”

(26.) Shun's “holding fast to the two ends” means that, consistent with the interpretation I developed in chapter 6, Shun does not choose one value instead of another, but finds a way to value them both.

(27.) *Zhongyong* 6. My reading (and translation) of this passage draws considerably on Yu Kam-Por's insightful paper, “The Handling of Multiple Values in Confucian Ethics”; I believe my rendering of *zhong* here as “harmony” is consistent with his argument, though he leaves *zhong* romanized. See Yu [forthcoming].

(28.) Zhu says, “Shun was greatly knowledgeable because he did not rely only on his own [existing knowledge], but drew on that of others” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 2, 5].

(29.) I thus disagree with Yu Kam Por's otherwise astute analysis, when he sees this passage as inconsistent with what he calls the “internalism” of Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism. See Yu [forthcoming].

(30.) Stalnaker's comparative study of Xunzi and Augustine points out the former's complete lack of interest in the topic of conversion [Stalnaker 2006, 187–8]. This makes Stalnaker's occasional reference to the role of “faith” in Xunzi's thought misleading, however. A similar conflation of trust in the claims of teachers or canonical texts, on the one hand, and pure faith, on the other, occurs in Andrew Flescher's stimulating discussion of a “developmental” approach to moral heroism and sainthood; see especially [Flescher 2003, 266].

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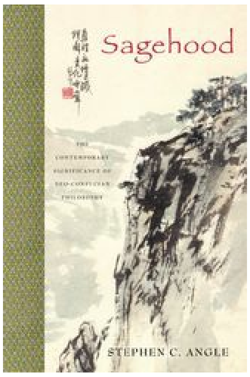

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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The Political Problem

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Sagehood is not just a matter of personal ethics: on any traditional Confucian's view, it is intimately involved in shaping one's broader community both unofficially and through participation in government. In other words, to aim at sagehood is to aim at some sort of political involvement and impact; this is expressed on the slogan “inner sageliness—outer kingliness (*neisheng waiwang*).” However attractive such an orientation may sound, the political dimension of sagehood seems to have many unfortunate consequences. Critics like Chang Hao and Thomas Metzher have argued that the ideal of sagehood has led to despotism and authoritarianism, has provided the foundation for a problematic utopianism and perfectionism in Chinese social theory, and today undermines democracy and/or support for piecemeal (but genuine) progress. This chapter reviews ways in which Neo-Confucians historically struggled with these issues in their discussions of abstract and institutional limits on rulers. It then turns to some solutions proposed by more recent Confucians like Yu Yingshi, Xu Fuguan, and Mou Zongsan. It concludes that the latter's idea of "self-negation (*ziwo kanxian*)" offers a promising approach to balancing the different demands of moral and political values.

Keywords: politics, Chang Hao, Thomas Metzger, authoritarianism, democracy, institutions, law, Yu Yingshi, Mou Zongsan, self-negation

Sagehood is a defining goal of Neo-Confucianism. In previous chapters, I have argued from various perspectives that people today, whether or not their ancestors could have been Confucians, should take seriously the ethical philosophy that is built around sagehood. Up to this point, though, I have left in the background an issue that may be one of the greatest strengths of a philosophy of sagehood, and is certainly one of its greatest challenges. Sagehood is not just a matter of personal ethics: on any traditional Confucian's view, it is intimately involved in shaping one's broader community both unofficially and through participation in government. In other words, to aim at sagehood is to aim at some sort of political involvement and impact. According to some views, in fact, to aim at sagehood is to aim at political leadership—to aim at becoming a "sage-king."

The sage ideal thus implies an interdependence between ethics and politics that meshes well with the centrality of harmony for which I have been arguing. Being on the road to sagehood involves coming to evermore-reliably look for harmony. Sometimes seeing the situations in which one finds oneself as amenable to harmony is a quite local business, perhaps involving only oneself and one's spouse or friend or coworker. Other times, though, harmony depends on broader action, on the actions of many others and perhaps on the transformation of many others' attitudes. This is especially so if, as I argued in Section 6.6.3, harmony is not to be equated simply with not rocking the boat. The perspective offered by Neo-Confucianism, in short, helps us to see how striving for personal betterment and social betterment are really one and the same process.

However attractive such an orientation may sound, the political dimension of sagehood seems to have many unfortunate consequences.

(p.180) As we shall see, critics have argued—with some accuracy—that the ideal of sagehood has led to despotism and totalitarianism, has provided the foundation for a problematic utopianism in Chinese social theory, and today undermines democracy and/or support for piecemeal (but genuine) progress. This chapter lays out the challenge posed by sagehood's necessary combination of ethics and politics, reviews ways in which Neo-Confucians historically struggled with these issues, and considers some solutions proposed by contemporary Confucians. In the next chapter, I then draw on the most promising suggestions from past and contemporary Confucians to sketch the parameters of a successful sagely politics.

10.1 Introduction: The Trouble with Sagehood

A good place to start is with the widespread view that the Confucian emphasis on "rule by men" has impeded development in China of "rule by law," and that lack of rule by law has led to arbitrary governance, widespread human rights violations, and tragedies like the

Cultural Revolution. As a leading liberal theorist puts it, “Only a truly wise and virtuous ruler would be fit to head the hierarchy of society and lead all men, by the persuasive example of his own goodness, to the achievement of perfect order and the practice of similar virtue” [Gu 2003, 56]. Unfortunately, such “truly wise and virtuous” rulers are very rare, in part because of the difficulty of finding people who “possess the vision to see beyond personal profit and material interest.” Such Confucian values continue to be of concern today, he continues, because of the many ways in which, despite declaring a break with China's “feudal” tradition, Communist leaders continued to embrace rule by men. Like many liberals, therefore, this theorist applauds the progress China has made in implementing legal reforms over the past two decades, and looks forward to continued evolution toward the genuine rule of law.

One of the most stimulating explanations for differences between Chinese and Western attitudes toward rule by men comes from Hao Chang, who in 1982 published an essay called “Dark Consciousness and Democratic Tradition.” His central concept, *you'an yishi* □□□□, is one's consciousness of the darkness within humans, or “dark consciousness” for short.[1] Chang argues that dark consciousness can be found in all cultural traditions, but its mode of expression and the degree to which it is felt differ in critical ways [Chang 2000, 18–19]. According to Chang, Christian doctrines of man's Fall and original sin contributed two strands to liberalism: a belief that perfection on earth was metaphysically impossible, since humans can never attain divinity, and an emphasis on legal and other institutions to keep imperfect people in check. Confucianism also had a dark consciousness. It is manifested, for instance, in Mencius's assertion that the difference between people and animals is slim [Ibid., 20], and in assertions by many Neo-Confucians that the path of cultivation is long and arduous.[2] Still, Chang characterizes these manifestations of dark consciousness as merely indirect insinuations that are greatly overshadowed by mainstream Confucianism's stress on the achievability of sagehood. The result has been a political philosophy built around the cultivation of sage-rulers, in contrast to the liberal democratic **(p.181)** tradition in the West which, even if it is sometimes more optimistic than this brief sketch suggests, is nicely crystallized in Madison's statement that “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”[3]

According to Hao Chang, in short, the indirect and half-hearted recognition of dark consciousness in Confucianism underwrites the political philosophy of rule by men that has made it so difficult for democracy to flourish in China. In a recent, seminal study of comparative political philosophy, Thomas Metzger adapts and develops Chang's idea in the context of a wide-ranging critique of Chinese (and Western) political theory. For Metzger, *you'an yishi* is the “sense of history's permanent moral darkness”: that is, the idea that moral and political perfection is impossible. By emphasizing “permanent” moral darkness, Metzger has made his version of dark consciousness narrower than Chang's. What the concept loses in broad applicability it gains in clarity: Metzger is now able to assert that dark consciousness is simply lacking in almost all Chinese political theories, which Metzger collectively labels “Discourse #1” [Metzger 2005, 703]. The flip side of

China's lack of dark consciousness is its ready perfectionism and utopianism; Metzger says that according to most Chinese political philosophers, “knowledge is available with which to arrive at rational solutions for all major political problems, and the moral-intellectual virtuosi sincerely trying to obtain this knowledge can be publicly identified” [Ibid., 18]. One result of these orientations is that participants in Discourse #1 reject moral and political dissonance as intolerable. Metzger writes: “Chinese utopianism…tends to define political disagreement in a Manichean way as conflict between people in the right and people in the wrong, instead of one between people who are morally and intellectually fallible and flawed” [Ibid., 700].

From Metzger's perspective, the major problem with the mainstream Chinese political discourse he has identified is that it suffers from a “seesaw effect”: that is, its strengths seem to lead ineluctably to corresponding—and devastating—weaknesses. (The same is true, Metzger believes, of the Western “Discourse #2,” whose strengths and weaknesses tend to be the mirror image of those in Discourse #1.) Metzger admires the emphasis in Discourse #1 on progress, on the (partial) intelligibility of history, and on moral praxis, education, and resolute efforts to shape our future for the better. On the other hand, he argues that these qualities are undermined by the very utopianism and perfectionism that seem to provide their justification [Ibid., 118]. Commitments to sagehood and thus to the availability of solutions to all political problems are problematic in two ways. First, believers in sagehood may be antidemocratic elitists.[4] Second, even avowed democrats tend to view their political goals in such idealistic and naïve terms that they are dissatisfied with the mixed successes and continuing dissonance among contending interests that mark real-world progress.[5] One particularly striking example is Xu Fuguan, a vocal New Confucian advocate of democratization, writing in the 1950s that “the very nature of democracy forced US presidents to act like ‘sages’ even if they were themselves morally mediocre” [Ibid., 418]. In short, there seems to be ample reason to worry that a commitment to sagehood will have problematic political consequences.

(p.182) 10.2 Sage and Politics in Song—Qing Neo-Confucianism

Let us now turn to the political theory and practice of Neo-Confucian philosophers, as well as taking some brief glimpses at the attitudes towards politics evinced by some Chinese rulers. In previous chapters, Neo-Confucian thinkers have been a primary source of inspiration as I developed my understanding of a contemporary Confucian philosophy of sagehood. When I turn, in the next chapter, to a constructive account of contemporary sagely politics, I will draw more explicitly on recent Confucian or Confucian-inspired theorists. Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and the other heroes of earlier chapters will play much less important roles. To show why this is so, we need both a basis in Neo-Confucian political theory and a taste of the ways in which emperors co-opted Neo-Confucian teachings for their own purposes. I will proceed in three steps. First, we will look at the notion of the sage-ruler and the related ideal of “inner sageliness and outer kingliness (*neisheng waiwang* □□□□).” Next we will consider the conflicting views one finds in Neo-Confucianism on the role of laws, institutions, and other limits that might constrain a ruler's authority. Finally, we will examine some of the ways in which emperors interpreted their own roles as putative sages, and the problematic aspects of Neo-

Confucianism that helped to reinforce, even if it did not entirely justify, remarkably despotic emperors in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

10.2.1 Sage-King Ideal

The roots of what would become the Neo-Confucian ideal of the sage-king lie deep in the Chinese past. Scholars have traced it to the shamanic kings of Chinese antiquity, and certainly by the classical era it was manifest in many ways [Ching 1997]. The slogan “inner sageliness—outer kingliness,” though originally from the Daoist *Zhuangzi*, was widely used by Neo-Confucians to express the intimate relation, or even identity, that they saw between inner moral cultivation and external, political action. An important question on which we need clarity, though, is: what was the scope of “politics” (i.e., “kingliness”) in question? Is politics only for the fully cultivated, and does politics just mean participation in state governance? This might be suggested by one reading of a text that lay at the core of Neo-Confucian discussions of the link between morality and politics, namely the *Great Learning*. Part of the famous opening stanza of this text—which dated to the classical era but was raised to new prominence by Neo-Confucians—runs as follows:

> The ancients who wished to manifest their bright character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first **(p.183)** make their intentions (*yi* □) sincere. Those who wished to make their intentions sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the apprehending the coherence in things.[6]

One way to understand this is that politics only comes at the end: politics means the running of the state, and this is the exclusive business of the supremely cultivated person, the sage. Thus sage-kings would be the only genuinely political actors; the rest of us should work dutifully at self-improvement, but concern with the wider realm would be inappropriate.

There are problems on multiple levels with this reading of the *Great Learning* and its implied picture of Confucian politics. For starters, no Confucians ever believed that kings were the only significant political actors. From classical texts to Neo-Confucian theory and practice, rulers were always paired with ministers who taught, advised, and (when necessary) remonstrated with their sovereigns. As Cheng Yi reminded the emperor, “During the Three Dynasties, a ruler always had a grand preceptor, a grand protector, and a grand tutor. The grand preceptor led and taught him. The grand tutor helped him to advance in virtue. And the grand protector protected his health.” Cheng notes that nowadays, when these offices have been abolished, such duties have fallen on the expositor of the office for classics. Cheng continues, “I beg Your Majesty to let the expositor know what you say, what you do, how you dress, and what you eat in the palace.…If Your Majesty should fail to follow the proper methods of cultivating or nourishing yourself, he will advise you and stop you immediately” [Zhu & Lu 1967, 222].

Through the office for classics and other institutions, ministers claimed a role in the political process.[7] They did so on the basis of their own cultivation, which could give them the ability to see an appropriate response even if the ruler failed to do so.

So government ministers also count as legitimate political actors, at least if they reach some level of moral cultivation. If "inner sageliness—outer kingliness" only applies to people in government, though, then it still seems that the vast majority of us will have no grounds for participating in the broad public sphere that significantly shapes our lives. Gone would be any hope of building a more democratic version of Confucian political theory. In fact, the Neo-Confucian sage-king ideal is much broader than simply legitimizing the rule of kings and their ministers on the basis of moral cultivation, even if in the end, we conclude that a viable Confucian politics will have to go well beyond anything realized or even contemplated by historical Neo-Confucian thinkers.

The key is recognizing that the intertwining of morality and politics, between personal and public, goes much deeper in Confucianism than I have so far allowed. It is not entirely clear where, in the *Great Learning* progression from "apprehending the coherence in things" to "bringing order to the state," one would try to draw such a line. Instead, as a contemporary scholar has argued, we should see moral cultivation as requiring actualization in terms of the sociopolitical order at each stage and level of political engagement.[8] Inner and outer are always linked, as our discussion of the relation between "knowledge" and "action" in chapter 7 also suggests. Personal and public are interdependent at all **(p.184)** levels. Perhaps the most succinct recognition of this appears in a passage from the *Analects*:

> Someone said to Confucius, Why are you not in government? The Master said, The *Shu* says, "Be ye filial, only filial, be friendly toward your brothers, and you will contribute to the government." This too, then, is being in government. Why should you speak of being "in government?"[9]

In other words, being virtuous in the most intimate of contexts still has political significance. We will see shortly that Zhu Xi expands on this basic idea, arguing for the creation of a variety of non-state institutions that straddle any distinction between moral and political.

10.2.2 Limits and Guidance

Turn now to the ways in which Neo-Confucians sought to limit the power of the state and, in particular, the ruler. Or perhaps a better way to put this would be: the ways in which Neo-Confucians endeavored to guide the ruler, and the polity more generally, to do the right things. No limits were needed if the emperor was following the Way. Hao Chang's argument that Confucian political theory aims at sage-rulers rather than at checks-and-balances is quite accurate. Efforts to guide the ruler do function as limits, though, insofar as the ruler is not perceived as following the Way. We should look at three interrelated sources of guidance. First is the theoretical grounding for limits/guidance provided by *li* □, or coherence; this meant that rulers—as actual, imperfect people—were never owed absolute loyalty. Second are ceremonies and ritual propriety more generally, which several scholars have noted serve to restrain rulers; in fact, I will suggest, rituals sometimes did their job too well. Last is the vexed and complicated world of laws and institutions, which sits in an uncomfortable relation with the central Confucian belief that it is ultimately the quality of the person that matters most. The thread that ties together my discussion of each source of guidance is the precarious balance that Neo-Confucians sought to establish between leaving room for them to educate and criticize a flawed but improvable leader, on the one hand, and providing grounds for the respect and obedience that all citizens, themselves included, owed to a sage-ruler.

We have already had ample opportunity to explore the concept of coherence (*li*) in earlier chapters. In his careful study of Song Dynasty political theory, Alan Wood shows that philosophers such as Cheng Yi used coherence in two complementary ways. Cheng argued that universal coherence necessitated a reverent attitude on the part of subjects toward their ruler; this could be seen both by reflection on one's inner feelings, and by the clear need for a strong ruler to protect China from the threat of invasion (which was imminent when Cheng Yi was writing) and rebellion. “On the other hand,” Wood writes, “it is abundantly clear that the main emphasis in his commentary is not on recommending obedience to any passing whim of the ruler but on showing how a ruler ought to bring human affairs into conformity with transcendent moral principles” [Wood 1995, **(p.185)** 115].[10] This idea thus fits well with the statement I quoted earlier from Cheng Yi, asking the emperor to heed the advice of his minister, since this advice would be based on a deep knowledge of the Classics and, ultimately, on an understanding of coherence that must, at least implicitly, be superior to that of the emperor. Still, Wood has to acknowledge that in practice, loyalty and obedience come first. He argues that theorists like Cheng Yi:

> …do not ever counsel active disobedience of a ruler by his subjects, but it would be a mistake to assume that they do not do so merely out of prudence. Thomas Aquinas, whose views on some of these matters are remarkably similar, also expressly forbade the individual act of sedition on the part of a disgruntled citizen, regardless of how pernicious a particular ruler might be, on the plausible principle that civil war is more destructive of the common good than a bad ruler would be. However, when a long train of abuses stimulated a popular act of rebellion on a massive scale, Aquinas also wrote that it might not be wrong to take part in such a rebellion, depending, as always, on the circumstances. Can this be any different from the obligation of the [Confucian] scholar-official to await a clear sign that the mandate of heaven has been transferred to someone else…before transferring his own allegiance to another ruler? [Ibid., 129–30]

Wood is determined to show that previous scholars, who interpreted Neo-Confucian political theory as demanding “the absolute duty of total loyalty to the sovereign,” have importantly overstated the case.[11] His close readings of Cheng Yi and others are persuasive on this score, but we must also be careful not to exaggerate the limits placed on the ruler. As far as Cheng Yi has told us, rulers can, in the end, do whatever they want, with only the threat of eventual large-scale rebellion to give them pause.[12]

10.2.3 Ritual

The second form of guidance we need to consider is ritual.[13] The guiding or constraining function of ritual can be approached from two directions. The first is its general role in shaping, educating, and pushing people toward perfection. Rulers and ministers are people, too; they are subject to the influences of ritual at least as much as other, less powerful individuals. I have already discussed the educative role of rituals in chapter 8, and will go on to say more about how this functions on a political level later in this and the next chapters. For now, let me turn to the other perspective we can take on rituals, which is their specific ability to constrain rulers. A great deal of the daily life of Chinese emperors was subject to ritual regulation, as were most of their public performances and major decisions.[14] Contemporary scholars have noted the ways in which this ritualization could, in certain circumstances, empower individuals to stand up to rulers, to “speak truth to power”; one scholar says that the resulting checks to imperial authority fostered a “kind of constitutional culture,” even while noting that the kinds of “rights” instituted by ritualization “were not absolute and martyrdom **(p.186)** was sometimes the price one had to pay for insisting on them” [Chu 1998, 176]. Indeed, I wonder whether it is useful to speak of “rights” protecting those individuals possessed with enough moral courage to challenge an emperor's ritual violations, and certainly “constitutional culture” seems to be a significant exaggeration. Be this as it may, rituals clearly did function to constrain emperors, both in everyday circumstances of which there is no record—because whatever temptation the emperor resisted, thanks to ritual requirements, was not recorded—and in famous cases of conflicts between an emperor and his court.

Before moving on, I want to enter one caveat about the constructive role of ritual. Many Neo-Confucians have the reputation of being extremely stern, rigorous moralists, and one gets the impression that living the life of an emperor under this kind of scrutiny could be extraordinarily demanding.[15] In his memorial to the emperor that I have already partly quoted earlier, Cheng Yi adds: “In case of any playful acts like cutting the leaf of a paint tree, the expositor may remonstrate with you and advise you as the matter arises” [Zhu & Lu 1967, 222]. The text's editor explains this reference as follows:

> When King Cheng (r. 1104–1068 BCE) was a boy and was playing with his younger brother, he cut a leaf of the paint tree in the shape of the jade baton which used to be conferred upon feudal princes by the emperor, and said that with it he was enfeoffing the younger brother. When Shi Yi, an official who was regarded as a sage, heard of it, he said that a king should not say anything as a joke. At his request, the fief was made official. [Zhu & Lu 1967, 222n18]

I want to take this opportunity to dispute the claim that sages, kings, or sage-kings may not joke. This may seem like a trivial matter, but when we recall the debates surrounding the personality of “moral saints” discussed in chapter 1, its importance should be apparent. Confucians, I argued then, have a ready response to such worries because they remember—most of the time—that sagehood involves a healthy harmony of values. Surely laughter and joking are part of what make up a sagely life, and are no way in conflict with sagely virtue, including reverence.[16] I am in full agreement with the

Analects, which gives us Confucius saying “If one served one's ruler by observing every last detail of ritual propriety, people would regard it as obsequious.”[17]

10.2.4 Institutions

The Chinese term *fa* □ refers to the third and final source of limits on, and guidance for, the ruler and his ministers. *Fa* is usually translated “law,” but the first point I need to make clear is that for Neo-Confucians, *fa* has broad and narrow meanings, both of which are relevant to this discussion. Narrowly understood, *fa* refers to legal codes; when used more broadly, it is better translated as “institution” or “system.”[18] Legal codes are one type of institution, but when *fa* is used in its broad sense, a much wider range of institutions is envisioned: one famous discussion of *fa* lists property arrangements, schools, marriage ceremonies, and expectations for military service [Huang 1993, 97]. The key question we need to **(p.187)** explore is to what degree *fa* in either of these senses served to constrain or direct governance—and, in particular, to limit the ruler.

A famous saying from the classical Confucian Xunzi can introduce this discussion: “There is only governance by men, not governance by *fa*.”[19] This belief, that it is the interpreters and implementers of *fa* (in both senses) who are decisive, rather than the *fa* themselves being crucial, would also dominate Neo-Confucian thinking on these topics. Zhu Xi said that legal codes (*lü* □) “are, after all, of some help in teaching and transforming people. But fundamentally they are deficient to some extent” [Zhu & Lu 1967, 234]. Speaking of *fa* in the broad sense, he wrote:

> Generally speaking, any institution (*fa*) must have its drawbacks. No institution is perfect. The important thing lies in having the right men. If there are the right men, even though the institutions are no good, there are still many benefits. But if there are the wrong men, there may be excellent institutions, but of what benefit would they be? [Zhu 1991, 138], slightly modified.

Similar sentiments can be found in many Neo-Confucian writings. Although the important Ming dynasty thinker Luo Qinshun recognized the importance of institutions, writing “only after institutions (*zhidu* □□) have been established is it possible to improve customs and increase material prosperity,” he still maintained that “if one wishes to change the *fa*, the essential consideration is to get hold of the right men” [Luo 1987, 88 and 86].

So far, this discussion of *fa* seems to fit perfectly with the criticisms of sagely politics that we reviewed earlier. Two qualifications are needed before we can make a final determination on the role of *fa* in limiting the ruler or the state. First, Luo Qinshun is not idiosyncratic in his assertion that institutions are necessary (even if they, in turn, depend on good men). Admittedly, many Neo-Confucians were harsh critics of the radical institutional reforms instituted by Wang Anshi (1021–86) in the early Song dynasty. Rather than top-down institutional reforms, thinkers like Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi wanted stress put on personal moral cultivation; interpreters have labeled this an “inward turn.” It is a mistake, though, to see Song dynasty Neo-Confucians as relying solely on individuals' solitary efforts at moral cultivation. Several scholars have emphasized the “middle level” institutions that Neo-Confucians came to rely on as critical supports for individual improvement and, ultimately, as a basis for reforming the state apparatus itself. Zhu Xi was worried about what one scholar has called “the politics of selfishness” at both central and local levels, and therefore argued for a focus on reestablishing the link that had once existed between “inner (moral) reform and outer (institutional) reform.” Zhu believed that “the key to China's moral regeneration [was] to establish a set of middle-level institutions that [would] enable the concern for one's household to extend to the village, and so on” [Levey 1991, 572]. Zhu therefore both worked to promote and wrote extensively about institutions like academies and village compacts, thereby “redefining the terms of political involvement through his commitment to institutional reform on [this] middle level” [Ibid., 545]. Still, while we can see that Zhu and many others believed institutional **(p.188)** changes were necessary, since all of this is in the service of reuniting the shattered link between “inner sageliness” and “outer kingliness,” this mainstream Neo-Confucian concern with institution-building leaves intact the worries about Neo-Confucian politics with which we began.

My second qualification is to note that some thinkers from the Song dynasty and later wanted to push the role of institutions even more into the foreground, and thus lay part of the groundwork for a version of sagely politics that can answer the challenges we have observed. I will persist in calling these thinkers “Neo-Confucians,” even though I agree with the many historians who have noted important differences, both in doctrine and self-identity, among and between various late-Imperial Confucian thinkers. The clearest cases of the trend come from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and in particular from the trenchant political manifesto *Waiting for the Dawn*, completed in 1663 by Huang Zongxi.[20] For our purposes the key is the emphasis Huang puts on *fa*, which he uses in the broad sense discussed earlier. A healthy polity is based on well-designed institutions like schools, property regimes, and ceremonies that train people to be social citizens, rather than selfish egoists. Huang contrasts these institutions with those promoted by recent rulers, which he characterizes as “anti-institutional institutions” (or, if you prefer, “unlawful laws”): in this case, the educational system, property regime, and ceremonies are designed solely to glorify the one family who happens to occupy the throne—whether they deserve it or not. Huang then famously asserts: “Should it be said that ‘There is only governance by men, not governance by institutions (*fa*),’ my reply is that only if there is governance by institutions can there by governance by men.” He goes on to explain: “If the institutions of the early kings were still in effect, there would be a spirit among men that went beyond the institutions. If men were of the right kind, all of their intentions could be realized; and even if they were not of this kind, they could not slash deep or do widespread damage.”[21] This is certainly not the modern notion of the “rule of law” (see chapter 11), but its recognition that good institutions can restrain even the worst of men is nonetheless important.

10.2.5 Vaulting Ambition: Rulers Who Think They Are Sages

I have been emphasizing the various ways in which Neo-Confucian theorists sought to limit or guide their rulers. I have said very little about the myriad ways in which the role of ideal sage-ruler was lauded and its power to transform others was celebrated. To conclude this look at Neo-Confucian sagely politics, I propose to turn briefly to the effects that such an understanding of the ruler's proper role can have upon the rulers themselves. I aim not for even coverage of all possibilities, but for a clear case in which our worries about sagely politics are dramatically, tragically realized.

Ming Taizu, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), was a brilliant and ambitious man who attended carefully to the teachings and texts offered to him by the leading Confucians of his day. His long reign (1368–98) featured many accomplishments and was characterized by a kind of religious **(p.189)** or ideological toleration [deBary 1981, 154–55], and yet he has gone down in history as one of the most infamous despots in Chinese history. Seeing his role as “teacher” to his ministers and subjects—in whose behavior and values he was continually disappointed—he undertook to reform them via increasingly drastic means. It is striking in the context of our discussion to note that Ming Taizu lacked “confidence in fixed institutions” [Dardess 1983, 220], which led to his continual tinkering with institutions and to reliance on his own teachings and moral promulgations. Two scholars who have studied the intellectual and social background out of which Ming Taizu emerged both conclude that distinctive versions of Neo-Confucian political teachings help to explain his draconian efforts at the “psycho-behavioral reform of mankind” [Ibid., 224]. One scholar puts it this way: in light of what he had been taught about his responsibilities as father/teacher to the people, “it took only a slight shift in focus for the emperor's [own] self-examination and rectification of mind—putting a generous interpretation on it—to direct itself toward the conscientious fulfillment of his duty to edify his subjects by something more than personal example” [deBary 1981, 158]. Another scholar puts it this way:

> [Ming Taizu] adapted the Confucian outlook generally, and the reform ideas of the Zhedong [Confucian] writers specifically, to the task of creating an autocratic political system for the purpose of effecting a program of national sociomoral regeneration. The revolting horrors [he] perpetrated in the course of pursuing that goal may have owed something to a violent streak in his personality, but even if that is true, that violence was expressed well within the moral and political framework devised by the Zhedong theoreticians. They had failed to foresee the terrible abuses the totalitarian order they built would almost certainly engender. [Dardess 1983, 5–6]

In different ways over the centuries, Confucians have regularly experienced tension between their commitment to the Way and their commitment to public service [deBary 1991]. This was particularly acute in the Ming and Qing dynasties, so much so that a leading scholar says, “as orthodoxy became more formalized and codified by the state, Confucian consciences showed increasing signs of alienation. The aspiration for genuine sagehood and the hope for official success parted ways. The striving for ‘sincerity,’ which had been seen as the essential pursuit of the sage, went underground” [deBary 1981, 170].[22]

To conclude this section, let us review the weaknesses and strengths of Neo-Confucian political thinking. These philosophers clearly recognized the need to guide and constrain rulers. They did not retreat from politics, but to the contrary put forward a variety of proposals and values—including the roles of ritual, middle-level institutions, and the ideal of *li*—that met with varying degrees of practical success. Still, I would say that the idea of a fundamental interdependence between morality and politics led to their positive ideals being hostage to their reliance on morally exemplary sage-rulers. When I turn in the next chapter to outlining a contemporary sagely politics, we will see several of these positive **(p.190)** elements reappear, though in a new framework that should avoid the dangers exemplified by Emperor Ming Taizu.

10.3 Separating the Moral from the Political?

10.3.1 Yu Yingshi and Xu Fuguan

One solution to the problems posed by sages in politics has been to urge a separation between the personal and the public, between the moral and the political. A particularly clear statement of this view comes from the eminent contemporary historian Yu Yingshi:

> It may not be entirely unjust to locate our trouble with Confucianism in the anachronistic attempt on the part of Confucians (especially Neo-Confucians since Song times) to fuse the public with the private. The fusion was probably inevitable as Confucianism was being transformed over the centuries into a state ideology. However, I would argue that if we trust Confucius' *Analects*, then the sage's original vision was focused decidedly more on personal cultivation and family life than on the governing of the state. Or, we may say, Confucius was primarily concerned with moral order and only secondarily with political order. At any rate, for a modern reader, passages in the *Analects* dealing with the art of government are no longer relevant, even though historically interesting.…I think it is our central task today to determine what is living and what is already dead in Confucianism. I further suggest that the line can largely be drawn between the public and the private. As a matter of fact, unless our preference is a patriarchal, theocratic, or totalitarian state, we must keep the two realms separate. [deBary et al. 1994, 27–8]

As the end of this passage makes clear, Yu is motivated in part by precisely the worry about problematic consequences of sagely politics that is driving this chapter. In another essay, Yu says his argument that Confucianism should focus on morality instead of politics is really a development of trends within Confucianism itself during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when thinkers increasingly emphasized the “affirmation of ordinary life” instead of kingship and world-ordering. Following what he sees as their lead, Yu insists that contemporary Confucianism must abandon the ideal of “completely ordering human life” [Yu 2004a, 180–82].

Yu does go on to qualify this argument slightly, noting that even after Confucianism “reorients itself in the modern situation by retreating to the private realm,” it may be that well-cultivated Confucians turn out to be active citizens in a modern state. “Moral virtue and civic virtue are separate in their origins, but there is no reason to assume that they cannot reinforce one another. It is in life, not in theory, that moral and civic virtue are united” [deBary et al. 1994, 28].[23] He puts the point slightly more positively elsewhere, noting that since all political **(p.191)** systems have leaders and elites, to put weight on the moral, personal quality of these elites—in a word, on their virtue—is salutary. “Achievements in the personal realm greatly aid the establishment and operation of public order.” Yu adds that both conservative and liberal political theorists in the West have recognized the need for “men of character” or the “cultivation of wisdom” [Yu 2004a, 184 and 186]. Be all this as it may, Yu does not retreat from his basic stance, which is that Confucianism today must restrict its focus to its original concern with personal morality.

The idea that there should be some sort of distinction between ethics and politics is in fact widespread among twentieth-century Confucians. However, some of these theorists articulate the relation as a fruitful polarity instead of Yu's relatively stark duality: that is, they argue that we must recognize significant continuities between personal/moral and public/political, even while we recognize differences in what we expect of one another from these different perspectives.

Let us look first at Xu Fuguan (1902–82), a scholar and political thinker who argues in various essays for the importance of the distinction between “governing the people (*zhi ren* □□)” and “cultivating oneself (*xiu ji* □□).” Contrary to Yu Yingshi's suggestion that Confucius primarily stresses personal morality, Xu maintains that the *Analects*, and classical Confucianism more generally, consistently advocate both of these two distinct standards.[24] He explains the distinction as follows:

> The standard of self-cultivation and scholarship requires that natural life endlessly rise toward virtue. It is absolutely not based solidly upon natural life, nor does it understand the value of human life to be founded on the requirements of natural life. The political standard of governing the people of course still recognizes the standard of virtue, but from this perspective, virtue occupies second place, with first place necessarily going to the requirements of the people's natural lives. [Xu 1980, 229]

Xu maintains that this distinction is implicit in classical texts like *Analects* and *Mencius*, and furthermore points out that it is explicitly made in the *Biao Ji* text, included in the *Record of Rites*. There, we read:

> The master said, In all the world, only now and again is there even a single person who loves humaneness (*ren* □) not because it satisfies some personal desire, and who hates inhumaneness without being afraid of punishment. Therefore the superior person reasons about the Way from the standpoint of himself, but establishes public standards (*fa* □) with the people's capabilities in mind. [Ibid., 230; see Wang (1980, 849); and cp. Legge (1967, 332–33)]

and

> The master said, It has long been understood that the complete attainment of humaneness is difficult, and only possible for a superior person. Thus the superior person does not criticize people, nor shame **(p.192)** them, on the basis of what he alone can attain. When the sage lays down rules for conduct, he does not use

> himself as the rule, but sees that the people shall be able to stimulate themselves to endeavor, and feel shame if they fail, in order that the sage's words be put into practice. [Ibid.; see Wang (1980, 853); Legge (1967, 336)]

The central idea that Xu finds here is to establish "public standards" instantiating minimal goals that are reachable by all, rather than just by the most highly cultivated.

Xu argues that to miss this distinction is to commit one of two errors: either coming to have overly high expectations for the people (which he associates with both Zhu Xi and the Communist Party), or having overly low expectations for oneself [Ibid., 231]. I think that Xu is right in this. I also applaud Xu's broad interpretation of "*fa*," which I am translating as "public standards": Xu is very clear that he does not anachronistically read this term as "law," but as "rules of life for typical people in the society" [Ibid.]. Still, I am worried that Xu makes too sharp a distinction between self-cultivation and its rigorous standards, on the one hand, and the more minimal standards appropriate to governing the people, on the other. He tends to conflate self-cultivation and "scholarship (*xueshu*)," seeing both as concerned with the discovery and realization of ultimate "truth." Looking back both at traditional Chinese history and at more recent Chinese experience with Communist ideological "truths," Xu argues that democratic politics should be distinguished from scholarship, self-cultivation, and truth—just as these latter are better off without having their independence compromised by political necessities [Ibid., 239]. In short, Xu comes closer to Yu Yingshi than it might first appear, even if he sees more of a foundation for distinct ethical and political concerns in Confucianism that does Yu.

I have said that Xu Fuguan makes too sharp a distinction between self-cultivation and governance. Why is the distinction he draws too sharp? There is an important aspect of his Confucian sources that Xu Fuguan misses. The second passage Xu cites from the *Biao Ji*, recall, ended by speaking of the kind of standard that the sage would lay down for the people, noting that it was different from using himself, in his perfection, as their standard. If we keep reading beyond the bit that Xu quotes, we immediately encounter the following:

> [The sage] enjoins ritual propriety to regulate conduct, good faith to bind it on them, right demeanor to express it (*wen* ▯), costume to distinguish it, and friendship to perfect it. The sage desires in this way to produce a sense of uniformity among the people. It is said in the *Xiao Ya*: "Shall they unblushing break man's law (*fa*)?/Shall they not stand of Heaven in awe?" [Wang 1980, 853; Legge 1967, 336]

I said above that Xu correctly reads "*fa*" as "public standard" rather than "law," but let us focus on what is distinctive about these public standards. Perhaps one could read them as superficial demands: dress correctly, follow the prescribed rituals, and so on. Following this line of thought, the distinction between such standards and the higher demands appropriate to superior people and sages would **(p.193)** be that, for the latter, these superficial markers express genuine commitments or virtue, whereas for common people, they simply represent an achievable way to keep order.

An alternative, more attractive, reading would emphasize the overlap between some of these standards (particularly "ritual propriety (*li* □)" and "good faith (*xin* □)") and the virtues that are regularly said to characterize truly good people. Both the *Analects* and the *Mencius* are harshly critical of those who attempt to follow set rules simply in order to appear good. In addition, the most famous comment on governance from the *Analects* echoes the suggestion in our *Biao Ji* passage that the people should be developing a genuine sense of shame and awe, and at least partial moral transformation, if they are ruled well: "The Master said, 'Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.'"[25] In other words, we can agree with Xu that "guide them by virtue" does not mean to hold the people to the same, supreme standard to which a sage seeks to hold him or herself, but we can still see it as expecting of the people that they develop certain virtuous dispositions which are regularly expressed through demeanor, dress, propriety, and so on. This means that the distinction between personal morality and public politics should not be drawn too sharply, because public institutions and standards are meant to have an influence on people's characters—not just on their overt behavior.

A critical challenge as I seek to develop these ideas will be to see if we can simultaneously maintain both the distinction between morality and politics, and the interdependence that I have just been emphasizing. If we lose the connection, we lose a central tenet of Confucianism. Moral cultivation must make a public difference; in other words, there is no principled limit to the realms in which we should be looking for harmony. On the other hand, if we cannot maintain the distinction, then all the problems that Xu and our earlier critics of sagely politics have identified will be unavoidable.

10.3.2 Mou Zongsan

The most sophisticated discussion by a twentieth-century "New Confucian" of the relation between morality and politics comes from the prolific philosopher Mou Zongsan. His *The Way of Politics and the Way of Administration*, in particular, is a rich source of insights into what might underlie a contemporary sagely politics. For the moment, I will confine myself to one of his book's main strands: the dialectical relation between morality (as subjective, personal insight and cultivation) and politics (as objective justification of political authority, and the institutions that instantiate this authority). Mou agrees with Xu Fuguan that there are different expectations in the moral and political realms. Mou writes that "achieving sagehood is an endless process," and thus "in politics, one cannot have an expectation that the people will become sages" [Mou 1991, 127]. Like Xu—especially when one supplements Xu with the rest of the *Biao Ji* passage, as I did earlier—Mou argues for a real but limited kind of "moral edification (*jiaohua* □□)" for **(p.194)** the people. According to Mou, this should be comprised of the core Confucian virtues, which collectively make up the minimal and universal way of humanity [Ibid., 126].[26]

I mentioned earlier that a key challenge for a view like Xu's is whether the distinction between morality and politics can be sustained. Here Mou makes an important contribution via his insight that the relation between morality and politics is “dialectical.” Rather than seeing a leader's political virtue as a direct extension of his or her personal, moral virtue—as Yu Yingshi suggested—Mou argues that there needs to be an indirect relation between them. Politics and political virtue must develop out of morality, but nonetheless have an independent, objective existence. Drawing on Hegelian language, Mou explains that full virtue depends on “self-negation (*ziwo kanxian* □□□□)” [Ibid., 59]. Our subjectively felt, internalized morality implicitly points toward an ideal of full, sagely virtue. Full virtue must be realized in the public, political world. Without objective structures (like laws), the public goals of full virtue are inaccessible. Since these objective structures limit (or “negate”) the ways in which our subjective feelings can be manifested, Mou concludes that the achievement of virtue requires self-negation. Objective, public standards are thus related to inner virtue, but they are also distinct from one another.

Mou's complex argument raises several issues. First, what does it mean for such structures to “negate” subjective virtue? It does not mean to *completely* negate. After all, Mou explicitly says that the objective approach cannot contain the needed “moral edification.” Objective political values are critical, yet they are limited, unable to touch the “whole” of human life [Ibid., 125]. “Negation” therefore refers to one thing's being limited or constrained by something else of a fundamentally different nature. Second, we should avoid using the common triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis to understand Mou's dialectic.[27] For Mou, the putative antithesis (objective structures) is not overcome, but persists. Also persisting is the perspective of personal moral cultivation. From either of these vantage points, it may appear that there has been no synthesis at all, but simply an ongoing tension. This is to miss the genius of Mou's insight, however. If one were to insist on looking for a “synthesis,” it would lie in the new possibility of attaining full virtue: full virtue, Mou argues, is not even conceptually possible without the existence of objective structure. The concrete implication of this is that no matter what one's level of moral accomplishment, “insofar as one's virtue is manifested in politics, one cannot override the relevant limits (i.e., the highest principles of the political world), and in fact must devote one's august character to the realization of these limits” [Ibid., 128]. In short, sages cannot violate the constitution. Politics thus has its independence from morality.

One way to understand Mou's argument is that there are two crucial dependencies: political value depends on moral value because the moral is the source of the political; and moral value depends on political value because the moral cannot be fully realized without the political. The latter dependency is all the more controversial because Mou is not content with the perennial Confucian view that a successful politics is necessary for full, individual moral attainment. The objective structures that Mou believes are required for sagehood include **(p.195)** the rule of law, constitutionalism, and a democratic politics. In 1958, several prominent Chinese intellectuals (including both Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan) issued *A Manifesto for a Reappraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture*.[28] A central tenet of this document is the affirmation that Chinese culture is vibrantly alive, and that its insights and values, properly understood, are of concern to the world community quite generally. At the same time, the authors argue that “democratic reconstruction” will have an enormous impact on the future successful development of Chinese culture. For present purposes, I will confine my attention to the relation between sagehood and democratic politics.

After arguing that democratic institutions are necessary to handle the difficult question of transfer of power, the Manifesto's authors write:

> There is a more profound reason why the establishment of a democratic government is necessary for the development of China's culture and history. In the past, a monarch could, to be sure, reign with moral integrity and the people thus bathe in his morality. But the people would still be passive, and therefore unable to achieve moral self-realization. In such a case, *the monarch could never really attain sagehood or achieve his own moral self-realization*. To do so, the ruler must first make his position available to each and every one of those qualified for it, and in this way affirm political equality for all the citizens. It then follows that a constitution must be drawn up, in accordance with the popular will, to be the basis of the exercise by the people of their political rights. Only thus may the people all attain moral self-realization, since self-realization demands, politically, the freedom both to ascend and to retire from official positions. [Chang 1962, 472; see Mou et al. 1989, 33, emphasis added].

The crux of the argument seems to be that for one to be a genuine sage, both the individual and everyone else must achieve moral self-realization: the ruler's self-realization depends on the self-realization of his or her people, in the same way that a parent's flourishing depends on that of his or her children. Since access to whatever positions their merit may entitle them to is essential for people's moral growth and self-realization, institutionalized access (via political rights) is required.[29]

In light of our discussion earlier, I would suggest that while this argument is promising, it is not wholly convincing. After all, why could not a broad-minded, sagely ruler do an exemplary job of allowing his subjects to rise as high as their talents merited—even to the point of abdicating in favor of a more gifted individual, should one emerge? This would seem to be the Confucian ideal, and I am not sure that the problem with it is that it keeps the ideal sage from achieving moral self-realization. It is certainly unreliable, though, because it once again makes political freedom depend entirely on the sage-ruler's moral cultivation; as Mou Zongsan puts it, this amounts to politics “being swallowed by morality” [Mou 1991, 140].[30] Mou's diagnosis is thus slightly different—though in the same spirit—as the *Manifesto*, of which he was a coauthor. As we have already seen, he believes that politics must achieve a kind of “independent,” “objective” **(p.196)** existence, partly negating the moral subjectivity out of which it is born. For this to happen, politics cannot rest solely on the ruler's shoulders, but must be the shared responsibility of ruler and ruled, which in turn is only possible under a democratic constitution [Ibid.]. The connection between democratic politics and sagely morality is thus more indirect, but no less necessary. One critical reason why Mou insisted that politics must not be swallowed by morality is his belief that “achieving sagehood is an endless process” [Ibid., 127]. If we cannot count on having a sage-ruler, then all must be limited by objective, democratic political institutions.

In the next chapter I will build on the arguments of Mou Zongsan and of some other contemporary advocates of Confucianism in order more thoroughly to sketch out and defend what a sagely politics would look like. In light of the degree to which we will be moving beyond anything imagined by Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming, a critical challenge will be to articulate the ways in which this politics enables the realization of core Neo-Confucian commitments. Contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming, who was a student of Mou Zongsan, has said that “Confucian personality ideals—the authentic person, the worthy, or the sage—can be realized more fully in the liberal-democratic society than either in the traditional imperial dictatorship or a modern authoritarian regime” [Tu 1996, 29–30]. Tu may be correct, but my aim here is to outline a society that is different from existing models of liberal-democracy in certain ways—and that fulfills the promise of Neo-Confucianism all the better.

Notes:

(1.) “Darkness” is usefully ambiguous, covering anything from the badness that arises from poor education or cultivation, to radical evil—that is, taking unalloyed pleasure in the suffering of others.

(2.) See *Mencius* 4B:19. Chang says that the dark consciousness of Liu Zongzhou (1578–1645) was so profound—his recognition of the ubiquity of human error so pervasive—that he bears comparison to the Puritans (who represent, for Chang, a Western extreme of squarely facing dark consciousness) [Ibid. , 26–7].

(3.) [Ibid. , 14]; see *Federalist Papers* #51. Chang notes that the influence of the enlightenment pushed some in the West to be more sanguine about the possibility of achieving perfection; see Chang [2000, 14–15].

(4.) Leading “New Confucian” Tang Junyi (1909–78) is a good example; see Metzger [2005, 250–4, 272–3]. Metzger also shows that Maoists have a similar tendency, on which see his fourth chapter.

(5.) This is a major theme of Metzger's book; see in particular chapters 5 and 6. For a parallel analysis of leading advocates of democracy at the time of the 1989 democracy movement, see Nathan [1997].

(6.) *Great Learning*; translation from Chan [1963, 86], slightly modified. “Apprehending the coherence in things” is *gewu* □□, on which see chapter 8.

(7.) Wood [1995, 144–5] discusses some of the relevant institutions.

(8.) Chen Xiyuan, as discussed in Tan [2004, 126].

(9.) *Analects* 2:21; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 113].

(10.) Wood's understanding of *li* as “transcendent moral principles” fits awkwardly with the interpretation of coherence I have been developing in this book, but his general point is well-taken.

(11.) [Ibid. , 130]; quoted from Hsiao [1979, 121].

(12.) The suggestion in Wood's subtitle that Song Neo-Confucian political theory lays the foundation for a "doctrine of political rights" is precisely the kind of exaggeration we would do well to avoid. Neither Wood's discussion of similarities between *li* and Western natural law, nor his final chapter on nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in Chinese political thought, substantiate the connection that would be needed to justify his subtitle. For astute discussion of political rights in earlier Confucianism, see Tiwald [2008].

(13.) Prior to Cheng Yi's success in introducing *li* or coherence into Confucian philosophical discourse, the term "ritual"—also pronounced *li*, but written with a different character—was sometimes used in a similar way, as a universal imperative to which the ruler might be held. See Wood [1995, ch. 4].

(14.) For a marvelous evocation of the pervasiveness of ritual in an emperor's life, see Huang [1981].

(15.) See my discussion in Angle [1998].

(16.) Woodruff's discussion of various uses of "irreverent" is quite relevant here. He writes: "Reverence and a keen eye for the ridiculous are allies: both keep people from being pompous or stuck up. So don't think that this book is an attack on laughter" [Woodruff 2001, 5]. See also the discussion of Confucianism and humor in [Bell 2008, ch. 9].

(17.) *Analects* 3:18; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 83], slightly modified.

(18.) There are also other Chinese terms that correspond to one or the other of these meanings of *fa*: *lü* □ refers unambiguously to legal codes, while *zhi* □ or *zhidu* □□ refer unambiguously to systems or institutions.

(19.) *Xunzi*, "*Jun dao pian*" 8:1a.

(20.) Others who anticipated Huang in various ways include Chen Liang, Ye Shi, and Wang Tingxiang; Gu Yanwu is a contemporary of Huang's whose views are also extremely important. Mou Zongsan's discussion of the limitations of Chen and Ye is quite illuminating: according to Mou, in an effort to come up with concrete solutions to the problems of their era, they ended up compromising with the rulers and advocating solutions too reliant on sage-heroes. Mou says that later thinkers like Huang Zongxi, despairing of short-term solutions and thus writing for the ages, are able to see deeper and offer more radical answers [Mou 1991, ch. 9].

(21.) Huang [1993, 99], slightly altered; see also Huang [1985, 7].

(22.) See also Huang [1995], which discusses a related dynamic during the reign of the great Kangxi Emperor of the Qing dynasty. The final chapter of the book has the self-explanatory title “The price of having a sage-emperor: the assimilation of the tradition of the Way by the political establishment in light of the Kangxi emperor's governance.”

(23.) The emphasis on political context in Yu's monumental study, 《□□□□□□□》 [*The Historical World of Zhu Xi*] [Yu 2004b], can be seen as bringing out the ways in which the moral and political intersect in practice.

(24.) Xu's explicit opponent in this debate is Xiao Gongquan—see Xu [1980, 229]—but Yu Yingshi's views are similar to Xiao's.

(25.) *Analects* 2:3; translation from Confucius [1979].

(26.) This is as good a place as any to note that Xu's and Mou's arguments that a limited form of edification has a place in the political realm are in serious tension with Thomas Metzger's claim that “ ‘civility’ as the public virtue of the merely decent person is not even a word that can be translated into Chinese” [Metzger 2005, 705], although neither Xu nor Mou puts forward a single word to cover this level of (in Metzger's terms) “civility” or “doable virtue.”

(27.) Indeed, Hegel himself did not use these terms, despite their widespread (and problematic) use today to explicate Hegel. Thanks to Joseph Rouse for a helpful conversation on these matters.

(28.) This is the English title, published in Chang [1962]. The full Chinese title is: “A Declaration to the World's People on behalf of Chinese Culture: Our Collective Understanding of Sinology and Chinese Culture, in Relation to the Future of World Culture”; see Mou et al. [1989].

(29.) It is interesting to note that Aristotle makes a somewhat related point. In Lisa Tessman's words, “For Aristotle, when a citizen is not ruling, that citizen cannot express or develop the virtues associated with ruling and therefore cannot have complete or perfect virtue” [Tessman 2005, 157].

(30.) Ming Taizu is an excellent example of the danger of politics being swallowed by morality, because it is at least plausible to interpret him as undertaking his violently coercive measures based on a set of ethical commitments, as he understood them. Cases like this raise the question whether any theory that does not find room for external limits can ever be satisfactory. Consider, for example, Michael Slote's effort to ground respect purely in empathy, such that we can criticize a religious persecutor—who carries out his tortures with “dry eyes”—because the persecutor “is arrogantly dismissive of, and lacking in empathy for, the viewpoint of the other” [Slote 2007, 59]. But based on the documentary evidence we might conclude that Ming Taizu was enormously pained by the necessity to “instruct” his victims in such painful ways. Supposing his eyes were flowing with tears, does not it seem ad hoc to simply insist that he was nonetheless lacking in empathy? If so, then we should conclude—with Mou Zongsan—that independent political values that restrain even the most empathetic rulers are necessary.

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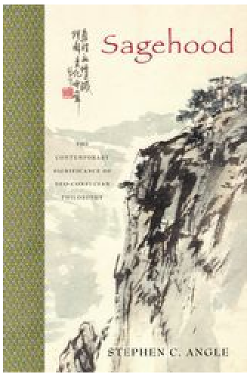

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Sages and Politics: A Way Forward

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter articulates a contemporary Confucian politics that allows the ideal of sagehood to inform both personal and public activities, without falling into the traps that have snared both the theory and practice of previous Confucian politics. The chapter begins with a review of the relation between perfection and fallibility. The attitude toward perfection and ideals that is recommended leads to a second topic, which spans questions of ritual and reverence. Ritual must feature prominently in any Confucian politics. Embracing ritual and reverence entails an affirmative attitude toward spirituality, but this is a very different thing from advocating the establishment of a Confucian church or state religion. Instead, this general approach to embracing ideals undergirds the importance of what Joseph Chan has called “moderate perfectionist institutions.” These institutions must invest a plurality of voices with sovereignty if the effort to look for harmony in our world is to have any practical hope. This, then, leads to a substantial discussion of the ways in which sagely politics must be participatory. Lastly, the chapter argues that in a contemporary Confucian context, laws and rights should be seen as a system of second resort.

Keywords: fallibility, ritual, reverence, moderate perfectionism, participation, law

Several of the pieces necessary for a satisfactory solution to the challenge of sagely politics have already emerged in the previous chapter. It is now time to supplement them and assemble the framework for a way forward: that is, a contemporary Confucian politics that builds constructively on the foundation provided by the earlier chapters, enabling the ideal of sagehood to inform both personal and public activities—all without falling into the traps that have snared both the theory and practice of previous Confucian politics. This is a tall order, and my approach in this chapter will accordingly be somewhat schematic. I begin by expanding on the relation between perfection and fallibility. While I agree with various contemporary thinkers that "perfectionism" can be understood in a way that renders it problematic, I argue here for an approach to perfection that avoids such problems even as it affords us critical resources. The attitude toward perfection and ideals that I recommend leads naturally to my second topic, which spans questions of ritual and reverence. Ritual must feature prominently in any Confucian politics. This approach to embracing ideals, in turn, undergirds the importance of what I call, following Joseph Chan, "moderate perfectionist institutions." I argue that sagely politics requires institutions that are moderately perfectionist, and yet have significant roles for individual, particularist judgment. These institutions must invest a plurality of voices with sovereignty if the effort to look for harmony in our world is to have any practical hope. This, then, leads to a substantial discussion of the ways in which sagely politics must be participatory. Lastly, I argue that in a contemporary Confucian context, laws and rights should be seen as a system of second resort. The upshot of this chapter, in short, is that not only can a contemporary Confucianism answer the political challenges **(p.198)** surrounding the idea of sagehood, but it in fact puts forward a vision of politics that is broadly attractive and offers opportunities for dialogue and mutual growth.

11.1 Perfection and Fallibility

In chapter 6 we encountered Martha Nussbaum's concern about a kind of perfectionism that stifles creativity, flexibility, and genuine perception of the particular situations one encounters, in all their complexity. The same kind of perfectionism serves as her foil in essays that are more explicitly concerned with politics. Through a discussion of Henry James's *Princess Casamassima*, for instance, Nussbaum introduces us to two contrasting types of political figures. Paul Muniment is a charismatic and committed radical who sees the world in general terms (often employing financial imagery); James describes this at one point as "sublime consistency" [Nussbaum 1990b, 209]. In contrast, the tragic hero of the novel, Hyacinth Robinson, is a person "on whom nothing was lost." Nussbaum says that he possesses "an ability to perceive and also to feel the practical significance of each particular event and person and perplexity." This similarity between Hyacinth's character and that of a Neo-Confucian sage is striking, and the resemblance is only enhanced when Nussbaum adds, "the distinction between responding and acting loses its sharpness in the life of such characters, since the great part of what they morally and significantly and assessibly *do* will consist in fitting response to the seen" [Ibid., 199].[1] Nussbaum's essay argues that we should take figures like Hyacinth seriously as models for political life, whereas those like Muniment, committed to a kind of perfection, rise so high "that politics becomes capable of atrocity, ceases to breathe the human air" [Ibid., 209].

In her book *Confucian Democracy*, Sor-hoon Tan expresses similar worries about perfectionism, though her touchstone (in addition to classical Confucianism) is Dewey rather than Henry James. According to Tan,

> Perfectionism implies that there is "a final solution" to all problems, that there exists one and only one correct answer to any question, that there is only one right way to live. It is this very perfectionism that renders positive freedom so pernicious historically. This perfectionism is fundamentally contrary to Dewey's philosophy in which the possibility of freedom means "a universe in which there is real uncertainty and contingency, a world which is not all in, and never will be, a world which in some respect is incomplete and in the making, and which in these respects may be made in this or that way according as men judge, prize, love, and labor." [Tan 2004, 162]

Even though Dewey endorsed a kind of "positive freedom" according to which one became more free as one grows into a better, higher self, there was never any finality to this process: one can never say "thus-and-such is the ideal, rational, final self into which we must all make ourselves" and thereby justify coercive **(p.199)** measures—mindless of costs, which become abstract numbers—to achieve this perfect solution.[2]

Nussbaum associates political perfectionism with a kind of abstraction that loses touch with the complex and contradictory world of human particularity. Tan's worry about perfectionism justifying a single, "final solution" to all problems points in a similar direction. A third, complementary concern comes from Thomas Metzger, who focuses on the "concept of political perfection put forward by Chinese believing it is practicable" [Metzger 2005, 20]. Thus he finds that Chinese liberals discuss democracy in terms of an "ideal society … on the verge of being historically realized" [Ibid., 468], and notes that a twentieth-century Confucian like Tang Junyi "believed that people could not resolutely act unless they had faith in the practical possibility of the world's total moral transformation" [Ibid., 268]. In a few moments I will explore an important difference between *belief* in perfection and an attitude like *faith* in perfection, but for now we can see that if perfectionism means failing to see value in anything short of perfection—since perfection is, after all, just around the corner—this supports the problematic attitudes Nussbaum and Tan have identified.

The question of what perfectionism can mean is related to what "fallibilism" and "fallibility" mean. The flip side of Nussbaum's rejection of perfectionism is her approval of James's insistence that we are "flawed objects with respect to our highest aims," the subjects of "tragic tensions in our love and attention" [Nussbaum 1990b, 212]. She says: "Great art plays a central role in our political lives because, showing us the tangled nature of our loves and commitments, showing us ourselves as flawed crystals, it moderates that optimistic hatred of the actual that makes for a great deal of political violence" [Ibid., 213]. Understanding our necessary fallibility and penchant for finding ourselves in tragic conflicts has the political consequence, according to Nussbaum, of undermining the sorts of utopian projects that she associates with perfectionism. Metzger draws a similar connection. Those whose "epistemological pessimism" and attendant "sense of history's permanent moral darkness" lead them to accept an unavoidable "dissonance" in our relations with one another will avoid problematic utopianism [Metzger 2005, 703].[3]

Drawing on Nussbaum, Tan, and Metzger, we thus have clear senses of a perfectionism that is to be avoided, and a fallibilism that would keep one free of perfectionism's clutches. There are hints even in some of these writers, though, of a way of reconciling the notions of perfection and fallibility in a manner I will recommend. Metzger worries that the version of fallibilism that he labels epistemological pessimism will undermine our critical ability to make "resolute progress" in the world, and he sometimes appeals to the need for a kind of "faith" that I will discuss later. A related point is that Tan's notion of fallibility is considerably less final than one finds in either Nussbaum or Metzger. Instead of necessary tragedy or permanent moral darkness, she talks of the tentativeness and open-endedness that necessarily attend human interactions, because our perspectives (or "horizon of meanings") are never identical:

> As long as one cannot *actually* become another person, the centers of horizons will never merge completely…. The recognition that our **(p.200)** attempts to "put ourselves in the place of another" can only ever meet with partial success—success relative to specific purposes—contributes to the probability of such attempts achieving satisfactory consequences without harmful side effects, for it introduces a certain tentativeness, an acknowledgement of fallibility, which keeps us alert to further developments in a situation that may require a revision of earlier conclusions. [Tan 2004, 70]

As far as Tan is concerned, this is an eminently Confucian view, and it meshes well with my discussion in earlier chapters of the ever-new challenges that the Confucian recognition of change and particularity embrace.

Sagehood is not about learning a set of rules that can then be rigidly applied. At the same time, I have emphasized that a commitment to sagehood involves a commitment to harmony as an ideal-for-us—that is, as a possibility for us, and not simply the description of some different and inaccessible realm (like Heaven). This ideal lies ahead of us, but is part of our world, and so it draws us on as we strive to realize it. Its contents are open-ended, not set; there is no sense in which one could, once-and-for-all, realize harmony and be done.[4] Harmony rightly conceived in dynamic terms represents a realistic kind of perfection.

11.2 Reverence and Ritual

In chapter 5, I argued that the Neo-Confucians were correct in maintaining that the type of attitude we should have toward harmony was reverence. One aspect of my argument was showing that talk of reverence could appropriate the power of Iris Murdoch's invocation of a kind of "faith" without the problematic consequences of Murdoch's approach. In this section I will return to the contrast between faith and reverence because both Metzger and Tan write suggestively, though ultimately rather inconclusively, about the need for something like faith. I believe that reverence plays the key role toward which they are groping in their talk of faith, and that it thus lies at the center of sagely politics. In addition, no version of Confucian politics can ignore ritual (*li*), which is centrally connected to reverence. Before this section is done, we will also need to confront dangers to which an emphasis on reverence and ritual is liable, to see whether our developing understanding of sagely politics can guard against them.

Reverence involves collectively embracing ideals in full awareness of our finiteness and imperfection. According to the analysis of philosopher Paul Woodruff, reverence is partly constituted by feelings of awe toward the object(s) of one's reverence, respect for the other imperfect beings like oneself who revere the same thing(s), and shame when one fails to live up to our shared ideals, at least to the degree it is within one's strength to do so.[5] It is crucial that reverence (and awe) be reserved for ideals of perfection that lie beyond our full ability to grasp, and thus have a tinge of mystery associated with them: neither specific individuals nor specific institutions—no matter how good—merit reverence. Ideals that we revere are beyond our ability to assess critically, while actual leaders **(p.201)** or laws are never beyond the pale of criticism. Indeed, part of what motivates us to criticize those who significantly fail to live up to our ideals is our shared reverence for the ideals. I discussed this in Section 5.1.5 with respect to individual moral decisions; reverence is also a critical motivator in political contexts. Woodruff argues that the "common reverence" of leaders and followers for shared ideals "unites them in feelings that overcome personal interests, feelings such as mutual respect. These feelings take the sting from the tools of leadership.… This is because there are no winners and losers where there is reverence. Success and failure are dwarfed by the magnitude of whatever it is that they hold in awe together" [Ibid., 175–76].

Before saying more about reverence, let us glance at places in which our critics of perfectionism have felt the pull of something they call "faith." As part of her incisive engagement with the possibilities for Confucian democracy, Tan argues "for Confucianism to be a viable, practical philosophy in current historical contexts, it can and must be reconstructed to advocate government by the people" [Tan 2004, 145]. She then admits, though, that philosophers unfriendly to her hero, John Dewey, have challenged the very possibility of government by the people. Critics like Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Neibuhr charge that, in Tan's words, idealism like that of Dewey "may be productive of good in individual conduct, but in politics it is pernicious to the extreme" [Ibid., 152]. This sounds familiar, since some criticisms of Confucian politics run along the same track, and we should not be surprised to hear Tan rebut by disclaiming "final solution"-style perfectionism. Still, what does motivate us to strive for a better world?

Tan says that both Dewey and Confucius want commitment without fanaticism; "their perseverance in working for their ideals is greater precisely because they do not delude themselves that the ideals are easy, or even necessarily possible, to achieve” [Ibid.]. In Dewey's own words, it is “faith” that makes such perseverance possible. He writes, “faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation.” Tan adds that “faith as ‘a tendency to action,’ a willingness to try without guarantee of success, a positive attitude to the unknown and uncertain, is very much part of Confucius' worldview and practical philosophy” [Ibid., 153].

For Dewey, “faith” seems to mean confidence that goes beyond our empirical grounds, in any specific instance, for being confident of a good result. History cannot ground this attitude, or else it would not count as faith. Tan says that this is not the same as being “naively optimistic,” though I have some trouble seeing the difference. In any event, it is an attitude I find difficult to justify. Like religious faith, Dewey's faith goes beyond rational justification, but unlike religious faith, it lacks a transcendent grounding. If Tan is right in saying that in Dewey's sense, “democracy as an ideal requires faith … in the possibility of its ever-closer approximation” [Ibid.], then I worry about our ability to commit ourselves to democracy. I also question her attribution of such an attitude to Confucius, of whom the *Analects* says the following: “Isn't [he] the one who knows it can't be done, but goes on doing it?”[6] In other words, Confucius's attitude is not “faith,” since he has a realistic sense of what he can actually achieve. Tan (and Dewey) are **(p.202)** right in thinking something is needed to drive an idealism that does not collapse into fanaticism, but their understanding of faith cannot fit the bill.[7]

I have already mentioned (in Section 10.1) Thomas Metzger's admiration for the way in which Chinese participants in “Discourse #1” are able to motivate “resolute action,” though he has troubles with their underlying epistemology. Recall that Tang Junyi “believed that people could not resolutely act unless they had faith in the practical possibility of the world's total moral transformation” [Metzger 2005, 268]. As Metzger tells it, the train of thought he finds in Tang and others is this: the understanding of a complete system of knowledge produces a “mind filled with faith and confidence (*xin xin* □□)” [Ibid., 94 and 238], which in turn leads to resolute action. Metzger is deeply skeptical about the first of these steps—that is, whether we should have as our goal understanding a complete system of knowledge—but likes the end result. Indeed, he says, “In my view, rejecting Marx's clumsy utopianism does not necessitate rejection of Marx's magnificently optimistic determination to restructure Western modernity” [Ibid., 559]. He believes that history grounds neither optimism nor pessimism, and so it is a “spiritual” question which attitude one adopts. A similar issue arises when, criticizing what he takes to be Richard Rorty's drab, utilitarian picture of the world, Metzger asserts that we should have a “pious” attitude toward the “cosmic setting” in which our goals are unavoidably conceptualized and pursued [Ibid., 755]. Here again he associates his preferred stance with Confucian spirituality, although he remains troubled by Confucian epistemological optimism.

I believe that a core attitude toward which both Tan and Metzger are groping, with their talk of faith, spirituality, optimistic determination, and piety, is reverence.[8] This is not to say that reverence explains everything, to be sure, but it can support commitment and determination. Democracy needs the support of reverence, which leads to precisely the "commitment without fanaticism" for which Tan is searching. Previous chapters have already explored this dynamic in the personal case of ethical cultivation. What remains to be done here is to bring in the connection between reverence and public rituals which, if classical and Neo-Confucians are to be believed, must be central to any Confucian politics.

Rituals operate on many levels. Some can be supported by the state and be aimed at all citizens; other can be quite local. In all cases, rituals are structured social practices with at least a claim to historical pedigree. Rituals help to shape and direct our feelings; at least when we engage in them with the proper spirit, rituals can "nurture" or transform our feelings in a lasting fashion.[9] One way this works has been astutely analyzed by Sor-hoon Tan. She writes:

> Ritual practices, which are designed to achieve harmony in recurrent occasions of daily living, create the nurturing environment for achieving harmony in other more problematic arenas of life. In conflict situations, the predisposition toward harmonious resolution and the avoidance of an adversarial stance can have a significant impact on the outcome. Polite and nonconfrontational postures, facilitated by ritual acts understood by all, even in situations of serious conflict of interests, **(p.203)** are not always simply hypocrisy; they are, in fact, powerful means of increasing the chances of an outcome acceptable to all. [Tan 2004, 84]

Daniel Bell has also emphasized a related way in which rituals push toward harmony and, more importantly, protect the vulnerable by making powerful and powerless members of a single group [Bell 2008, ch. 3].

Rituals have long been closely associated with reverence in China; in his contemporary discussion of reverence, Woodruff notes the importance of ritual or ceremony and gives credit to the Chinese tradition for recognizing its role [Woodruff 2001, 104–5]. He articulates the role of ritual nicely when he says that the Confucians "place *li* [ritual] at the pivot between natural feelings and developed virtue" [Ibid.]. Ritualized interactions are important because they help us develop the ability to see ways in which more is at stake than merely the immediate outcome. Funerals are about far more than the expression of grief. We honor the departed and his or her life; we celebrate and are moved by his or her virtues; we rebuild and refresh our relationships and our communities. We are reminded of our finiteness, and yet also of the great things that we can accomplish, even if only partially. In short, as we remember what the departed "stood for," we are revering the ideals that we hold in common.

Only occasionally are funerals political events. Explicitly political rituals, though, can also be understood in terms of reverence. Woodruff writes:

> Voting is a ceremony. It is an expression of reverence—not for our government or our laws, not for anything man-made, but for the very idea that ordinary people are more important than the juggernauts that seem to rule them. If we do not

> understand why we should vote in this country, that is because we have forgotten the meaning of ceremony. And the meaning of ceremony is reverence. [Ibid., 21–22]

Of course, hearing Woodruff say that voting is ceremony and voting is ritual immediately brings to mind countries with 99.99 percent participation, everyone voting for the one and only candidate on the ballot. But that is to misunderstand "ritual," to think it only applies to empty practices, to mere formalities. Not all forms of political participation—on which more later—are equally ritualized, but this just makes those that are expressed through "ceremonies" all the more important. They are important for us, for our neighbors, for our children, and certainly for our elected leaders, who need to be reminded (and better yet, to internalize) that they are public servants.

As important as the ritual aspect of voting is, we should also remember Mou Zongsan's argument that politics must have a kind of independence, even though it grows out of morality and ritual. I will elaborate on this theme in the next section, but for now note that elections are both tradition-governed rituals, and law-governed political institutions. If the ritual dimension dominates, it may be serving to mask imbalances of power, and thus be dangerous. Part of what gives the rituals surrounding elections their force, in fact, is their association with laws before which all are equal. When the combination of ritual, reverence, and impartial law is challenged, however, elections can lose much of their function, **(p.204)** even if they succeed in identifying a unique winner through a process that can be claimed as "fair." One of the lasting impressions of the U.S. presidential election of 2000 is the teams of lawyers deployed by each candidate, poised to challenge any inconsistency that might put their candidate at a disadvantage. While this can seem like a good thing—after all, fairness is a fundamental desideratum for elections—it also puts in the foreground an image of law as tool to be exploited in one's interest, and undermines the significance of voting as ritual. Reverence for the ideal of democracy becomes incrementally harder to sustain.[10]

Let me add two caveats about rituals before moving on. First, we must keep in mind that reverence is not appropriately directed at an individual or at a concrete (and flawed) institution. We revere ideals, things that are in one way or another beyond us. Many of our public rituals today make this very explicit. In the United States, the parades and other events of Memorial Day give us an opportunity to celebrate the dedication and courage of soldiers. When one examines the activities that take place, even some holidays that seem to celebrate a single individual, like Martin Luther King Day, really are devoted to the ideals for which he stood. However, I believe we should be less comfortable with public rituals that call for us to revere our nation, people, or leaders. Great leaders deserve our respect and support, but not our reverence. We should care about our nation and about more local communities but we should not revere these groups of flawed individuals. Reverence is appropriate for the ideals to which a nation has, over time, committed itself, but not for the nation itself, come what may. If one's nation abandons responsible ideals, one must be prepared to criticize and resist.

Finally, Tan warns that "when ritual forms reify at the expense of creative content in performance," the "pursuit of community and social stability becomes perverted and self-defeating" [Tan 2004, 86]. She and others have emphasized that in every particular performance of ritual, we make the ritual our own, contributing our creative individuality. Indeed, Confucius is recorded in the *Analects* as saying, "If one served one's ruler by observing every last detail of ritual propriety, people would regard it as obsequious."[11] In the context of public rituals, the lesson here is that we need to encourage different groups to make the rituals their own, by incorporating aspects of their local history or memories, so that the rituals are invested with genuine significance—that is, they help people to develop genuine reverence for their shared ideals, even as the means of expressing this reverence varies somewhat from one context to another.[12]

11.3 Perfectionism and Institutions

11.3.1 Moderate Perfectionism

Talk of public rituals promoting shared ideals moves us toward our next topic: the proper roles of institutions and, in particular, the question of state perfectionism. There is a real possibility of terminological confusion here, because individual perfection and state perfectionism are distinct notions. "State perfectionism" does not mean that the state seeks its own perfection. Instead, the idea is that the state can and should promote valuable conceptions of a good life on the parts **(p.205)** of its citizens, rather than leaving it entirely up to its citizens to seek—or not—genuinely valuable lives. This latter view, according to which the state should not promote any particular conception of a good life, is known as state "neutrality," and is regularly asserted as part of liberalism. The varieties of "perfectionism" I discuss here are related to the ideas of perfectionism discussed in Section 11.1, since all views are committed to the idea that we can be better than we currently are. The conclusion of Section 11.1 was that an open-ended form of perfectionism could avoid the critiques I discussed there. In a similar fashion, my argument here will be that Confucians should only endorse a specific and limited sort of state perfectionism. My strategy will be to look first at some defenses of perfectionism (and critiques of neutrality) that have been offered in recent Western political philosophy, and then to look at how well these versions of perfectionism fit with—and are further enhanced by—the Confucian view of politics that I have been developing. Finally, I will touch on the complementary ways in which Confucian perfectionism and particularism support one another.

Contemporary defenders of perfectionism agree that radical versions of the idea are to be avoided. Joseph Chan identifies "extreme" perfectionism with views like the following: the state can adopt and promote a comprehensive, specific ranking of goods and ways of life; it can promote this view coercively, by means of legal sanctions; it denies that there are other values (like peace or social harmony) that it needs to balance against its perfectionism aims; and it insists that it is the primary, direct agent responsible for the promotion of the good life (instead of allowing social organizations to play significant roles) [Chan 2000, 14–16]. "Moderate" perfectionism, in contrast, takes a softer stance on each of these points, though it still affirms the idea that the state can promote—albeit noncoercively, via subsidies, tax exemptions, education, and so on—"valuable human goods such as the arts, family life, and basic human virtues." Similarly, George Sher argues that states can and should promote only those goods that conduce to "near-universal, near-unavoidable goals," and like Chan does not believe that perfectionist values should monopolize political decision-making [Sher 1997, 229 and 246].

Because the idea of state neutrality, which is thought to rest on the importance of individual autonomy, has been so dominant in recent Western political theory, proponents of perfectionism tend to dwell at length on alleged arguments in favor of neutrality or against perfectionism. These arguments are many and various, and are largely outside of the scope of our present concerns. Two issues, though, are worth noting. First, there is no incompatibility between moderate perfectionism and valuing autonomy. Sher summarizes two chapters of detailed argument as follows:

> There are many reasons to acknowledge a strong presumption for allowing citizens to make their own decisions and exercise control over their lives. This presumption is especially weighty when force or threats are involved, and it should loom large in the decisions of any government. However, no such presumption can justify ignoring, or taking entirely out of play, the weighty reasons that considerations of **(p.206)** goodness can provide; and as long as these reasons remain in play, they can be expected sometimes to be decisive. [Ibid., 104]

As will be clear later, there are good Confucian reasons for valuing political autonomy to a significant degree, which must be harmonized with whatever perfectionist considerations we end up endorsing. Second, Chan and Sher give us two lines of defense against the charge that state perfectionism will lead to oppression of those who do not share every aspect of the state-approved vision of flourishing. On the one hand, Chan has emphasized that moderate perfectionism is not oppressive because of its relatively ecumenical approach to specific goods, and its noncoercive way of advocating them [Chan 2000, 17]. Most people will find the goods promoted under such a scheme to be attractive, and those who do not will not be forced to play along. On the other hand, Sher cautiously acknowledges the continued possibility of oppression, but convincingly shows that a retreat all the way to neutrality is not required to protect against it. Systems of rights and laws are sufficient already, so it is gratuitous to demand a "prophylactic neutrality" when there is a significant cost—namely, losing the good done by perfectionism—in doing so [Sher 1997, ch. 5].

11.3.2 Confucian State Perfectionism

With a rough understanding of how to approach perfectionism now in hand, let us turn to Confucian politics and ask, first, whether it indeed exemplifies moderate perfectionism. I will follow the lead of my previous chapter, and take Xu Fuguan and particularly Mou Zongsan as our most promising points of departure. Their advocacy of "moral edification (*jiaohua* □□)" as a political goal makes clear that they are perfectionists, since they believe that the state should play a role in citizens' ethical improvement. Furthermore, the various ways in which they limit the public project of edification also show them to be interested in a moderate form of perfectionism. Anticipating Sher's criterion, Mou says that the values we should publicly advocate are the minimum and universal way of humanity [Mou 1991, 126]. Compared with the standards to which one ought to hold oneself as part of individual moral cultivation, the standards that are taught and expected through public education are loose. Mou repeatedly argues that a central political principle is that leaders must be open to, and conform to, the desires of the people, rather than imposing the leader's vision on the people in any coercive fashion [Ibid., 124 and 164]. Mou's vision thus seems to fall in the moderate range in each of Chan's criteria: it has no comprehensive, specific ranking of goods and ways of life; it does not promote its goods coercively; it recognizes goods in addition to those it actively promotes; and it allows entities other than the state to play roles in promoting visions of the good life.[13]

A possible objection to this reading of Mou is his suggestion that the “Confucian Teaching (*rujiao* □□)” be a required subject in schools [Ibid., 179]. Mou is explicit that this is to be done in the context of educational institutions, not in separate Confucian churches, which justifies my translation of *rujiao* as “Confucian Teaching” rather than the more standard “Confucian Religion.” Given what **(p.207)** else Mou has said about the limits on public moral edification, I suggest we give him the benefit of the doubt on this score. In any event, contemporary Confucians must be vigilant against any suggestion that they are founding—and insisting on general adherence to—a comprehensive religious dogma.[14]

One theme of Mou's book is the various ways in which Confucian discussion of institutions has historically been deficient, and the corresponding perspectives from which institutions need to be emphasized. At the center of his analysis is the distinction between the inner, “intensional” meaning of core political principles, and the outer, “extensional” form through which these principles can be manifested. Mou has a complex historical argument explaining why the former approach has been emphasized in China, while the latter has been dominant in the West; for our purposes, we can set this argument aside and focus on his contention that neither of these approaches is sufficient on its own. An “extensional” approach, which rests on explicitly codified laws and rights, is too rigid to encompass the political aspect of edification, and thus leaves us with no guidance on how to realize ourselves as full individuals [Ibid., 158]. A purely intensional approach, on the other hand, is too subjective, too easily manipulated. One needs objective institutions, based on and justified by “regulative laws,” if politics is to be adequately independent and succeed in achieving its purposes [Ibid., 164]. Mou thus returns to the argument I have already outlined in the previous chapter: politics must emerge out of, but be partly independent from, morality. Without a principled commitment, backed up by objective institutions, to respecting and heeding the wishes of the people, leaders inevitably slide into seeing the world as theirs to exploit for their personal benefit. Mou argues that some Confucians, at least, thus come close to a democratic spirit, but by failing to found objective institutions on the basis of this regulative principle, they ultimately fail to realize their own commitments [Ibid., 166–74].

Mou's arguments here lay much of the groundwork for the role I will insist on, in the following two sections, for participation and for laws. I agree with him that full, consistent realization of Confucian political principles requires such institutions, and requires that they have the kind of independence for which he calls. At the same time, I will work to further articulate the idea that such objective political institutions rest in a dialectical relation with the lofty and never-ending personal goals of sagehood. Mou is right that Confucians cannot rest content with a purely "extensional" politics, just as they cannot rest content with a neutral state.

11.3.3 Specificity and Particularism

Before moving on to these matters, we need to cover two further points concerning perfectionist institutions. First, none of the authors under consideration in this section is very specific about what moderate perfectionist institutions might look like, nor about how they might work. Chan mentions subsidies, tax exemptions, and education; Mou cites with approval Huang Zongxi's idea of educational academies, which Huang hoped could serve as an independent source of moral authority to balance against the state.[15] We might note that institutions **(p.208)** can shape or constrain our behavior in at least two different, though related, ways. On the one hand, they can seek to structure the incentives with which our social world presents us, in such a way that someone with a typical set of motivations will make proper choices and thus act properly. On the other hand, an institution can seek to transform our motivational set so that we come to make proper choices even independent of carefully structured incentives. Or, to put this in language more familiar from earlier chapters of the book, institutions can seek to change the ways we perceive our situations, since proper action will flow reliably from seeing the world properly. As I say, these two different modes are related, since Confucians have long believed that the former kind of shaping can lead to the latter. In particular, this is a role the rituals can play, as emphasized in chapter 8.[16]

Second, we should take note of the complex relations between perfectionism and particularism. Particularism is the idea that correct moral actions are the outcomes of proper perception of particular situations, rather than applications of general rules to individual cases; this general idea has been discussed repeatedly in previous chapters. Particularism thus appears to fit poorly with those types of institutions that depend on impartial, inflexible rules. However, when we look deeper we will see that the perfectionism I endorse and a particularism that accepts a dialectical relationship with objective institutions actually support one another. A central theme of the next section will be the importance of participation to the legitimacy of Confucian political institutions, which in turn rests on the idea that since even the best leader is flawed and limited to his or her particular perspectives, sovereignty must be plural—that is, shared with all the individual citizens of the state. All political institutions, including perfectionist ones, thus rest on a foundation that respects particularism. A second way in which particularism and perfectionism support one another is that particularism does not rely on the (implausible) premise that all judgments are equally good. The definition of particularism I cited earlier speaks of *proper* perception of particular situations. And we have seen in earlier chapters that moral perception is improved as we become better people, which is precisely the goal of a state's perfectionist institutions. The right kinds of education, rituals, participatory engagement, and so on help us to see our particular situations better.

Martha Nussbaum has also argued that our political institutions themselves must be flexible and particularist. She discusses the ways in which the U.S. legal system is, in fact, particularist, since "good legal judgment is increasingly being seen as Aristotle sees it—as the wise supplementing of generalities of written law by a judge who imagines what a person of practical wisdom *would* say in the situation" [Nussbaum 1990b, 200]. In fact, she emphasizes that Aristotle "concedes repeatedly that rules *must* frequently be used in public life, and that this is better than any available alternative. He denies, however, that they are the norm toward which the public domain should strive" [Nussbaum 1990a, 99]. The impersonal application of rules should not be our norm, Nussbaum suggests, because personal, particularist judgments are irreducibly valuable in the political domain. **(p.209)** Drawing on James's portrait of Hyacinth Robinson (see Section 11.1), Nussbaum writes, "It's James's point that this commitment to the personal *is* political; that it is in rising so high [away from the personal] that politics becomes capable of atrocity, ceases to breathe human air" [Nussbaum 1990b, 209].

Despite the resonances between Nussbaum's Aristotelian view and my Confucian one, I would argue that Mou's dialectical approach is to be preferred. The rule of law and other objective, rule-based institutions are more than a necessary evil. They are constitutive of a successful "public domain": that is to say, Mou has argued that a flourishing public domain is not conceivable—except briefly, almost by accident—without such objective institutions. Contrary to Aristotle, they are part and parcel of the norms toward which our public domains should strive. At the same time, I will argue later in this chapter that our system of law should nonetheless be seen as a system of second resort. Our objective institutions can be designed to encourage personal solutions and harmony, rather than conflictual interactions. Here we might recall Sor-hoon Tan's suggestion that, "In conflict situations, the predisposition toward a harmonious resolution and avoidance of an adversarial stance can have a significant impact on the outcome" [Tan 2004, 84]. In the terms discussed at the end of chapter 6, we are more likely to arrive at solutions from a stance of vanilla than vindaloo.

11.4 Participation

So far I have said very little about the nature of the independent, objective political institutions that must—according to Mou Zongsan's argument—constrain us. I begin to remedy that here by arguing that the institutions through which sagely politics is conducted must be participatory. This is not their only required feature, but it is one that is strikingly absent from many conceptions of Confucian politics and thus requires considerable discussion. I define a participatory politics as: a polity that is systematically responsive to the views of a broad range of community members, as determined through their actually, freely taking part in political activities of many kinds. Participation in these activities, furthermore, must be both protected (via rights and laws, on which see the next section) and encouraged (which becomes an important perfectionist goal for the society).[17] A political system in which leaders draw conclusions about the opinions of citizens without the actual input of those citizens is not participatory, no matter how accurate the leaders are able to be. The same goes for a system in which citizens decline to take part out of apathy. In this section, I detail three arguments that cement the relationship between Confucian politics and participation. The first shows that participation is required for individual moral growth; the second, that the required independence of politics from morality necessitates participation; the third, that recognition of the practical impossibility of a sage-leader makes participation essential. Once I have reviewed each of these arguments, I will turn briefly to some of their implications, including the flexible range of political forms with which they are consistent.

(p.210) 11.4.1 Three Arguments

If personal moral growth—that is, the never-ending process of striving for sagehood—requires a participatory politics, then a sagely politics must entail participation. Sor-hoon Tan writes:

> The exemplary person, and certainly the sage, is wiser than the average person, yet in political action, what people believe, how they think and feel, no matter how foolish or even deluded, cannot be ignored. Acting authoritatively [i.e., *ren*] toward people requires helping them become wiser, hence, the importance of education as a responsibility of authoritative government. The transformation of people requires their participation. [Tan 2004, 144][18]

This is quite persuasive, but notice that Tan's discussion of “participation” here may fall short of my definition of political participation. Tan's point is about the necessity of an active, rather than passive or (worse) coercive, education. The question is, how broad is the scope of one's education, and thus how broadly can we interpret “participation”? In answer, Tan draws in part on Dewey, who says that “Human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing things which are common, things for the sake of which men and women form groups—families, industrial companies, governments, churches, scientific associations, and so on.” Tan comments: “A person who focuses solely on her own needs and wishes is ethically stunted, since she fails to recognize the sociality of human beings” [Ibid., 121]. Later, she adds that people who have not been allowed to participate politically have weak moral fiber, just like children who are never given responsibility and thus fail to learn to act responsibly [Ibid., 204].

Confucian polities are perfectionist on two levels. They promote widely shared virtues and other goods for all citizens. And even though they do not advocate more demanding, fully specified visions of the good life, they do push the idea that citizens should continue to strive to improve themselves. There is a level beyond which the state should not specifically advocate, but the state never gives the message that citizens should now rest content that they are “good enough.” Furthermore, remember my discussion earlier of voting. Participation is more than just expressing views and being heard; in many instances, there is a ritual aspect, too, that further contributes to the transformative importance of the activity. In this light, and given the general plausibility of Tan's claims about the need for broad and active participation if we are to learn and grow, we should conclude that a Confucian polity must be participatory.

One might object to this reasoning in the following fashion. What about a state that tells its people, “Okay, you all go figure out how to educate yourselves, and especially how to educate yourselves about morality, but we (the leaders) will take care of the serious foreign policy decisions and all of the major decisions about our economic system. You will have some minimal, token say in the foreign policy and the economic realms (perhaps through a periodic election for leaders), but we're going to structure things such that it will be difficult for you to follow and understand the issues in the foreign policy and economic realms, and **(p.211)** we'll give you incentives for leaving those decisions to the status quo leadership." Such a state could be moderately perfectionist and may seem to fit with what Tan says about education, but it is not in any meaningful sense participatory overall. But could not it count as Confucian?[19]

The problem with such a state is that it infantilizes its citizens, treating them as insufficiently mature to deal with the large and complex realms that ultimately make the most difference to people's lives. It is certainly true that the trope of ruler as "father and mother of the people" runs throughout much Confucian political writing, but even in its original contexts this trope is in tension with the notion that any person can become a sage. Tan's point about the stultifying effect of focusing only on one's own needs applies here, as does my discussion of the critical role that imagination plays (according to Confucians) in overcoming apparent ethical dilemmas. Genuine ethical development requires engaging with issues in all their complexity, because only by recognizing the many dimensions of each given situation can we see our way toward harmonious resolutions.[20] This is not to demand that each citizen become an expert in any given area, just as the objection does not assume that the state's leaders are experts (in environmental science, population demographics, etc.). What is wanted is ethical maturity —which will certainly involve listening carefully (and critically) to the advice of experts— rather than an intellectual elitism.[21]

A second argument for participatory politics takes as its point of departure Mou Zongsan's observation that human morality and politics must be partly independent from one another if we are to best realize our potentials for sagehood. I say "partly" independent, because many of the goals of morality and politics run in parallel, as when politics encourages continued striving for perfection even beyond the level of basic virtue that it can specifically promote. As I explained in Section 10.3.2, Mou argues that politics is independent insofar as it is realized through objective structures; these structures institute a different form of authority from moral authority, which derives from an individual's subjective moral cultivation. In Mou's understanding, though, not just any objective structures will do. The structures must realize principles, or unchanging laws, that can be derived from what Mou calls our *lixing* □□, or coherent nature.[22] In good Neo-Confucian fashion, Mou says that the full, internal expression of our coherent nature is found in our fully developed conscience, and thus in our continuously perfect responses to all situations—which, he adds, represents a kind of creativity, because the responses are not analytically predictable [Mou 1991, 66–68]. The external structures that have political authority are the "extensional presentations" of our *lixing*.[23]

What objective structures, then, can institutionalize (in the properly independent-and-thus-limited way) our *lixing*? Mou believes that broadly speaking they are democratic institutions. On Mou's reading, classical Confucianism understood our coherent natures well enough to see that political sovereignty derives from the shared will of the people, but thinkers like Mencius failed to see the need for this sovereignty to be processed through objective institutions.[24] Instead, Mencius accepted the notion that sovereignty can be passed on from one individual to another in a hereditary monarchy. Mou argues that only an **(p.212)** objective, democratic constitution can institute legitimate political authority [Ibid., 20–22 and 114–16]. For political authority to be adequately independent of any given individual's claims to moral authority, we must be sure that the objective structures of politics provide reliable means for all citizens to play their own roles in the state's decision-making. Mou is content to leave this in terms of democratic institutions; I would prefer the more basic idea of participatory institutions, as defined earlier. “Participation” is preferable for two reasons: first, it is more directly tied to the underlying justification that I have just spelled out; and second, it may provide more flexibility in institutional design.

The final reason why Confucian politics must be participatory is rooted in Confucianism's distinctive, simultaneous commitments to perfection and fallibility. We all can become sages (and should strive to do so), but none of us is actually a sage. None of us, including our leaders. That means that none of us, including our leaders, can be relied upon to see all relevant sides of a given situation. Not only are situations complex and people's motivations often opaque, but our environments are constantly changing. No one can rest content with his or her satisfactory answers to past challenges, because new challenges are constantly arising. Past chapters have emphasized the importance of seeing multiple perspectives as it relates to proper individual ethical reactions, and in chapter 9 I spent some time on the role that dialogue should play in individual ethical development. In the present context, we can see how these individual, moral norms should give rise to political norms. Given the limitations of our actual leaders, then so long as we accept the premise that our political system should be designed so that our leaders make the best decisions possible, it follows that we need objective institutions of protected political participation. It should not be left up to a given leader whether to listen to the various voices of the people. Instead, we must encourage every voice to speak up, and all ears to listen. “Encouragement” must go beyond exhortation and slogans if it is to be successful: a robust system of civil rights is necessary if people are to feel confident in their ability to put forward their perspectives—and to complain if such perspectives are not taken adequately seriously.[25] Institutional structures that encourage us to hear one another offer us the best context from which to seek harmony, even if there is still no guarantee that we will see or hear everything that is relevant. Such objective institutions, and the limits they place on political options by constraining unilateral behavior, should not be seen as a grudging comprise with our (temporary?) fallenness or darkness. Rather, they are a necessary part of a value-system apt for us and our world.[26]

11.4.2 Implications and Objections

Taken together, the three arguments I have just sketched constitute powerful evidence that a contemporary Confucian should endorse a participatory politics. Before moving on to the chapter's final section, let me address two points that follow from this endorsement of participation, as well as two serious objections to the idea that a politics such as I have described can really be Confucian. First, what specific political forms does it countenance? I caution against rushing to the **(p.213)** simple answer of "democracy," for two types of reasons. First, depending on how one defines democracy, it may fail to qualify as adequately embracing participation. For instance, if democracy is understood as an elite competition for power, then a polity might qualify as "democratic" without commitment to the ideals I have argued a Confucian should see as necessary. (Note that this is not a matter of unfairly comparing democratic reality to Confucian ideals: the question is not whether such a "democratic" society would live up to its ideals, but whether its ideals would even include the type of participation I have outlined here.) Second, polities that would not count on standard definitions as democratic—or at least, as liberal democratic—might embrace precisely the kind of participation needed. I have argued elsewhere that a particular version of democratic centralism would endorse and protect a robust kind of political participation, and it might well support the perfectionist goal of promoting participation, as well.[27] Whether this argument is accepted or not, we should at least be open to such possibilities, while noting that mere lip service to an ideal of participation is not enough.

Another topic on which I want to touch is the implication of such a Confucian-style participatory politics for international relations. In earlier chapters I have discussed our shared reverence for an all-encompassing universal coherence, as well as the notion of extending our concern to all things in the universe, though I stressed that Neo-Confucians do not ask us to love, or treat, all things in the same way. With this in mind, I suggest that Confucians should endorse a kind of rooted cosmopolitanism. One's political participation, as well as that of the state, should expand to transnational entities—whether they be international nongovernmental organizations, various European Union bodies, the United Nation's many offices, etc.—although one's own and one's state's first allegiance and deepest commitment will tend to be closer to home. Exactly how this works out for an individual and for a particular state will depend on many factors, but suffice it to say that there is ample room in this conception for concern with the international dimensions of justice and other global problems.[28]

My stress on participation and (moderate) perfectionism might lead one to wonder how the Confucian perspective I am putting forward differs from deliberative democracy, which similarly values participation and similarly eschews pure "neutrality" in favor of perfectionist goals. For deliberative democracy, these perfectionist goals include support for the attitudes and values that enable free deliberation among autonomous individuals. In particular, one might ask whether the participatory element in my version of Confucian politics is so strong that what Gutmann has called the "disharmony of democracy" will be an inevitable result—and if so, whether such a politics can possibly be Confucian, given the centrality of harmony to Confucianism.

To answer this challenge, let us first see what the "disharmony of democracy" is. Most basically, disharmony arises because sometimes what the majority wants and what an individual wants will not line up. Gutmann argues that this tension will be mitigated insofar as a society embraces a specifically deliberative form of democracy, grounded in autonomy, which necessitates “the willingness and ability to shape one's private or public life through deliberation, informed reflection, evaluation, and persuasion that allies rhetoric to reason” [Gutmann **(p.214)** 1993, 140]. Rather than people relating to one another “merely by asserting their will or fighting for their predetermined interests,” deliberation grounded in the shared value of autonomy allows for a kind of collective shaping of one another's preferences, actions, and their outcomes [Ibid., 141]. Under these conditions, disharmony will be less evident. Nonetheless, several factors mandate that disharmony is ineliminable. Gutmann cites imperfect information, human imperfection in general, indeterminacy of judgment [Ibid., 149], and then adds:

> Even a perfect people with ideal institutions could not eliminate the disharmony of democracy that is rooted in the tension between living your life as you see fit, and recognizing that to live your life as you see fit, you must share political power with many other people and therefore you may not be able to live every part of your life just as you see fit. [Ibid., 156]

Even a “perfect people,” as she sees it, could not do away with fundamental conflicts among incommensurable goods, so some degree of disharmony is unavoidable.

What, then, of a Confucian participatory politics? In giving up on the idea that a sage-leader will tell us all what to do, have we made disharmony inevitable? The answer is yes, at least practically speaking, but not in exactly the way that Gutmann says. A Confucian should agree that our actual state is one of imperfect information, imperfect people more generally, and at least some indeterminacy of judgment.[29] Our actual state is thus one of disharmony or “dissonance,” to use Thomas Metzger's term. Where the deliberative democrat places belief in autonomy at the root of her values, though, the contemporary Confucian places a reverence for harmony. This does not mean that Confucians should dismiss anything short of complete harmony as not valuable or not choiceworthy. That would be to completely misunderstand the attitude of reverence, with its necessary implication that we are imperfect, falling short of our ideal. (And in any case, “complete harmony” is a phantom in a universe that is constantly changing, constantly throwing up new challenges.) Still, replacing belief in autonomy with reverence for harmony does have important consequences. When one begins to embrace “looking for harmony” as part of one's life task, living “every part of your life just as you see fit,” without taking the world (loosely speaking) into account offers less attraction. Or rather, in living “every part of your life just as you see fit” it comes naturally to take the world into account, just as according to the *Analects*, when Confucius was seventy he was able to “follow his heart's desire without overstepping the line” [*Analects* 2:4]. At the idealized extreme, a society of sages would not suffer the kind of disharmony that Gutman believes would remain even among perfect people.

Most discussions of whether a proposed reconstruction of Confucianism can count as Confucianism turn on the idea of certain core values or principles. As the discussion above has just illustrated, though, answering the question of whether a given value (like harmony) retains its centrality will often be neither simple nor obvious. Normative arguments will need to be put forward, and ultimately be successful, that articulate the way in which the value is important; often, this **(p.215)** will be quite different from the way that value's importance was expressed in earlier times. In fact this is just one way in which normative argument is needed if we are to talk of core values. With live traditions and texts that are never self-interpreting, normative argument will always be necessary even to determine what the core values of the tradition are. Traditions do not have unchanging, essentialized cores.

Still, the rough parameters of such debates can usually be anticipated, and it seems likely that any future Confucianism will continue to stress the moral and psychological significance of both roles and hierarchy. The roles may be significantly redefined and, in particular, delinked from gender, but it seems unlikely that a community could ever come to count as "Confucian" a perspective that did not emphasize the differences between individuals based on the different roles that, at any point in time, partly constitute them. Similarly, the idea of distinct responsibilities based on complementary, hierarchical relations seems very basic to Confucianism. To be sure, one of the classic "Five Relationships" was not hierarchical: the friend–friend relationship was equal. But even here there is a hierarchical element, as the best friendships were with those who are one's moral equal or superior, since such relationships would support one's own moral growth. In any event, it seems reasonable to ask whether there is room for roles and hierarchy in the participatory politics argued for earlier.[30]

This is certainly a large question, but my initial answer is that I can see no reason why the arguments presented above for participatory politics require egalitarianism. Individuals can have a say in public affairs, thus cultivating their individual moral growth, without their say being always equal to someone else's. What is crucial is that they are heard, taken seriously, reacted to—and that they have the civil and political rights necessary to make this happen. A system that offered others a louder voice would not necessarily negate the growth taking place among those whose voices were institutionally "softer," so long as (1) the loud do not simply drown out the soft, and (2) there were broadly acceptable reasons for the distinctions in volume. This would be all the more true if these distinctions were not fixed to specific individuals, but rather to changing roles or categories. Perhaps more education, greater age, or certain life experiences might qualify one to speak more loudly.

Each of the other two arguments from Section 11.4.1 is also consistent with distinctions among in the "volume" of one's political participation, depending one one's role. Both of these latter arguments suggest, though, that we should be very wary of any arrangement that links high volume to current power-holding. In particular, loud claims to superior wisdom on the part of a power-holder must not be allowed to drown out other voices: this is precisely the worry that both arguments diagnose and seek to cure through institutionalized, protected participation.

Efforts to take advantage of hierarchical superiority (of knowledge, experience, wisdom, moral character, or what have you) will thus have to be carefully balanced against robust protections for participation on the part of all. In this regard, we can see how a Confucian might look favorably not just on the meritocratic, examination-based “upper house” of Daniel Bell's proposal for a future **(p.216)** China, but also on the democratic lower house [Bell 2000]. We would still need to understand a good deal more about how political participation in the society is protected and encouraged, but the balance expressed in the differing qualifications of the two houses' representatives is consistent with the argument of this chapter.

11.5 Laws and Rights as a System of Second Resort

In the last section, I argued that political participation in a Confucian state is both essential, and must be protected by a robust system of civil and political rights. Many other kinds of law, as well, will be needed for politics to have the kind of independence from morality for which I have argued, following the lead of Mou Zongsan. Like Mou, though, I also insist that political and legal norms are not wholly discontinuous with moral norms, but rather that politics and law are only partly independent, existing in harmony with morality. A central goal of this final section of the chapter is to clarify this relationship by looking specifically at the case of law. I begin with some of the different things that have been meant by “rule *by* law” and “rule *of* law,” both in the theoretical literature and in contemporary China. This leads to a discussion of the various ways in which law can—and should, according to Confucians—be related to morality. I then argue that we should avoid both “legalism,” by which I will mean a social arrangement in which legal values are the only norms to which citizens attend, and “law as last resort,” by which I will refer to systems in which the social pressures against making legal claims are so strong that people often do not actually rely on law for needed protection. My Confucian-inspired alternative—which has at least some basis in traditional legal practice—is law as a system of second resort, wherein laws and legal procedures are structured in such a way as to encourage morality and even moral growth, but without falling into the trap of “last resort” avoidance.

11.5.1 Rule by Law

Scholarly discussion of the differences between “rule by law” and “rule of law” is complex and often founders on terminological ambiguities, in both English and Chinese. Let us begin with the two extreme possibilities. At one end of the spectrum, there is the use of law—or at least, of pronouncements that look like laws—at the ruler's discretion to achieve the ruler's own desires. If a ruler fails to achieve his or her will by the use of such “law,” he or she will turn to other means of governance: law has no pride of place. I will call this “rule by law.”[31] Turning now to the other end of the spectrum, there is general agreement that for the most full-blooded versions of “rule of law”—which many call “thick” versions of the rule of law—broader issues of moral and political value must enter into the definition, such that good laws can be distinguished from bad ones by the failure of the latter to support an appropriate concept of justice, among other things [Peerenboom 2002, 69–70].[32] In between these extremes lies “principled **(p.217)** rule by law” or “thin rule of law,” according to which for something to count as law, it must satisfy a list of procedural requirements. Scholars generally agree on the requirements that need to be satisfied; two examples are that laws must treat people in similar situations alike, and laws must be made public.[33]

11.5.2 Law and Morality

My reason for trying to make sense of these various distinctions is to clarify the sort of relationships that should obtain, on a contemporary Confucian view, between law and morality. I see at least three dimensions. First, a contemporary Confucian should insist that for something to count as law, it must satisfy the generally agreed-upon list of procedural requirements, all of which have some link to or implication for morality. I say that Confucians today should accept all this as part of what it means to have a “law” because accepting these procedural criteria is a crucial part of recognizing the partial independence of politics and law from morality, as discussed earlier. In general, I find no obstacle in historical Confucian writings to understanding law in this way. As discussed in Section 10.2.4, most Confucian discussions tend to be about the broader notion of *fa* ▯ as institution, thus leaving space for further specification of the ways that law constrains us. Some general comments like *Analects* 4:10 (“The Master said, The gentleman's relation to the world is thus: he has no predilections or prohibitions. When he regards something as right, he sides with it.”) may pose problems, but working out this tension is already part of Mou Zongsan's project, which I have endorsed earlier.[34]

A second dimension of the relation between morality and law—which, like the first dimension, has been articulated most clearly by legal theorist Lon Fuller—is a pragmatic tie between the “inner morality” to which law requires us to aspire and a broader “outer morality” without any direct connection to law. According to the procedural ties between law and morality (discussed in the previous paragraph), in order to be issuing genuine laws, a ruler must be striving for (and achieving, to an acceptable degree) clarity, publicity, and so on. Fuller argues that the practical commitment to employing law brings with it other commitments: “To embark on the enterprise of subjecting human conduct to the governance of rules involves of necessity a commitment to the view that man is, or can become, a responsible agent, capable of understanding and following rules, and answerable for his defaults” [Fuller 1969, 162]. Fuller does not go so far as to say that full-fledged moral values (like justice or benevolence) simply fall out from a commitment to law. Instead, the connection is pragmatic: one who is, in fact, committed to law will tend to have other commitments. Thus he allows that it is possible, “by stretching the imagination, to conceive the case of an evil monarch who pursues the most iniquitous ends but at all times preserves a genuine respect for the principles of legality,” but Fuller denies that history contains many examples of regimes that combine “a faithful adherence to the internal morality of law with a brutal indifference to justice and human welfare” [Ibid., 154]. In short, a second dimension of the relationship between law and morality to which a contemporary Confucian should subscribe is this pragmatic **(p.218)** dimension. It has no particular grounding in Confucian texts, but neither is there any tension caused by its acceptance.

The final dimension of the moral–legal relationship on which I want to focus is the way in which particular laws and legal machinery can be designed to encourage morality.[35] No legal system is neutral with regard to its effect on personal moral growth. In countless ways, a given legal system sets up a system of incentives and disincentives, pathways and barriers, which collectively shape how we perceive situations and thus nudge our behavior in particular directions.[36] For example, the U.S. system of civil law provides for two kinds of damages to be assessed in many cases, compensatory and punitive. Although these damages are assessed for completely distinct reasons, both are awarded to successful plaintiffs—even when the punitive damages are many times greater than any damage they may have suffered personally. It is also the case that many plaintiff's attorneys take cases "on contingency," which means that they are paid only if they are successful, in which case they often earn a quarter or more of the total damages. Taken together, these practices create a set of incentives that have many consequences, influencing not only who chooses to sue whom, but also how aggressive plaintiff's attorneys will be—indeed, these incentives no doubt play a role in determining which personality types gravitate toward which legal practice area—and how likely it is that parties to a conflict will agree to seek a mediated solution rather than going to court.

It is not my purpose here to argue for or against the particular system currently followed in the United States. Certainly it has the good consequence of sometimes empowering individuals to take on large corporations or other powerful interests by whom the individuals have been harmed. There seems little doubt, though, that in at least some cases the system structures situations in such a way that parties to a dispute perceive their options in highly conflictual terms, and are motivated by the possibility of huge payoffs to pursue aggressive litigation. To be sure, the large majority of civil lawsuits are settled before trial. My point, though, is that the two features of the legal system I have mentioned (punitive damages being awarded to plaintiffs, and the practice of taking cases on contingency) nudge people toward seeing their situations in more conflictual terms, and toward more aggressive behavior, than might be the case under a different legal system. Viewing one's world as tending toward conflict rather than harmony, and acting more aggressively, both have impacts on one's moral growth.

11.5.3 A Confucian Approach

This is clearly a large and complicated subject, since the legal system is large and complicated, and its various aspects are likely to influence different people in somewhat different ways. A contemporary Confucian's bottom line, though, is that since any legal system will have effects of the kinds just discussed, so it is incumbent on us not to close our eyes and ignore them. Instead, we must design the system so that it will have the best effects possible—keeping in mind, of course, the limits placed on perfectionist institutional design in our earlier **(p.219)** discussion of "moderate perfectionism." Within such a framework, I believe contemporary Confucians should favor an approach that I call "law as a system of second resort." The society's norms, and the details of the legal system itself, should be arranged such that recourse to the legal system is typically not one's first choice when faced with some sort of dispute. A society in which legal values were the only things governing people's behavior—in which every apparent dispute was understood simply in terms of relevant laws—would be characterized by "legalism," and would be extremely unattractive. In addition to the problem of encouraging conflict that I have already discussed, legalism holds us to extremely low standards. As Roger Ames has written, “To use human rights as a measure for the quality of life possible within a community is like using minimum health standards as a universal index on the quality of restaurants. Human rights as law is ultimately a minimum standard, a last resort, the invocation of which signals a gross failure in the community” [Ames 1988, 213].

Rather than immediate recourse to litigation, Confucians should prefer that a combination of institutional design and moral education encourage people to see their problems as amenable to solution through informal or formal mediation.[37] There is by now a considerable literature on the role of mediation in Chinese society. The most extreme position holds that we are in fact mistaken to talk of Chinese “law”; instead, a better understanding of things like penal codes and the resolution of civil disputes derives from the idea of a “disciplinary practice” [Stephens 1992]. This picture is stimulating and insightful, but ultimately the discipline model fails as a total explanation insofar as it misses the existence of norms to which inferiors can appeal against superiors—norms that operate much more like legal norms.[38] It is also not at all clear that a disciplinary model provides a framework for understanding the importance of mediation that contemporary Confucians should accept.

Another way of thinking about mediation is that provided by the growing interest among Western legal scholars in what is called “alternative dispute resolution.” According to this view, mediation can produce superior outcomes to litigation in certain contexts, though analysts argue that mediation must be carefully structured so that weaker parties' interests are protected. Noting the value of alternative dispute resolution and the prevalence of mediated solutions in traditional China, Albert Chen has argued that contemporary Chinese jurists can learn from the Confucian tradition, albeit a tradition that has undergone “creative transformation,” to promote the role of mediation in contemporary Chinese legal culture [Chen 2003]. Nonetheless, Chen maintains that mediation should not be the “predominant mode or officially preferred mode of dispute resolution”; contrary to the traditional Confucian ideal according to which litigation would disappear, in a modern state, litigation must have pride of place over mediation [Ibid., 282]. Be this as it may, Chen concludes by noting that mediation is widely practiced in the Chinese world today; in China, “cases settled by mediation annually have consistently outnumbered those that go into the court system” [Ibid., 287].

In addition to the question of the relative priority between mediation and litigation, there is the important issue—which returns us to issues at the core of **(p.220)** this section—of how mediation relates to morality. On the one hand, the goal of mediation can be seen as finding an imaginative solution to a perceived conflict that manages to appropriately honor the various values and commitments that disputants bring to the table. In this case, a gifted mediator/facilitator can be seen as helping the disputants to look for harmony in a way contemporary Confucians would surely endorse.[39] On the other hand, a look at the cases of famous mediations cited as traditional exemplars by Chen reveals that the imaginative articulation of solutions is not the only technique employed. Officials are often described as enlightening the disputing parties with Confucian moral values, and in many cases the disputants are “moved” or “weep” [Ibid., 263–66]. In other words, they are transformed and no longer want to pursue their litigation. Chen comments:

> The creative transformation of traditional mediation would entail the abandonment of the paternalistic role of the mediator and the overly moralistic elements of the tradition … [Modern mediators] can no longer draw directly on the Confucian norms of self-restraint and moral cultivation and urge parties to give up their interests and rights…. [However,] personal transformation and moral growth in the course of mediation is still possible and can still serve as a noble ideal in at least some types of cases. Through dialogue, through reflection, human beings can still learn to become better and wiser human beings. [Ibid., 285]

Chen here strives to strike a balance, avoiding conceiving mediation as paternalistic lecturing from putative moral superiors while still recognizing that mediation can provide a powerful context for moral growth. This is the same balance that a contemporary Confucian should strive to achieve, though the Confucian's espousal of moderate perfectionism will lead to his or her finding the balance in a slightly different point than Chen (an avowed liberal). As discussed earlier, state institutions (like mediator training and certification) can have specific values built into them in two ways: a range of basic, fundamental values are embraced, as is the open injunction to continually strive to improve oneself.

I have framed this discussion of mediation with the idea of law as a system of second resort. Law should not be our first resort: litigation tends to polarize interests in ways that conduce neither to harmony nor to moral growth. A “legalistic” state would be an impoverished one inhabited by morally stunted people. On the other hand, contemporary Confucians must recognize the need to avoid seeing law as a system of *last* resort, by which I mean a model according to which significant pressure is applied to avoid litigation. In this kind of society, people all too often fail to protect their rights and interests against incursions by stronger parties. The pressures involved may be built into the structure of the legal system (e.g., high costs or lengthy waiting periods), or they may derive from harsh social strictures against being the “lowly” type of person who litigates disputes. In either case, the costs to society and to individuals will be many. Most apt to my present discussion, a society in which law is seen as a last resort will fail to **(p.221)** provide adequate protection for political participation of the type a contemporary Confucian must demand.

“Law as a system of second resort” is thus a slogan that encourages us to balance moral growth with objective protections. It is an expression of Mou Zongsan's idea that moral and political growth exist in a dialectical relation. It calls for the legal system to be carefully structured so that it is widely available but not resorted to by default. It calls for the skills and values of mediation to be widely taught and appreciated, and for the existence of many different modalities of dispute resolution. There are countless specific questions of institutional design raised by this framework that I cannot begin to address, but I hope that the broad outline of a contemporary “sagely politics” will nonetheless be clear. **(p.222)**

Notes:

(1.) Nussbaum adds that James says, about such people, that he sees their “doing” as “their feeling, their feeling as their doing” [Ibid.].

(2.) Tan frames her analysis with Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between negative and positive liberty or freedom. Negative freedom is basically liberty from interference, so long as one is not harming another. According to advocates of positive freedom, on the other hand, one is not genuinely free unless one is able to freely follow one's true self; this often entails some form of education or cultivation, such as the suppression or transformation of desires.

(3.) For more on “permanent moral darkness,” see Section 10.1.

(4.) On this point, compare the discussion of “settled coherence (*dingli* □□)” in Section 2.2.2.

(5.) See Section 9.2 on the relation between “strength” and striving for ideals and perfection.

(6.) See *Analects* 14:38.

(7.) See also my discussion of faith in Section 9.6.

(8.) Indeed, “piety” is an alternative translation for the Greek word *eusebia*, which is one of the words Woodruff associates with reverence [Woodruff 2001, 225–6].

(9.) In his influential discussion of ritual, the classical Confucian Xunzi emphasizes the “nurturance” aspect of ritual, which is also implied in *Analects* 2:3. See *Xunzi* 19:1.

(10.) See also my related discussion of law as only a “second resort” in Section 11.5.

(11.) *Analects* 3:18; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 83, slightly modified]. *Analects* 9:3 also points to the permissibility of changing rituals as circumstances change. Roger Ames and David Hall have emphasized the creativity of ritual in many publications; see Hall and Ames [1987] for an early example.

(12.) There are instances in the *Analects* of both resisting changes to rituals and of accepting them; passage 9:3 contains an instance of each. The key difference seems to be whether the changed ritual still expresses reverence for the appropriate ideal.

(13.) It seems clear that the way Mou envisions the perfectionist promotion of virtue avoids Bryan Van Norden's worry that such an approach might lead to an extreme epistemological optimism [Van Norden 2007, 335]. It is also worth considering the criticisms that some contemporary Confucians have launched against educational programs sponsored during the 1970s and 1980s by the government in Taiwan. One such critic argues that a compulsory senior high school text “was an egregious example of how party-state ideology manipulated the moral content of the state-prescribed primary and secondary textbooks … for its own political ends” [Makeham 2008, 198].

(14.) For example, suggestions like those of Kang Xiaoguang in favor of a Confucian Church with Confucian priests should be met with extreme skepticism [Kang 2005, xlviii and 182–90].

(15.) Huang's ideas have been widely noted and praised, with William deBary going so far as to characterize them as a “Parliament of Scholars.” See Huang [1993, 83] and also Daniel Bell's discussion in Bell [2000, 303–6].

(16.) This Confucian concern to simultaneously shape the situations in which we find ourselves such that we act well, and develop our underlying character so that we can act well regardless of situation, helps them to answer “situationist” critiques of virtue ethics. For more discussion, see Angle [2007].

(17.) Compare Shi [1997, 21], who defines participation as “activities by private citizens aimed at influencing the actual results of governmental policy.” Shi's approach allows (in principle) for considerable participatory effort without any significant government responsiveness. My more normative definition would not count such a scenario as “participatory politics.” “Responsiveness” does not necessarily require outcomes in which governmental policies mirror citizen demands. The government might respond with good reasons why the demands not be met. So long as they remain open to consideration of further demands, this still counts as responsive; see Rawls [1999, 72].

(18.) See also Ibid. [180–1], where Tan argues that changing the people's *habitus* “requires the participation of all involved in the practice.”

(19.) My thanks to Steven Geisz for pressing this point.

(20.) See Sections 6.2 and 9.4.

(21.) See the discussion of dialogue in Section 9.5.

(22.) *Lixing* is regularly translated as “rationality,” but I find the implied understanding of *lixing* to be seriously misleading, not least because Mou explicitly associates our perception of *lixing* with feeling as well as thought. In addition, for my purposes the association with earlier Neo-Confucian ideas of *li* (or coherence) is quite important.

(23.) Mou's language of “intensional” and “extensional” presentation raises an interesting tension, because it suggests that the two are, at root, identical: no change in one without a corresponding change in the other. But politics must be looser, less demanding, than morality without losing any of its authority. Once political norms have been externalized and objectivized, they can then be fulfilled without fully complying with the internal, subjective demands of ethics or sagehood.

(24.) Tan has a subtle analysis of the relation between the people (*min* □) and heaven (or *tian* □) in *Mencius*, offering several possible readings. In the end, she prefers an interpretation that is consistent with the view I have ascribed here to Mou. See Tan [2004, 136–45].

(25.) This is obviously a large claim but there is a considerable consensus among political philosophers to support it. See, for instance, Henry Shue's argument [1996] that our “basic” rights are interdependent and my own discussion in Angle [2005b].

(26.) Seeing the way in which protected political participation is derived from the individual virtues that support mutual perspective-taking and dialogue can help to answer the challenge Swanton raises about the relation between virtue ethics and political philosophy [Swanton 2003, 271–2].

(27.) See Angle [2005a, 2005b]. See also Salmenkari [2006] for a detailed review of the strengths and weaknesses of democratic centralism.

(28.) For relevant exploration of the ways Confucians (both classical and contemporary) might think about territorial borders, see Chan [2008]. Chan emphasizes that since Confucianism “has not yet developed a theory of distributive justice within the context of a modern political community, let alone a theory of justice between states, … [it] still has a long way to go” [Ibid., 81]. Nussbaum's discussion of cognate issues for a contemporary Aristotelian are also worth noting; see Nussbaum [1990c, esp. 207–9].

(29.) In chapter 6, I discussed ties-for-first in which one had no resort but to “plump” for one option of the other. Swanton [2003, ch. 13] also contains a great deal of relevant discussion.

(30.) It is relevant here to note that May Sim has emphasized that Aristotle's idea of “political justice” is fundamentally among equals, and not a natural extension of other kinds of justice [Sim 2007, 175]. She also argues that since the virtue among citizens needs to be equal, they thus share a different form of affection than that in family [Ibid., 173].

(31.) See Peerenboom [2002, 33]. The same arrangement has also been called “ad hoc instrumentalism” by those who insist that for a means of governance to count as “law,” the ruler's commitment to it must be “consistent and principled,” even if law is still deployed to serve the ruler's own ends [Winston 2005, 316]. That is, for some theorists there is already a minimal moral content in “rule by law,” while others call ad hoc instrumentalism “rule by law,” and distinguish principled commitments to law as a “thin” theory of “rule of law” [Peerenboom 2002, 65].

(32.) These issues are rendered still more complex when one overlays the English-language theories with Chinese discussions, because the relevant Chinese terminology is also somewhat ambiguous. *Fazhi* □□ can mean either rule by law or rule of law. *Yifa zhiguo* □□□□ clearly expresses an instrumentalist orientation, though whether it refers to purely ad hoc instrumentalism, or to principled rule by law, has been left unclear. *Yifa zhiguo* □□□□, finally, more clearly implies that the government is bound by law, and is thus the least ambiguous rendering of “rule of law.” See [Peerenboom 2002, 64].

(33.) For a full list, see Winston [2005, 320 f] or Peerenboom [2002, 65–7]. Fuller [1969, 46–91] is the *locus classicus* for many of these ideas, and contains extended discussion of the moral implications of each criterion.

(34.) Translation of *Analects* 4:10 from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 15].

(35.) In my view, Confucians need not take a position on the controversial issues raised by the most robust rule-of-law views, which require that for rule of law to be genuine, the laws in question must contain a variety of substantive commitments—such as protections for human rights, principles of social justice, and so on [Peerenboom 2002, 69–71]. As I have said and will reiterate later, contemporary Confucians will certainly insist that a range of rights—civil, political, economic, social, and others—be enshrined in law and afforded protection, but this is not because such rights are necessary for the system to count as a legal system at all.

(36.) Since I first wrote these words, the book *Nudge* has appeared in which its authors analyze a wide range of ways in which the “architecture” of choice situations can influence what we choose. They argue that such effects are unavoidable, and (partly for this reason) that we should pursue a policy of “libertarian paternalism”; see Thaler and Sunstein [2008]. The research that Thaler and Sunstein summarize will be useful to any Confucian seeking to design moderate perfectionist institutions. My brief remarks here focus on civil law, which Thaler and Sunstein do not discuss. “Virtue Jurisprudence” is a burgeoning field of inquiry whose most ambitious theorists claim that “the aim of the law is to make citizens virtuous” [Solum 2003, 181]. Duff [2006] contains persuasive criticism of such strong claims, but also articulates some significant ways in which criminal law ought to recognize and enforce moderate demands on virtue in the public sphere.

(37.) It will probably be wise not to draw too stark a line between litigation and mediation, which in practice will often be mixed together in different ways. In addition, recourse to formal litigation must not be stigmatized such that it becomes merely a “last resort.”

(38.) The existence in late-Imperial Chinese society of norms to which inferiors can appeal against superiors is emphasized in Wood [1995].

(39.) In light of my emphasis in chapter 6 on the frequent importance of grief in harmonious reactions to complex situations, it is striking that in some of the historical examples cited by Chen, the sorrow of the magistrates is clearly generative of more harmony than would otherwise have been possible [Chen 2003]. Also relevant here is Wang Yangming's own discussion of how a judge should hear cases: “He has to see why the man in the wrong might have done something because he could not help it, while the party in the right may also have shown some faults. In this way, he would allow the persecuted party to state his situation, while the party receiving redress also must not escape responsibility. This would be to exhaust to the utmost the impartiality (*gong* □) of coherence” [Wang 1972, 70], slightly altered. See Wang [1985, *juan* 21, 5].

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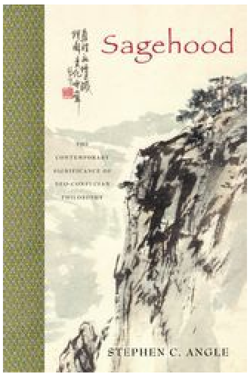

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Conclusion: The Future of Contemporary Confucianisms

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

The conclusion aims to situate the book's arguments in a larger context of contemporary concern with “Confucianism” in various senses. “Confucianism” has been—and may continue to be, or become again—more than a philosophical tradition. It bears complicated relations to Chinese (and broader East Asian) cultural identity and political, religious, and spiritual practices. These are highly contested matters at the present moment, with no likelihood of a simple solution. It is important for philosophers to recognize these complexities, and not to claim to be able to solve every question related to the status of “contemporary Confucianism” simply by looking at texts or making arguments. Still, progress can be made even in these broader debates if we come to see the value of a contemporary Confucian philosophy based in Neo-Confucianism. The chapter also seeks to reply to readers who may be very skeptical about the relevance of Neo-Confucianism's talk of harmony in our present day. Building on an argument made by Liang Shuming a century ago, the book concludes by sketching reasons that even a “possessive individualist” should see, in Neo-Confucianism, both a significant challenge and suggestions of a way forward.

Keywords: Confucianism, tradition, culture, identity, Liang Shuming, possessive individualism

Is Confucianism alive or dead? Many of the institutions that supported it are gone. The vast system of civil service examinations that provided the impetus for a millennium's worth of students to study the Confucian classics ended in 1905. Confucian temples and other sites of ritual worship are now no more than tourist attractions. “Scriptural Confucianism,” as one scholar has called it, is dead—never to return.[1] The most basic of Confucian institutions, the family, has been greatly transformed over the last century, but many families are still the locus of some Confucian values and practices, whether or not they are explicitly identified as Confucian. Outside the family, social scientists and journalists have found various ways in which seemingly Confucian ideas, language, and values still play roles in societies with Confucian heritage. While the question of what should count as “Confucian” in these contexts is often vexed, to one degree or another we should conclude that some Confucian influence still survives in people's lives. And then there is the academy. Judging by numbers of scholars, conferences, and publications, historical scholarship on Confucianism is very much alive in East Asia.

However, it is less clear what we should say about Confucian “philosophy.” If by this term we mean rooted global philosophy (as that term was defined in the introduction) with its roots in the Confucian tradition, there is relatively little of it being practiced today. Even the twentieth-century New Confucians, whom I would argue were exemplary rooted global philosophers, are more likely today to be the subjects of historical study than inspirations for further creative philosophizing in their mold. There are various reasons for the current reticence to pursue constructive Confucian philosophizing [Makeham 2008], but I also sense that the reticence may be waning. Over the **(p.224)** next decade, I expect that the engagement between Confucian philosophical traditions and a range of other philosophical traditions will grow rapidly, both in Greater China and in North America, Europe, and elsewhere.

A central goal of this book has been to suggest one way in which such engagement might occur. The partners to my dialogue have been the two leading Neo-Confucian thinkers (Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming), on the one hand, and a number of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers—especially those concerned with virtue ethics—on the other. These choices are based upon my own training, my interests in ethical and political thought, and my sense that these philosophers have things to say to one another. There is enough overlap between twelfth- through sixteenth-century Neo-Confucianism and twentieth- and twenty-first-century virtue ethics, I am arguing, in order to make the conversation fruitful. To anyone who finds this claim far-fetched, I have two replies. First, many of those same contemporary Western philosophers have found conversations with ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, not to mention medieval Christian philosophers, to be extremely fruitful, and we should not underestimate the linguistic and cultural differences between the worlds of Aristotle or Aquinas and our own. Second, I hope that the preceding eleven chapters have suggested some of the fruits that can be born from the cross-pollination of these two traditions.

My central argument has been that taking Neo-Confucianism seriously as contemporary philosophy involves taking sagehood seriously, and this in turn involves a commitment to learning to look for harmony. My efforts to unpack that phrase span much of the book, touching on topics as diverse as how to balance caring between intimates and strangers, what the role of reverence should be, how to respond to ethical conflicts, the sense in which we should gradually come to see ethical situations more clearly, what contemporary sense can be made of Neo-Confucian "spiritual exercises," and how to imagine a political philosophy that simultaneously honors a commitment to sagehood and our contemporary dedication to legal rights and political participation. On all these subjects I am sure there is much more to be said.

My goal in this conclusion is not to further develop the book's themes, though, but to situate this project in a larger context. This book is simultaneously ambitious and modest. Its ambition lies in the scope of its concerns and its goal of broadening philosophical conversations both East and West. It is modest, though, in the sense that I do not claim to have put forward the only possible meaning of Confucianism today. Some of my interpretations of Neo-Confucianism are controversial, but the modesty I have in mind goes deeper than a recognition that other scholars may have grounds to challenge these interpretations. The strands of the Neo-Confucian tradition on which I draw are important and insightful, but do not exhaust the perspectives one can find within Neo-Confucianism, to say nothing of those who would prefer to construct their version of contemporary Confucian philosophy on classical, rather than Neo-Confucian, foundations. So "contemporary Confucian philosophy" really should be understood as a plurality of possible perspectives, waiting to enter into critical dialogue with other philosophical traditions. The results of these dialogues **(p.225)** will differ, additionally, depending on which non-Chinese partners are chosen. Kant and Hegel were among the chief interlocutors chosen by New Confucians in the twentieth century; I have focused on contemporary Anglo-American ethics; a number of philosophers today are interested in resonances between Confucianism and the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions; and so on. Furthermore, let me emphasize again that "Confucianism" has been—and may continue to be, or become again—more than a philosophical tradition. It bears complicated relations to Chinese (and broader East Asian) cultural identity and political, religious, and spiritual practices. These are highly contested matters at the present moment, with no likelihood of a simple solution. It is important for philosophers to recognize these complexities, and not to claim to be able to solve every question related to the status of "contemporary Confucianism" simply by looking at texts or making arguments.

Notwithstanding these various challenges, progress can be made even in such broader debates if we come to see the value of a contemporary Confucian philosophy based in Neo-Confucianism. This is part of the contemporary significance of Neo-Confucian philosophy. There is another audience that I also hope will find some significance in the ideas of this book—and it is in many ways a more challenging audience for me to reach. I have argued that reverence for coherence (in a specific sense) and for harmony lie at the core of Neo-Confucianism. To many readers, though, these commitments may seem like romantic pipedreams, completely incompatible with what has been called a “possessive individualist” orientation to the world [Macpherson 1962]. Others will hold a tragic view of life according to which there is no harmony or coherence: the world is just a meaningless heap of incompatible demands and desires, and the best we can do is nobly acknowledge our plight and persevere. Each of these views may be coupled with the idea that talk of coherence and harmony are simply not live or realistic options for people living outside of China. What has this book had to say to such readers?

Taking the last of these challenges first, there are two broad ways in which people outside of Greater China can think about the relevance of ideas like Neo-Confucian harmony and coherence. First, harmony and coherence can be approached using the framework of rooted global philosophy. From within one's local framework—which may be liberalism, a version of virtue ethics, or something else—one works to respond to the challenges highlighted by the contrast with Neo-Confucianism. In Section 5.1.3, for instance, I argued that Michael Slote needs more than his theory provides to explain how we are motivated towards balancing our care between intimates and unknown others. Similar issues arose in Section 11.2 concerning the motive behind our commitment to political ideals like democracy and “resolute progress” more generally. In both cases, I suggested that Neo-Confucian reverence for universal coherence seems tailor-made to answer the challenge. The logic of rooted global philosophy suggests that a Western thinker like Slote needs to take these arguments seriously, even if he is not prepared to endorse all of the details of Neo-Confucianism. Stimulated by the encounter with Neo-Confucianism, he may develop a version of the harmony idea that fits more comfortably within his vocabulary of sentimentalist virtue **(p.226)** ethics. He has not become a Confucian, but neither has he rejected out of hand the relevance of harmony.

An alternative way for those outside of East Asia to take seriously ideas like harmony and coherence is for them to embrace contemporary Confucianism more explicitly. It is quite possible that before long, the idea that Confucianism could only be relevant to people in Greater China will seem as curious as would the claim that Aristotle is only relevant to those of Greek ancestry. Whether this will indeed materialize depends on more than philosophical arguments, but significant economic, political, and cultural trends all point tentatively in this direction. Whether conceptualized as part of “cultural China” [Tu 1991], as “Boston Confucianism” [Neville 2000], or in some other way, Confucianism as live philosophical option is likely to play a genuine role in our future.

What of the nihilists who perceive nothing but tragedy? Clearly neither Confucian nor nihilist can simply point to the world and say, “See? Harmony” or “See? Tragedy.” Confucians, in particular, do not hold that any current configuration of the world exemplifies universal coherence. Indeed, as I argued in chapter 2, we should not even think of coherence as specifying a specific final end. Instead, it offers a way to think about our interdependence that points toward the way in which we can flourish together in (and with) the broader world. As we further mature the abilities we all already have to look for harmony, we will find ways to push toward greater coherence. With their acute consciousness of history, Confucians will never suggest that the route toward harmony is simple or linear. I have argued in chapter 6 that a sage would never find a conflictual situation to be genuinely tragic, and we can all strive to meet conflicts in as sagelike a manner as possible. Even though we will all fall short, at least some of the time, Confucians hope that all of us will be impressed with the possibilities for harmony that *are* realized, and see the ways in which positive response to harmony is deeply rooted in us. After all, they will point out, their notions of harmony and coherence are themselves partly constituted by our human responses to one another and to our larger environment.

Possessive individualism can be thought of as the benign emphasis on individual rights or as a more malign form according to which we inhabit a dog- eat-dog world of scarcity in which someone's success is always at another's expense. Confucians have been struggling with these ideas since the beginning of the twentieth century, if not earlier. I believe contemporary Confucians should adopt an updated version of Liang Shuming (1893–1988)'s famous twofold argument from 1921. He recognized the importance of institutions like individual rights and urged that “Chinese culture” find a way to adopt them wholesale. Notwithstanding the power of the underlying “Western culture,” however, he thought the West itself was beginning to see the deep problems that came from an atomistic individualism, and therefore urged that China find a way to maintain its “culture”—albeit in a significantly transformed way [Alitto 1979; Liang 2002]. Although there are some problems with Liang's categories and arguments, his basic approach is followed by Mou Zongsan, as I discussed in Section 10.3.2. To possessive individualists, Confucians today should say that the current global **(p.227)** crises are only the latest evidence that possessive individualism is ultimately self-defeating.

Liang Shuming thought that something like possessive individualism was ubiquitous in Western culture, thanks in part to a monolithic idea of culture. I have no such assumption. This book is not a salvo in some global struggle between “civilizations.” When we realize how diverse are the world's philosophical and spiritual traditions, we see that there can in fact be no single contemporary “significance” for Neo-Confucian philosophy. Its meaning lies in the outcome of ongoing engagement between the Neo-Confucian masters and people today, no matter what their place of residence or philosophical starting points may be. This book expresses one view of Neo-Confucianism's contemporary significance; it will have succeeded if it encourages others to discover a significance for themselves. **(p.228)**

Notes:

(1.) See Elvin [1990]. A few intellectuals have called for reviving or reconstructing public Confucian institutions, a view that most find quixotic.

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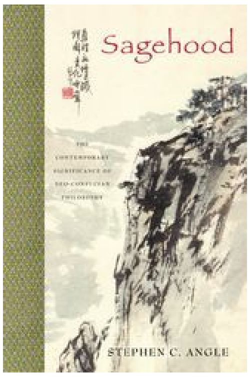

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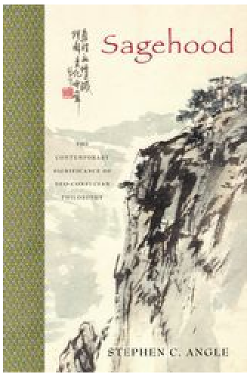

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Notes:

(1.) Neo-Confucian sages should thus be seen as entirely different from R. M. Hare's “archangel,” whom Nussbaum takes as exemplifying what it would be like to experience all moral problems the way that Maggie initially tries to. While I disagree with her offhand comment that we need more “proles” than “archangels”—given what Hare means by “prole”—her general argument here is well-taken, as is her point that even Aquinas believed that angels were “poor guides for getting around in this world, however well off they might be in heaven.” See Nussbaum [1990a, 66] and Hare [1981, 44–5].

(1.) Perhaps keeping in mind MacIntyre's criticisms of watered-down modern languages as inadequately capturing the richness of traditional moral discourses, Stalnaker adds: “bridge concepts are not conceived as junior versions of Esperanto that might come to fully articulate both vocabularies in a new, third idiom; they merely assist in the process of creating comparative ethical relations between distant ethical positions” [Ibid.]. For a somewhat different approach to comparing Western and Chinese ideas of virtue that depends on a distinction between “thick” and “thin” concepts, see Van Norden [2007, 15–21]; I offer some critical remarks on this approach in [Angle forthcoming a].

(1.) My daughters' public elementary school takes part in what is, according to its own Web site, the largest moral-education curriculum in the U.S., “Character Counts.” See http://www.charactercounts.org. I am afraid to say that it is hard for me to see how this program of occasional afterthoughts—at least as it is implemented at this one school—can make much of a difference to anyone.

(1.) Other classic descriptions of sagely ease include *Xunzi* 8, on which see Stalnaker [2006, 190], and *Zhongyong* 20.

(1.) Nussbaum adds that James says, about such people, that he sees their “doing” as “their feeling, their feeling as their doing” [Ibid.].

(2.) Tan frames her analysis with Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between negative and positive liberty or freedom. Negative freedom is basically liberty from interference, so long as one is not harming another. According to advocates of positive freedom, on the other hand, one is not genuinely free unless one is able to freely follow one's true self; this often entails some form of education or cultivation, such as the suppression or transformation of desires.

(2.) Tillman [1992] tells the story of the rise of Zhu Xi. See Wilson [1995] for more on Dao Learning, and Bol [2008] for extended discussion of the historical significance of Neo-Confucianism.

(2.) See *Mencius* 4B:19. Chang says that the dark consciousness of Liu Zongzhou (1578–1645) was so profound—his recognition of the ubiquity of human error so pervasive—that he bears comparison to the Puritans (who represent, for Chang, a Western extreme of squarely facing dark consciousness) [Ibid. , 26–7].

(2.) Also known as the Warring States Era, it can be dated from 481 to 221 BCE. Confucius himself is believed to have lived from 551 to 479 BCE.

(2.) Zhu says that 70 percent toward self-improvement and 30 percent toward examinations should be fine, though he adds that "What the Sage [i.e., Confucius] taught others was nothing but self-improvement" [Zhu 1990, 191].

(2.) See, for example, Nancy Sherman's contribution to Damon [2002], or Noddings [2002]. Many philosophers have also drawn on the debate between Kohlberg and Gilligan over how to understand moral development; see, in particular, Blum [1991]. Martin Hoffman has developed another of the leading research program in moral development; see Slote [2007] for an important philosophical effort to build on Hoffman's work.

(2.) Many connections are apparent, for instance, with Zhu's remarks in Zhu [1997, ch. 9], which is partly translated in [Zhu 1990]. Sarkissian [2007] is a thought-provoking effort to understand *Analects* 2:4 that resonates in certain ways with my account. In part because of differences between his classical and my Neo-Confucian sources, however, Sarkissian reaches the conclusion that the ability to "read minds"—by which he means detecting others' emotional states—can never be perfect.

(2.) Mark Csikszentmihalyi provides important background to this idea that sages can avoid either-or choices in Csikszentmihalyi [2004]. He cites some early examples of individuals faced with dilemmas who do not find good solutions; early commentaries on these stories invoke the phrase "both advancing and retreating are problematic" [Ibid., 4]. However, a theme of Csikszentmihalyi's book is the emergence of the idea of perfect sages who can sythesize or (in my language) harmonize the various relevant virtues. His focus is on the physical-cum-psychological "material virtue" underlying this and other developments.

(3.) See *Analects* 9:6, and Chen [2000, 415]. The dating of passages in the *Analects* is very controversial; for an extremely stimulating approach that agrees with Chen in seeing *Analects* 9:6 as early, see Brooks and Brooks [1998, 52 and *passim*].

(3.) [Ibid. , 14]; see *Federalist Papers* #51. Chang notes that the influence of the enlightenment pushed some in the West to be more sanguine about the possibility of achieving perfection; see Chang [2000, 14–15].

(3.) Ode no. 301; translation from Waley [1960, 225], slightly modified. See Cook [1995, 76n140] on the etymology of *ping* □.

(3.) Among this literature are a few studies that focus specifically on moral education in contemporary Greater China. A preliminary study with a Confucian focus is Doan et al. [1991]. More recently, the *Journal of Moral Education* devoted an issue (33:4, 2004) to moral education in contemporary Greater China, and its essays and book reviews are of consistently high quality. For a preliminary effort to put Confucians and contemporary psychological theorists into dialogue, see Angle [2009].

(3.) My characterization of virtue ethics here is influenced by Swanton [2003, 19 and 26].

(3.) “*Li*” was not universally emphasized by all early Neo-Confucians, but soon came to be widely adopted as a central explanatory concept. For one version of the idea's history, see Ziporyn [forthcoming], a work that has been very influential on my thinking. See also Chan [1964].

(4.) For most virtue ethicists, there is still room for reasoning about what to do. Some (following Aristotle) give reason a central place in their theories. Others (following Hume) do not, yet this does not mean that moral reactions are simply brute feelings, immune to discussion of which factors are (and are not) relevant to a proper reaction. For one discussion of these matters, see Hutton [2001].

(4.) Psychologist Martin Hoffman's work is particularly seminal; see Hoffman [2000]. Slote has been at the forefront of recent philosophical attention to empathy, though he notes that Hume's concept of “sympathy” is fundamentally similar to what we now call “empathy” [Slote 2007].

(4.) The most sophisticated discussion of these themes within Neo-Confucianism comes during the famous Korean “Four-Seven Debate.” All the relevant documents are beautifully translated in Kalton [1994].

(4.) *Guoyu* 16; cited in Tan [2004, 76].

(4.) Philosopher Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* is a modern classic [Hallie 1979]. Contemporary philosophers who have drawn on narrative studies include Blum [1988] and others.

(4.) Leading “New Confucian” Tang Junyi (1909–78) is a good example; see Metzger [2005, 250–4, 272–3]. Metzger also shows that Maoists have a similar tendency, on which see his fourth chapter.

(4.) Bresciani [2001] chronicles the history of New Confucianism. See also Makeham [2003] and Cheng and Bunnin [2002].

(5.) To anticipate the discussion of sagely moral perception that will come in chapter 7, we can flesh out Slote's remark that we are not following “moral principles” when expressing balanced caring as follows. In an easy case, when one is seeing rightly—for instance, not viewing more favorably the child that is more like oneself—then we can leave the mechanism of love to itself: it will function in a balanced fashion automatically. But in harder cases, we need to see better (less selfishly, etc.) rather than unfeelingly follow principles. Slote spends considerable time arguing that good people should not be motivated by conscientiousness. “Someone who is worried about the moral character of his or her actions will count as less *directly* involved with others and less (purely) benevolent than someone who is simply occupied or absorbed in helping others” [Ibid., 46]. As we will see, for a range of reasons Neo-Confucians would certainly agree.

(5.) The exuberant tone of the second ode suggests that the following statement by DeWoskin needs serious qualification: “Balance in art, like balance in human feelings, is a matter of restraint and minimalization. The sacrificial soup is a thin soup; ritual music is restrained” [Dewoskin 1982, 160]. But as we read in the *Analects*, sometimes extremes are appropriate to the occasion—and thus harmonious: “The Master said, … In ceremonies: than lavish, be rather sparing. In funerals: than detached, be rather moved.” *Analects* 3:4; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 80]. See also the discussion below (Section 4.4.1) of Wang Yangming's statement that an infant's crying all day can be “the extreme of harmony.”

(5.) [Zhu 1990 , 104–5]. Gardner consistently translates “*zhì* □” as “will” where I have “commitment.” I have already argued in chapter 7 at length for understanding *zhì* as “commitment,” so I will not pursue the issue very far here. I trust that my discussion in this section will further solidify my reading. Also note that Gardner makes explicit that Zhu is following Cheng Hao in glossing *zhì* as follows: “Where the mind is headed is what is meant by ‘*zhì*’” [Ibid., 105]. But this is precisely my point: *zhì* is not an independent faculty that directs one (that is, a will), but rather an orientation or direction one adopts, and endeavors to live up to, for one's mind (i.e., a commitment).

(5.) One focus of Colby and Damon's analysis is on the ways in which, for almost all their subjects, they have “seamlessly integrate[d] their commitments with their personal concerns” [Colby and Damon 1992, 300] in a fashion that Confucians would for the most part endorse. I hesitate to say that Confucians would fully endorse the way in which moral and personal are unified for Colby and Damon's exemplars because the one difficulty that some experienced—the one regret several felt—was attending adequately to their families [Ibid., 298].

(5.) Wang did write some short treatises, such as his “Inquiry on the *Great Learning*,” but they are a small portion of his collected works. On Wang's wishes with respect to his conversations, see Ivanhoe [2002, Appendix 1]. On the difficulties posed by Wang's texts, see also Cua [1998, 156].

(5.) This is a major theme of Metzger's book; see in particular chapters 5 and 6. For a parallel analysis of leading advocates of democracy at the time of the 1989 democracy movement, see Nathan [1997].

(5.) It is certainly relevant that a number of scholars in recent years have argued that we should view classical Confucians as virtue ethicists. See, for example, Ivanhoe [2002, 2n6], Hutton [2001], Van Norden [2007], Yu [2007], and Sim [2007].

(6.) See *Xunzi* 19, as well as his account of sagely intelligence itself in *Xunzi* 21. Another paradigmatic assertion of sagely creativity is found in the *Li Ji*; see discussion in Wang [1993, 287–8].

(6.) Translation based on Brooks and Brooks [1998, 14], slightly modified. Another interpretation of the second half of this sentence is " … he will have no flaws" (see [Yang 1984, 36]). For my purposes, this interpretive dispute does not matter, because in either case, the person described has reached a high level of ethical attainment.

(6.) See Wood [1995]. "Law" is used as the translation for *li* in Bruce [1923], which is criticized by Needham and Graham [Graham [1992, 12].

(6.) An important work developing these ideas is MacIntyres's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [MacIntyre 1988]. Thomas Metzger has developed related ideas specifically with respect to China; he calls the underlying norms "rules of successful thinking." See Metzger [2005].

(6.) One difference is over how much continuity there is between graphs inscribed on Shang dynasty oracle bones and subsequent Zhou dynasty uses of *de*. Contrast Nivison [1996a], who sees considerable continuity; Chao [2006 2006], who sees more difference than Nivison yet still places this in a general process of the development of *de*; and Zhang [2006], who argues for a more decisive difference and break with previous terminology.

(6.) I will explore some of what might allow us to do this in subsequent chapters. One excellent treatment of related themes, albeit without reliance on Chinese traditions, is Rorty [2004]. Another recent theorist whose work resonates with Neo-Confucianism is Christine Swanton. On her account, "honoring" the various values relevant to a situation is only one of the forms of "moral recognition" that a virtuous person should enact. Her "constraint integration" view of ethical problem solving, therefore, involves numerous dimensions of, and relations to, value. See Swanton [2003].

(7.) I will discuss this slogan, which first appears in the Daoist *Zhuangzi*, in considerable detail in chapter 10. We should note in this context that the tie between sagehood and rulership was loose, even in the classical period; *Mencius* 7B:15, for example, describes as "sages" people who were not rulers. For further discussion, see Wang [1993, 12], Chen [2000, 419], and Bol [2008, esp. ch. 4].

(7.) Admittedly, *Analects* 7:30 reads: "The Master said, Is humaneness really far away? If I want humaneness, then it is already there" [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 44], slightly modified. But this is at most about a momentary achievement. It is clear from many other passages in the *Analects* that ethical improvement is a lengthy and demanding process.

(7.) Thanks to Xia Yong for suggesting the addition of "rooted" to "global philosophy" in order to more clearly express my meaning; and to Bo Mou for the term “constructive engagement.”

(7.) The key difference between a perfect, sagelike response and an imperfect response may not be immediacy. A spontaneous reaction is certainly better than a labored one, just as a smooth, flowing response seems better than an awkward and hesitant one, but if important details are unclear, I do not think that sages should be seen as having superhuman abilities to immediately disambiguate such matters. See also the next chapter, on sagely “ease.”

(7.) Scholars differ somewhat on how to deal with the fact that the kind of charisma represented by *de* is not always moral. All agree that *de* is primarily or in general ascribed on the basis of admirable behavior or character, even while noting exceptions; for example, Nivison [1996b, 33] cites a *Zuo Commentary* story in which it is used to refer to the power of a young woman's sexual attractiveness, and *Mencius* 4A:14, which is also discussed in Van Norden [2003, 119n14]. Zhang [2006] gently criticizes Chen [2002] for overemphasizing the degree to which *de* is genuinely neutral; Zhang argues quite successfully that nonmoral uses of *de* should be seen as conscious exceptions to the core meaning.

(7.) Strikingly, some proponents of a contemporary, feminist-inspired “ethics of care” also worry that their theories cannot accommodate obligations to strangers. See Slote [2001, 64].

(7.) The dating of passages from the *Zuo Commentary* is highly controversial. This particular section purports to recount events from 522 BCE. Some scholars investigating the development of ideas of harmony take the passage as indeed representing the standard, late Spring and Autumn period view [Guo Qi 2000].

(7.) Wood [1995, 144–5] discusses some of the relevant institutions.

(8.) In a personal communication, Chenyang Li has argued for strongly distinguishing between the first stage of commitment—which he would translate as “set one's will on …”—and a second stage in which one works to live up to one's commitment. But 4:4 and 4:9 suggest that both stages must be understood continuously, in terms of “*zhì*,” which therefore cannot be understood as “will.” In addition, Wang's explicit claim that *zhì* can “mature” requires seeing it as more than just the initial act of willing or committing.

(8.) For instance, Zhu Xi says “If he doesn't have a good foundation for himself, it's foolish of him to buy wood today to build the house.” [Zhu 1990, 100]. Swanton writes: “Whether perfectionist strivings should be seen as marks of virtuous perfectionism depends on a host of factors, including depth motivations, intentions, degree of wisdom, … self-knowledge such as knowledge of one's strength and talents, seriousness of effects on others and the extent to which one has responsibilities to those others, the worthwhileness of the ends to which one is devoted, and the likelihood of one's success in achieving them, even with effort” [Swanton 2003, 209].

(8.) See Nivison [1996a], Ivanhoe [2000, ix–xiv], and Chao [2006 2006].

(8.) Some Confucian philosophers over the last century have interpreted Confucianism through the lens of the Kantian ideas of “autonomy” and “heteronomy,” arguing that something within us (perhaps the *daoxin* □□, perhaps the *liang zhi* □□) can be construed as, in effect, a source of autonomous moral law. Mou Zongsan is the best-known proponent of such a view, and he argues that while Zhu Xi himself cannot avoid heteronomy, others (like Wang Yangming) have more successful views. While I cannot engage in a detailed effort to refute such interpretations here, in my view such approaches are both historically and philosophically problematic.

(8.) See MacIntyre [1988, 373]; for some critical discussion, see [Angle 2002b].

(8.) See *Mencius* 2A:7, which reads in part, “The maker of arrows is afraid lest he should fail to harm people, whereas the maker of armor is afraid lest they should be harmed … . For this reason one cannot be too careful in the choice of one's calling” [Mencius 1970, 83]. Interestingly enough, when discussing the case of her business owner having to tell employees they have been fired, Stohr adds that for some people who must regularly deliver such news, a certain degree of coldness may not be a failing [Stohr 2003, 344n12]. Mencius would disagree, as I think would the Neo-Confucians, as I explain in the next paragraph. I would like to thank Sharon Sanderovitch for stimulating discussion of matters relating to these ideas, on which see also her Sanderovitch [2007].

(8.) Indeed, “piety” is an alternative translation for the Greek word *eusebia*, which is one of the words Woodruff associates with reverence [Woodruff 2001, 225–6].

(8.) Chen Xiyuan, as discussed in Tan [2004, 126].

(8.) *Zuo Commentary*, Zhao 20. Translation from Cook [1995, 67–71].

(9.) *Wu Xing Pian*, cited and discussed in both Chao [2006 2006, 180–1] and Chen [2002, 35]. The types of behavior discussed are humaneness (*ren* □), appropriateness (*yi* □), propriety (*li* □), wisdom (*zhi* □), and sagacity (*sheng* □).

(9.) For anticipations of the solution I draw here out of Slote, see Chan [1993] and Tao [2000]. Both distinguish between “relationship love” and “general love” as aspects of *ren* in classical Confucian theory. Chan helpfully develops the idea that an “engaged perspective” is more apt than speaking of a “personal perspective,” because only the former captures critical aspects of the relationships within which one's care is manifested. Chan has little to say, though, about how the two types of love are to relate to one another [Chan 1993, 4 and 336]. Tao makes some promising preliminary remarks, but I believe the views I develop in the next section go considerably farther. Finally, both Chan and Tao briefly address the possibility of a tension between the two types of love (or two perspectives). Their ideas partly anticipate my argument in chapter 6, especially when Tao mentions that Confucian sages may sometimes feel “regret” [Tao 2000, 236].

(9.) For instance, Gardner cites a passage from Zhu Xi that he translates in part, “Let us strip away the things covering over the mind and wait for it to come out and be itself" [Zhu 1990, 104]. Read in its original context, though, the emphasis of this passage is not on passivity but on gradually developing the ability to naturally look for harmony, rather than—to any degree—forcing oneself to do so. When the mind can thus naturally function, it actively looks around. See Zhu [1997, 183].

(9.) A later commentator on the *Reflections* added to the passage from Cheng Yi just cited that "momentary arousing of one's intention (*yi*) is unreliable" [Chan 1967, 63].

(9.) Compare Brian Fay's notion of multicultural "interactionism," which "doesn't envision the transcendence of difference (something it thinks is impossible in any case)…. [Instead,] in encounters between selves and others, between similarity and difference, the choice is not to adopt one or the other, but to hold them in dynamic tension." Fay looks for "growth," as seen from within each perspective, but not for "consensus" [Fay 1996, 234 and 245]. In his contribution to the 1948 Symposium on Oriental Philosophy, E. A. Burtt proposes a way in which "Occidental" philosophers can approach "Oriental" philosophies in a spirit Fay would no doubt applaud: "Readiness for … growth, through appreciative understanding of the contrasting contexts of ways of philosophizing in the East is, indeed, the only attitude by which we can gradually learn what in our present criterion is dependably sound and what is merely an expression of some partisan cultural interest of the Occident" [Burtt 1948, 603].

(9.) In his influential discussion of ritual, the classical Confucian Xunzi emphasizes the "nurturance" aspect of ritual, which is also implied in *Analects* 2:3. See *Xunzi* 19:1.

(10.) The "unactualized" and "actualized (*yifa* □□)" phases of the mind's operation are an important aspect of neo-Confucian psychological theory. See Metzger [1977], Wittenborn's discussion in Zhu [1991], and Angle [1998].

(10.) Among other things, this means that Neo-Confucians should be much more interested in Swanton's way of talking about "objectivity" as *appropriate* (i.e., balanced and duly limited) self-transcendence, which can go wrong in both "hypersubjective" and "hyperobjective" directions. See Swanton [2003, ch. 8].

(10.) We know this because sages can, in principle, become perfectly attuned to all *li*. Ziporyn writes that "the perception and the valuation are inseparable" [675], a thought he suggests is most explicit in Wang Yangming's philosophizing, but I would argue is equally basic for Zhu Xi.

(10.) These four sentences draw heavily on Cook [1995, 77]. Cook notes that "Neolithic pottery vessels…. have been shown to have been crafted—we might assume quite consciously—into dimensions of exacting mathematical proportions" [Ibid. , 77n141].

(10.) The texts on which Professor Chen draws are the *Guoyu*, the *Yi Zhou Shu*, and the *Zuo Commentary*. Dating of these texts and their subsidiary sections is a vexed issue; some scholars will not be as confident as Professor Chen that all of his examples genuinely originate in the Spring and Autumn era, but firm conclusions are not yet possible.

(10.) Frisina grounds this interpretation of Wang in passages like the following: “The man of humanity regards heaven and earth and all things as one body. If a single thing is deprived of its place, it means that my humanity is not yet demonstrated to the fullest extent” [Wang 1963, 56 (§93)].

(10.) Slote sees it as a strongpoint of his theory that its requirements appear to fall in between Singer's extremely demanding consequentialism, and Williams's extremely loose theory of moral integrity [Slote 2001, 73].

(10.) Discussions of *zhì* in the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* that fit well with my argument here can be found in Van Norden [1992] and Stalnaker [2006], respectively.

(11.) *Analects* 3:18; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 83, slightly modified]. *Analects* 9:3 also points to the permissibility of changing rituals as circumstances change. Roger Ames and David Hall have emphasized the creativity of ritual in many publications; see Hall and Ames [1987] for an early example.

(11.) For instance, Slote says, “The father who loves both his children deeply will, by virtue of the very psychology of what it is to love, tend to allocate concern, efforts, attention, money toward his two children in a somewhat balanced fashion” [Ibid., 89]. He adds that the father's feeling “doesn't just fall into place out of the blue. It reflects the father's sense of what it means to be a parent …” [Ibid.].

(11.) Zhu Xi's views are not substantially different. Qian [1989, vol. 2, 364–78] is a classic study of Zhu Xi's notion of *zhì*. Qian Mu emphasizes that the continuity Zhu argues for between *zhì* and reverence (*jing* □) is a way of synthesizing the insights of Cheng Yi and Lu Xiangshan. A recent essay on Zhu Xi whose perspective on *zhì* fits extremely well with my discussion here is Marchal [2007, esp. 10–11].

(11.) In addition, some have argued that “globalization” itself has quite different effects, creating new local environments and healthy fragmentation. See Pieterse [1994].

(11.) In two insightful essays, Yu Kam Por has found evidence in classical and Han dynasty texts for a view very much like the one I am developing here. For instance, he notes that according to the *Analects* 6:18, “the deficiency of one value cannot be compensated for by additional qualities of another value” [Yu forthcoming, 63]. Commenting on this *Analects* passage, Zhu says both that “Only when students reduce what is excessive and supplement what is deficient can they attain complete virtue” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 40], and that if either value “wins out over the other, coherence cannot be adequately [attained]” [Zhu 1997, 727]. Even more strikingly, Yu has found a passage in the *Yi Zhou Shu* that explicitly names the synthetic, harmonious point at which we should aim: “If there is an *in-between* (*zhong* □), it is called *three*. If there is no *in-between*, it is called *two. Two* struggles with each other, and results in weakness. *Three* constitutes harmony, and results in strength.” Yu adds, “*three* is not another claim that competes with the *two*, but a synthesis of the two" [Yu 2009, 17, emphasis in original].

(11.) Zhu's realization that Li Tong's approach was untenable, and his elaboration of an alternative that draws heavily on Cheng Yi, have been the subject of considerable scholarship. The famous "First Letter to the Gentleman of Hunan" in which he announces his new view is translated at Chan [1963, 600–2]. [Taylor 1990, 79–80] is helpful on the relevance to quiet sitting; more generally, see [Liu 1988].

(11.) Bryan Van Norden's reading of *li* as "pattern" vacillates between the vague and the specific senses of pattern. On the one hand, he says that *li* is "a pattern common in all things." He also suggests that certain numeric patterns (sets of one, two, four, and five) might point at the structure of "the pattern" [Van Norden 2004, 107–8]. But in the end these efforts toward specificity are abandoned, because of the "limitations of the adequacy of language," and we are left with only the vaguer idea of being patterned.

(11.) In chapter 8 I emphasized that one aspect of reverence is seeing things as interdependent, rather than merely obsessing with a single thing. Compare the following exchange: "One student concentrated too much and he became somewhat haughty. Master Zhu remarked: He thought of the idea of reverence as one thing and tried to preserve it to the exclusion of all else, and therefore this defect resulted. If we realize that reverence is merely self-examination and self-reflection … then there will be no more such defects" [Zhu 1974, 94]; translation adapted from Zhu [1991, 102].

(12.) One good example comes in the remarks he adds to the *Great Learning*: "… After exerting himself in this way for a long time, there will come a moment when he clearly penetrates everything. The manifest and the hidden, the subtle and the obvious qualities of all things: all will be available to him. The whole substance and vast operations of the mind will be completely illuminated. This is called 'apprehending coherence in things (*gewu*).' This is called 'the extremity of knowledge (*zhi zhi zhi* □□□)' " [Zhu 1987, Pt. 1, 6]; translation substantially modified from Zhu [1990, 118].

(12.) Zhu has the following to say about interruption: "Someone asked about our reverence being easily interrupted. Master Zhu replied: Once you believe that it is interrupted then it is already continuing [i.e., no longer interrupted]. Practice this until it matures and all will be connected [without interruption]" [Zhu 1974, 93]; translation adapted from Zhu [1991, 102].

(12.) See Cheng and Cheng [1981, 292], and Graham's well-known analysis at Graham [1992 1992, 49–50].

(12.) In an important recent study, Mark Csikszentmihalyi shows how ideas of the sage's perfection—his ability to avoid quandaries or dilemmas—developed in tandem with ideas of "material virtue," by which Csikszentmihalyi means various theories about how the virtues manifest themselves through physiological changes. See Csikszentmihalyi [2004].

(12.) [Ibid. 90, emphasis in original]. He also provides a second, distinct argument for “balanced caring,” namely that it makes more sense than the “inverse-care law,” which is the idea that we should care less for those farther away, according to some mathematical formula [Ibid., 74]. I agree that balanced caring beats this highly implausible rule (which Slote also calls “aggregative partiality”), but this on its own does little to justify a choice of balanced caring over, say, narrow focus on intimates.

(12.) [Yu forthcoming, 61]; Yu bases his argument on classical and Han dynasty rather than Neo-Confucian writings, but his reasoning and examples are still extremely relevant.

(13.) It seems clear that the way Mou envisions the perfectionist promotion of virtue avoids Bryan Van Norden's worry that such an approach might lead to an extreme epistemological optimism [Van Norden 2007, 335]. It is also worth considering the criticisms that some contemporary Confucians have launched against educational programs sponsored during the 1970s and 1980s by the government in Taiwan. One such critic argues that a compulsory senior high school text “was an egregious example of how party-state ideology manipulated the moral content of the state-prescribed primary and secondary textbooks … for its own political ends” [Makeham 2008, 198].

(13.) Another famous passage with a similar message occurs in *Zhuangzi* 6, when two friends sing and rejoice upon a third friend's death. See Zhuangzi [1994, 60]. For a striking evocation and analysis of such attitudes, see Yearley [1983, esp. 135].

(13.) On the increasing mystification, see Wang [1993, 11]. As for inaccessibility, here is a Tang dynasty thinker: “Sagehood is a matter of heaven (*tian*), and not something that can be arrived at through cultivation,” quoted in Wang [1999, 31]. One scholar notes that some went so far as to divinize sages, but that this was unusual [Wang 1993, 24].

(13.) In a helpful essay on Neo-Confucian self-cultivation, Rodney Taylor characterizes Wang's focus on activity as the pursuit of “existential confirmation of the individual's metaphysical nature” [Taylor 1990, 83]. I believe this is partly correct, but it neglects the gradual maturation process that I have been emphasizing. One possible reason for this is Taylor's explicit goal in that essay of finding a way to apply the “sudden/gradual” paradigm to Neo-Confucianism; the proper conclusion to his essay is that such a model is not helpful in understanding Neo-Confucianism. See Taylor [1990, 83].

(13.) Prior to Cheng Yi's success in introducing *li* or coherence into Confucian philosophical discourse, the term “ritual”—also pronounced *li*, but written with a different character—was sometimes used in a similar way, as a universal imperative to which the ruler might be held. See Wood [1995, ch. 4].

(13.) [Graham 1986, 426]; see also the discussion in Ziporyn [2007, 65–7].

(14.) Although I have drawn on the work of Hall and Ames mentioned earlier, I believe they underplay the objective dimension of *li* and related ideas, leaning too far in a nominalist direction. See also Ziporyn [2007, 76], where he suggests that Hall and Ames “slightly overstate the nominalism of the tradition.”

(14.) See Ivanhoe [2002, ch. 5] and Ivanhoe [2000]. Ivanhoe describes Zhu Xi's approach to self-cultivation as “recovery” and Bryan Van Norden has argued that Zhu Xi combines a “discovery” model of with elements from “development” and “reformation” models [Van Norden 2007]. These both contrast with the pure “discovery” model they see at work in Wang Yangming. I am suggesting here that Wang, too, must be seen as more of a mixed case.

(14.) For some telling examples of these ideas, see Zhu [1990, 103 (§2.17), 134 (§4.31), and 141 (§4.47)]. In addition to his frequent talk of “obtaining for oneself (*zide* □□),” Zhu also talks of “embodied comprehension (*tiren* □□)” and sometimes of “obtaining via embodied comprehension (*tirende* □□□),” as in the last passage cited.

(14.) Based on the direction of his most recent work, I suspect that Slote would now say that a person with “fully developed empathy” is someone who would deeply appreciate our common humanity in the needed way (or at least that fully developed empathy is a necessary condition) [Slote 2007, 34–5 and 99]. Since the exact meaning of “fully developed empathy” is a bit unclear—Slote connects it both to a statistical notion of normality and to certain “natural” dispositions—I will put off evaluating the success of such an idea's justifying balanced caring until another occasion.

(14.) Zhu expresses this basic idea many times, for instance when he says that grief is the “root” of a funeral [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 20].

(14.) Liu here echoes his teacher Mou Zongsan's views; see Mou [1991, 127]. For considerably more on Gao Panlong, see Taylor [1990].

(14.) For example, suggestions like those of Kang Xiaoguang in favor of a Confucian Church with Confucian priests should be met with extreme skepticism [Kang 2005, xlviii and 182–90].

(14.) For a marvelous evocation of the pervasiveness of ritual in an emperor's life, see Huang [1981].

(15.) Kline [2007] worries that Stalnaker himself is too sanguine about the contemporary relevance of the ancient practices he discusses. Antonaccio [1998] argues that there are difficulties with three contemporary efforts of retrieval (by Hadot, Foucault, and Nussbaum), then puts forward an alternative approach to spiritual exercises, based on the ideas of Iris Murdoch, which she believes can avoid such difficulties.

(15.) [Slote 2001, 7–8]. See also Ibid. [5–7] for discussion of alternative interpretations of Aristotle, none of which make Aristotle out to be a pure agent-baser.

(15.) Huang's ideas have been widely noted and praised, with William deBary going so far as to characterize them as a “Parliament of Scholars.” See Huang [1993, 83] and also Daniel Bell's discussion in Bell [2000, 303–6].

(15.) One side of this story is the vexed relations, on both social and intellectual levels, between Confucianism on the one hand and Buddhism and Daoism on the other; another side is the efforts of Confucians in the Mongol Yuan Dynasty to preserve their culture in very trying times.

(15.) *Qi* has been translated in many ways, from “ether” to “material force” to Gardner's intriguing “psycho-physical stuff” [Zhu 1990].

(15.) Zhu is not completely consistent on this issue. I mentioned earlier *Analects* 7:6, which reads “The Master said, ‘Committed to the Way, based on *de*, close to humaneness, and acquainted with the arts.” In the context of the *Analects*, where *de* is a moral charisma that may well fall short of full *ren*, this statement is not problematic. But in light of Zhu's understanding of *de*, seeing *ren* as a further achievement, beyond *de*, is a bit tricky. Faced with this dilemma, he sometimes says that in fact *de* is not reliable without the still deeper achievement of *ren*, or that if one only has *de* and not *ren*, one can lose *de* [Ibid., 866, 870]. To be sure, there are differences between *de* and *ren*, as I discuss later. But I view the idea that *de* is unreliable as a mistake forced on Zhu by his commitment to harmonizing all classical texts, to the extent possible, into a single system.

(16.) Indeed, the relation that Neo-Confucians urge us to have toward *li*—which we will discuss in some detail later—bears comparison to the role of God in the Christian ethics of agapic love, and Slote acknowledges that since love is an inner state, this version of Christian ethics may count as agent-based. Whether it does or not depends on details that need not concern us here; see Slote [2001, 8–9].

(16.) This explains why Zhu can both deny that “appropriateness (*yi*)” is “the virtue of our heart-mind” in one place [Ibid., 414] and assert that appropriateness (along with propriety and wisdom) *are* “[aspects of the] virtue of our heart-mind” in another [Ibid., 418]. The key, which he makes explicit in the latter passage, is that humaneness alone can function as an inclusive term.

(16.) Stalnaker has stressed that for Augustine, too, more is involved than reason restraining passions. Augustine and Xunzi share what Stalnaker calls a “chastened intellectualism,” according to which increasing intellectual commitment and changed inclinational tendencies go hand in hand [Stalnaker 2006, 278].

(16.) Woodruff's discussion of various uses of “irreverent” is quite relevant here. He writes: “Reverence and a keen eye for the ridiculous are allies: both keep people from being pompous or stuck up. So don't think that this book is an attack on laughter” [Woodruff 2001, 5]. See also the discussion of Confucianism and humor in [Bell 2008, ch. 9].

(16.) This Confucian concern to simultaneously shape the situations in which we find ourselves such that we act well, and develop our underlying character so that we can act well regardless of situation, helps them to answer “situationist” critiques of virtue ethics. For more discussion, see Angle [2007].

(16.) Swanton acknowledges that at first blush, it appears that virtue ethics and dialogic ethics are in significant tension with one another [Swanton 2003, 251]. As we will see later, though, she then argues that “virtues of dialogue” actually form a significant part of overall virtue.

(16.) By “single principle,” I have in mind something like the consequentialist maxim “Do that which maximizes good consequences.” That is, a “principle” is something that can be stated and applied to cases. This is certainly the most common understanding of “principle” in contemporary English-language philosophy, which is one reason why the old-fashioned translation of *li* as principle is so misleading.

(17.) Antonaccio stresses the significance of retaining a notion like divinity, arguing that for Murdoch the tension between our deepest selves and true good “remains a constant possibility within the moral life” [Antonaccio 1998, 86]. She criticizes Martha Nussbaum for relaxing this stress on perfection in Nussbaum's retrieval of Stoic “therapy of desire.”

(17.) The five habits, which are “closely linked and developmentally sequential,” are: (1) dialogue; (2) interpersonal perspective-taking; (3) critical, systemic thought; (4) dialectical thought; and (5) holistic thought. For further elaboration, see Ibid. [108 and 111–24].

(17.) Compare Shi [1997, 21], who defines participation as “activities by private citizens aimed at influencing the actual results of governmental policy.” Shi's approach allows (in principle) for considerable participatory effort without any significant government responsiveness. My more normative definition would not count such a scenario as “participatory politics.” “Responsiveness” does not necessarily require outcomes in which governmental policies mirror citizen demands. The government might respond with good reasons why the demands not be met. So long as they remain open to consideration of further demands, this still counts as responsive; see Rawls [1999, 72].

(17.) According to *Zhongyong* 1, “grief (*ai* □)” is a natural emotion which, when one feels it to the right degree, is part of a harmonious response.

(17.) Zhu Xi makes a similar remark, saying that when our conduct has matured, we have “virtue (*de* □)” [Zhu 1997, 778]. See the discussion in Section 3.3.

(17.) I discuss the relation between transcendence and reverence, particularly as it applies to classical Chinese thought, in Angle [2005].

(18.) See *Mencius* 4A: 17. For a detailed sinological discussion of *quan* in various early texts, see Vankeerberghen [2006]. Vankeerberghen argues that in a case like the example mentioned here from *Mencius*, the agent “gives up … something of lasting, unchanging value,” namely, “ritual prescriptions”; furthermore, he suggests that this is a matter of “reason” winning out over “passion” [Ibid., 74–5]. I am skeptical about this interpretation, and suspect Mencius——much like the later Neo-Confucians——saw *quan* as arriving at a balanced response to a particular situation's demands, but I will not pursue the point (concerning interpretation of Mencius) further here. For a discussion of

Zhu Xi on *jing* versus *quan*, see Wei [1986].

(18.) Swanton believes the core “plight” driving ethics is that “in addressing the demands of the world, each of us, even the most virtuous of us, is limited in his or her perspective” [Swanton 2003, 250]. This leads her to frame her understanding of virtue ethics in a way that is much more congenial to “dialogic ethics” than may have been thought possible. Solving disagreements, she argues, requires “virtues of practice,” among which are dispositions to engage well in, and learn from, dialogue. More broadly, the virtues of practice aim at facilitating problem-solving via “constraint integration.” She writes: “The process of integration is not a process of choosing to ignore certain constraints while focusing on others; of choosing one horn of a supposed dilemma over another. Rather, the process is one of transformation of a problem” [Ibid., 254]. She describes in detail how “progressively specifying and respecifying the constraint structure of a problem” leads the problem to become more tractable, because “the transformed specifications open up a richer range of possibilities for their satisfaction” [Ibid., 255].

(18.) For Hadot's reasons for using “spiritual,” see Hadot [1995, 82]. Stalnaker discusses related issues with care and insight; his discomfort with “self-cultivation” (the typical translation of *xiu shen* □□) as both too individual and too rooted in an agricultural metaphor inapt for Xunzi lead him to prefer spiritual exercise [Stalnaker 2006, 43].

(18.) There are also other Chinese terms that correspond to one or the other of these meanings of *fa*: *lü* □ refers unambiguously to legal codes, while *zhi* □ or *zhidu* □□ refer unambiguously to systems or institutions.

(18.) This is true even for Wang Yangming, notwithstanding his stress on finding the *li* within one's own mind, because the “things (*wu* □)” on which Wang instructs us to focus are relational. As he says, “wherever one's intention is directed is a thing. For example, when one's intention is directed toward serving one's parents, then serving one's parents is a ‘thing’” [Wang 1983, 37 (§6)]; translation modified from Wang [1963, 14].

(18.) See also Ibid. [180–1], where Tan argues that changing the people's *habitus* “requires the participation of all involved in the practice.”

(18.) I discuss Cheng Hao's influential formulation of the “form one body with all things” idea in chapter 7, where I also review its relation to the idea of “humaneness.” Zhu Xi comments extensively on the *Western Inscription*, expanding on (among other things) Cheng Yi's idea that Zhang's insight is best understood through the lens of “Coherence is one, but simultaneously distinguishable into many” [Zhu 1997, 2269–70].

(18.) This connection to ritual is another way in which grief is closely related to reverence. See Woodruff [2001, esp. ch. 6] on ritual and reverence.

(19.) In his discussion of the Chengs' distinction between “balanced (*zhong*)” and “commonly applied (*yong* □)”——which the Chengs equate to “standard”——he says that “typical” is better than “settled” [Zhu 1997, 1324]. Also, he clearly prioritizes the “balanced” or situationally apt over the “standard” or “commonly applied”: “First there is balance, and only after is there common application” [Ibid., 1327].

(19.) Xunzi's account of rituals thus offers an intriguing answer to the “situationist” challenge to virtue ethics, since he can both accept that character traits are often not robust across different situations (thus the need for rituals to keep us from moral danger) and still maintain that transformation toward a robust moral character is possible. For further discussion, see Angle [2007].

(19.) One example: “[The human psyche] constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of the self or through fictions of a theological nature” [Murdoch 1970c, 79].

(19.) Also relevant here is the classical text “On Education (*Xueji*),” included as part of the *Liji*, which clearly emphasizes the importance of asking questions, raising doubts, and having conversation partners. I thank Yu Kam Por for this information.

(19.) My thanks to Steven Geisz for pressing this point.

(19.) Wang emphasizes the gradual nature of moral development in Section 65 of *Record for Practice*. See Wang [1983, 95–6].

(19.) The contemporary scholar Huang Yong has argued that Neo-Confucian (his focus is on the Cheng brothers, but it applies equally to Zhu Xi and others) virtue ethics is an “ontological virtue ethics,” grounded in the identity of virtue and nature, and that this basis for virtue avoids key problems that afflict standard Western discussions of virtue's connection to actual human psychology and to its normative status. I cannot consider here Huang's critique of Kantian and Utilitarian accounts of the relations between value and fact, but it is very relevant to my purposes to reflect on his positive account of the Neo-Confucian grounding of virtue in nature. The key move in Huang's argument is that for the Cheng brothers, facts about human nature are “rich with values,” since our nature is itself virtuous, and therefore Neo-Confucians can derive “what a human person ‘ought to be’ … from what a human person ‘is,’ without committing the naturalistic fallacy.” Finally, “In the Cheng's view, we see human nature as good because of the value we have, and we have such a value because of the fact that human nature is good. So instead of an either-or situation, there is a reflective equilibrium between the two” [Huang 2003, 463–4]. I agree with quite a bit of Huang's account, including the idea that our natures are “rich with values.” However, I believe that the way Huang articulates the relation between our values and the goodness of nature is problematic: the way he puts it is not a “reflective equilibrium”—a concept that applies to quite a different sort of context—but a vicious circle. The way to save Huang's insight is to remember the identity between nature and coherence, and then to emphasize the constitutive role that human valuation plays in the articulation of coherence, as discussed in the previous chapter. We naturally fit with, contribute to, or enhance the coherence (harmony) of the universe, and this valuable, intelligible way that things fit together (to recall my more specific gloss for *li*) is centrally constituted by our valuing of and participation in life-giving activity. We do this, in turn, through the responsive dispositions collectively referred to as our *de* or virtue.

(20.) Others who anticipated Huang in various ways include Chen Liang, Ye Shi, and Wang Tingxiang; Gu Yanwu is a contemporary of Huang's whose views are also extremely important. Mou Zongsan's discussion of the limitations of Chen and Ye is quite illuminating: according to Mou, in an effort to come up with concrete solutions to the problems of their era, they ended up compromising with the rulers and advocating solutions too reliant on sage-heroes. Mou says that later thinkers like Huang Zongxi, despairing of short-term solutions and thus writing for the ages, are able to see deeper and offer more radical answers [Mou 1991, ch. 9].

(20.) [Wang 1984, *juan* 27, 13a]; translation from Wang [1972, 122], slightly modified. Ching notes that the example of an infant crying all day, and this being characterized as the "extreme of harmony," comes from *Daode Jing* 55.

(20.) The best example of this process is the Korean Neo-Confucian "Four-Seven Debate"; see Kalton [1994].

(20.) For instance, the text says that "[Confucius] left no trace" [Zhu & Lü 1967, 291]. In the first instance, this means no trace of selfish intentions—unlike Yan Yuan, who could not leave all such intentions behind. But the ambiguity is intentional.

(21.) Kwong-loi Shun and Bryan Van Norden make a related point when they say that sages are not of "two minds," vacillating between two courses of action. Instead, sages are characterized by "motivational harmony." It is striking that Shun defines "motivational harmony" in almost the same terms that Karen Stohr defines her "harmony thesis." Here is Shun: a person exhibits motivational harmony when his "inclinations are well-aligned with his moral judgments, and [his] moral actions are therefore not actions against recalcitrant inclinations" [Shun 1986, 42]. Here, for comparison, is Stohr's "harmony thesis": "a virtuous agent's feelings should be in harmony with her judgments about what she should do," and so "she should find virtuous action easy and pleasant" [Stohr 2003, 339]. In light of my discussion here, we can see that the key difference lies in Stohr's assumption that "harmony" means that virtuous action will be "easy and pleasant." See also the related discussion in Van Norden [1997, 249].

(21.) It is worth noting that while Cheng Hao is not said to have been born with a sagely nature—and is never labeled as a sage—he is said to have "possessed an unusual nature by endowment, and nourished it in accordance with the Way" [Zhu & Lü 1967, 299]; cf. Zhu and Lü [1983, 335]. In addition, Zhang Zai came closer than any other Neo-Confucian I know of to claiming sagehood for himself. He titled his magnum opus *Correcting the Unenlightened*, and surely had in mind the following passage from the *Classic of Change*: "To cultivate correctness in the unenlightened is the task of the sage." See discussion in Kasoff [1984, 123–4].

(21.) Wang makes the same point in a slightly different way when asked whether joy is present when one's parent has died and one is crying bitterly. Wang says: “There is real joy (*le* □) only if the son has cried bitterly. If not, there won't be any joy. Joy means that in spite of crying, one's mind is at peace. The original substance of the mind has not been perturbed” [Wang 1983, 343 (§292)]; translation from Wang [1963, 230].

(21.) In Wang [1983, §140], the two phrases follow immediately on one another, suggesting that “mind is coherence” is simply a way of emphasizing the importance of the “coherence of mind.” See also Wang [1983, §117 and §222] for *xin zhi li*, and *passim* for *xin ji li*.

(21.) There is now considerable literature on virtue ethical approaches to the determination of right action. I expand on the ideas in this paragraph in Angle [forthcoming b], where I note that Swanton's account of a kind of reasoning process called “constraint integration” fits well with the general Neo-Confucian orientation I have developed.

(22.) Ames and Rosemont [2009] and Liu [2004] are examples of such an approach.

(22.) Readers who feel this dismissal of “faith” is too quick are asked to turn to chapter 9, which contains considerable discussion of faith, belief, spirituality, and their relations to contemporary exemplary lives.

(22.) In conversation, Daniel Bell has posed the following challenge to the idea that sages do not feel regret: “A sage may be feeling tired and take a nap and let his child play under what would normally be safe conditions, but if something unlucky happens to the child that could have been prevented if the sage had not taken a nap, it seems that regret is an appropriate emotion to experience.” I believe it is perfectly sensible to maintain that a genuine sage, whose choices—including those that led to him or her being tired—have manifested universal coherence, would of course be saddened by such an unlucky occurrence, but need not “regret” in the sense I am using the term. Bell also suggested that “there's something arrogant—and wrong—about believing that one can't make any mistakes in the future.” My response is that no one should take him or herself to be a sage: that is a failure of humility. A sage can and should be confident and appropriately forceful in each given case, but should not be arrogant in the way Bell describes.

(22.) A reference to *Mencius* 2A:6. Van Norden notes that Wang misquotes—or at any rate, alters—the original statement in *Mencius* [Van Norden 2007, 255]. These changes are related to the significant differences between Mencius and Wang Yangming, as discussed briefly by Van Norden and more extensively in Ivanhoe [2002].

(22.) See also Huang [1995], which discusses a related dynamic during the reign of the great Kangxi Emperor of the Qing dynasty. The final chapter of the book has the self-explanatory title “The price of having a sage-emperor: the assimilation of the tradition of the Way by the political establishment in light of the Kangxi emperor's governance.”

(22.) Wang Yangming makes this same idea even more explicit. “Things in the world, such as the names, varieties, and systems, and plants and animals, are innumerable. Although the original substance of the sage is very clear, how can he know everything? … What he should know, he naturally asks others, like Confucius who, when he entered the Great Shrine, asked about everything" [Wang 1963, 201], slightly altered.

(22.) Contemporary philosopher Christine Swanton argues that, in general, we should not be "virtuous beyond our strength," but also combines this with an astute discussion of the ways in which perfectionism itself is a virtue: that is, we should work to "strengthen" ourselves morally. Indirectly, then, we *are* striving to be virtuous beyond our (current) strength. In addition, Swanton suggests that in some circumstances, we should after all try to go beyond our strength. I discuss these ideas briefly at the end of this chapter, and see Swanton [2003, ch. 9].

(22.) Later Confucians revive the distinctive importance of ritual, and criticize Zhu and others for neglecting it. See Chow [1994].

(23.) My thanks to Elise Springer for discussion of these murky matters. Interestingly relevant to these questions is Aaron Stalnaker's discussion of the differences between Xunzi and Augustine on whether our past sins have such momentum that we can never truly overcome their influence [Stalnaker 2006, 135].

(23.) Rules, especially ritual rules that govern a wide range of activities, are certainly important in the daily practice of Confucianism. But we should not be misled by this into thinking that the rules have an equal status with specific, virtuous, perception-based reactions. It is the latter that provide the ultimate content for Neo-Confucian ethics, even if explicit appeal to such non-rulebound judgment is only necessary in relatively rare cases. Most of the argument for this claim will have to wait on later chapters, but the central point is that even when one simply follows a seemingly obvious application of a rule (in Confucian terms, this is *jing* □), in the background is the perception of the situation as not requiring any unusual departures from the rule (i.e., *quan* □). Recent work in Western virtue ethics has done a great deal to elucidate the ways that rules can play significant roles in our moral lives without being fundamental; see Hursthouse [1999].

(23.) Mou's language of "intensional" and "extensional" presentation raises an interesting tension, because it suggests that the two are, at root, identical: no change in one without a corresponding change in the other. But politics must be looser, less demanding, than morality without losing any of its authority. Once political norms have been externalized and objectivized, they can then be fulfilled without fully complying with the internal, subjective demands of ethics or sagehood.

(23.) Also from *Mencius* 2A:6, and see also *Mencius* 1A:7, wherein King Xuan exhibits similar feelings on seeing an ox being led to ritual slaughter. In addition, *Mencius* 7A:45 bears comparison with Wang: "A gentleman is sparing (*ai* □) with things but shows no humaneness toward them; he shows humaneness towards the people but not filial affection (*qin* □)" [Mencius 1970, 192, slightly altered]. The chief difference with Wang is that the underlying sense of continuity emphasized by Wang—since all the feelings he identifies are aspects of “humaneness”—is very attenuated in Mencius.

(23.) [Wang 1983, 33 (§5)]; translation from Wang [1963, 10], slightly modified. Wang refers to the beginning of Section 6 of the *Great Learning*: “What is meant by ‘making the intention (*yi*) sincere’ is allowing no self-deception, as when we hate a bad smell or love a beautiful color” (translation from Chan [1963, 89], slightly modified). The *Great Learning* text thus agrees with Wang that allowing the self to deceive one is akin to failing to love a beautiful color.

(23.) For a particularly thorough discussion of Zhu Xi's recommended method of reading, see Peng [2007].

(23.) [Wang 1983, §6]. Chan's translation contains two important mistakes [Wang 1963, 12–14]. First, he translates “*yi* □” as “will” and adds a notion of this will's being “*directed* towards” particular objects, which corresponds to nothing in Wang's original. There is no notion corresponding closely to Western ideas of will in Neo-Confucianism. I discuss this at more length in chapter 7. Second, instead of “no mind-independent coherence” and “no mind-independent things,” he gives us “neither principles nor things outside the mind,” which sounds too much like idealism. Ziporyn's otherwise excellent discussion of Wang leans a bit too far toward idealism, too, when he says “‘The mind is *li*’ means that the mind is the decisive vortex creating a unique vortex around itself *whenever it wills* …” [Ziporyn 2007, 669, emphasis added].

(24.) Wang never uses the term “true action,” but it seems natural to distinguish two senses of action, along the same lines he distinguishes two sense of knowledge. Shallow, non-true action would encompass random movements or perhaps cases in which one would say one did not know what one was doing. Wang comes close to making a distinction in this area when he refers to people “acting on impulse (*renyi qu zuo* □□□□)” [Wang 1983, 11 (§5)].

(24.) This wrongness has been influentially explored by Carol Gilligan in her landmark book, *In a Different Voice*. She writes “Although from one point of view, paying attention to one's own needs is selfish, from a different perspective it is not only honest but fair. This is the essence of the transitional shift toward a new concept of goodness, which turns inward in acknowledging the self and in accepting responsibility for choice” [Gilligan 1993, 85]. According to Gilligan's developmental approach, the latter perspective is more mature, “representing a more complex understanding of the relationship between self and other” [Ibid., 105]. This is not to say that Gilligan's view, or feminist “care ethics” more generally, is identical to Neo-Confucianism. A good place to start in exploring these differences is Julia Tao's insightful essay about difference between classical Confucian and feminist conceptions of care; see Tao [2000].

(24.) The paired phrases come from *Zhongyong* 27. Jiang discusses a related formula used by the Cheng brothers that purportedly balances the two kinds of learning: aim at the “correctness of universal coherence (*tianli zhi zheng* □□□□)” as well as the “fullness of human relationships (*renlun zhi zhi* □□□□)” [Jiang 1994, 280]. An important article on

Zhu Xi's efforts to balance the two is Yu [1986].

(24.) In contrast, *Mencius* 5A:1 recognizes the complexities caused by multiple values. Shun weeps because he cannot please his parents, but he does not wallow in grief. My student Ben Brewer has noted an intriguing parallel between *Mencius* 5A:3 (discussed above, in which Xiang is simultaneously enfeoffed and banished) and 7A:35 (in which Shun flees with his father): Could we not consider the latter case to involve the banishment of the Blind Man? Shun gives the Blind Man his son's full love and attention, but at the same time removes him from society. We typically see the removal from society as a matter of safeguarding the Blind Man from arrest, but does it not also protect others from the Blind Man? This reading of 7A:35 helps it to better accommodate all the relevant values.

(24.) Tan has a subtle analysis of the relation between the people (*min* □) and heaven (or *tian* □) in *Mencius*, offering several possible readings. In the end, she prefers an interpretation that is consistent with the view I have ascribed here to Mou. See Tan [2004, 136–45].

(24.) I must disagree, therefore, with contemporary scholar Zhao Weidong, who argues that Wang Yangming leaves behind objectivity entirely [Zhao 2001, 59].

(24.) Perhaps this is what Zhu means by “When [a sage] asks despite knowing, we see the ways in which sages are not self-sufficient (*zi zu* □□)” [Zhu 1997, 560].

(25.) Although not discussed by Neo-Confucians as far as I know, reading about people different from ourselves also can aid in ethical education. It enhances our concern for these others in two ways: by helping us to feel that they are “like us” and therefore within the ambit of our care; and by inducing empathetic responses to their sufferings. Richard Rorty emphasizes these ideas as part of what he calls “sentimental education” [Rorty 1993].

(25.) Michael Slote has observed (in conversation) that Wang's idea of forming one body with “mere” things takes it beyond the comparison that would otherwise seems apt between what Wang is saying and the idea of “empathy” as understood by contemporary psychologists, on which see Hoffman [2000]. The question of how Wang's claims fit with, are challenged by, or challenge the views of contemporary psychology is an important question that I cannot pursue here, but see Angle [2009] for some initial forays in this direction.

(25.) In Slote's most recent work, his understanding of empathy as central to morality and necessarily other-directed reinforces the possibility that it might make “moral” sense to exclude oneself from consideration [Slote 2007, ch. 7]. However, as noted in Section 5.1.1, the basis of empathy in feelings that one has, which must be of the same order as those feelings one has about oneself, makes the ground for the limitation of empathy and moral concern to others quite problematic.

(25.) I appreciate P. J. Ivanhoe's help on this point. See also the further discussion of the sage's mixed feelings, and sadness at the state of the world, in the next section.

(25.) This is obviously a large claim but there is a considerable consensus among political philosophers to support it. See, for instance, Henry Shue's argument [1996] that our “basic” rights are interdependent and my own discussion in Angle [2005b].

(26.) This is as good a place as any to note that Xu's and Mou's arguments that a limited form of edification has a place in the political realm are in serious tension with Thomas Metzger's claim that “ ‘civility’ as the public virtue of the merely decent person is not even a word that can be translated into Chinese” [Metzger 2005, 705], although neither Xu nor Mou puts forward a single word to cover this level of (in Metzger's terms) “civility” or “doable virtue.”

(26.) Seeing the way in which protected political participation is derived from the individual virtues that support mutual perspective-taking and dialogue can help to answer the challenge Swanton raises about the relation between virtue ethics and political philosophy [Swanton 2003, 271–2].

(26.) Although working from very different premises, Swedene [2005] arrives at an interestingly similar conclusion to mine; he argues that our moral educational practices should be designed such that in response to putative moral dilemmas, “negative self-assessing emotions ought to be discouraged in favor of emotions such as grief and sadness, which are negative and self-conscious, but not self-assessing.”

(26.) As discussed earlier, for Wang, the superior expertise—at least with respect to moral matters—will need to come from a lack of selfish obstacles to the functioning of one's *liang zhī*, rather than from something like the development of more highly sensitive feelings. For a discussion of the rather different model of expertise found in *Mencius*, see Hutton [2002]. Interestingly, Hutton argues that Mencius's idea of moral connoisseurship “is primarily a connoisseurship of intuition, which consists in deepening one's sensitivity to one's spontaneous impulses and in rooting out what one ‘really wants’ by nature” [Ibid., 175].

(26.) Thanks to P. J. Ivanhoe for pressing me on these points, on which see also Section 2.5 on normativity.

(26.) In Wang's *Record for Practice*, “the people filling the street are all sages” appears twice, both times said by students. It seems clear that they are repeating a teaching of the Master's, though, and in each case Wang responds so as to deepen his students' understanding of their fundamental commonality with the common people. See Wang [1983, 357 (§313)] and Wang [1963, 239–40].

(26.) Shun's “holding fast to the two ends” means that, consistent with the interpretation I developed in chapter 6, Shun does not choose one value instead of another, but finds a way to value them both.

(26.) Tessman [2005] discusses with great subtlety the pain that can come with heightened sensitivity to global suffering.

(27.) The great Qing Dynasty philosopher Dai Zhen was uncomfortable with Zhu's characterization of *li* as "above form"; see Dai [1995, VI, 171]; cf. Dai [1990, 198]. He felt that Zhu had made *li* into a peculiar abstract entity that was disconnected from our lived reality (and from the term's earlier meaning). In the present context, though, I would argue that Dai's understanding of *li* (as "necessity [*biran* □□]") differed with Zhu Xi on the issue of whether it was a "thing," not on the issue of whether it was abstract. On this latter point, they actually agreed.

(27.) For further elaboration of Wang's resistance to the idea that the sage is omniscient, see Wang [1983, 303–4 (§227)]. In fact, in two of his letters Wang explicitly asserts that sages are imperfect. In one he writes that sages are "as prone to faults as other men"; in the other, he points out that Confucius makes clear that he does not think himself to be without faults [Wang 1972, 49 and 76].

(27.) *Zhongyong* 6. My reading (and translation) of this passage draws considerably on Yu Kam-Por's insightful paper, "The Handling of Multiple Values in Confucian Ethics"; I believe my rendering of *zhong* here as "harmony" is consistent with his argument, though he leaves *zhong* romanized. See Yu [forthcoming].

(27.) Indeed, Hegel himself did not use these terms, despite their widespread (and problematic) use today to explicate Hegel. Thanks to Joseph Rouse for a helpful conversation on these matters.

(27.) Hursthouse herself echoes this idea, when she writes that "A too great readiness to think 'I can't do anything but this terrible thing, nothing else is open to me' is a mark of vice" [Hursthouse 1999, 87n23].

(27.) Kravinsky's comfort with the dependability of numeric ratios—unlike messy relationships between humans—leads him to success in real estate finance and to a very utilitarian approach to moral questions.

(27.) The issue of when and why someone might pause to reflect or look again is complex and depends, in part, on how closely the person has approached sagehood. Zhu Xi is critical of a certain sort of deliberateness that always involves pausing to measure cost and benefit, rather than acting directly. On the other hand, he acknowledges that a pause is sometimes apt, though whether this is by way of acknowledging the weightiness of the situation, or because extra caution against error is needed, is not clear. See Zhu [1997, 211], Zhu [1990, 188], and Tillman [1982, 149]. My discussion of the different reasons that sages might engage in dialogue is also quite relevant; see chapter 9. In addition, full consideration of this question should take into account Swanton's discussion of the difference between times when automatic processing of problems is apt, and when critical reflection needed. She says that experts do not dispense with the latter, and indeed they deploy it more systematically than novices when encountering a novel or hard problem [Swanton 2003, 259]. Swanton's notion of "critical reflection" can be usefully compared with the felt need for a “pause” in deliberation that is sometimes experienced by the contemporary exemplary figures studied in Parks Daloz et al. [1996, 133].

(27.) See Angle [2005a, 2005b]. See also Salmenkari [2006] for a detailed review of the strengths and weaknesses of democratic centralism.

(27.) Another similar claim, much discussed among Neo-Confucians, is the early Neo-Confucian Zhou Dunyi's explanation for why he refused to cut the grass growing outside his window: “[The feeling of the grass] and mine are the same” [Zhu & Lü 1983, 340]; translation from Zhu and Lü [1967, 302].

(28.) From the perspective of contemporary metaethics, there are at least two ways in which one might flesh out the idea that “everything matters.” One is a realist, objectivist picture according to which everything has a certain value. Perhaps God made the world that way. The root metaphor here is one of *discovering* values. The alternative picture is pragmatist, according to which humans work to *articulate* values in a dynamic world of which they are—together with everything else—continuous cocreators. Both of these views resist the antirealist idea that humans simply *construct* or *invent* values. There is much more that could be said here, including showing how the ideas under discussion relate to current debates in environmental ethics. For present purposes, I will only say that I do not believe we are forced to read Wang as a realist instead of a pragmatist, in the sense just alluded to.

(28.) For relevant exploration of the ways Confucians (both classical and contemporary) might think about territorial borders, see Chan [2008]. Chan emphasizes that since Confucianism “has not yet developed a theory of distributive justice within the context of a modern political community, let alone a theory of justice between states, … [it] still has a long way to go” [Ibid., 81]. Nussbaum's discussion of cognate issues for a contemporary Aristotelian are also worth noting; see Nussbaum [1990c, esp. 207–9].

(28.) This includes Dai Zhen, who wrote that “If in all cases with regard to heaven, earth, persons, things, affairs, and actions one seeks what is necessary and cannot change, the *li* will be perfectly clear” [Dai 1995, VI, 165]; cf. Dai [1990, 171].

(28.) Blackburn [1996] argues that such situations are quite common, and offers useful discussion of “plumping,” which in some circumstances might be quite lighthearted, in others weighty and ritualized.

(28.) Zhu actually sounds very much like Wang when he says, “The Way is … so distant that even sages cannot … comprehensively understand it … . But the coherence (*li* □) that is the reason for things, though hidden and not visible, can nonetheless be known and acted upon” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 2, 8]. This statement is a comment on *Zhongyong* 12, which says that “ … even sages in trying to penetrate to [the Way's] furthest limits do not know it all” [Ames and Hall 2001, 93].

(29.) It is interesting to note that Aristotle makes a somewhat related point. In Lisa

Tessman's words, “For Aristotle, when a citizen is not ruling, that citizen cannot express or develop the virtues associated with ruling and therefore cannot have complete or perfect virtue” [Tessman 2005, 157].

(29.) This passage is quoted by several of Zhu's critics, among them Dai Zhen——see Dai [1995, VI, 163]; cf. Dai [1990, 168]——and Luo Qinshun [Luo 1987, 61], on whom see in the main text.

(29.) The parable of the tiger, cited by both the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi—but not by Wang—makes this point explicitly. Here is Cheng Yi: “There is a difference between true knowledge and everyday knowledge. I once saw a peasant who had been wounded by a tiger. When someone said that a tiger was attacking people, everyone was startled, but the peasant reacted differently from the rest. Even a child knows that tigers are dangerous, but it is not true knowledge; it is only true knowledge if it is like the peasant's. So when men know evil but still do it, this also is not true knowledge; if it were, decidedly they would not do it” [Graham 1992, 80].

(29.) The difference between a *life* being marred—in the sense of “too bad it happened in that life”—and a *person* being marred was suggested to me by Kelly Sorenson, who has my thanks.

(29.) For Zhu's changing attitudes, see Liu Shu-hsien [1988]; for considerable discussion of Zhu's understanding of the psychological background to this problem, and an earlier effort at analyzing his solution, see Angle [1998]. I have greatly benefited from Choi's subtle critique of my earlier analysis.

(29.) [Wang 1983, 148–9 (§125)], translation from Wang [1963 , 82]. The same idea can be found in many other passages in Wang's *Record for Practice*; it is especially explicit in Ibid. [205 (§146)], where the Cheng brothers' discussion of recognizing the “dispositions of the sage” is criticized and the need for personal realization stressed.

(29.) In chapter 6, I discussed ties-for-first in which one had no resort but to “plump” for one option of the other. Swanton [2003, ch. 13] also contains a great deal of relevant discussion.

(29.) I thus disagree with Yu Kam Por's otherwise astute analysis, when he sees this passage as inconsistent with what he calls the “internalism” of Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism. See Yu [forthcoming].

(30.) Wiggins [1980] is one important source of this literature: Wiggins emphasized that for Aristotle, practical deliberation is partly constituted by the “unfinished or indeterminate character of our ideals,” leading him to emphasize “situational appreciation” [Ibid., 233–4]. See also the following: McDowell [1979], Sherman [1989], Nussbaum [1990a], and Blum [1991]. Murdoch [1970a and b] are also critical sources on moral perception, though more indebted to Plato than to Aristotle.

(30.) It is relevant here to note that May Sim has emphasized that Aristotle's idea of “political justice” is fundamentally among equals, and not a natural extension of other kinds of justice [Sim 2007, 175]. She also argues that since the virtue among citizens needs to be equal, they thus share a different form of affection than that in family [Ibid., 173].

(30.) Stalnaker's comparative study of Xunzi and Augustine points out the former's complete lack of interest in the topic of conversion [Stalnaker 2006, 187–8]. This makes Stalnaker's occasional reference to the role of “faith” in Xunzi's thought misleading, however. A similar conflation of trust in the claims of teachers or canonical texts, on the one hand, and pure faith, on the other, occurs in Andrew Flescher's stimulating discussion of a “developmental” approach to moral heroism and sainthood; see especially [Flescher 2003, 266].

(30.) See, in particular, Zhu's analogizing reverence to someone guarding a door [Zhu 1990, 119–20]. Donald Munro writes that this image “suggests an ever alert state in which one is always mindful of the prospective mesh between an emerging sentiment and the demands of the rules of conduct” [Munro 1988, 127]. See also Choi [unpublished] and my earlier discussion in Angle [1998]. There is evidence in this very passage against understanding Zhu as straightforwardly telling as to guard the door, however, since he says that ideal reverence will have the result that there are no “depravities” against which to guard, no “self” to be subdued. But how can this be, if reverence involves the post-facto suppression of problematic feelings as they emerge into consciousness?

(30.) Ming Taizu is an excellent example of the danger of politics being swallowed by morality, because it is at least plausible to interpret him as undertaking his violently coercive measures based on a set of ethical commitments, as he understood them. Cases like this raise the question whether any theory that does not find room for external limits can ever be satisfactory. Consider, for example, Michael Slote's effort to ground respect purely in empathy, such that we can criticize a religious persecutor—who carries out his tortures with “dry eyes”—because the persecutor “is arrogantly dismissive of, and lacking in empathy for, the viewpoint of the other” [Slote 2007, 59]. But based on the documentary evidence we might conclude that Ming Taizu was enormously pained by the necessity to “instruct” his victims in such painful ways. Supposing his eyes were flowing with tears, does not it seem ad hoc to simply insist that he was nonetheless lacking in empathy? If so, then we should conclude—with Mou Zongsan—that independent political values that restrain even the most empathetic rulers are necessary.

(30.) For a different view of the relations between Zhu and Wang on sagehood, putting more emphasis on their differences (while still recognizing key, underlying similarities), see Guo [2003]. Another interesting difference between them lies in their understanding of Confucius himself. Briefly, Zhu Xi (following Cheng Yi) believed that Confucius was born a sage and did not need to engage in rigorous cultivation; he described himself as going through such cultivation (especially in *Analects* 2:3) only out of humility and to inspire others' efforts. Wang, in contrast, believed that Confucius had to work so that his “commitment” gradually “matured,” just like anyone else. This view of Wang's will be a major topic of chapter 7; on Zhu's view, see Zhu [1987, Pt. 3, 8].

(30.) Elsewhere, Kidder writes that Farmer saw “intimate, inescapable connections between the gleaming corporate offices of Paris and New York and a legless man lying on the mud floor of a hut in the remotest part of Haiti” [Kidder 2003, 218].

(31.) Another classic passage that bears on the present point is *Mencius* 2B:13, especially as interpreted by Zhu Xi. Mencius has left the state of Qi, having failed to convert its ruler to the Way. He appears saddened, and a disciple questions whether a *junzi* should have such a reaction: it goes against Mencius's famous teaching of the “unmoved heart.” Mencius responds rather cryptically that *Tian* apparently did not wish a true king to arise at this point; why should he be unhappy? Zhu Xi's commentary is insightful, and whether it is the correct reading or not, reveals his own thinking quite clearly. “We can see here the simultaneous presence, without contradiction, of the sage's commitment to worry on behalf of the world, and the complete sincerity of his taking joy in *Tian*” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 58]. Worry or concern or sadness can be combined in the sage's breast with joy: Mencius is suffering no “regret” in my technical sense. For an insightful and pathbreaking discussion of this passage, see also Ivanhoe [1988].

(31.) For relevant discussion, see Cheng [1991, 382–8]. Wang Yangming says something very similar, though he emphasizes interconnectedness so much that the unique thing drops out of the picture almost entirely: “Concentrating on one thing means the absolute concentration of the mind on universal coherence” [Wang 1983, 56 (§15)]; translation from Wang [1963, 25]. For a passage that notes the continued presence of particulars, depending on their relevance to the situation, see *Record for Practice* (§63).

(31.) The Chinese term here is not “*he*,” but “*xixi* □□.” An argument could be made for translating “*xixi*” as “peaceful.” Be this as it may, Chan's choice of “harmonious” is still quite reasonable, and—as I detail later—there is no question that the ideal in the background of this passage is harmony.

(31.) See Peerenboom [2002, 33]. The same arrangement has also been called “ad hoc instrumentalism” by those who insist that for a means of governance to count as “law,” the ruler's commitment to it must be “consistent and principled,” even if law is still deployed to serve the ruler's own ends [Winston 2005, 316]. That is, for some theorists there is already a minimal moral content in “rule by law,” while others call ad hoc instrumentalism “rule by law,” and distinguish principled commitments to law as a “thin” theory of “rule of law” [Peerenboom 2002, 65].

(31.) [Cua 1998, 133]. The same passage also appears in Cua [1982, 64]. Cua refers to Matson [1976, 151].

(32.) Elise Springer is writing insightfully on the complex process of both taking on moral responsibility, and passing it on to others who may have more traction on the issues at hand. I have learned a great deal from her work-in-progress, “Criticism and Moral Concern.”

(32.) These issues are rendered still more complex when one overlays the English-language theories with Chinese discussions, because the relevant Chinese terminology is also somewhat ambiguous. *Fazhi* □□ can mean either rule by law or rule of law. *Yifa zhiguo* □□□□ clearly expresses an instrumentalist orientation, though whether it refers to purely ad hoc instrumentalism, or to principled rule by law, has been left unclear. *Yifa zhiguo* □□□□, finally, more clearly implies that the government is bound by law, and is thus the least ambiguous rendering of “rule of law.” See [Peerenboom 2002, 64].

(32.) Some scholars have in fact translated *jing* □ as “seriousness” or “inner mental attentiveness,” both of which miss this aspect of the concept. See Chan [1963] and Zhu [1990]. Gardner believes that “attentiveness” captures “reverence”; see Gardner [2004, 116n12].

(33.) See *Analects* 16:8. Zhu's comments are in Zhu [1987, Pt. 3, 124]. In an illuminating discussion of Confucian religiosity, Chung-ying Cheng suggests some differences with various Western conceptions, and specifically that “there cannot be found any holy terror or dread in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism.” See Cheng [1991, 475].

(33.) For a full list, see Winston [2005, 320 f] or Peerenboom [2002, 65–7]. Fuller [1969, 46–91] is the *locus classicus* for many of these ideas, and contains extended discussion of the moral implications of each criterion.

(34.) It is notable that in this section of his text, the only citations Dai Zhen makes to Song Confucians are to various statements of their involvement with Buddhism and Daoism. That is, he does not cite Zhu Xi as saying that *li* is external and rigorously controls the feelings. Rather, he more vaguely alludes to the policies of “those who govern” nowadays: *they* invoke coherence (*li*) in order to censure others.

(34.) Meyers discusses similarities and differences among emotional attitudes, occurent emotions, and standing emotions. Emotional attitudes seem closely related to temperament and character, though there is room for more work to unpack these relations. In light of the Neo-Confucian “one body with all things” teaching, we also might want to expand Meyers' definition beyond “interpersonal encounters.”

(34.) Scholars disagree on whether sagehood has had a significant continuing relevance in broader Chinese culture. For two important accounts, contrast Gu [2005] with Metzger [2005]. For a stimulating discussion of Feng Youlan's focus on everyday life rather than on the quest for sagehood, see Chen [2007].

(34.) Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the similarities between creative response, in much the sense I am describing, and improvisational rather than score- or script-based performance, is helpful here. “The salient difference between acting from a script and improvising is that one has to be not less but far *more* keenly attentive to what is given by the other actors in a situation.” “[She] must suit her choice to the evolving story, which has its own form and continuity.” As in jazz improvisation, Nussbaum continues, “The perceiver who improvises morally is doubly responsible: responsible to the history of commitment and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context; and especially responsible to these, in that her commitments are forged freshly on each occasion, in an active and intelligent confrontation between her own history and the requirements of the occasion” [Nussbaum 1990a, 94].

(34.) Zhu felt that part of the classical commentary on the *Great Learning* was missing, and so wrote his own, which then circulated as part of the original. See Daniel Gardner's discussion in Zhu [1990, 104], which is also the source of this translation, though I have modified it slightly.

(35.) [Zhou 1990, 3]. One of Zhu Xi's major theoretical innovations was to identify ultimate coherence with “*tai ji*,” a term whose literal meaning is “supreme ridgepole” that he takes from Zhou Dunyi. Joseph Adler has shown that *ji* must be understood as “polarity,” by which he means the back and forth, ordered (i.e., coherent) change between the two poles of *yin* and *yang* [Adler 2008, 69–73].

(35.) Joel Kupperman used “really good person” in a lecture at Wesleyan University. See also Kupperman [1999], where the term also appears (though not explicitly as a translation of *junzi*).

(35.) In my view, Confucians need not take a position on the controversial issues raised by the most robust rule-of-law views, which require that for rule of law to be genuine, the laws in question must contain a variety of substantive commitments—such as protections for human rights, principles of social justice, and so on [Peerenboom 2002, 69–71]. As I have said and will reiterate later, contemporary Confucians will certainly insist that a range of rights—civil, political, economic, social, and others—be enshrined in law and afforded protection, but this is not because such rights are necessary for the system to count as a legal system at all.

(35.) Compare the discussion of rules in chapter 2. In addition, the considerable literature that exists on Aristotelian practical reasoning is relevant here. See the references cited in Note 30 of this chapter.

(36.) *Great Learning* 7. “Wrath” is “*fenzhi* □□,” more or less synonymous with the standard term for anger, “*nü* □,” but clearly used by Neo-Confucians as a technical term for errant anger. “*Nü*” is a neutral term which can be appropriate or not, depending on how and when it is manifested.

(36.) For another suggestion that *li* is like natural law, see Wood [1995].

(36.) Since I first wrote these words, the book *Nudge* has appeared in which its authors analyze a wide range of ways in which the “architecture” of choice situations can influence what we choose. They argue that such effects are unavoidable, and (partly for this reason) that we should pursue a policy of “libertarian paternalism”; see Thaler and Sunstein [2008]. The research that Thaler and Sunstein summarize will be useful to any Confucian seeking to design moderate perfectionist institutions. My brief remarks here focus on civil law, which Thaler and Sunstein do not discuss. “Virtue Jurisprudence” is a burgeoning field of inquiry whose most ambitious theorists claim that "the aim of the law is to make citizens virtuous" [Solum 2003, 181]. Duff [2006] contains persuasive criticism of such strong claims, but also articulates some significant ways in which criminal law ought to recognize and enforce moderate demands on virtue in the public sphere.

(36.) [Wang 1993 , 83 and 301]. See also Wang's discussion of Jia Yi's elaborate conception of stages [Ibid., 149].

(37.) It is interesting to note that based on his reading of *Mencius*, Yu Jiyuan distinguishes between two goals that are continuous and sequential, the "moral self" and the "perfect self." Only in the latter case does one fully realize oneself as a human being: "A person fully actualizes his nature not in oneness with society, but in oneness with Heaven, although if the society is one in which the way of heaven prevails, there is no tension between these two unities" [Yu 2001, 246].

(37.) It will probably be wise not to draw too stark a line between litigation and mediation, which in practice will often be mixed together in different ways. In addition, recourse to formal litigation must not be stigmatized such that it becomes merely a "last resort."

(37.) Wang is alluding to the well-known distinction between the "human mind" and the "*dao* mind": the former represents our selfish attachments; the latter, our all-encompassing (though not self-denying) reactions.

(38.) See Berthrong [2007, 10–12]. Influenced by his interpretation of Chen Chun's reading of Zhu Xi, Berthrong concludes that the rider has a more active role than I am allowing here. The extensive discussion of the horse-rider metaphor in the Korean Neo-Confucian "Four-Seven Debate" is extremely illuminating. I believe that the position at which Yulgok eventually arrives is the same as the view I am defending here. See Kalton et al. [1994, 173–83], though contrast this to Yulgok's earlier, perhaps more problematic view [Ibid., 115 and 152].

(38.) Remember that, as discussed earlier and also in the next chapter, sages are not "conscientious," but spontaneous in their perception of disharmony and in their reactions thereto.

(38.) The existence in late-Imperial Chinese society of norms to which inferiors can appeal against superiors is emphasized in Wood [1995].

(39.) See Section 5.1.1 on different views concerning whether we can empathize with "mere things." Also relevant here are Bridget Clarke's arguments, based on elements of Iris Murdoch's picture which have strong corollaries in Neo-Confucianism, that virtuous people will be able to identify patterns of discrimination and oppression. See Clarke [2003, esp. ch. 4].

(39.) Students in my Spring 2008 "Neo-Confucianism" class pressed a nice objection when I presented them with the argument of this paragraph. How do we know, they wondered, that M's motive is not simply to lessen discord within her family? Has she shifted to an inflexibly—and equally problematic, from an ethical point of view—sanguine view of D? My view is that Murdoch's text does not suggest that this is what has happened, but no judgment can be final: our efforts at commitment and self-improvement are open-ended and fallible.

(39.) In light of my emphasis in chapter 6 on the frequent importance of grief in harmonious reactions to complex situations, it is striking that in some of the historical examples cited by Chen, the sorrow of the magistrates is clearly generative of more harmony than would otherwise have been possible [Chen 2003]. Also relevant here is Wang Yangming's own discussion of how a judge should hear cases: “He has to see why the man in the wrong might have done something because he could not help it, while the party in the right may also have shown some faults. In this way, he would allow the persecuted party to state his situation, while the party receiving redress also must not escape responsibility. This would be to exhaust to the utmost the impartiality (*gong* □) of coherence” [Wang 1972, 70], slightly altered. See Wang [1985, *juan* 21, 5].

(40.) For insightful discussion of this theme, see both Antonaccio [2000, ch. 5] and Gordon [1995, ch. 2].

(40.) I elaborate on this idea, with attention to the possibilities of someone committed to harmony nonetheless standing up for his or her rights, in Angle [2008, 88]. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Confucians tend to see direct confrontations as less useful than more indirect criticism. Discussing the gradual and indirect means by which Shun eventually led his brother to reform his wicked ways, Wang Yangming says: “If one criticized [a wicked person's] mistakes, it would aggravate his bad nature. At first Shun brought about the condition in which Xiang desired to kill him because he was too anxious for Xiang to be good. This was where Shun was mistaken. After some experience he realized that the task merely consisted of disciplining himself and not of admonishing others. Consequently, harmony was achieved” [Wang 1983, 345 (§296)]; translation slightly modified from Wang [1963, 232].

(40.) See generally the essays in Hadot [1995], pp. 57 and 265 in particular.

(40.) [Ibid., 167]. Huang Yong believes that for the Cheng brothers, *li* is precisely the *activity* of “life-giving (*sheng sheng*),” but he stretches the evidence too far. A case in point is this short passage: he translates “□□□□□□□□” as “*li* as life-giving activity is natural and ceaseless.” He similarly claims that when Zhu says “this chair is a thing; that it can be sat in is its *li*,” Zhu is saying that *li* is an activity. See Huang [2007, 196 and 196n20]; the Zhu Xi reference is to Zhu [1997, 1768].

(41.) A striking, Confucian example of rancorous attitudes comes from Zheng Jiadong's portrait of twentieth-century New Confucians like Mou Zongsan. Zheng writes that these men were “embittered by the fact that so few people in the mundane world responded sympathetically to their views, and so their ideas failed to secure nurturing and corroboration.… They loathed the ways of the world, were aloof and acrimonious, full of anger, and readily abusive. They opposed and criticized reality; it would be difficult to say that in any real sense they were constructive” [Zheng 2005, 85].

(41.) This is Hadot's term; see Hadot [1995]. I discuss its relation to Neo-Confucian ideas in chapter 8.

(41.) Following the lead of the contemporary scholar Zhang Jiacai, John Berthrong has argued that at least for Zhu Xi's student Chen Chun, the Supreme Polarity is an instance of *li* that is fully “active.” See Zhang [2004] and Berthrong [2007].

(42.) The exact kind of impossibility differs depending on the specific Greek thinker. For Plato, it is metaphysically impossible for a human to attain *sophia*. Aristotle's views on this score are somewhat muddled. He does seem to think it is possible to attain *sophia*, but the life in question will be bizarre and “useless” from a human perspective [Aristotle 1987 , 422 (1141^{b})]. Even so, at the end of the *Nichomachean Ethics* he nonetheless recommends that we “must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us” [Ibid., 471 (1177^{b})].

(43.) [Zhang 1978, 12]. This passage is cited approvingly by Luo Qinshun [Luo 1990, 31]; translation from Luo [1987, 128–9], slightly altered. We should note that *li* does not play as important a theoretical role for Zhang Zai as it would for many subsequent Neo-Confucians, but Kasoff downplays its role in Zhang's thought too far. See Kasoff [1984, 52–3].

(43.) Rorty herself makes such an argument; see Dehart [1995] for another example.

(43.) See Wang's discussion of Shun in *Record for Practice* (§296).

(44.) For a recent effort to compare Aristotle with early Confucianism on this issue, see Yu [2007 , ch. 7]. While I am uncomfortable with the degree to which Yu uses language like “divine” and “saint” when discussing (or translating) Confucian sources, I am in basic agreement with his conclusion: “[For Aristotle,] the fulfillment of the practical self does not lead to the fulfillment of the theoretical self, and vice-versa. These are two models of human flourishing that cannot be fulfilled within a single career.… In contrast, in Confucius, there is only one continuous process of the development of the relational self, in which one's virtuous character keeps deepening and perfecting” [Ibid., 204].

(44.) In light of my discussion in chapter 6 of the emotional complexity that can accompany sagely “ease,” note that Tim's reflecting on how far his society needs to improve will be tinged with sadness or grief; this does not alter the ease with which Tim-the-sage responds to the situation.

(45.) For a detailed account of the context for and significance of Urmson's essay, see Flescher [2003 , ch. 1].

(45.) See, for instance, Zhu's statement that “With regard to coherence, [in each thing] it is always complete (*wubuquan* □□□)” [Zhu 1997, 52]; or “each thing contains the Supreme Polarity” [Ibid., 366].

(46.) Mother Theresa is mentioned in Ibid. [432]. Wolf also cites George Orwell's famous comment from his “Reflections on Gandhi”: “Sainthood is … a thing that human beings must avoid…. It is too readily assumed that … the ordinary man only rejects it because it is too difficult; in other words, that the average man is a failed saint. It is doubtful whether this is true. Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings” [Ibid. , 436n4].

(47.) [Melden 1984 , 79]; Melden suggests that they are “heroes” (and disagrees with Urmson's conflation of the categories of saint and hero) at Ibid. [81n15].

(48.) See Blum [1988]. Blum also uses the term “Murdochian exemplar” for those he labels saints, alluding to Iris Murdoch's notion of the best kind of person, which I will discuss in chapter 7. In addition to hero and saint, Blum also discusses the cross-cutting categories of “idealist” and “responder.” There is another interesting discussion of “saints” in the Preface to Flanagan [1991]; Flanagan's main point is that we do not have an adequate theory of moral psychology to explain such exemplars.

(49.) Flescher's account of “excessive” sensitivity, both the suffering and the great moral works it enables, bears comparison with Lisa Tessman's insightful remarks about the “burden” of sensitivity, and yet the difficulty of saying how much sensitivity is “enough.” See Tessman [2005, ch. 4].

(50.) Huang [2007, 203–4] discusses the connection that the Cheng brothers saw between sages and *shen*, a difficult term that means both “mysterious, wonderful” and “spirit” or even (tendentiously) “divine.” Huang explicitly raises the question of the appropriateness of taking *shen* to correspond to divinity or God in Western thought, and concludes that this is only apt if we follow certain revisionist Christian theologians in questioning the traditional notion of a deified, radically transcendent God.

(50.) The deep Buddhist concern to end suffering may be undermined by at least some ways in which their metaphysics is articulated; see Section 2.2.2.

(51.) Aaron Stalnaker makes precisely this argument about the classical Confucian Xunzi's view of sagehood: such an ideal of perfection is meant to chasten the virtuous, to keep them from self-satisfaction [Stalnaker 2006, 191 and 263].

(54.) The idea that “morality” as it has been understood in the last few hundred years of Western philosophy is too narrow has been widely endorsed in contemporary Western virtue ethics. Williams [1985] is a famous statement of this view; I particularly like Swanton's articulation of the way that virtue “seep[s] into every nook and cranny of life.” See Swanton [2003, 68–76].

(55.) [Alitto 1979 , 3]; see also Ibid. [30] for some discussion of his youthful efforts at personal cultivation. Alitto says “single-minded character building cannot avoid having a tinge of self-conceit.” See also Ibid. [46], for some discussion of Liang's father's own “life of scrupulous striving for moral perfection.”

(58.) One Western philosopher who sees the phenomenology of moral “choice” in a similar way is Iris Murdoch, whose views I will discuss extensively in later chapters. In an essay called “The Idea of Perfection,” she argues that it is a mistake to think that our will can make unconditioned choices among various goods. She writes that “I can only chose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort.… One is often compelled almost automatically by what one can see” [Murdoch 1970a, 37]. See also astute discussion of this theme in Colby and Damon [1992 , 70–6] and Flescher [2003].

(59.) She understands that the line between virtuous and vicious perfectionism can be tricky to draw, and requires “a sophisticated understanding of the relationships between the individual's own psyche, the facts of her behavior in a specific context, the social milieu in which she operates, and her attitudes toward that milieu” [Ibid., 208].

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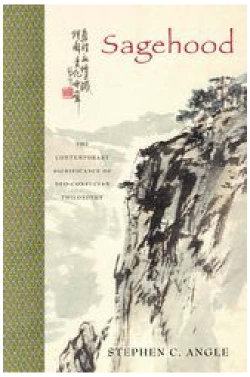

Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy

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Notes:

(2.) Zhu says that 70 percent toward self-improvement and 30 percent toward examinations should be fine, though he adds that “What the Sage [i.e., Confucius] taught others was nothing but self-improvement” [Zhu 1990, 191].

(3.) See *Analects* 9:6, and Chen [2000, 415]. The dating of passages in the *Analects* is very controversial; for an extremely stimulating approach that agrees with Chen in seeing *Analects* 9:6 as early, see Brooks and Brooks [1998, 52 and *passim*].

(4.) See *Analects* 6:30, which the Brooks argue is a late interpolation [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 176]. One challenge to the Brooks' dating scheme, it is worth noting, is *Analects* 7:26, which they date rather early, yet seems to view the sage as an elusive ideal.

(4.) Two words both Romanized “*zhi*” feature prominently in this chapter; I will distinguish them by adding tone marks (and, where needed, the Chinese characters).

"*Zhì* □" is "commitment"; "*zhī* □" is "know" or "knowledge."

(4.) Elsewhere Zhu says this is an example of the method of "cultivating this heart, so as to broaden the reach of one's humaneness" [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 9].

(5.) *Mencius* 6A:7; see also *Mencius* 4B:28.

(7.) Admittedly, *Analects* 7:30 reads: "The Master said, Is humaneness really far away? If I want humaneness, then it is already there" [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 44], slightly modified. But this is at most about a momentary achievement. It is clear from many other passages in the *Analects* that ethical improvement is a lengthy and demanding process.

(7.) I will discuss this slogan, which first appears in the Daoist *Zhuangzi*, in considerable detail in chapter 10. We should note in this context that the tie between sagehood and rulership was loose, even in the classical period; *Mencius* 7B:15, for example, describes as "sages" people who were not rulers. For further discussion, see Wang [1993, 12], Chen [2000, 419], and Bol [2008, esp. ch. 4].

(8.) See *Mencius* 2A:7, which reads in part, "The maker of arrows is afraid lest he should fail to harm people, whereas the maker of armor is afraid lest they should be harmed … . For this reason one cannot be too careful in the choice of one's calling" [Mencius 1970, 83]. Interestingly enough, when discussing the case of her business owner having to tell employees they have been fired, Stohr adds that for some people who must regularly deliver such news, a certain degree of coldness may not be a failing [Stohr 2003, 344n12]. Mencius would disagree, as I think would the Neo-Confucians, as I explain in the next paragraph. I would like to thank Sharon Sanderovitch for stimulating discussion of matters relating to these ideas, on which see also her Sanderovitch [2007].

(8.) For instance, Zhu Xi says "If he doesn't have a good foundation for himself, it's foolish of him to buy wood today to build the house." [Zhu 1990, 100]. Swanton writes: "Whether perfectionist strivings should be seen as marks of virtuous perfectionism depends on a host of factors, including depth motivations, intentions, degree of wisdom, … self-knowledge such as knowledge of one's strength and talents, seriousness of effects on others and the extent to which one has responsibilities to those others, the worthwhileness of the ends to which one is devoted, and the likelihood of one's success in achieving them, even with effort" [Swanton 2003, 209].

(9.) For instance, Gardner cites a passage from Zhu Xi that he translates in part, "Let us strip away the things covering over the mind and wait for it to come out and be itself" [Zhu 1990, 104]. Read in its original context, though, the emphasis of this passage is not on passivity but on gradually developing the ability to naturally look for harmony, rather than—to any degree—forcing oneself to do so. When the mind can thus naturally function, it actively looks around. See Zhu [1997, 183].

(10.) Frisina grounds this interpretation of Wang in passages like the following: "The man of humanity regards heaven and earth and all things as one body. If a single thing is deprived of its place, it means that my humanity is not yet demonstrated to the fullest extent” [Wang 1963, 56 (§93)].

(11.) Zhu Xi's views are not substantially different. Qian [1989, vol. 2, 364–78] is a classic study of Zhu Xi's notion of *zhì*. Qian Mu emphasizes that the continuity Zhu argues for between *zhì* and reverence (*jing* □) is a way of synthesizing the insights of Cheng Yi and Lu Xiangshan. A recent essay on Zhu Xi whose perspective on *zhì* fits extremely well with my discussion here is Marchal [2007, esp. 10–11].

(11.) In two insightful essays, Yu Kam Por has found evidence in classical and Han dynasty texts for a view very much like the one I am developing here. For instance, he notes that according to the *Analects* 6:18, “the deficiency of one value cannot be compensated for by additional qualities of another value” [Yu forthcoming, 63]. Commenting on this *Analects* passage, Zhu says both that “Only when students reduce what is excessive and supplement what is deficient can they attain complete virtue” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 3, 40], and that if either value “wins out over the other, coherence cannot be adequately [attained]” [Zhu 1997, 727]. Even more strikingly, Yu has found a passage in the *Yi Zhou Shu* that explicitly names the synthetic, harmonious point at which we should aim: “If there is an *in-between* (*zhong* □), it is called *three*. If there is no *in-between*, it is called *two. Two* struggles with each other, and results in weakness. *Three* constitutes harmony, and results in strength.” Yu adds, “*three* is not another claim that competes with the *two*, but a synthesis of the two” [Yu 2009, 17, emphasis in original].

(11.) *Analects* 3:18; translation from Brooks and Brooks [1998, 83, slightly modified]. *Analects* 9:3 also points to the permissibility of changing rituals as circumstances change. Roger Ames and David Hall have emphasized the creativity of ritual in many publications; see Hall and Ames [1987] for an early example.

(12.) One good example comes in the remarks he adds to the *Great Learning*: “… After exerting himself in this way for a long time, there will come a moment when he clearly penetrates everything. The manifest and the hidden, the subtle and the obvious qualities of all things: all will be available to him. The whole substance and vast operations of the mind will be completely illuminated. This is called ‘apprehending coherence in things (*gewu*).’ This is called ‘the extremity of knowledge (*zhi zhi zhi* □□□)’ ” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 1, 6]; translation substantially modified from Zhu [1990, 118].

(14.) For some telling examples of these ideas, see Zhu [1990, 103 (§2.17), 134 (§4.31), and 141 (§4.47)]. In addition to his frequent talk of “obtaining for oneself (*zide* □□),” Zhu also talks of “embodied comprehension (*tiren* □□)” and sometimes of “obtaining via embodied comprehension (*tirende* □□□),” as in the last passage cited.

(14.) See Ivanhoe [2002, ch. 5] and Ivanhoe [2000]. Ivanhoe describes Zhu Xi's approach to self-cultivation as “recovery” and Bryan Van Norden has argued that Zhu Xi combines a “discovery” model of with elements from “development” and “reformation” models [Van Norden 2007]. These both contrast with the pure “discovery” model they see at work in Wang Yangming. I am suggesting here that Wang, too, must be seen as more of a mixed case.

(15.) Zhu is not completely consistent on this issue. I mentioned earlier *Analects* 7:6, which reads “The Master said, ‘Committed to the Way, based on *de*, close to humaneness, and acquainted with the arts.” In the context of the *Analects*, where *de* is a moral charisma that may well fall short of full *ren*, this statement is not problematic. But in light of Zhu's understanding of *de*, seeing *ren* as a further achievement, beyond *de*, is a bit tricky. Faced with this dilemma, he sometimes says that in fact *de* is not reliable without the still deeper achievement of *ren*, or that if one only has *de* and not *ren*, one can lose *de* [Ibid., 866, 870]. To be sure, there are differences between *de* and *ren*, as I discuss later. But I view the idea that *de* is unreliable as a mistake forced on Zhu by his commitment to harmonizing all classical texts, to the extent possible, into a single system.

(17.) From Section 3 of Zhou Dunyi's *Tongshu*, this appears very near the beginning of the greatly influential anthology Zhu Xi coedited, *Reflections on Things at Hand*. Translation from Zhu and Lu [1967, 8], slightly modified.

(18.) [Zhou 1990, 16]. In light of the last sentence, note that the ease with which sages act virtuously is a major topic of this study, dealt with most directly in chapter 7. A final point worth noting is that at least once, Zhu Xi uses *de* to mean the very general virtue or excellence of a given faculty, when he says that “the *de* of one's ears is acuteness, the *de* of one's eyes is perspicacity, and the *de* of one's heart-mind is humaneness” [Zhu 1997, 104].

(18.) [Wang 1983, 57 (§16)]; translation from Wang [1963, 25], slightly modified. On “congealing of the sage essence,” see Wang [1983, 58]. The terms “beautiful person,” etc., come from *Mencius* 7B:25.

(18.) I discuss Cheng Hao's influential formulation of the “form one body with all things” idea in chapter 7, where I also review its relation to the idea of “humaneness.” Zhu Xi comments extensively on the *Western Inscription*, expanding on (among other things) Cheng Yi's idea that Zhang's insight is best understood through the lens of “Coherence is one, but simultaneously distinguishable into many” [Zhu 1997, 2269–70].

(18.) This is true even for Wang Yangming, notwithstanding his stress on finding the *li* within one's own mind, because the “things (*wu* ▯)” on which Wang instructs us to focus are relational. As he says, “wherever one's intention is directed is a thing. For example, when one's intention is directed toward serving one's parents, then serving one's parents is a ‘thing’” [Wang 1983, 37 (§6)]; translation modified from Wang [1963, 14].

(20.) [Wang 1983, 73 (§37)]; translation from Wang [1963, 34].

(21.) Zhu [1991, 154], slightly modified. The classical citations are *Analects* 12:2 and *Mencius* 7A:1, respectively.

(21.) In Wang [1983, §140], the two phrases follow immediately on one another, suggesting that “mind is coherence” is simply a way of emphasizing the importance of the “coherence of mind.” See also Wang [1983, §117 and §222] for *xin zhi li*, and *passim* for *xin ji li*.

(21.) Wang makes the same point in a slightly different way when asked whether joy is present when one's parent has died and one is crying bitterly. Wang says: “There is real joy (*le* □) only if the son has cried bitterly. If not, there won't be any joy. Joy means that in spite of crying, one's mind is at peace. The original substance of the mind has not been perturbed” [Wang 1983, 343 (§292)]; translation from Wang [1963, 230].

(23.) “*Duo neng* □□”—a phrase being quoted from *Analects* 9:6, which we discussed briefly earlier—literally means capable of many things or omnicompetent, and certainly did not have, in its original context, the sense of truly “limitless” ability. By the Song dynasty, though, many seem to take it to be equivalent to “*wusuobuneng* □□□□,” which is literally “able to do anything.” Zhu Xi uses the phrases interchangeably. See Wang [1999, 32].

(23.) Also from *Mencius* 2A:6, and see also *Mencius* 1A:7, wherein King Xuan exhibits similar feelings on seeing an ox being led to ritual slaughter. In addition, *Mencius* 7A:45 bears comparison with Wang: “A gentleman is sparing (*ai* □) with things but shows no humaneness toward them; he shows humaneness towards the people but not filial affection (*qin* □)” [Mencius 1970, 192, slightly altered]. The chief difference with Wang is that the underlying sense of continuity emphasized by Wang—since all the feelings he identifies are aspects of “humaneness”—is very attenuated in Mencius.

(24.) In contrast, *Mencius* 5A:1 recognizes the complexities caused by multiple values. Shun weeps because he cannot please his parents, but he does not wallow in grief. My student Ben Brewer has noted an intriguing parallel between *Mencius* 5A:3 (discussed above, in which Xiang is simultaneously enfeoffed and banished) and 7A:35 (in which Shun flees with his father): Could we not consider the latter case to involve the banishment of the Blind Man? Shun gives the Blind Man his son's full love and attention, but at the same time removes him from society. We typically see the removal from society as a matter of safeguarding the Blind Man from arrest, but does it not also protect others from the Blind Man? This reading of 7A:35 helps it to better accommodate all the relevant values.

(24.) Perhaps this is what Zhu means by “When [a sage] asks despite knowing, we see the ways in which sages are not self-sufficient (*zi zu* □□)” [Zhu 1997, 560].

(27.) The issue of when and why someone might pause to reflect or look again is complex and depends, in part, on how closely the person has approached sagehood. Zhu Xi is critical of a certain sort of deliberateness that always involves pausing to measure cost and benefit, rather than acting directly. On the other hand, he acknowledges that a pause is sometimes apt, though whether this is by way of acknowledging the weightiness of the situation, or because extra caution against error is needed, is not clear. See Zhu [1997, 211], Zhu [1990, 188], and Tillman [1982, 149]. My discussion of the different reasons that sages might engage in dialogue is also quite relevant; see chapter 9. In addition, full consideration of this question should take into account Swanton's discussion of the difference between times when automatic processing of problems is apt, and when critical reflection needed. She says that experts do not dispense with the latter, and indeed they deploy it more systematically than novices when encountering a novel or hard problem [Swanton 2003, 259]. Swanton's notion of “critical reflection” can be usefully compared with the felt need for a “pause” in deliberation that is sometimes experienced by the contemporary exemplary figures studied in Parks Daloz et al. [1996, 133].

(28.) For a very similar sentiment in which a shouldering of burdens and a feeling of joy are combined, see Zhu Xi's reading of *Mencius* 2B:13, discussed in chapter 6, Note 31.

(28.) Blackburn [1996] argues that such situations are quite common, and offers useful discussion of “plumping,” which in some circumstances might be quite lighthearted, in others weighty and ritualized.

(28.) Zhu actually sounds very much like Wang when he says, “The Way is … so distant that even sages cannot … comprehensively understand it … . But the coherence (*li* □) that is the reason for things, though hidden and not visible, can nonetheless be known and acted upon” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 2, 8]. This statement is a comment on *Zhongyong* 12, which says that “ … even sages in trying to penetrate to [the Way's] furthest limits do not know it all” [Ames and Hall 2001, 93].

(30.) See, in particular, Zhu's analogizing reverence to someone guarding a door [Zhu 1990, 119–20]. Donald Munro writes that this image “suggests an ever alert state in which one is always mindful of the prospective mesh between an emerging sentiment and the demands of the rules of conduct” [Munro 1988, 127]. See also Choi [unpublished] and my earlier discussion in Angle [1998]. There is evidence in this very passage against understanding Zhu as straightforwardly telling as to guard the door, however, since he says that ideal reverence will have the result that there are no “depravities” against which to guard, no “self” to be subdued. But how can this be, if reverence involves the post-facto suppression of problematic feelings as they emerge into consciousness?

(30.) For a different view of the relations between Zhu and Wang on sagehood, putting more emphasis on their differences (while still recognizing key, underlying similarities), see Guo [2003]. Another interesting difference between them lies in their understanding of Confucius himself. Briefly, Zhu Xi (following Cheng Yi) believed that Confucius was born a sage and did not need to engage in rigorous cultivation; he described himself as going through such cultivation (especially in *Analects* 2:3) only out of humility and to inspire others' efforts. Wang, in contrast, believed that Confucius had to work so that his “commitment” gradually “matured,” just like anyone else. This view of Wang's will be a major topic of chapter 7; on Zhu's view, see Zhu [1987, Pt. 3, 8].

(31.) Another classic passage that bears on the present point is *Mencius* 2B:13, especially as interpreted by Zhu Xi. Mencius has left the state of Qi, having failed to convert its ruler to the Way. He appears saddened, and a disciple questions whether a *junzi* should have such a reaction: it goes against Mencius's famous teaching of the “unmoved heart.” Mencius responds rather cryptically that *Tian* apparently did not wish a true king to arise at this point; why should he be unhappy? Zhu Xi's commentary is insightful, and whether it is the correct reading or not, reveals his own thinking quite clearly. “We can see here the simultaneous presence, without contradiction, of the sage's commitment to worry on behalf of the world, and the complete sincerity of his taking joy in *Tian*” [Zhu 1987, Pt. 4, 58]. Worry or concern or sadness can be combined in the sage's breast with joy: Mencius is suffering no “regret” in my technical sense. For an insightful and pathbreaking discussion of this passage, see also Ivanhoe [1988].

(31.) For relevant discussion, see Cheng [1991, 382–8]. Wang Yangming says something very similar, though he emphasizes interconnectedness so much that the unique thing drops out of the picture almost entirely: “Concentrating on one thing means the absolute concentration of the mind on universal coherence” [Wang 1983, 56 (§15)]; translation from Wang [1963, 25]. For a passage that notes the continued presence of particulars, depending on their relevance to the situation, see *Record for Practice* (§63).

(33.) [Wang 1983, 182 (§139)]; translation from Wang [1963, 109–10], slightly altered. For an early discussion of this story, see *Mencius* 5A:2.

(39.) In light of my emphasis in chapter 6 on the frequent importance of grief in harmonious reactions to complex situations, it is striking that in some of the historical examples cited by Chen, the sorrow of the magistrates is clearly generative of more harmony than would otherwise have been possible [Chen 2003]. Also relevant here is Wang Yangming's own discussion of how a judge should hear cases: “He has to see why the man in the wrong might have done something because he could not help it, while the party in the right may also have shown some faults. In this way, he would allow the persecuted party to state his situation, while the party receiving redress also must not escape responsibility. This would be to exhaust to the utmost the impartiality (*gong* □) of coherence” [Wang 1972, 70], slightly altered. See Wang [1985, *juan* 21, 5].

(40.) I elaborate on this idea, with attention to the possibilities of someone committed to harmony nonetheless standing up for his or her rights, in Angle [2008, 88]. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Confucians tend to see direct confrontations as less useful than more indirect criticism. Discussing the gradual and indirect means by which Shun eventually led his brother to reform his wicked ways, Wang Yangming says: “If one criticized [a wicked person's] mistakes, it would aggravate his bad nature. At first Shun brought about the condition in which Xiang desired to kill him because he was too anxious for Xiang to be good. This was where Shun was mistaken. After some experience he realized that the task merely consisted of disciplining himself and not of admonishing others. Consequently, harmony was achieved” [Wang 1983, 345 (§296)]; translation slightly modified from Wang [1963, 232].

(43.) See Wang's discussion of Shun in *Record for Practice* (§296).

(48.) See [Zhu 1997, 1768] for the *li* of a chair.