

The Virtues, Moral Inwardness, and the Challenge of Modernity

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1 Introduction

Stephen C. Angle's book *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* is a fascinating attempt to take Neo-Confucian moral thought seriously as contemporary philosophy. Most readers will close this book with the strong feeling that Angle has opened up new and highly promising vistas for cross-cultural philosophical inquiry. His writing style is admirably clear and always engaging, and while he attempts to draw out the systematic implications of Neo-Confucian teachings, he remains remarkably close to the original texts. Besides developing quite a sophisticated interpretation of Chinese thinkers like ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) and WANG Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529), he also engages with contemporary virtue ethicists like Iris Murdoch, Michael Slote, and Christine Swanton. In this way, Angle's book cashes in on an intuition probably shared by many scholars working on Chinese philosophy, namely that the only way to prove the relevance of pre-modern Chinese thought today is to go to the street-corner and engage with current debates in Western philosophy.

Angle's interpretative framework rests on one central claim: that the concept of *li* 理 should be translated as “coherence” or “the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together,” and not as “principle” or “pattern,” as it has most often been translated in the past (122).¹ This claim is directly related to his second thesis, that a stable commitment to finding harmony is indispensable for moral action (128-9). Both claims have countless implications and ramifications and ultimately lead Angle to a set of far-reaching conclusions. There have already been a couple of book reviews,²

¹All the below citations that do not specify a source are from Angle 2009. I am indebted to the two anonymous referees for extensive and very helpful comments.

²Compare van Norden 2010, Cline 2010, Neville 2011, Tiwald 2011a, and Chong 2012. See also Angle's reply to Tiwald's review and the response by the latter (Angle 2011 and Tiwald 2011b).

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so ignoring many of Angle's contributions, in the following essay I will directly focus on what I regard to be the controversial issues: (1) The basic conflict between Angle's virtue-ethicist framework and the more traditional deontological framework that can be found in twentieth-century Chinese scholarship; (2) the internality of the concept of *li* that Angle, in my opinion, does not do full justice to; (3) the demandingness of *li* that Angle's account tends to play down; (4) Angle's use of the concept "moral perception" that, in my opinion, although articulating an important dimension of the Neo-Confucian moral vision, still leaves larger issues unsolved; and (5) the contradictions inherent to the "politics of sagehood" favored by Angle. I will (6) finish with a few more general remarks on Angle's methodology and the possibilities of a "rooted global philosophy." In *Sagehood*, Angle takes up arguments of various Neo-Confucian thinkers in order to establish his framework, but for the sake of brevity I will focus on his interpretation of ZHU Xi and WANG Yangming as they are the two most important representatives of the Neo-Confucian discourse.

2 Two Interpretative Frameworks

Angle's confident claim that Western virtue ethics and Neo-Confucianism "have a lot to talk about" (51) and his attempt to develop a Neo-Confucian version of virtue ethics must seem rather surprising to readers in the Chinese world. During most of the twentieth century, scholars in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan considered Neo-Confucian teaching to be a species of Kantian deontology or used Kantian terminology to re-articulate and evaluate Neo-Confucian teachings.³ I do not think that Angle willfully ignores this scholarship; in fact, he provides us with at least three reasons to believe that the virtue-ethicist interpretative framework might indeed have a point. First, the idea of sagehood that lies at the center of the Neo-Confucian ethical vision is comparable to the Aristotelian notion of the *phronimos* who embodies a kind of contextually sensitive responsiveness (and is not concerned, at least not primarily, with abstract rules or principles) (22-23). Second, the concept of "virtue" (*de* 德) and related concepts like "humaneness" (*ren* 仁), "appropriateness" (*yi* 義), and "wisdom" (*zhi* 智), play crucial roles in the particular moral psychology developed in Neo-Confucian writings (55-57). Third, the cultivation of character and fine emotional states is the highest goal of Neo-Confucian ethical education (135-144). Nevertheless, it remains a fact that this virtue-ethicist interpretative framework runs against the standard interpretation of Neo-Confucianism in the Chinese world, thus I think we have reason to give this discrepancy a second thought.

The Kantian story (written most brilliantly by the philosopher MOU Zongsan 牟宗三, 1909-1995) goes something like this: according to the authentic Neo-Confucian doctrine (as represented by the thought of WANG Yangming), morally worthwhile action must be motivated *purely*: morality has this strict kind of unconditional value that motivates immediately (beyond all empirical incentives, imperatives of self-interest, and human sensibility). In Kantian language, an action is morally good only

³ Here I am thinking of the well-known interpretations of scholars like MOU Zongsan 牟宗三, LAO Sze-kwang 勞思光, YU Yingshi 余英時, CHEN Lai 陳來, and LEE Ming-huei 李明輝 (see for example LEE Ming-huei 1997).

if it proceeds from a subjective principle or “maxim” that is fit to be a universal law; in Neo-Confucian language, an action is morally good only if it proceeds from an intention that is identical with *li* (accordingly, *li* is interpreted as equivalent to the Kantian “moral law”). Therefore, Neo-Confucians want us to go through a long process of moral cultivation and purification of our motivational structure, until the “moral law” (*li*) determines it entirely, and we are no longer subject to empirical motives contrary to the “moral law.” At this state, the inner center of our self (which in Kantian language is the “will,” in Neo-Confucian language the “heart-mind” [*xin* 心 and “nature” *xing* 性]) is free of all contingent influence. We are moral by virtue of being rationally free and independent of external determination.⁴

There is undoubtedly a need for further specification; also, a couple of rather annoying difficulties are connected with this approach (a basic problem seems to be that the unbiased reader will have difficulties in locating an explicit notion of “reason” or “practical reason” in Neo-Confucian texts; many readers will also remain rather unconvinced by Mou’s all too optimistic belief in the existence of some sort of intuitional faculty that directly reveals the presence of the “moral law” in us). But we don’t have to follow all the baroque complexities of Mou’s prose, in order to get his main point: Neo-Confucians are not concerned with the consequences of our actions or the relative value of virtuous states or character traits, but only care about the unconditional value of the moral “ought” that is somehow closely connected to a faculty inside the agent.

At this point, we are drawn to conclude that Mou’s interpretation can hardly coexist with the virtue-ethicist approach advanced by Angle in *Sagehood*. Or can this conclusion be avoided? More broadly speaking, what to do about this clash of interpretations? Obviously, very complex matters both of historical accuracy and philosophical plausibility are at stake, which are difficult to discuss economically. In my view, the crucial question might be how exactly we understand *li* and its relationship to the “virtues” (*de*). Thus, since the concept of *li* is also, as I have already said, the focal point where various lines of argument in Angle’s book concur, it is a good place to start an investigation into what is most deeply at stake in *Sagehood*.

3 *Li* and The Inwardness of Morality

Although Angle’s interpretation of *li* 理 is quite complex, at its core it offers us an accessible, succinct, and even elegant answer to a very old question. Following the lead of Brook Ziporyn, Angle translates the Chinese concept *li* as “coherence”: to possess *li* implies “responding coherently in ways that generate situations with evermore inclusive coherence” (43). It is by virtues like “humaneness” (*ren* 仁) that the agent articulates the “overall coherence” of his or her life, “with respect to ever-larger contexts” (57). Even more substantively, Angle calls *li* the “valuable and intelligible way that things fit together” (122). The basic assumption that there is a harmonious, organic unity among all phenomena leads the Neo-Confucians to the

⁴ See MOU Zongsan 1968–69 and 1985. For a more detailed account of his interpretation see Billioud 2011: 34–67.

claim that the idea of “forming one body with all things” motivates us to choose the virtuous option in a particular situation (69-71). Accordingly, the virtue-ethicist imperative demands from us: “Aim to realize harmony” (59). But Angle actually does not see Neo-Confucians very much concerned with imperatives and reasons for actions; instead, he holds that Neo-Confucians want us to strive to *perceive* the “coherence” inherent to a particular situation and then actualize it (49; compare 121-123). In other words, *li* is highly situational, context-sensitive, and does not imply repeatability (33). However, *li* is at the same time, at least partially, constituted by our inner, most natural reactions to particular situations (35).

All these are, of course, far-reaching claims. Now there is a certain ambiguity in Angle’s book about what “coherence” actually stands for: On the one hand, Angle often underlines the objective dimension of *li* (qua “natural patterns” of the world) (a position connected with ZHU Xi’s thought); on the other hand, he tries to gesture toward a more open, dynamic, and subjective account of *li*, in which the reactions of the individual actor would be, at least partially, constitutive of *li* (connected with WANG Yangming). To some extent, this ambiguity merely reflects the fact that Angle does not attempt to re-construct a particular Neo-Confucian thinker (CHENG Hao 程顥, CHENG Yi 程頤, ZHU Xi, WANG Yangming, or DAI Zhen 戴震) but wants to speak for the whole movement. However, in his exchange with Justin Tiwald, Angle has already slightly revised his original position: he now prefers the translation “Coherence” (with a capital C) for *li* in order “to signal that speaking of Coherence is to make a significant metaphysical claim about the structuring of the universe, rather than a deflationary view according to which *li* is whatever one happens to find coherent” (Angle 2011: 239). At this point, we might of course wonder whether Angle still wants to defend his earlier claim that Neo-Confucianism is “agent-based” in Michael Slote’s sense of the word (84); but it is actually another issue that, I believe, potentially undermines the virtue-ethicist approach and can be seen as playing into the hands of the Kantian interpretative framework: that is the fact that all Neo-Confucians (ZHU Xi and WANG Yangming included) are very adamant about regarding *li* as internal to our inner self.

Since the Cheng brothers identified *li* with our inner “nature” (*xing* 性), all Neo-Confucians understood *li* and *tianli* 天理 (“Heavenly Pattern”) as some kind of innate endowment: while for Mencius *xing* is processual, dynamic, and thus in constant interaction with the outside world, ZHU Xi and the other Neo-Confucians have a much more internalized understanding of *xing*: now, it describes the deepest and therefore more or less static core of our selfhood that needs only to be recovered (compare Ivanhoe 2002: 46-57). At this point, it is important to notice that internal does not mean *empirically* internal (internal to our ordinary emotional life): insofar as our *xing* contains the “ten-thousand” *li*, which are “beyond forms” (*xing er shang* 形而上), *xing* is also “beyond forms,” i.e., is beyond all dispositions or traits of human character. And, at least according to Mou, *xing* somehow corresponds to the Kantian idea of a priori in the sense of being “independent of all experience” and, at the same time, “generated by human beings through the faculty of reason” (compare Schmidt 2011: 266). Therefore, although it does not become directly manifest in our ordinary, empirical conscience, it is present at any moment of our life, as the ground of our actions, and as the “flawless moral nature within the inward space of human beings” (CHAN Lee 2010: 629; compare Billioud 2011: 36-41). Only the sage, not ordinary

persons, is able to let his or her “flawless moral nature” (*xing* or *xingti* 性體) “emanate” (*chengxian* 呈現, *liulu* 流露) spontaneously, unhindered by *qi*, egoist desires, or passions.⁵

What does this all mean? Angle is of course aware of the internality of *li* (35); and, at one point, he even posits: “Only behavior that springs from one’s inner heart counts as *de*” (53). But he does not develop this further in his book; instead, he often speaks of the moral reactions to situations as grounded in virtuous dispositions that can be described empirically, as if the Neo-Confucian virtues were “fundamentally grounded in our experience” (89).⁶ In another context, reacting to Justin Tiwald’s objection, Angle admits more explicitly than before that following the *li* “need[s] not be about the conscious perception of coherent practices” but consists of more profound, non-conscious reactions of the agent to his or her environment (Angle 2011: 238; compare Tiwald 2011a). But as soon as we have thus admitted as much, we come much closer to accepting Mou’s claim that the notion of *xing* or *xingti* directly corresponds to Kant’s faculty of the “free will,” implying both the ability to act in a spontaneous, unconditioned way and the awareness of absolute, unconditional obligation. To put it more bluntly: in some fundamental way, the “internal” and the “external” are separated, and it is this very gap, Mou claims, that constitutes our spiritual freedom. Although I am not sure that the whole Neo-Confucian argument can be reconstructed in Kantian language, I tend to think that Angle’s account neglects what I want to call the *moral inwardness* of the Neo-Confucian actor.

And it is precisely this Neo-Confucian emphasis on moral inwardness, I believe, that creates difficulties for the virtue-ethicist interpretation of *li*. Angle’s stance is relatively clear: he regards *li* (or better: the possession of *li*) as a settled, virtuous disposition that motivates us to act virtuously.⁷ In contrast, Mou seems to interpret *li* as something akin to the Kantian “reasons for actions” that are generated by the Categorical Imperative (i.e., as reasons that are not related to the external world, but instead articulate our freedom, since actions based on moral reasons must be caused spontaneously or entirely from ourselves).⁸ So here we might have identified a really worrying issue: if Mou’s interpretation is correct, *li* cannot be simply grounded in ordinary emotional life and the possession of *li* cannot correspond to the development of virtuous dispositions. In other words: if we strive to realize the Neo-Confucian

⁵ See, for example, the very clear analysis in Fuji 2011: 75-83, 104-109.

⁶ Thus, I am also not entirely convinced by Angle’s claim that Neo-Confucianism is better grounded in ordinary human experience than Iris Murdoch’s vision of moral life: the Neo-Confucian account of *li* may prove to be similarly moving, but ultimately is perhaps as elusive as Murdoch’s famous idea of “the good” (86-89; compare Murdoch 2001).

⁷ Thus, when analyzing ZHU Xi’s famous statement “Humaneness is both the coherence of love and the virtue of the heart-mind,” Angle underlines that “virtue” is a “cultivated, consistent ability to correspond correctly” linked to the “heart-mind” (56-57).

⁸ MOU Zongsan’s analysis of *li* captures this sense quite well: *li*, which he understands as “principle” (the “that-by-which” *suoyiran* 所以然), has an ontological dimension in the sense that it “can be directly grasped within our heart/mind, in a given situation, as something active”; thus, it is “no longer descriptive but points to that by which a reality can really be generated” (Billioud 2011: 66, fn. 114). Being “active,” *li* initiates a process of creation: moral value and moral reality is created *by the moral action itself*. This idea may sound somehow mysterious to the modern (Western) mind, but for Neo-Confucian thinkers the idea of action is closely connected to the idea of a dynamic and creative process. Following MOU Zongsan, Sébastien Billioud has argued convincingly that Confucian thought in general presupposes a subject-centered, practical ontology that is very different from traditional Western ontology (Billioud 2011: 123-160, especially 144-155).

imperative “Aim to realize harmony” just for pragmatic or power-driven reasons, our actions won’t have much moral value at all and will certainly not lead to true harmony with the cosmos (since *li* cannot be grounded in “selfish desires”). Instead, the Neo-Confucian imperative must be motivated by higher, rather transcendent reasons.

But is it still possible then to re-articulate *li* in the secular language of modern philosophy? I am not sure or, at least, I haven’t found an entirely convincing interpretation yet. In the end, Mou seems to have taken refuge to a decisionistic view of moral action (centered around “the concrete, singular, existential, immediate [decision], implying responsibilities that one cannot sheer away from” 具體的、獨特的、存在的、當下的、責無旁貸) (Mou 1968–69, 1: 654). Angle’s account is actually not so different from Mou’s, when he describes harmony as “a singular achievement in response to a particular situation” (65). But Angle would obviously not be satisfied with a decisionistic paradigm of moral agency, so I wonder how he can overcome the tensions inherent to the Neo-Confucian account.

4 Moral Perception

If *li* is in fact internal to our deeper selfhood, why should there be a need to *perceive* the *li*? Especially as far as WANG Yangming’s thought is concerned, it must come as a surprise that Angle refers to Iris Murdoch’s principle “True Vision Occasions Right Conduct” and Lawrence Blum’s famous example on the importance of moral perception (“Tim, a white male, waiting for a taxi”) in order to reconstruct Wang’s principal claim about harmony (128–131). If I understand him correctly, Angle thinks that, according to WANG, we should pay attention to the morally salient features of particular situations, as if these were external properties or common sensibles. But, I believe, the solution to the problem of *li* cannot lie in any sort of moral realism, since WANG himself, in one of the most famous episodes of his biography, abandoned the observation of external things like bamboo (obviously realizing that the *li* of the bamboo cannot be discovered as a real property *on the bamboo*) and decided to develop a new and much more inward-turned understanding of morality. Or, to put it more bluntly, WANG is not concerned with real properties, but with a particular kind of moral consciousness, and therefore his idea of perception must be active, spontaneous and holistic, not passive, mechanic and particular (compare Ivanhoe 2002: 25–26).

Admittedly, Angle, when analyzing the responses of the Neo-Confucian subject to his or her environment, sometimes underlines that “such responses are not merely perceptual, but affective as well” (119). He even speaks of some kind of “active moral perception” (121). But his use of the Aristotelian idea of moral perception might still be less helpful than expected. We should not forget that even ZHU Xi, although his understanding of *li* has often been said to be relatively “objectivist,” does not demand us to study empirical reality but merely wants us to read books and focus on the “patterned structure” of the world (Kim 2000: 322)! Angle sometimes uses the language of objective ends,⁹ and once even endorses Christine Swanton’s idea that virtue is the “disposition to respond well to the ‘demands of the world’” (58; compare Swanton

⁹ For example, Angle writes (on WANG Yangming) that “the universe is patterned in such a way that we should and must bear choosing parents over strangers, sacrifices over animals, and so on” (103; compare 98).

2003: 21). But are the demands that *li* places on us really identical with the “demands of the world”? I think that Kirill O. Thompson has a point when he writes (on ZHU Xi): “*Li* in this, the real, sense are not readily open to untutored direct perception or abstract contemplation. They can be discerned and responded to only after one has undergone an intense and dedicated effort of practice, study, and reflection. Discernment of *li* is a deeply subjective process” (Thompson 1988: 40). In a similar vein, MOU Zongsan’s frequent use of the verbs “create” (*chuangzao* 創造) and “be active” (*huodong* 活動) seems to tell us that Zhu, Wang, and the other Neo-Confucians are concerned with the subjective, value-creating, even voluntaristic side of human agency. Thus, if the Kantian interpretative framework is correct, it is quite obvious that Neo-Confucians are less concerned with *seeing reality as it is* than Angle realizes.

An obviously related issue is the question of how much room there is for creativity according to the Neo-Confucian teachings. Angle tells us that Neo-Confucians highly emphasized the creativity of the individual moral actor (123-125). But, again, I tend to think Angle somehow overstates his case. The famous Mencian stories quoted by Angle about Shun’s marrying without first telling his parents (123-125) and Shun’s treatment of his villainous stepbrother Xiang all gesture toward a rather dynamic and open understanding of harmony. But we should not forget that the protagonist in these two stories is the sage Shun, *not ordinary human beings like ourselves*. So how much creativity did Neo-Confucians grant to ordinary human beings? How much variety of moral behavior was allowed? At this point, it seems important to me that the interpretation of the Mencian stories has never figured very prominently in later Neo-Confucian writings. And the reason for this is, of course, that the Neo-Confucian moral vision is deeply immersed into particular human relations and contains a particular image of what human life is, but this image is relatively narrow and tends to exclude many other options.¹⁰ The Neo-Confucian “creation” (*chuangzao*) is some kind of spiritual act, coping with necessity by transcending it, but it is *not*, at least in my view, the making of new options. I also admit that Neo-Confucians often write about the idea of a “larger whole” (“forming one body with all things”); nevertheless, I am not convinced that this idea includes the empirical features of the world or our selves, our desires, and self-interests. Thus, I am also rather skeptical about Angle’s claim that “there is no morality-versus-prudence distinction” in Neo-Confucianism (92). In my view, Neo-Confucians believe that only by transcending our very personal and thus necessarily partial point of view are we able to fully “recover” the deepest core of our selfhood, namely the pure and original *xing*. In other words, Angle’s interpretation tends to downplay both the inter-nality and the demandingness of *li*.

Much of what I have said until now could be construed as if I were primarily concerned with historical accuracy. And Angle might just reply that this criticism does matter less than I suppose, as his goal is not a purely historical reconstruction of the original Neo-Confucian teachings, but to point out the constructive potentials of Neo-Confucian moral theory (6-7). However, I tend to think that to the extent Angle emphasizes the particularistic, “rooted” nature of his philosophical project, his arguments are in fact very often historical and contextual; we therefore need to take the

¹⁰ Consider also that the range of situations described by ZHU Xi and WANG Yangming is rather *narrow* (serving one’s parents, serving the emperor, fulfilling one’s duties as husband or wife, etc.); it is probably also much less open to empirical reality than the descriptions we find in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

original mode of thought of Neo-Confucian discourse very seriously. Despite this difference, Angle's rather constructive interpretation and my more historically minded objections share a common spirit: like Angle, I do believe that Neo-Confucian teachings actually pose a *philosophical* challenge to the ethical theories that we are used to in the West today and thus need to be taken seriously as *philosophical* statements (although not necessarily as one unified philosophical position).

MOU Zongsan would certainly have thought Angle's approach wrong, since he actually regards "virtue" as a derivative term: for example, in his seminal *Constitutive Heart-Mind and Nature* 心體與性體, he clearly states that "virtues" (*de*) merely manifest themselves due to particular situations, but the ultimate ground for deciding whether the actor "corresponds correctly" to a particular situation is found in the inner self (i.e. the "heart-mind" and "nature") (MOU Zongsan 1968-69: 3: 240-41).¹¹ However, I don't think that this conclusion is necessary; there are at least two reasons for this stance. First, a strong concern for moral inwardness might well be integrated into a virtue-ethicist framework, as scholarly work on Kierkegaard has demonstrated (see Roberts 1995). Second, the Kantian approach runs into deep trouble when it comes to the universalizability of *li*: As MOU himself points out repeatedly, the Neo-Confucian *li* (qua "moral law") is necessarily embodied in individual actors, for example in sages like Confucius; and he also clearly believes that there cannot be a formalized, objective account of the "moral law" beyond the concreteness of human life (some algorithm or duty generator like the Categorical imperative).¹² Thus, the only meaningful way of understanding the Neo-Confucian *li* might be a dispositional account that somehow does justice to the more transcendent nature of *li* (I am eager to hear more on this point from Angle).

In sum, I think, it is hard to see how Neo-Confucianism can be reconstructed as a principle-based ethics centered around the motive of duty and free will. Thus, I still tend to endorse Angle's observation that the Neo-Confucian idea of responsiveness can best be understood as a disposition that "springs from a fine internal state rather than from self-control" (53). Having come this far reveals, at the least, the complexities of Neo-Confucian thought, and I actually wonder whether we could integrate the Neo-Confucian concern for moral inwardness into a refined virtue-ethicist framework. At this point, however, it is difficult to press the issue further. I am looking forward to learning more from Angle on these complex issues.

5 The "Politics of Sagehood"

Angle's book is admirable not only for its extensive exegesis and philosophical analysis, but also for his deep commitment to the continuous dialogue with the living tradition of Confucianism. In many ways, his goal is not so different from the goal of

¹¹ In fact, there are many passages in ZHU Xi's commentary to the *Four Books* (*si shu* 四書) in which virtues are described as somehow derivative from the *li* embodied in the "heart-mind" and "nature" (see for example ZHU Xi 1983: 131-132).

¹² MOU Zongsan 1968-69, 3: 115-118. Billioud correctly points out: "Will's ability to be a law unto itself (*lifa* 立法)—in other words, our ability to act in such a way that the maxims of our choice are conceived as a universal law (which is the basis of Kantian autonomy)—becomes for MOU Zongsan an ability to apprehend (*jue*, *mingjue*) and perceive (*ganshou* 感受) principles (*li*)" (Billioud 2011: 65). But again, the act of perception shouldn't be understood in the sense of *sensorial* perception.

MOU Zongsan and many other contemporary Chinese scholars: to demonstrate that Neo-Confucian moral thought is still a viable philosophical option in the age of global modernity. The position ascribed to the Neo-Confucians as articulated by Angle makes it quite clear that the strong concern with harmony should be an essential part of any “politics of sagehood.” Angle takes up MOU Zongsan’s idea of “self-negation” (*ziwo kanxian* 自我坎陷) and tries to demonstrate that while the ideal of sagehood should never become an objective standard for politics again (as it used to be in traditional Chinese society), the Confucian quest for moral perfection and the reverence for harmony should still play an essential role in the future framework of a genuinely Confucian democracy (197–221).

Now Angle’s ambitious claim about the indispensability of Neo-Confucian teachings for modern Chinese-speaking societies raises at least two important objections. The first is obviously the epistemological status of the claims about “coherence.” If Angle wants to reduce the role of the law system to a “system of second resort” (220–1), he needs to provide us with a set of objective standards: The relatively vague self-descriptions about “seeing and feeling coherence” advanced by single actors ought to be translated into more robust claims that can be justified discursively and intersubjectively in public. But does Neo-Confucianism contain such standards? It is not easy to answer this question. Undoubtedly, the notion of *li* 理 should somehow be part of the answer; however, I fear, the relative vagueness and rather contextual nature of *li* make it difficult to articulate such standards that would be accessible to each individual, independent of its cultural context. But this is exactly what is demanded in modern, open, and pluralistic societies like Hong Kong or Taiwan. In other words, there is a strong tension between Neo-Confucianism and the modern and secular political experience with its epistemological demands for clarity and consistency.

The second objection is connected to what I perceive as a general tension between pre-modern Neo-Confucian accounts of agency and the general mindset of modern societies. At one point of his book, Angle rather boldly claims that while the deliberative democrat “places belief in autonomy at the root of her values [...] the contemporary Confucian places a reverence for harmony” (214). In the age of postmodernism and intercultural understanding, cultural claims on modernity are very common; but we can easily imagine that most citizens in places like Taipei or Hong Kong would rather prefer the value of autonomy to the value of harmony. (Mou has, of course, tried to convince us that Neo-Confucian teachings do contain both the value of autonomy and the idea of self-legislation, but I am rather doubtful whether this line of argument can convince many unbiased observers.) Modernity, as Hegel famously put it, is about the “principle of subjectivity,” and while it might make sense on a more philosophical level to relativize this principle, on a more sociological level Hegel’s dictum seems to be rather close to reality. In particular, recent developments in Taiwan demonstrate that traditional values like the Confucian admiration of morally worthy persons all too often conflict with the basic mind-set of a democratic society. Interestingly, in a recent discussion between Taiwanese philosophers, a large number of participants were both sympathetic to Confucian values in general and very adamant about the need to free the Taiwanese education system from the influence of Neo-Confucian texts (see Taiwan Philosophical Association 2012). The reason for this is not too difficult to discern: while ideally the Neo-Confucian agent is sensitive to the particulars and the individual, etc., in reality the endorsement

of Neo-Confucian teachings is all too often accompanied by political, economic, and social interests that go against the other's autonomy and hinder the unbiased perception of social and political reality (think for example of gender issues). In one word, Neo-Confucian teachings may be less "particularistic" than Angle realizes (208), and in reality few social actors are willing to bring forward "good Confucian reasons" (206) for the value of autonomy. Also, as CHONG Kim-chong has demonstrated in his review of Angle's book, harmonizing all values, as the Neo-Confucian sage ideally should do, is not an easily available option for us in modern societies characterized by the conflict of highly divergent viewpoints (Chong 2012).

The question at issue concerns, of course, the precise role that Neo-Confucian claims can be said to play in modern societies. How does the search for harmony and "coherence" relate to the process of modernization itself (with its new forms of social organization and dependence, but also with the capitalist logic of self-preservation and self-empowerment)? How many social and political actors are actually willing to commit themselves to Neo-Confucian values? What does it mean to be endorsing Neo-Confucian values in a post-totalitarian society like the "People's Republic of China"? And to what extent does the nearly unlimited Neo-Confucian optimism—namely that spiritual transcendence can be embodied in individual actors and the derived claims to political and social authority—potentially undermine the secular basis of modern societies? I agree with Angle that Neo-Confucian virtue ethics, as a philosophical theory of personal improvement, certainly proves to be a very powerful and moving narrative about the quest to become a better, more virtuous person, and as such it can actually enhance our lives. But I am less optimistic than Angle about its future as a social medium and/or a political theory: in my opinion, the foundational, even "metaphysical" nature of the Neo-Confucian discourse on *li* makes it rather difficult to develop Neo-Confucianism into a general and reasonable theory of political agency.

6 Conclusion

Finally, let me articulate some thoughts on the larger hermeneutical and philosophical questions involved in Angle's project. Angle sees himself rooted in the broader Confucian tradition, and he aims to do "rooted global philosophy" that fosters "constructive engagements" with contemporary moral thought in the West. To be willing to encounter different traditions, to be open and flexible to philosophical challenges from other traditions proves to be essential for Angle's understanding of philosophy as a living tradition (7-8). This is a remarkably elegant definition of what philosophical activity should be in a global age when we are too often trapped in closed cultures and all too parochial worldviews. But what exactly are the broader implications of this methodological stance?

It seems to me that Angle articulates quite an influential understanding of philosophy in American academe, as it has been brought forward in particular by Alasdair MacIntyre: philosophy is a "mode of inquiry" closely connected to particular practices and traditions, but cannot and should not aspire to make truly universal claims (see MacIntyre 1988). Angle presupposes that he, as somebody trained at American universities in a subject called Chinese philosophy, can turn to Neo-Confucian texts in the same way that contemporary philosophers turn to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, i.e.,

not solely from scholarly piety, but hoping to find insights that could in principle illuminate current issues in ethics. In this process, Angle admits, we will change certain parameters of Neo-Confucian discourse and even pick out the stronger arguments and omit weaker arguments; thus the result is “not only a defense, but also a further articulation of Neo-Confucian ethics” (111). But he still claims to be speaking for *one* particular tradition. However, to what extent does this new philosophical stance still deserve to be called “Neo-Confucian”? The power of Angle’s interpretation comes, I believe, from the very appealing way he connects Neo-Confucian arguments with the ordinary language in which we express our modern moral experience (with concepts like the self, freedom, the virtues, ends, goods, etc.). But to what extent can Neo-Confucian texts claim to fully articulate this modern moral experience? These are, of course, complex matters with no ready-made answers, but as I have already said, I am less inclined than Angle to recognize the “modern” dimension of Neo-Confucian teachings. I hope that he could address these concerns in greater detail in his future work. While the Neo-Confucian writings may not contain a full-blown theory of virtue ethics, they could provide us with important insights into the intricate relationship between moral autonomy and virtuous agency in a very different cultural context than ours.

In sum, Angle’s *Sagehood* is one of the most distinctive and provocative studies in Chinese and cross-cultural philosophy to have appeared in several years. The reader should view my criticism as a constructive contribution to what I see as a common project: to better understand the Neo-Confucian moral vision, and, if possible, to re-articulate it as a non-Western alternative to the common moral theories in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Only after we have come to better understand the Neo-Confucian tradition and its continuing influence on Chinese culture today, can we begin to re-think contemporary moral issues from a truly global perspective.

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