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CHENG BROTHERS' NEO-CONFUCIAN VIRTUE ETHICS: THE IDENTITY OF VIRTUE AND NATURE

INTRODUCTION: MORALITY AND ITS POSSIBILITIES

One of the fundamental meta-ethical issues is the fact/value or is/ought relation. On the one hand, there is a question of whether we can derive a value or an "ought" from a fact or an "is." This question is about what is moral. David Hume first raised this question and his answer was negative, as he claimed that there is no link between "what is" and "what ought to be." G. E. Moore further argued that to attempt to derive "what ought to be" from "what is" is to commit a Naturalistic Fallacy. These days, despite some persistent oppositions, most moral theorists seem to have accepted the Humean dictum: "what ought to be" cannot be derived from "what is," although there is no agreement as to how "what ought to be" may be derived. On the other hand, there is a question of whether "what ought to be" implies "what can be." This question is about whether morality is possible. When we say that one ought to do something, we assume that one can do it, as morality cannot demand someone to do something that is impossible. So most moral philosophers have taken for granted the so-called Kantian principle that "'ought' implies 'can'."

Both questions are familiar to anyone interested in meta-ethical issues. However, not everyone regards them as two sides of the same coin, and the potential conflict between the received answers to these two questions has not been clearly noted. Hume's law assumes the independence of moral values from fact, that is, what one ought to do or to be has nothing to do with who one is or what one does. Yet Kant's principle assumes that we cannot determine what one ought to do or to be independently of the fact of what one can be—what one "is" able to. Of course, this potential conflict may be reconciled to some extent by making a distinction between "is" and "can." While this distinction does make some sense, by using "is able to" as a

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synonym for “can,” I intend to show the similarity between “is” and “can.” The central question is whether in order to know what someone is/does or what one can be/do, we need to know some facts about the person.

This article attempts to see whether value can be independent of fact. I shall provide a negative answer. In this regard, I think the two traditional Western models of ethics, Kant’s deontology and Bentham/Mill’s utilitarianism, are both faulty. Kant’s duty (“ought”), defined by his formulation of categorical imperative, is not derived from the fact of what a person is (including “can be”) but from his pure reason. Although he claims that the moral laws are self-legislated, the self that makes moral laws is a noumenal self, while the self these moral laws are supposed to govern is a phenomenal self. So although it is Kant himself who says that “ought” implies, or rather, should imply, “can,” he does not show that a person in the phenomenal world “can do” what he thinks the person “ought to do.” Bentham and Mill’s utilitarianism is believed to have paid more attention to facts about human beings. As a matter of fact, it is sometimes claimed that utilitarianism pays so much attention to such facts that it commits the Naturalistic Fallacy. The idea is that utilitarianism starts from the very fact that everyone likes to have pleasure and avoid pain. However, utilitarianism does not therefore derive, from this fact, the value that everyone ought to seek one’s pleasure and avoid one’s pain. Rather, it simply says that it is good to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. In order to do so, utilitarianism claims that one ought to make some sacrifice of one’s own pleasure or to endure some pain if it can increase the total amount of happiness of the society. Yet neither Bentham nor Mill has shown that what one “ought” to do in their view is indeed something one “can” do, especially if there is such a thing as psychological egoism.

Given such difficulties, the newer and at the same time also older (as it may be traced back to Plato and Aristotle) model of ethical discourse, virtue ethics, seems to be more promising. Contemporary virtue ethicists have developed this model primarily to replace or at least supplement utilitarianism and deontology, which they see as problematic (although not exactly in the same way that I see them as problematic). According to virtue ethics, a moral person is a virtuous person, and a moral action is one that a virtuous person does. A virtuous person does something not because he or she is commanded to do it or because it will bring out some good consequences. It is rather because he or she has the internal disposition to do it. This internal disposition is at least promising with regard to addressing the Kantian principle of “‘ought’ implies ‘can’.” It is for this reason that this article will focus on this particular model of moral discourse. However, my

conviction is that the versions of virtue ethics that have been developed today—what I call non-ontological virtue ethics—are still deficient and in many cases suffer from the same problems as utilitarianism and deontology do, as I shall show in the next section. In the remaining sections, I shall develop an alternative version of virtue ethics, what I call Neo-Confucian ontological virtue ethics, based on Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao's identification of virtue and nature.

NON-ONTOLOGICAL VIRTUE ETHICS: THE NEO-ARISTOTELIAN AND CLASSICAL CONFUCIAN FORMS

Although not all those who advocate virtue ethics appeal to Aristotle for inspiration, many of them, such as G. E. M. Anscomb, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre, John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum, and Michael Slote, do. They are described as neo-Aristotelian because, as pointed out by Rosalind Hursthouse, they “allow themselves to regard Aristotle as just plain wrong on slaves and women,” and also because they do not restrict themselves to Aristotle's list of virtues; their ethics “is ‘Aristotelian’ in so far as it aims to stick pretty close to his ethical writings wherever else it can.”¹

In Aristotle's discussion of virtues, since the function of a human being is “an activity of soul which implies rational principle” (1098a7), the function of a good human being is “the good and noble performance of these [actions of the soul that imply a rational principle]” (1098a14). Since such good and noble performance of actions is called virtue, Aristotle concludes that “human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue” (1098a17). Thus, on the one hand, virtue does not arise in us by nature, for “of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity; but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them” (1103a27–33). On the other hand, virtue is not against our nature: “we are fitted by nature to receive them” (1103a24–26), as humans by nature are rational social animals. In Aristotle, as pointed out by Hursthouse, virtues thus “benefit their possessor and make their possessor good *qua* human being.”²

Such Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics seems capable of avoiding the problem related to the possibility of morality: we humans can be virtuous, because we humans as rational social animals are equipped to receive virtues. However, it has a very instrumental-

ist conception of virtues, namely, virtues serve to “benefit their possessor and make their possessor good *qua* human being.” In other words, virtues are not good in themselves; they are good because the purpose they serve is good—to help the soul of its possessor to better act according to the rational principle. Aristotle’s interpretation of human nature as activity of the soul according to the rational principle is a naturalistic interpretation. He reaches the interpretation by searching for what is common to all humans and at the same time what is unique to humans. In this process, there is no explanation to show why it is a “morally” good thing to allow human souls to better act according to the rational principle. If Hobbes’s conception of human nature turns out to be true, an Aristotle would perhaps have to say that human virtues are whatever that make human beings *qua* human beings, that is, to do better in their war against each other.³ In this sense, we may say that Aristotle also derives the “ought” from the “is” and so commits the Naturalistic Fallacy.

In recent years, many efforts have been made to explore the possibility of interpreting Confucian ethics in light of virtue ethics currently developed in the West, although their main focus is classical Confucianism.⁴ However, so far, not much attention has been paid to the issue of the relationship between virtue and nature, and its implication for virtue ethics or ethics in general. Confucius’s *Analects*, without doubt, is the wellspring of any discussion of Confucian virtues, such as *ren*, rightness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness. With regard to my central question of the relationship between virtue and nature, however, the *Analects* does not provide enough material for speculation. As one of Confucius’s own students said, “We can hear our master’s view on culture and its manifestation, but we cannot hear his view on human nature and the way of heaven” (5:12). We do not precisely know what Confucius’s view of human nature is and how the virtues that he discussed are related, if at all, to human nature.

Mencius, in contrast, not only provides us with a clear notion of human nature but also presents a picture of how it is related to human nature. According to Mencius, “human nature is originally good just as water originally flows downward. There is no human being without this good nature, just as there is no water that does not flow downward” (6a2). However, when he claims that human nature is good, he does not state that humans are born with virtues. Instead, he tells us that human nature only includes the beginnings of the four cardinal virtues: “The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of *ren*; the feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of rightness; the feeling of deference and compliance is the beginning of propriety, and the feeling of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom. Men have these

four beginnings just like they have their four limbs" (2a6). In other words, humans have the natural tendency to become virtuous, but they are not naturally virtuous. This is important for Mencius, because in his view, moral cultivation is merely to follow, develop, and expand this natural tendency into actual virtues. If human nature is evil, then moral cultivation means distorting or violating human nature so that a virtuous person, paradoxically, will not be a human being as he lacks the human nature that is originally evil. It is in this sense that he said that such virtue as *ren* and rightness would become calamity (6a1); at the same time, if such virtues are already in human nature and humans *qua* humans are born to be virtuous, then there would be no wicked people and there would be no need for moral cultivation, which obviously is not true.

In this sense, we may indeed say that Mencius derived "ought" from "is": one ought to have these four cardinal virtues because there are seeds of these virtues in human nature. However, we cannot say Mencius committed the Naturalistic Fallacy, because he not only said that we should be virtuous because there were seeds in our human nature but also that human nature was good. In other words, the fact, the "is," from which Mencius derived the value, the "ought," is not morally neutral; it is a fact that is already embedded with value. However, Mencius gave us no precise idea about the possibility of morality: while we "ought" to develop the seeds of virtues in our nature, "can" we? In Mencius's view, human beings become evil for two reasons. First, there are mean qualities with which one is born, although Mencius does not recognize them as part of human nature, as he is looking for something that distinguishes humans from other beings in his definition of human nature. The second is the environmental condition. There is no assurance from Mencius that the good qualities in human nature can overcome the mean qualities and resist unfavorable environmental factors. So while it is clear that one "ought to" develop one's inborn four beginnings, it is not clear if one "can" do so.

According to Xunzi, human nature is evil: "one's inborn nature is to seek for gain. If this tendency is followed, strife and rapacity result and deference and compliance disappear. By inborn nature, one is envious and hates others. If these tendencies are followed, injury and destruction result and loyalty and faithfulness disappear. By inborn nature one possesses the desires of ear and eye and likes sound and beauty. If these tendencies are followed, lewdness and licentiousness result, and the pattern and order of propriety and righteousness disappear" (*Xunzi* 23.1). Thus, in order to cultivate virtues in a person, some external forces have to be applied. Just as crooked wood must be heated and bent before it becomes straight and blunt metal must

be ground and whetted before it becomes sharp, so “the sage-kings of antiquity, knowing that the human nature is evil, and that it is unbalanced, off the track, incorrect, rebellious, disorderly, and undisciplined, created the rules of propriety and rightness and instituted laws and systems in order to correct man’s feelings, transform them, and direct them so that they all may become disciplined and conform with the Way” (*Xunzi* 23.1).⁵ Since all human beings can be made virtuous, whereas animals cannot, by nature, human beings must have something that animals do not. This, as Xunzi told us, is the faculty to know and practice virtues. In Xunzi’s view, people can know and practice virtues but do not want to unless externally forced.

Xunzi’s theory faces a more serious problem with regard to the possibility of morality: if human nature is evil, can humans be made good? Donald Munro has examined several passages in the *Xunzi* that apparently suggest some goodness in human nature.⁶ This is not the place for a detailed discussion of these passages, but it suffices to say that what they indicate is that humans not only have (whereas animals do not have) the potential to but also actually can (whereas animals cannot) reform themselves, change their evil nature, and become a sage. However, there does seem to be a problem here. According to Xunzi, humans can become good only with external influences, the sages and the propriety they established. However, the sages, according to Xunzi, have the same evil nature (*Xunzi* 23.2; 23.4). Then who or what made the first sages?

From the above discussion, we see three views of the relationship between virtue and nature. In Xunzi, virtue is at odds with human nature; in Aristotle, virtue helps humans to fully realize their nature, but there is no indication of whether human nature tends toward virtue or not; in Mencius, virtue is consistent with and further develops human nature. However, none claim that virtue is human nature. The reason is apparently clear: if human nature already includes virtue, then everyone is already born to be a virtuous person and there is no need for moral cultivation. However, as we have seen, the separation of virtue and nature has also caused some problem in each of these positions.

THE IDENTITY OF VIRTUE AND NATURE IN CHENG HAO AND CHENG YI’S THOUGHT

In the Song period, the Cheng brothers, Hao and Yi, continued the Mencian line of thinking. Their theory of human nature maintains the Mencian position that human nature is good. At the same time, they

significantly modified and even fundamentally transformed this position, often without explicitly acknowledging their so doing.

First, the idea of human nature is no longer an anthropological/psychological notion but becomes a cosmological/ontological one. Human nature is identical with the *dao*, heart-mind, heaven, and most importantly, principle (*li*) (see *Yishu* 25; 321).⁷ Cheng Hao claimed that although he learned a great deal from others, the two words, *heaven* and *principle*, were his own creation (*Waishu* 12; 424). In the Cheng brothers' view, principle is the fundamental reality of everything in the world, including human beings. Hence, the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming, which they helped to initiate, has also been called the Learning of Principle (*lixue*). What is then the relation between the nature of things, including human nature, and principle? Cheng Yi said it unmistakably: "Nature is principle; the so-called principle is nothing but nature" (*Yishu* 22a; 292). In contrast to Mencius, who looked for human nature in the place where humans distinguished themselves from animals, for the Cheng brothers, human nature is not different from the nature of the ten thousand things. Actually, the adjective "human" before the noun "nature" does not appear in their discussion, as they simply use the term *xing* (nature). This is a particular emphasis of Cheng Hao. According to him, "humanity and heaven are united as one from the very beginning and there is no need even to unite them" (*Yishu* 6; 81). In his famous letter to Zhang Zai on stabilizing (human) nature, he made it even clearer. Zhang Zai's query was this: when one's nature is aroused by external things and becomes agitated, how may it be calmed? Cheng Hao replied that Zhang had this question because "you think that external things are outside and carry yourself to follow them, and that there are both things inside and outside your nature" (*Wenji* 2; 460). In actuality, there is no such distinction.

Second, Cheng Yi made the distinction between two different senses of nature. One is "what one is born with" (*sheng zhi wei xing*); and the other is "what is mandated by heaven" (*tian ming zhi wei xing*). For Cheng Yi, they cannot be confused: "In what one is born with, nature means what one is endowed with; while in what is mandated by heaven, it means nature as principle. Today we often talk about someone's inborn nature as temperate or intemperate. This is what is the so-called naturally (*tian*) made, the way we are born. This is human nature as natural endowment. However, nature as principle is all good. It is heavenly given and is the principle of the natural" (*Yishu* 24; p.313). This is the distinction between nature in the physical (*xing er xia*) or ontic sense, and nature in the metaphysical (*xing er shang*) or ontological sense.⁸ This distinction is crucial, especially

with regard to the deficiency in Mencius's account of human nature we mentioned earlier. Without this distinction, Mencius had to talk about the great and mean qualities one is born with, unable to present a coherent view of human nature: its great qualities are good but its mean qualities are bad. Cheng Yi's nature, in the ontological sense, represents what Mencius calls the great qualities. It is not merely what humans are born with; it is also that which enables human beings to continue to exist. It is, in short, nothing but humanity's actual existence. It is in this sense that human nature is always good. What Mencius regarded as the mean qualities belong to the "physical" and not the metaphysical nature; it is merely whatever one is born with. It is clear that the Chengs had the metaphysical sense of human nature in mind when they claimed that nature, including human nature, is the principle, heaven, and *dao*.⁹

Third, when they followed Mencius and claimed that human nature (in the metaphysical sense) is good, the Chengs did not merely say, as Mencius did, that there are four beginnings in human nature, which, if nurtured, can be fully developed into the four cardinal Confucian virtues. Instead, they posited that human nature is already virtuous, because nature possesses virtue and so virtue and nature are united. When talking about the five Confucian virtues, Cheng Hao referred to them in terms of nature, "*Ren* implies impartiality . . . ; rightness means what is proper . . . ; propriety means to distinguish; wisdom means to know; and faithfulness means 'that is the case.' All ten thousand things have their nature. These five are the constant natures" (*Yishu* 9; 105). Cheng Yi made the similar identification of virtue with nature: "*Ren*, rightness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness, these five are [human] natures" (*Yishu* 2a; 14).

Such a claim that virtue belongs to nature may sound surprising to the Western ear, since virtue is usually considered as something to be nurtured, something one acquires through moral cultivation. To better understand in what sense the Chengs believed that such Confucian virtues belong to human nature in particular and to the nature of ten thousand things in general, it helps if we examine their conceptions of the most fundamental of the five virtues, *ren*.¹⁰ When the Chengs talked about nature, principle, *dao*, or heaven as the fundamental reality of the ten thousand things, including human beings, they did not mean that this fundamental reality is beyond, beneath, behind, or before the ten thousand things in existence. It is, rather, the life-giving activity (*sheng*) itself. In other words, nature, principle, *dao*, or heaven is not some metaphysical being that has the life-giving activity. It is this life-giving activity itself that is manifested in the myriad things. Cheng Yi made this point very clear: "The *Dao* is the natural life-giving activity of the ten thousand things. So things'

having life in the spring and continuing growth in the summer are the *dao* as the life-giving activity . . . The *dao* is nothing but the everlasting life-giving activity without any forced efforts" (*Yishu* 15; 149). This is what the *Commentary on the Book of Change* calls the great virtue of heaven and earth. Cheng Hao directly related *ren* to this life-giving activity: "The great virtue of heaven and earth is the life-giving activity (*sheng*); 'in the fusion of the intermingling of heaven and earth, the ten thousand things are transformed and attain their purity.' This life-giving activity is the so-called nature. The most impressive aspect of the ten thousand things is the spirit of life. Therefore the origination [the life-giving activity] is called the chief quality of the good. This is *ren*. Humans are one with heaven and earth" (*Yishu* 11; 120).

How did they make the connection between *ren* as a moral virtue and the life-giving activity (*sheng*) as the ultimate reality of the world? Cheng Yi disclosed this connection most directly by explaining the common usage of the term *ren*, referring to the seed or kernel of a fruit that gives life to a new tree, even though in Cheng Yi's interpretation, *ren* does not mean the seed itself but the life-giving activity of the seed. In his view, the heart-mind is to *ren* just as the seed is to its life-giving activity: "When we talk about what is in charge, we call it the heart-mind; when we talk about its acting, we call it *ren*. . . . The heart-mind is like a seed, and its tendency to grow is *ren*" (*Yishu*, 18; 183–4). Cheng Hao's favorite way to disclose this sense of *ren* as the life-giving activity is by using a medical analogy: "Medical books describe the numbness of hands and feet as not *ren*. This is the best description [of *ren*]. To be *ren* is to be in one body with heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things and to see them as nothing but oneself. When one realizes this, what can be the limit of one's reach?" (*Yishu* 2a; 15). When one's hand is numb (not *ren*), not only is it the case that this hand cannot feel life, but it can also be said that it does not have life itself. He so illustrated his Confucian moral discourse with the medical description of not *ren*: "Physicians consider being numb, and having pain and itch as not *ren*; similarly, humans consider the lack of awareness, and not being able to know rightness and principle, as not *ren*. This is the best analogy" (*Yishu* 2a; 33).¹¹

Because one's nature is virtuous and virtues belong to human nature, Cheng Yi further claimed that "to act from one's nature is always good. For this reason, the sages give it [human nature] the names of *ren*, rightness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness" (*Yishu* 25; 318). In other words, virtues are no longer merely moral qualities; they are what constitute the metaphysical reality of human beings and, for that matter, of all other beings. It is in this sense that Cheng Hao talked about virtuous nature and the virtue of nature: "'Virtuous nature' implies how noble nature is. It means the same as 'nature

is good;’ ‘virtue of nature’ refers to what nature has” (11; p.125).¹² So the reason we ought to act according to our nature is not that whatever is natural is good, but that nature *is* good. In other words, nature is not a value-free fact from which we can derive values. The fact is already a moral fact. In this sense, the Chengs did not commit the Naturalistic Fallacy.

METAPHYSICAL VIRTUE AND PHYSICAL (PSYCHOLOGICAL) FEELING

It should be clear that for the Chengs, human nature is no longer an anthropological or psychological idea; it is an ontological or metaphysical idea. By attributing such Confucian virtues as *ren*, rightness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness to human nature, or even by identifying them with human nature, the Chengs not only reached the conclusion that human nature is originally good but also transformed moral virtues into the ontological foundation of all beings. This, however, raises several questions for us. First, if human nature and human virtue are metaphysical or ontological, how do we know that there is such a human nature and that it is virtuous? Second, if it is not the case that human nature has the beginnings of virtues, as Mencius claimed, but that it is already completely virtuous, do we not have to make the counterfactual conclusion that every human being is already virtuous and so no moral cultivation is needed? Third, if evil still exists, as it apparently does, what causes it and how may it be removed?

To answer such questions, the Chengs made a distinction between the metaphysical nature and the physical feelings (*qing*). In their view, while feelings come from nature, nature has to express itself in feelings. As Cheng Yi pointed out, “Whatever has life has nature; and whatever has nature has feeling. If there is no nature, how can there be feelings?” (*Yishu* 18; 204). In a passage sometimes attributed to Cheng Hao, it is more clearly stated that *ren*, rightness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness are the “five constant natures. As to commiseration and so forth, they are all feelings. All that is aroused is called feeling” (*Yishu* 9; 105). Here, the feeling of commiseration or love is the expression of *ren*, the feeling of shame and dislike is the expression of rightness, the feeling of deference and compliance is the expression of propriety, and the feeling of right and wrong is the expression of wisdom.¹³ It is in this sense that Cheng Yi argued that it is wrong to interpret *ren* as love (commiseration), or filial piety and brotherly love. About love, “Mencius said that the heart of commiseration is *ren*, people then believed that love is *ren*. Commiseration is indeed love, but love is feeling, while *ren* is nature. How can we

simply see love as *ren*? Mencius said that the heart of commiseration is *ren* because he had previously already said that the heart of commiseration is the beginning of *ren*. Since it is called the beginning of *ren*, it is not to be called *ren*. Han Yu was wrong to say that universal love is *ren*. Those who are *ren* indeed love universally, and yet we cannot simply see universal love as *ren*" (*Yishu* 18; 182). What about filial piety or brotherly love, which was considered as the root of *ren* in the *Analects* (1.2)? Since it is the root of *ren* that is nature, must it also belong to nature instead of feeling? To answer this question, Cheng Yi provided a unique interpretation of this sentence in the *Analects*: *xiao di ye zhe qi wei ren zhi ben ye*. This sentence is usually translated into English as "filial piety and brotherly love are the root of *ren*." However, for Cheng Yi, this sentence really means that "to practice *ren*, one has to start from filial piety and brotherly love. Because filial piety and brotherly love are only one aspect of *ren*, it is fine to regard them as the root of practicing *ren*, but it is wrong to call them the root of *ren*. The reason is that *ren* is nature, while filial piety and brotherly love are the function. There are only the four virtues of *ren*, rightness, propriety, and wisdom in nature. Where can you find filial piety and brotherly love there? *Ren* is in charge of love, but is there any love greater than love of family members?" (*Yishu* 18; 183. See also *Jingshuo* 6; 1133).¹⁴ Therefore, in the Chengs' view, filial piety and brotherly love are a particular kind of love and thus belong to feeling and not nature.

Accordingly, by distinguishing nature from feeling, the Chengs provided an answer to the first question we raised at the beginning of this section of how we can know anything about the metaphysical human nature. The answer is that nature has to express itself in feeling and feeling is the very expression of nature. From its expression in feelings, nature can be seen. Cheng Yi told us that the goodness of nature "can be seen from the feelings of the four beginnings" (*Yishu* 22a; 291). For example, "because of the heart of commiseration we know there is *ren*" (*Yishu* 15; 168). Because they believed that nature has to express itself in feeling, the Chengs also argued against Buddhism that urges us to abandon our feelings: "It is natural for [the metaphysical] nature to be expressed in joy, anger, sadness, and happiness. Now [Buddhists] claim that they have to be completely forced away in order to attain innocence. This is indeed to lose innocence" (*Yishu* 2a; 24).¹⁵

Let us look at the second question. If the metaphysical human nature is fully virtuous and such a nature will, by its own "nature" (as life-giving activity), have to express itself in feelings, then such feelings must be also good. If so, what is the need for morality? This question is actually related to the Kantian principle of "'ought' implies

‘can’.” We have talked about one side of this principle: if what one ought to do is essentially what one cannot do, then morality is impossible. The other side is that if what one ought to do is something that one cannot not do, then morality becomes impossible in a different way.¹⁶ The Chengs had a ready answer to this question. For them, while nature is always good, feelings can be either good or bad. They explained this by way of their interpretation of the well-known sentence in the first chapter of the *Doctrine of the Mean*: “Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused, it is called equilibrium (*zhong*); when these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony (*yong*).” In the Chengs’ view, when the aroused feelings attain due mean and degree, such feelings are good. However, when there is either excess or deficiency, they become bad or evil. Since nature, which is the same as principle, is always good, Cheng Yi asked “how can joy, anger, sadness, and happiness, when not aroused, not be good; when stirred to the mean, they are still all good. Only when they are not stirred to the right degree that they become evil” (*Yishu* 22a, 292).¹⁷ In short, for the Chengs, while human nature is originally completely good, its expressions in feelings can be either good or bad. It is good when it attains the right measure and reaches harmony. It becomes bad when it is aroused wrongly.¹⁸

Here, however, it seems that the Chengs only explained the nature of evil but did not answer the third question we raised at the beginning of this section: what is the source of evil and how do we remove it? Cheng Hao told us that “one’s feeling becomes obscured and unfit for the *dao* because, in most cases, of one’s resorting to selfishness and cunning” (*Wenji* 2; 460–461). Here we are selfish and cunning not because of our nature but precisely because we have not fully reflected upon our nature and mistakenly believed that we are separated from each other and from other things. Thus, in Chengs’ view, moral cultivation consists of two interconnected parts: to be reverent (*jing*) and to grasp the principle-nature. To be reverent is to have one master (*zhuyi*). This one master is nothing but the principle-nature. One’s heart-mind is indeed nothing but the principle-nature, but this does not mean that everyone has realized that. To be reverent is to let one’s heart-mind be fully occupied by one’s knowledge of principle-nature so that private desires will be unable to enter. In this sense, to be reverent means to grasp principle. This is what Cheng Yi meant: “Cultivation needs reverence; learning needs the extension of knowledge” (*Yishu* 18; 188). The purpose of such moral cultivation, to use Cheng Yi’s term, is to guide one’s feelings according to nature (*xing qi qing*) so that they will be in accord with the mean (see *Wenji* 8; 575). It is not to abandon the feelings, as the Buddhists advocate. The

ultimate goal is of course to become a sage, who, because his “feelings are in accord with all creation, has no feelings of his own;” who “is joyous because according to the nature of things before him he should be joyous, and is angry because according to the nature of things before him he should angry,” and therefore whose “joy and anger do not depend on his own mind but on things” (*Wenji* 2; 460–461). Here, what Cheng Hao meant is not that sages do not have feelings, but that because they are not selfish and cunning, their feelings are naturally aroused to the mean so that it seems that they do not have feelings.¹⁹

CONCLUSION: A NEO-CONFUCIAN ONTOLOGICAL VIRTUE ETHICS

So what have we learnt from the Cheng brothers' virtue ethics based on the identity of virtue and nature? First, the Chengs' identification of virtue with nature provides a solution to the problem of the possibility of morality, a problem faced by all secular ethics. (Religious ethics may be able to avoid the problem, to the extent that religion may require human beings to do things that they cannot do, or at least cannot do alone, because God may assist them, as St. Augustine believed.) A virtue ethics based on such an identification not only can tell us what we ought to do by telling us the kind of person we ought to be, but also that we can be the kind of person we ought to be. We can be persons of *ren*, rightness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness because such virtues are in our nature.

Second, in such a virtue ethics, what a human person “ought” to be is derived from what a human person “is,” without committing the so-called naturalistic fallacy. When Hume made the distinction between fact and value, and claimed that we can never derive a value (ought) from a fact (is), his underlying assumption is that a fact is value-free. The Chengs' identification of virtue with nature refutes such an assumption: the fact about human nature is rich with values, because nature is virtuous. Hence, the Chengs asked us to live a life according to nature not merely because it is our nature (as if we ought to live a different life should our nature turn out to be different), but also because our nature is good. A common question that is usually asked in this context is: do we see human nature as good because we think it is good, or do we think it is good because it is good? However, this question does not occur to the Chengs. Such an either-or question assumes that there is an objective human nature over there and a subjective observer here. This is what Cheng Hao criticized as the separation of oneself as the inner from the others as outer, which are originally unified. In the Chengs' 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.

Third, as Hursthouse has pointed out, the fundamental difficulty of any virtue ethics based on an idea of human nature is how we can know what human nature is, for there seems to be no neutral point of view from which to look at human nature objectively.²⁰ How can we then have a picture of the metaphysical human nature? For the Chengs, the world is full of signs of life and what they did is to search the foundation of such signs, which is indeed similar to what Charles Taylor calls the ontological articulation of moral response. Taylor's ontological articulation "is not merely formulating what people already implicitly but unproblematically acknowledged. . . . Rather it could only be carried forward by showing that one or another ontology is in fact the only adequate basis for our moral responses, whether we recognize it or not."²¹ Similarly, the Chengs' attempt is to provide an ontological conception of nature to articulate the signs of life and then use the signs of life that we can observe to check our ontological conception of nature. Through such a reflective equilibrium, we can better understand both the signs of life that we can observe and the ultimate reality of the life-giving activity that we cannot observe.

Finally, in the first section, we mentioned that the Kantian "ought" is also derived from an "is," that is, from the fact of what human being is in the noumenal world. We also pointed out that such "ought" does not necessarily imply "can" for a human being living in the phenomenal world. Now, the Chengs' idea of human nature is also a metaphysical or ontological one. Does it have the same problem here: a virtue ethics whose "ought" is derived from the metaphysical fact that human nature is good may be something that a human being in the "physical" world "can" *not* do? The answer is negative. It is so because the Chengs' metaphysics or ontology is very different from Kant's. Kant's metaphysics assumes that there is another world beyond and above this one, whereas there is no such world in the Chengs' metaphysics. Nature, as ultimate reality, is not some *thing* that exists behind, beyond, or beneath the ten thousand things. It is the *activity*, the life-giving activity (*sheng*), of the ten thousand things. In other words, there is no nature that is outside the ten thousand things, and there is nothing that does not have this life-giving activity. Despite its immanent nature, however, in the Heideggerian sense, Cheng's conception of nature as life-giving activity is more genuinely metaphysical.

ENDNOTES

1. *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
3. This becomes clearer if we can see that Aristotle discussed human virtue as one species of a genus: "something's virtue is relative to its own proper function" (1139a17). In other words, Aristotle can determine virtue or vice only by its relation to the *telos* its possessor is supposed to have, but he was not concerned about the evaluation of such *telos*, as long as it is the natural *telos* of the thing. For an argument that Aristotle's interpretation of human nature is evaluative and not naturalistic, see Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics," in Altham and Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); for a response to this argument, see Bernard Williams's "Replies," in *ibid.*
4. A.S. Cua, for example, claims that "throughout its long history, Confucianism has stressed character formation or personal cultivation of virtues (*de*). Thus it seems appropriate to characterize Confucian ethics as an ethics of virtues" (Cua, *Moral Visions and Traditions: Essays in Chinese Ethics* [Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press], p. 269). See also James T. Bretzke, "The Tao of Confucian Virtue Ethics," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 35 (1995): 25–42; Chong Kim Chong, "Confucius' Virtue Ethics: Li, Yi, Wen and Chih in the *Analects*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 25 (1998): 101–130; Edward Slingerland, "Virtue Ethics, the *Analects*, and the Problem of Commensurability," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 29 (2001): 97–125; Young-Bae Song, "Crisis of Cultural Identity in East Asia: On the Meaning of Confucian Ethics in the Age of Globalisation," *Asian Philosophy*, 12 (2002): 109–126; and Wong Wai-Ying, "Confucian Ethics and Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 28 (2001): 285–300.
5. It may be asked whether Xunzi's ethics in this sense is a virtue ethics, since, as Wing-tsit Chan pointed out, "rules of propriety shifted from being a means of personal moral cultivation to one of social control" (*A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963], p. 129). I think it is at least possible that Xunzi's ethics is still a virtue ethics. The necessary external force or social control is needed only to change the evil human nature. However, as soon as this is done, and humans become virtuous, such external force and social control are no longer needed.
6. See Munro, "A Villain in the *Xunzi*," in *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivision and His Critics*, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe (Chicago: Open Court, 1996); for a response to Munro's article, see Eric Hutton, "Does Xunzi have a Consistent Theory of Human Nature?," in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, edited by T.C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).
7. Parenthetical references to Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi are from *Collection of Two Chengs (Er Cheng Ji)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), with the book title and volume number, followed by page number.
8. Carsun Chang characterized this distinction as one between the physical and essential natures (*The Development of Neo-Confucianism* [New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1957], 1:194–195).
9. Cheng Yi believed that nature in these two senses could explain why Confucius and Mencius talked about nature differently: "when Mencius said that [human] nature is good, he meant the origin of the nature. When Confucius said that [human] nature is not far apart, he meant that what people are endowed with are not very different from each other" (22a; p. 291).
10. Mencius usually only talked about four virtues: *ren*, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Later Dong Zhongshu added the fifth, faithfulness. The Chengs sometimes talked about four virtues and sometimes five. About the relationship between *ren* and the other virtues, we are told that "*ren* is the whole and the other four are four limbs" (*yishu* 2a; 14; see also *Yizhuan* 1; 697. See also *Yishu* 15; 154). For Mou Zongsan's explanation, see his *The Substance of Heart/Mind and the Substance of Nature [xin ti yu xing ti]* (Taipei: Zhengzhong Shuju, 1982), p. II: 222–223. Lin Jiping is obviously

- wrong to claim that the relationship between *ren* and other virtues is a substance/function relation or the metaphysical/physical relation (see his *An Investigation of Song Learning* [*song xue tan wei*] [Taipei: Lantai chubanshe], p. 1.281).
11. Zhu Xi disagreed with Cheng Hao's conception of *ren*, arguing that awareness or consciousness (*jue*) is only included in *ren* but is not *ren*. Mou Zongsan replied that this awareness for Cheng Hao is not used in a cognitive sense. Since lack of awareness of pain and itch is not different from being dead, awareness means life (*The Substance of Heart/mind and the Substance of Nature*, II. 226).
 12. Clearly A.C. Graham was wrong to hold that Cheng Hao held a different view of human nature than his brother. In his view, Cheng Hao did not think human nature is good; instead, he believed that "to do good is in accordance with the nature, to do evil goes against it; but the nature itself cannot be called good" (*Two Chinese Philosophers* [La Salle: Open Court, 1992], pp. 45 and 46).
 13. It is interesting to note that no feeling is mentioned here as expression of the metaphysical virtue/nature of faithfulness. According to Cheng Yi, out of the five virtues, "the four have their beginning [in feeling]; only faithfulness does not. There is only [the feeling] of lack of faithfulness" (*Yishu* 15; 168. See also *Yishu* 9; 105). For some discussion of this issue, see Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, pp. 53–55 and Cheng Chung-ying, *The Dao of Unifying the Internal and External: Essays on Confucian Philosophy* [*he nei wai zhi dao: ru jia zhe xue lun*] (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Science Press), p. 226, note 1.
 14. Cheng Hao entirely agreed with Cheng Yi on this interpretation (see *Yishu* 11; 125). Mou Zongsan believed that although Cheng Yi's interpretation of the words *wei ren* as "practicing *ren*" is not grammatically correct, it is permissible in this context (*The Substance of Heart/Mind and the Substance of Nature*, p. 304).
 15. Meng Peiyuan is thus right to point out that, in the Chengs' view, "although nature is 'metaphysical' moral virtue, it can be realized only through feeling. . . . In this sense, they don't advocate to extinguish feeling" (*The System of Category in Neo-Confucianism* [Beijing: People's Press, 1998], p. 225).
 16. As pointed out by John Danley, the Kantian principle says that "'ought' also implies 'cannot', in the sense that an agent has freedom or discretionary principle in acting." ("Ought' Implies 'Can', or The Moral Relevance of a Theory of the Firm," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 7 [1988]: 24).
 17. Earlier, when talking about feelings, the Chengs mentioned the four beginnings in Mencius. Here and in other places Cheng Yi talked about a different set of feelings, the so-called seven feelings: joy, anger, sadness, and happiness, love, hate, and desire. What is the relationship between the four beginnings and seven emotions? While the Chengs did not say anything clear about it, it later became one of the most important philosophical debates, the so-called "Four-Seven Debate" among Korean Neo-Confucians. Both sides agreed that the four beginnings are always good, while the seven feelings can be good or bad (for this debate, see M.C. Kalton et al. [trans.] *The Four-Seven Debate* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993]; for a discussion of this debate, see Cheng Chung-ying. "A New Interpretation of Yi T'oegye's 'Four-Seven' Theory in Light of Mencius and Chu Hsi." *T'oegye hakpo* 52 [1986]: 99–118). However, I don't think it is an appropriate interpretation of the Chengs. In my view, the four beginnings are general terms for human feelings, while the seven feelings are different incarnations of such beginnings. The four beginnings, when not aroused to the right measure, can also be bad (see *yishu* 2a; 14). Tang Junyi seemed to agree with my interpretation (see his *On the Origins of Chinese Philosophy: The Original Teaching* [*zhongguo zhexue yuanlun: yunajianpian*] [Taipei: Taiwan Student Books, 1990], p. 172).
 18. The Chengs have two different interpretations of evil. In addition to seeing it as excess or deficiency of feeling, they also interpreted it in terms of vital energy (*qi*): while nature is always good, "*qi* may be good and may be bad" (*yishu* 21b; 274). This interpretation seems to me fundamentally deficient, as it results in an untenable conclusion: "Some people are born to be good, while some people are born to be evil. This is both caused by the endowment of *qi*" (*Yishu* 1; 10).

19. Lin Jiping is obviously wrong to interpret this passage as saying that "to be happy with what everyone is happy with; to be angry with what everyone is angry with" (*Investigation of the Song Learning*, I: 266).
20. *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 20.
21. *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 10.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

Cheng Hao	程顥	<i>Songxue tanwei</i>	《宋學探微》
Cheng Yi	程頤	Tang Junyi	唐君毅
<i>de</i>	德	<i>tianli</i>	天理
<i>dingxing</i>	定性	<i>tianming zhi wei xing</i>	天命之為性
Dong Zhongshu	董仲舒	<i>Waishu</i>	《外書》
<i>Er Cheng ji</i>	《二程集》	<i>Wenji</i>	《文集》
Han Yu	韓愈	<i>xiaodi ye zhe qi</i>	孝弟也者其
<i>he</i>	和	<i>wei ren zhi ben ye</i>	為仁之本也
<i>He neiwai zhi</i>	《合內外之道：	<i>Xin ti yu xing ti</i>	《心體與性體》
<i>dao: rujia zhexue lun</i>	儒家哲學論》	<i>xing</i>	性
<i>Jingshuo</i>	《經說》	<i>xing er shang</i>	形而上
	(《程氏經說》)	<i>xing er xia</i>	形而下
<i>li</i>	理	<i>xing qi qing</i>	性其情
Lin Jiping	林繼平	<i>Xunzi</i>	《荀子》
<i>lixue</i>	理學	Yang Zhu	楊朱
<i>Lixue fanchou xitong</i>	《理學範疇系統》	Yanzi	顏子
Meny Peiyuan	孟培元	<i>Yishu</i>	《遺書》
Ming	明 (朝)	<i>Yizhuang</i>	《易傳》
Mou Zongsan	牟宗三		(《周易程氏傳》)
Mozi	墨子	Yu	禹
<i>qi</i>	氣	Zhang Zai	張載
<i>qi yu</i>	七欲	<i>zhong</i>	中
<i>qing</i>	情	<i>Zhongguo</i>	《中國哲學原論：
<i>ren</i>	仁	<i>zhexue</i>	原教篇》
<i>sheng</i>	生	<i>yuanlun: yuan jiao pian</i>	
<i>sheng zhi wei xing</i>	生之為性	<i>zhuyi</i>	主一
Song	宋 (朝)		

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