

Does ZHU Xi Distinguish Prudence from Morality?

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Abstract In Stephen Angle's *Sagehood*, he contends that Neo-Confucian philosophers reject ways of moral thinking that draw hard and fast lines between self-directed or prudential concerns (about what is good for me) and other-directed or moral concerns (about what is right, just, virtuous, etc.), and suggests that they are right to do so. In this paper, I spell out Angle's arguments and interpretation in greater detail and then consider whether they are faithful to one of the chief figures in Neo-Confucian thought. I begin by identifying some of the better-known ways in which moral philosophers give special treatment to prudential considerations, and say which of these Angle's reading of the Neo-Confucians appears to rule out. After laying this groundwork, I proceed to test Angle's interpretation against the moral thought of history's most influential Neo-Confucian philosopher, ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), arguing that even on Angle's own reading, there are certain respects in which Zhu preserves the distinction, although by Angle's lights these ways are perhaps less pernicious than their contemporary equivalents. I also look closely at how Angle uses the psychological structure of humane love (*ren* 仁) to undermine the prudence-versus-morality distinction. Here I suggest that the better way to phrase his point is to say that prudence drops out or becomes an ethically incoherent concept, which is something quite different from rejecting or collapsing the distinction between prudence and morality.

Keywords Neo-Confucianism · ZHU Xi · Prudence

1 Introduction

It is my honor to have this opportunity to say more about Angle's exciting work on Neo-Confucianism and contemporary ethics. He and I have a lengthy exchange about the work in a recent issue of *Dao* (Angle 2011, Tiwald 2011a, 2011b). But that did

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not come close to saying everything I needed to say, so it is good to engage with Angle's ideas and arguments at greater length, not least because we have somewhat similar scholarly dispositions. In general, Angle and I share a strong preference for charitable readings of the Neo-Confucians that he discusses in *Sagehood*, especially of ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) and WANG Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529). To be sure, this is one of the best ways to bring to light their contemporary significance (a stated goal of the book), but it is also good practice for historians of the Chinese thinkers, because certain structural features of Neo-Confucian discourse tend to lead novice and even some seasoned readers astray—for example, by mistaking the Neo-Confucians' preference for trenchant prose for conceptual sloppiness or imprecision. But in my case, my predisposition for charitable readings sometimes pulls in two directions, for I am also enamored with the later critics of thinkers like Zhu, such as DAI Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777) and WANG Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692). With this in mind, I would like to press for a somewhat more complicated account of Zhu on one particular issue—an account that both puts Zhu in a better light and also does justice to his critics.

The issue I will be concerned with is the distinction between morality and prudence, understood primarily as a question about how and to what degree prudential ends and motivations factor differently into moral assessments than moral ends and motivations. Angle has very suggestive and interesting things to say about this, but I think even by his own lights they are preliminary, leaving a certain amount of room for elaboration and fine-tuning. In the section that follows (Section 2), I will begin with some brief remarks about the nature of the problem and Angle's take on it. There I will mention some of the ways in which philosophers have distinguished between morality and prudence, explain briefly why these might be problematic, and then identify the implications of the distinction that Angle thinks the Neo-Confucians would reject. In the final two sections (Section 3 and Section 4) I will turn to look at ZHU Xi and see whether and to what degree he lives up to Angle's characterization. As I hope to show, there is plenty of room for more nuances here. In some respects Angle is undoubtedly right to imply that Zhu would reject the distinction, but in others (as Angle may well admit) Zhu would accept it, and in still others it is worth asking whether Zhu would find prudence a coherent concept at all.

2 The Distinction in General

Prudence and morality can be distinguished in different ways to suit different aims. Angle mentions a few particular reasons for collapsing the distinction, but his general line on the distinction is more open-ended, leaving room to think more expansively about implications for ZHU Xi's and Neo-Confucian ethics. Let me mention a few of the most common implications of the distinction. To provide enough context to help wrap our minds around these implications, I will briefly describe each one and then identify an intuition that tends to make it (and thus the distinction itself) appealing.

- (1) Permissibility vs. Praiseworthiness: moral behavior is praiseworthy or virtuous, while merely prudential behavior is at best permissible or tolerable. For

example, while it might be permissible to schedule a more relaxing weekend for oneself, there is nothing inherently and morally praiseworthy about it.

- (2) Rationality: lacking sufficient concern for oneself is necessarily irrational, while lacking sufficient concern for others is immoral and not necessarily irrational. For instance, it might be immoral but not irrational for a childless adult to want to save her own life before saving the life of a parent or child.
- (3) Constraints on Obligations: prudential considerations set limits to how much we can be morally obligated to sacrifice. Thus, a moral theory is wrong if it demands extraordinary sacrifices from us, as do forms of utilitarianism that require us to give to the point of destitution in order to save the lives of famine victims.
- (4) Constraints on Self-interested Behavior: a certain subset of moral principles or considerations sets moral limits to the pursuit of one's own good. Perhaps we can only pursue our own good insofar as it is consistent with our basic duties to our parents and children.¹

Just as there are some intuitions that lend each of these some *prima facie* plausibility, so are there reasons to think them problematic. Consider the first option (1): to say that only moral motives are virtuous or morally praiseworthy appears to rule out virtues like temperance and appropriate pride or self-respect. It also gives rise to “moral saints” problems of various kinds, which highlight the implication that the most praiseworthy people are absurdly self-sacrificial, so that they become inadequate or insufferable friends or parents, or not well-rounded in other respects (Wolf 1982). The third option, which says that prudential considerations impose hard-and-fast constraints on our obligations to others, might be construed as too inflexible, as when a person has the opportunity to sacrifice her life to save hundreds. The fourth option is similarly inflexible, and specifying the relevant sub-class of moral considerations tends to be a task that’s better left alone.²

Of these approaches, Angle takes up (1), (2), and (4) most explicitly. He thinks Neo-Confucians can sidestep moral saints problems because they *don’t* think that the most praiseworthy behavior is necessarily self-sacrificial (Angle 2009: 23–24, 28). He suggests that Neo-Confucians (*pace* Michael Slote) would reject hard-and-fast distinctions between moral and non-moral virtues, where the latter are understood as merely rational and not moral (Angle 2009: 79; Slote 2007: 104–24). He also says the Neo-Confucians reject the view that morality always trumps or overrides prudence, and this could be read as inclusive of (4), which takes “morality” in the narrower sense of moral constraints (Angle 2009: 92).

¹ Philosophers sometimes say that morality “trumps” prudence, which can be read as (4) or some combination of (4) and (1) or (2).

² To be sure, most careful treatments of the morality-versus-prudence distinction are going to be subtler than any one of (1) through (4) suggests. For example, Kant is often regarded as an inveterate defender of the distinction, but he thinks we have (moral) duties toward the self, some of which often coincide with our self-interest, as with the duty not to commit suicide (Kant 1996: 547, *Akademie* number 6.422–23). That said, the four implications I have sketched should be enough to help us appreciate Angle’s more thematic claim that the Neo-Confucians would reject the distinction itself. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting some ways of problematizing the four implications outlined here.

There is a different and more obvious sense in which a prudence-versus-morality distinction might be undermined: by emphasizing that in many cases, morality-terms and prudence-terms are coextensive, so that, for example, what counts as morally good and what counts as prudentially good are the same things. Variations of this claim are a commonplace in Confucian texts, applying most noticeably to people of extremely good or virtuous character like the gentleman or the sage, who enjoy the inherent benefits of humaneness and righteousness and win the love and admiration of others. As should be evident from the four-part analysis offered in this section, Angle is making a much more interesting and challenging claim than this. He means to show that for the Neo-Confucians, the distinction does not have the moral significance its defenders normally attribute to it, and this has implications for the content and logical entailments of prudential and moral language, not just for their extensions.

3 “Everything Matters”

Let us now consider Angle’s principal arguments for his claim that the Neo-Confucians collapse or undercut the prudence-versus-morality distinction. I find two that seem to attack the distinction generally, in ways that have implications for one or more of (1) – (4). I call the first “everything matters.”

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. (Angle 2009: 92)

Of course, one might object that “everything matters” for many defenders of the morality-versus-prudence distinction as well. Perhaps a defender of the distinction thinks people may act on their prudential interests, but that such action is at best permissible and never praiseworthy on its own merits. Both prudence and morality matter on this view as well. But Angle’s view seems to be that this is too rigid a way of taking moral and prudential considerations into account, that it treats them as “mattering” in qualitatively different ways—action motivated by the one is at best permissible; action motivated by the other is potentially virtuous. Better to see morality and prudence as factors that an astute moral agent will treat in ways that resist generalization. Thus, Angle says in the above remarks that the “style and form with which one acts” are significant but “not in a way that can be detached from the situations in which we find ourselves.”

There are multiple ways to deny a distinction. One is to say that the distinction is not intelligible or conceptually coherent (as with shapes and triangles). Another is to say that the distinction, while intelligible, is nevertheless not particularly important or significant. I take Angle to be arguing for a qualified form of the latter view. It is not that the distinction is incoherent, nor that it has no importance or significant implications whatsoever. Indeed, if we read Angle carefully he seems to indicate there is something to distinguishing between (other-regarding) morality and (self-regarding) prudence after all, for there *is* one generalization that Angle does venture in his

description of the context-specific decision-making of the good moral agent (or “sage”): namely, that the sage looks for ways of striking balances or harmonizing different types of things, making sure that there is not too much of one type or another. And Angle speaks as though morality and prudence are among the types whose excess one guards against. For example, in a separate discussion Angle asserts that Neo-Confucians are not susceptible to moral saints problems because sagehood is “rooted in the notion of harmonious balance” and “sages will have no trouble seeing why leaning too far in a single direction is problematic” (2009: 28).

In light of this, it seems that the most precise way of formulating Angle’s view is as follows: the Neo-Confucians regarded the morality-versus-prudence distinction as intelligible, and even thought there were general conclusions we could draw about each side of the distinction (one should guard against having too much of one or the other), but they did not think we should draw the sort of general conclusions that philosophers have found problematic for contemporary ethics, which presumably follow from at least one of the four familiar views sketched in section two.

Let me now turn to consider whether this interpretation is true of ZHU Xi, who is probably the chief representative of Neo-Confucian thought. To a certain extent, it is hard to deny that Zhu thinks moral agents should treat their other-directed and self-directed concerns differently. Perhaps the most obvious case in point is what he calls the “self-centered” or “[merely] human” desire (*siyu* 私欲 and *renyu* 人欲, respectively). On my reading of Zhu, it is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for a self-centered desire that it be prudential—that is, that it be motivated by some sort of self-directed concern, usually describable as a concern with promoting one’s own welfare or benefit (*li* 利). Zhu has a tendency to make bold pronouncements to the effect that our human or self-centered desires are fundamentally incompatible with the natural moral responses arising from *tian li* 天理, the heavenly patterns or (as Angle translates it) the universal coherence of things: “there has never been a case where *tian li* and human desires have been mixed” (Zhu 1986: *juan* 13, 224.2). Given that these sorts of statements are common, it is important to deal with them in a way that explains why we should not read into them a distinction between prudence and morality of any of the four kinds described above.

Zhu thinks we should be more suspicious of self-directed feelings and inclinations because they have a tendency to be much more pernicious than other-directed ones. Concerns for one’s own good are far more likely to warp our sense of the real value of the things (*wu* 物), and thus upset the level-headedness or tranquility of mind (*jing* 靜) that gives rise to proper moral feelings and motivation. Consequently, virtuous moral agents need to guard more carefully against valuing too highly things that they perceive to be to their own benefit, just as they must guard more carefully against overestimating their own moral worth (sages attribute sagehood to others but never to themselves) (Zhu 1986: *juan* 13, 232.2, Gardner 1990: 185). And Zhu’s gentleman is allowed to pursue the benefit of others more self-consciously than his own benefit; indeed, Zhu thinks that pursuing one’s own benefit self-consciously is usually self-defeating (Zhu 1986: *juan* 13, 237.7, Gardner 1990: 187). Furthermore, Zhu (as I read him) thinks we are allowed to err on the high side in what we want for others but should err on the low side in what we want for ourselves. We can demand that a meal be flavorful for the sake of parents and guests, but we should not want so much for

our own food.³ All of this suggests that Zhu thinks moral agents should treat some prudential considerations differently than moral ones, which in turn explains why he thinks virtuous people tend to put personal aspirations and desires (for fine foods, for a position in the civil service) behind their aspirations and desires for family, friends, and others. And surely he is right to do so, since overvaluation of one's own good plays so prominent a role (and at so many levels or stages) in moral failure.

If this is right, we have reason to think that Zhu acknowledges the prudence-versus-morality distinction for some purposes but not others. Generally speaking, we should have different attitudes toward self-centered desires than we should toward other-directed desires. And a prudential attitude is a necessary condition for a self-centered desire. Nevertheless, given my analysis above, it could be that Angle has a general line of response available to him. With some exceptions, most of the above is concerned with what we might call "psychological guarding" activity, vigilantly looking out for (and treating with more suspicion) prudential *motives*. It does not say much about the importance of distinguishing moral and prudential *ends*. That is, it does not say that distinguishing between the two types of ends has much in the way of significant and generalizable implications for virtue, permissibility, or obligation. The one noteworthy and generalizable implication it does have is that it tells us—perhaps just as a rule of thumb—not to favor either side of the distinction too much (as Angle's "balancing" metaphor suggests).

To illustrate, consider a case in which it might seem worthwhile to reflect on how a person's self-directed considerations for a course of action compare with other-directed ones. In the aftermath of an earthquake that devastates a city's water supply, a shop owner ponders whether to demand exorbitant amounts of money for her stock of bottled drinking water. For Zhu, the shop owner should be on the lookout for the subtle ways that her self-centered desires can distort her ethical perception or judgment, and she should find ways of framing the dilemma so that she does not have an outsized estimation of her own importance or worth. But she would not make much headway by laying down ground rules for prudential and moral ends *in general*. Having identified the relevant considerations at stake, it would not add much of significance to say "...and these are prudential while those are moral." She should not conclude (nor should we) that her moral ends should simply trump her prudential ones, that she would be praiseworthy only insofar as she follows her moral ones, etc. At this level of generality, there is not much to say, except that we should be more careful or vigilant about the desires motivated by prudential goods, and that we guard against favoring one or the other too much, even if the precise balance to be struck depends on the particulars.

In sum, I have qualified Angle's thesis about Zhu and the prudence-versus-morality distinction in two ways. The first is that Zhu allows that there is a distinction between prudential and other-directed *motives*; the second is that, insofar as he thinks it worthwhile to make generalizations about prudential and moral *ends*, he insists that we look out for imbalances between them.

³ For example, see Zhu 1986: *juan* 13, 224.7. This concerns what we should "want" or "seek" in food, but Zhu does not suggest that this should stop us from enjoying fine foods when we get them—perhaps this helps to minimize the effects of any moral saint problems.

I take this to be a more accurate and defensible interpretation of ZHU Xi, but let me say briefly that there are ways of reading him even more radically, so that even the two qualifications turn out to be untrue. In response to my observation that—on Angle’s reading—Zhu thinks there is a general imperative to strike a balance between the two types, Angle might argue that I have mischaracterized prudential ends as a “type” unto themselves. For Zhu, he could say, what matters about the shop owner’s competing ends is not whether they are to her own benefit or to others’, but simply that they take objects that are in different empathic proximity to her self. On this view, Zhu’s commitment to distinguishing prudential and moral ends (such as it is) is derived from his commitment to graded love or partial care more generally. Like most Confucians, Zhu thinks we owe greater obligations to our parents than to our friends, and to our friends than to strangers, etc. Perhaps, for Zhu, there are not deep and generalizable differences between striking the right balance in cases that involve one’s own good and striking the right balance in cases that involve the good of people in different degrees of proximity to oneself. That is, there are not fundamental differences between weighing the good of a stranger against one’s own good and weighing the good of a stranger against the good of a parent or close friend.

The other qualification that I suggested had to do with the distinction between prudential and other-directed motives. I can say with more confidence that Angle would reject this qualification. In a second line of argument that he offers in his book, Angle contends that for the good or virtuous moral agent, there will invariably be some self-concern amidst our otherwise moral or other-directed concern, so that prudential concern is as much a necessary condition for self-centered desires as it is for benevolent desires (Angle 2009: 78–79). In the next section, I will explore this intriguing contention, which I will call the “single source” argument.

4 The “Single Source” of Humane Love

What I am calling the “single source” argument has to do with the experience of caring about things in the best way, which Zhu and other neo-Confucians characterize as exhibiting the virtue of *ren* 仁, variously translated as benevolence, humaneness or humane love. Among other things, humane love consists in caring about each thing in the appropriate way and to the appropriate degree (parental love for one’s children, a more tempered and detached sort of care for a stranger, etc.). It also has important perceptual or cognitive content: when we love others in this virtuous way, we actually regard or see them as extensions of ourselves, or more precisely, see them and us as forming one entity or body (*yi ti* 一體). On Angle’s view, this suggests that other-directed concern and self-directed concern draw from a “single source of affective response” and that the motivation to help ourselves (as when we want to alleviate our own pain) is in some sense “continuous with” the motive to help another (or alleviate *her* pain) (Angle 2009: 79). He cites a well-known passage to this effect, which comes not from Zhu himself but from the philosopher CHENG Hao 程顥 (1032–85), whose description of humaneness was adopted by Zhu:

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* 氣) does not circulate through them so they are not regarded as part of one’s self. Therefore, widely conferring benefits and helping others is the task of the sage.⁴

Angle draws two conclusions from this passage. The first is that when one loves humanely or is in a state of *ren*, one cares about oneself and not just others. As he puts it “*ren* includes care for oneself” (Angle 2009: 79). The other conclusion is that both self-care and other-care have what he calls a “single source”:

On both CHENG Hao’s account and on modern views of empathy, there is in fact only a single source of affective response, whether the pain is one’s own or another’s....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 motivation to do something in the former (other-directed) case. (Angle 2009: 79)

I’m enough of a logic chopper to be reluctant to weigh in on these particular claims of Steve’s without hearing more. (In what sense do other-directed and self-directed concern have one affective source? In what sense are the motives to help the other and help oneself continuous?) So I just raise this issue to suggest that there is interesting work to do here, and to point to some reasons to tread carefully before concluding that this collapses the prudence-versus-morality distinction. Some of these concerns are conceptual and some are textual. I will briefly review both sets.

Let me start with the conceptual concerns. In order for a consideration to be a matter of prudence to a particular moral agent, presumably she has to care about her own good in part *because it’s her own*, and not just incidentally. If I only care about performing my role on a soccer team well because I’m interested in having a successful or harmonious soccer team (or soccer league), this isn’t prudence as understood by Kant or Slote (to name two defenders of the prudence-versus-morality distinction). Prudence is supposed to give us reasons for action that matter in part because the good in question is our own. (There is an ineliminable *de se* attitude here.)

Is there reason to think that Zhu’s humane person cares about her own well-being in part because it is her own? Perhaps. One line of argument might go like this: the humane person loves or cares about the flourishing (a very rough translation of *sheng* 生) of a larger whole to which she belongs, in part because she belongs to it. The whole does not flourish unless each individual part flourishes (albeit in some way that coheres or harmonizes with the other parts). Therefore, the humane person loves and is concerned about her own flourishing, in part because it is her own. The goalie thus cares about her own performance because she cares about the success of her team, but she cares about the success of her team in part because *she* is on the team, and having a successful team

⁴ Cheng and Cheng 1981: *juan* 2A, 15.3 (page 15, third complete paragraph on the page). Angle’s brackets and translation (2009: 78), modified from Ivanhoe 2002: 28.

depends in part on its helping each player perform well. This might be one way of extending Angle's argument that "when everything matters, we are included," from which he concludes "it is appropriate that we matter to ourselves" (Angle 2009: 92). To this, we could add that the humane person does not just care about her flourishing because it is hers, but she actually cares about it *more* because it is hers. To modify a popular Neo-Confucian analogy, it is appropriate to care more about oneself than, say, someone from a distant land that one has never met, just as it is appropriate to care more about some parts of one's body (the head) than others (a foot).

This argument is promising, but as a form of self-concern it is so mediated that many philosophers who make meaningful distinctions between morality and prudence would not know what to say about it. To see why, consider what happens when we make the object of concern a larger unit than a mere team or league: perhaps we care about ourselves only insofar as it fits into a harmonious nation or a harmonious universe. Is this still recognizably prudential? To be sure, our own good still matters to us in part because it is our own, but our part becomes vanishingly small. One might respond again by saying that it is appropriate to care more about oneself than distant corners of the earth (as we care more about our head than our feet), but I am not certain that this mitigates the problem.

Furthermore, there is a textual concern that makes me think twice about the argument just provided. Although Zhu follows CHENG Hao in thinking about humaneness as a kind of love that extends the self to the rest of the world (makes us all "one body"), it is not certain that he thinks ascriptions of personal identity ("this good is mine," "you are an extension of me," etc.) are supposed to be the motivating force for that love. Zhu objected to certain interpretations of Cheng that overemphasized the language of "forming one body" with the rest of the world, most famously in his short work, *A Treatise on Humaneness* (*Ren shuo* 仁說). The treatise is laconic, but one way of reading it is like this: some influential students of Cheng think that humaneness consists in forming one body with things, with the implication that appropriate care or love is incidental or less essential to a proper account of humaneness.⁵ But it is better to say that the real substance of benevolence is a graded pattern of love that gives due care or concern to everything in its proper measure. Our unity with other things makes it possible to love them, but this unity is just a necessary condition for loving them, not a reason for loving them, just as having nerve endings in my leg (or the right sort of *qi* flowing between it and the rest of my body) is a necessary condition for feeling pain in my leg, but not *my* reason for feeling the pain. Accordingly, the humane moral agent is not concerned about her own suffering or flourishing because it is hers (that's not her *reason* for caring about it). Indeed, it would be dangerous if she attended too much to such considerations. Her real concern is to promote flourishing (*sheng sheng* 生生) wherever it feels most natural for her to do so, without worrying about whose flourishing it is, just as we tend to want to stop pain because it we find it painful, and not because of where the pain is located.⁶

⁵ Here, Zhu is almost certainly thinking of YANG Shi 楊時 (1053–1135).

⁶ As mentioned, this interpretation of the *Ren shuo* is controversial (like most others), but we can at least say with some certainty that Zhu doesn't want to overemphasize the role of ascriptions of personal identity ("me," "mine," "not mine"), as he thinks the "form one body" interpretation of humaneness does. See Wing-tsit Chan 1989: 151–83, especially 162 and 168–69.

On this interpretation, however, we are once again talking about something quite removed from prudence as it is normally understood, according to which I care about my good in part because it is mine. Perhaps we could say that it collapses or eliminates the distinction between morality and prudence, but we could just as well say that it makes the very idea of prudence morally incoherent from the truly benevolent person's point of view, which is something quite different. I am not collapsing the distinction between three and four sided triangles when I point out that there *is* no such thing as a four-sided triangle. There is much of philosophical interest and nuance that Angle might say in response to this, but without knowing a bit more about the sense of prudence that he has in mind, or the sense in which he thinks self-directed and other-directed motives are continuous, it seems "prudent" merely to raise these questions for now and save the extended discussion until after we have seen the specifics.

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