**A Dilemma for Yong Huang’s Neo-Confucian Moral Realism**

*Abstract* (200 words)*:* Yong Huang presents criticisms of Neo-Aristotelian meta-ethical naturalism and argues Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucian approach is superior in defending moral realism.After presenting Huang’s criticisms of the Aristotelian metaethical naturalist picture, such as that of Rosalind Hursthouse, I argue that Huang’s own views succumb to the same criticisms. His metaethics does not avoid an allegedly problematic ‘gap,’ whether ontological or conceptual, between possessing a human nature and exemplifying moral goodness. This ontological gap exists in virtue of the fact that it is possible for there to be bad people, and the conceptual gap exists in virtue of the fact that people are not ‘good’ (in that sense of being a good agent) merely because they are human. Aristotelians and Confucians both should reject that such gaps are problematic. I conclude by proposing that Huang is better understood as criticizing the Aristotelian move from scientific-empirical facts about human nature to the objective prescriptivity of moral norms. But so too I argue that Confucians should not follow Huang here either. There is good scientific evidence that would be supportive of a Confucian analysis of social virtues and provide one way of responding to those worries about the scientific-empirical accessibility of facts about the good life.

*Keywords*: naturalism, metaethics, Zhu Xi, Aristotelianism, empiricism

Yong Huang aims to provide a defense of moral realism – commitment to truth-evaluable propositions about morality, some of which are true, and which depend upon moral properties or facts that are mind-independent (2023: 1). He opts for metaethical naturalism in the tradition of virtue ethics, on which good-making normative properties have to do with agents rather than actions*.* Huang nevertheless argues that Zhu Xi’s Confucian account has advantages over classical and Neo-Aristotelian meta-ethical naturalism, as it can respond to certain metaethical problems that beset these accounts. Huang’s proposal is to eliminate ‘ontological distance’ between moral properties and the nature of agents. Huang argues that human nature is ‘constituted by’ virtues (chiefly benevolence), so that to lack these virtues is to be a non-human animal. I will argue that Huang’s proposal fails as a metaethical response, as his position either succumbs to the same criticisms as the Aristotelian approach or does not resolve the metaethical issues which he identifies.

**Huang’s Criticisms**

Neo-Aristotelian metaethical naturalists hold that ‘good’ is a predicative or attributive adjective which requires appeal to some given kind membership when we evaluate whether an *x* is a good *x.* A thing is good in light of whether it fulfills species-specific norms. Moral evaluations bottom out in “evaluations of individual living things as or qua specimens of their natural kind” (Hursthouse 1999: 197). Huang shares with Neo-Aristotelians that account of ‘good,’ broadly speaking. Yet Huang rejects that what makes agents good could be either some fact about exercising their unique capacities/functions well, as Huang interprets Aristotle to do, or fulfilling ends that ‘serve the purpose of the human species,’ as Huang interprets Hursthouse to do (2023: 11-13).

Huang worries, first, that Aristotle’s own version of ethical naturalism seems not to provide a morally determinate conception of the way in which human nature relates to the moral good (2023: 12). Rationality can be put to harmful uses, so if the human good were merely ‘to be intelligent in acting,’ the Aristotelian picture would fail to provide a determinate account of the human *moral* good*.* One could be a ‘rational wolf,’ for example, and exercise the capacity for rationality to kill and eat other people, which seems an immoral activity even though it would involve exercising the capacity well (Huang 2023: 18). The notion that moral perfection lies in exercising rationality ‘well’ leaves critically underdetermined what it is to exercise that capacity in a *morally good* way (e.g., McDowell 1998: 173).

From Huang’s perspective, Neo-Aristotelians have a leg up on Aristotle himself. For Neo-Aristotelians such as Rosalind Hursthouse, using capacities well *singillatim* is insufficient to distinguish good agents. Exercising rationality well is only taken as one of the five ends of the human species, which, when realized together and appropriately, constitute humans as a good kind of social animal (Hursthouse 1999: 217-238). Huang thinks the problem for Hursthouse’s account is similar to that besetting Aristotle: “… although human beings have an additional aspect, rationality, in comparison to those of animals, humans have the exactly same ends as social animals” (2023: 13). As with the objection to Aristotle’s focus on exercising rationality well, Huang believes there is something morally indeterminate about the end of being a social animal, such that the notion is not uniquely a moral one. Huang’s counterexample to Neo-Aristotelian metaethics is that of a ‘social gangster’ who acts well toward members of his own social group but fails to act morally toward others outside of it. Huang alleges Neo-Aristotelians cannot rule out that “a social gangster would also be a good human being, since they join the activity of their gang and treat their fellow gangsters fairly, though they fight against human beings outside the gang” (Huang 2023: 13).

**Huang’s Proposal**

Huang’s favored solution to these problems is to identify the nature and ends of human beings with a morally determinate concept of nature. To do so closes the ‘ontological gap’ Huang alleges besets Aristotelians: “there is at least some gap between [an Aristotelian] conception of human nature and moral property of the good as commonly understood” (2023: 18). The alleged gap is then between human nature and what it is to be a good *x*. Huang proposes the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi’s account of human nature allows us to close this gap. Zhu Xi appeals to human naturein much the same way as the Aristotelians. For Zhu Xi, human nature is constituted by a formal principle (*li* 理)that entails species-specific norms, and what is specific to human beings is humaneness or benevolence (*ren* 仁).[[1]](#footnote-1) Exercising the capacity for *ren* is normative for members of our species, such that failing to cultivate the virtues is morally blameworthy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But Zhu Xi apparently goes further than Aristotelians in identifying human nature. Zhu Xi identifies *ren* as “the principle that makes human beings human” (Zhu 1994: 516) and says that “the reason that humans are humans is simply that they possess [*ren*]….” (Zhu 1986: 1459). Huang interprets Zhu Xi on this point as saying *ren* “is constitutive of our human nature,” where ‘constitutive’ means that “without [*ren*], one is a deficient human, a human in name only, a human that is not much different from beasts, or even not a human at all” and thus “are what distinguishes humans from animals” (2023: 16-17). Huang goes on to argue that his concept of human nature is morally determinate, since “to be a good human being is just to be a person possessing these virtues,” but also objective because we can know that human nature is so constituted by the virtues (2023: 18). Huang believes we discover that human nature is good by observing that human beings naturally have certain feelings, and that those feelings are morally good feelings, which therefore (we can infer) originate in a good human nature (Huang 2023: 20-21).

On Huang’s interpretation, Zhu Xi seems to identify ‘what it is to be human’ even conceptually with ‘possessing the virtues.’ And the concept of what it is to be a human being is supposed to be morally determinate in a way that being a cuckoo or wolf is not, because humans have a capacity for moral behavior that other animals lack (Huang 2023: 24-25). Consequently, there is neither an ontological or conceptual gap between being human and possessing virtues (Huang 2023: 28-33). Nevertheless, while we can grant that one can observe a feeling occurs and that it occurs ‘naturally’ in the sense that it is (as Huang claims) “immediate” and not a product of calculation or habituation (2023: 22), Huang has given us no reason to believe that we can observe that a given feeling is a *morally good* feeling or ‘natural’ in the normatively loaded sense. Immediacy is not a mark of normativity, as sociopathology, for instance, is equally natural in the sense of involving reactions that are immediate without calculation or habituation. Dickens’ Scrooge feels deeply and hatefully about everyone, these sentiments come immediately and ‘naturally’ to Scrooge, but nevertheless Scrooge is obviously a bad person.

In response to Hume’s objection that we cannot infer normative from descriptive facts, Huang proposes that the fact that a person has morally appropriate feelings is both normative and descriptive and treats this response as on-a-par with that of Aristotelians (2023: 28-29). Jeeloo Liu argues that Huang’s responses involve circular reasoning and that his position might slide into a kind of non-naturalism about moral properties (2023: 4-5, 8-9). Huang seems to think we can know feelings are morally good, even though their relation to human nature is not observed but known through inference (Huang 2023: 18). Moral properties appear to be non-natural, insofar as what makes an action or feeling or *qi* normatively appropriate looks to be neither empirically accessible nor a natural property. This is unlike Aristotelianism, on which facts about what is good for a given species are empirically accessible natural facts.

Even if we grant Huang’s claim that we can observe morally good feelings and know them to be natural to human beings (in a rich sense), Huang elides a much more fundamental distinction that is crucial for his metaethical position: being a *deficient* human is not the same as being *not a human at all*. Huang’s proposal relies upon rejecting a gap between a moral property of goodness and human nature itself, which he alleges besets the Aristotelian account. Nevertheless, Huang’s account involves just as much a ‘separation’ between possessing a nature and exemplifying that nature *well* as the Aristotelian or Neo-Aristotelian account does, and we can pose exactly parallel problems to Huang’s.

For Aristotle’s view, *having the ability* to engage in reasoning morally well and *reasoning morally well* can come apart, nor is ‘reasoning morally well’ conceptually identical with ‘having the capacity to reason.’ So too, however, feelings themselves can be either morally appropriate or not. Even if we can determine that some feelings or reactions are morally normative because they arise from ‘good’ human nature, there is still a gap between *having the ability* to feel appropriately and *feeling appropriately* (Walker 2023: 14-15). Huang’s concept of human nature as constituted by the virtues does not eliminate the conceptual distance either, since ‘having a nature to feel morally appropriate feelings’ is not identical with ‘feeling appropriately.’

Huang accepts cases such as the ‘rational wolf’ or the ‘social gangster’ to undermine Aristotelianism and Neo-Aristotelianism respectively, because he takes it that the relevant aspect of human nature (rationality or sociality) can be exemplified without moral goodness. It is true that one cannot exemplify moral goodness without being a good person. A distinction between exemplifying your good nature and exemplifying your good nature *well* would generate the same purported gap in merely another form: some people cultivate their *qi* in such a way as to *exemplify* their virtuous nature, whereas others do not cultivate their *qi* and so are vicious, failing to exemplify human nature well, although vicious people remain essentially human (Huang 2023: 24-25). There would remain both a conceptual and metaphysical gap between being human essentially and exemplifying human nature well, even on a morally determinate concept of human nature as good. The concept of human nature is not morally determinate in a way as to eliminate the gap between instantiation and instantiating well.

Huang could reply that his view involves no such dilemma as I have posed. Although Aristotle does refer to an extreme limit of vice as having a bestial character (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 5), Aristotelians do not hold that vicious humans undergo a change of species membership to become non-human animals. Huang, by contrast, could interpret Zhu Xi’s claim that vicious individuals “are just birds and beasts” (Zhu 1986: 1347) quite literally. If vice were to cause a change in species membership, human beings that become vicious do not merely exemplify human nature badly but indeed become members of a distinct species. Nevertheless, this possible response by Huang does not resolve the dilemma I posed. It merely shifts it elsewhere. In short, those who have ceased to be human by vice or are not yet human by failing to cultivate the virtues and exemplify their nature well – ‘humans in name only’ – seem not to have any reason to *become* human, any more than a cat does (see the problem discussed in Gavin 2020: 1018-1019 as one of ‘strict normativity’). Huang would then have a dilemma between holding either that some humans exemplify human nature badly (thus falling into the original dilemma), or that some non-human animals would have reason to become human or be blameworthy for their state of failing to be human (falling into a dilemma of providing normative reasons for non-humans to become humans). But the latter fork would involve not only the problem of Huang providing normative reasons for ‘humans in name only’ to become human, but plausibly will also generate my dilemma again. Huang would likely appeal to facts that it is *natural* to ‘humans in name only’ to have reason to become human, given his overall naturalism about such normative facts. If so, there would be another ontological gap between what features of non-human animals explain the reasons that some *should* become human, and others need not, and this is unexplained by the fact that human nature is constituted by virtues.

There is then a dilemma for Huang. Metaethical naturalism depends on the view that there is no pernicious gap between *is* and *ought,* as there are concepts of nature that can ground rich normative inferences about agents (and their actions) being more-or-less *natural* in the ethically relevant sense. If Huang’s criticisms of Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics are well-founded, and the existence of a gap between *having a nature* and exemplifying employing capacities *naturally* (i.e., according to the norms appropriate to that nature) generates insoluble difficulties, then we should reject Huang’s own version of metaethical naturalism, since it requires just such a distinction or otherwise involves him in similar difficulties.

**A Different Worry**

I suggest we can rescue Huang’s intuition. He wanted to address the way in which human nature generates the ‘objective prescriptivity’ of moral norms, especially as concerns resolving moral disagreement. What Huang might be suspicious of is that Aristotelians seem to want to move from an *empirical* approach to human nature, where ‘empirical’ is supposed to be (roughly) scientific or metaphysically naturalistic, to the objective prescriptivity of moral norms. Huang’s proposal addresses *this* move, since the moral appropriateness of moral feelings is empirically discoverable not through scientific research but, presumably, through introspection or other (perhaps epistemically basic) kinds of observations of mental states. There is then a sense in which Huang’s approach is naturalist or empirical, as it involves empirical experience of moral properties, but not ‘scientifically’ naturalistic in the pattern of Hursthouse or Thompson, nor obviously metaphysically naturalistic (2023: 18).

One might worry that an evaluation given in terms of the *scientific-empirical* facts about human beings does not seem to give the right kind of *prescriptive* force to ethical norms (as does Liu 2023: 14-15). As Bernard Williams argues, Aristotelianism’s appeal to a normative conception of human nature is one that has been debunked by, or is at least empirically inaccessible to, modern science. The Aristotelian account “takes for granted . . . a strong view of the harmony among themselves of human capacities and needs” (Williams 1995a: 199). Scientific naturalism cannot provide that sort of ‘thick’ or teleological concept of human nature (Williams 1995b: 109-110). Evolution shows that we evolved various capacities piecemeal over long periods of time, and that the shape these capacities have taken in the human species is entirely contingent. These scientific-empirical facts are normatively indeterminate in themselves. Even if contingently connected to moral facts about human nature, the normative connection itself between a capacity and how it ought to be used will be empirically inaccessible to science. Thus, without a teleological concept of functions and capacities, we can note scientifically that human beings happen “to possess certain caring dispositions—for whatever contingent personal, cultural, or evolutionary reasons” but cannot draw “categorical judgments concerning things about which [humans] *ought* to care” (McPherson 2015: 204).

**Conclusion: Neo-Confucian Responses**

Perhaps these or similar worries are what trouble Huang. However, Huang does not seem to resolve them directly, as he does not discuss how we know a feeling is morally appropriate, and in what way we encounter empirically that property of moral appropriateness. There is obviously more to be said about the assumptions behind these worries – the epistemology or metaphysics is not a little uncontroversial – but I would suggest that Neo-Confucians would not be well-served to go Huang’s route in rejecting the scientific-empirical accessibility of facts about human nature. Instead, Confucians can appeal good contemporary scientific evidence that can respond, at least indirectly, to skepticism about the objectivity of the distinctive Confucian ethical insight that right social relationships – undergirded by *ren* – are central to making human lives go well (Tiwald 2020: 963-980). If there are mind-independent reasons to prefer some social arrangements to others – which seems quite reasonable – then scientific insights, from biology and sociology, might be highly relevant. Rather than evolutionary biology undermining the knowability of such facts, it seems to confirm that social hierarchies take the shape they do to respond to real pressures, and that our moral practices of holding others accountable (e.g., blame and shame) exist for good reasons. Gauss (2011: 101-260) is noteworthy for tying such concerns to political science and economics.

For instance, the case of the ‘social gangster’ might be analyzed from the perspective that the gangster’s relationship to his own social group is destructive of wider societal harmony, and therefore that the gangster is acting contrary to what is good for human society. Confucians can therefore infer (‘seeking the origin from its current’) that the social gangster’s dispositions, which cause him to act this way, are malformed. Thus, we can arrive at objective knowledge that the gangster’s behavior is not *ren* since wider facts about social hierarchies and their place in human life tell against it. Zhu Xi might therefore provide a different path for resolving moral disagreement objectively and in a way which complements traditional Aristotelian concerns, insofar as he can point in the direction of other scientifically-empirically accessible facts showing that the life of virtue is good for human beings and the societies they inhabit.

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1. Huang 2023: 15-16, citing Zhu 1994: 516, 1459. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Huang 2023: 26, citing Zhu 1986: 1570. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)