



Cheng Brothers on Moral Knowledge

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It is generally agreed that, although there were Zhou Dunyi, Shao Yong, and Zhang Zai (the so-called "three masters in the Northern Song" [bei song san zi]) as forerunners, Cheng Brothers (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi) were the true initiators of what in the West is called "neo-Confucianism." In Chinese, it is called "learning of li (principle)," "learning of dao," "learning of xin (heart-mind), or simply "learning of Song." Although the very term "learning" in all these terms indicates its scholastic tendencies (and it is not surprising that it is often compared with the Western scholasticism in the Middle Ages), Cheng Brothers' main focus is moral knowledge that is inseparable from moral practice. In terms of the relationship between the two, it has now become a platitude that moral practice must be guided by moral knowledge, and moral knowledge must come from moral practice. The Cheng Brothers did hold this view. However, in this paper, I shall focus another, and perhaps more controversial, aspect in their discussion of moral knowledge and practice: "No one knows without being able to act; and one does not act simply because one does not know." I say it is controversial because we have used to the distinction between "knowing" and "willing": a person may know it is wrong to steal but still steals thing. In Cheng's view, however, this means that the person does not really know it is wrong to steal, just like a person who keeps putting his finger on fire cannot claim that he knows fire will hurt his finger. In this person, I shall examine Chengs' detailed arguments for this thesis and its implication for moral (and legal) punishment as is commonly conceived, since we usually think it not right to punish anyone who unknowingly did something wrong, while in Chengs' view, all wrongs are done unknowingly.

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