

## Lecture 4

### The Character of the Confucian System

In our last lecture we discussed the origin of the various philosophical schools. Let us now look at each of the intellectual systems, the kinds of problems they addressed, and their principal ideas. By tracing these principal ideas and problems, we shall be able to arrive at the intrinsic character of each system.

Let us today evaluate the Confucian system and see what the basic ideas and problems were, and the intrinsic character of the system. Among the schools of the pre-Qin period [pre-255 BCE], namely Confucianism, Mohism, Daoism, and Legalism, the ideas of the Confucian school were the most numerous and complex, whereas Daoist thought was more consolidated. In understanding the pre-Qin Confucians, we will not merely seek to understand any single individual, but rather look at them as a whole, and by looking at their development link them together. Thus we will not adopt the method of making any one individual a criterion of the system. Since we want to look at the development of the Confucian school, which began with Confucius [Kong Zi , 551-479 BCE] and was continued by Mencius [Meng Zi, 371?-289? BCE], we shall first take a look at the ideas in the *Analects* [*Lun Yu*] and then go on to look at what some of the ideas and problems are in *Mencius*. Then we shall take a look at what ideas are found in *The Doctrine of the Mean* [*Zhong Yong*], the *Yi Jing* Commentaries [*Yi Zhuan*, also "Ten Wings"] and *The Great Learning* [*Da Xue*].

To understand the intrinsic character of pre-Qin Confucianism, you must first have a good understanding of the main ideas of these five books, which represent the most basic principles, the core doctrine of the Confucian school. Although these five texts do not add up to very many words, the ideas in them are very complex. Daoism by contrast is far less complex. Confucianism was a great doctrine that could give one's life a fundamental direction, and even though neither Confucius nor Mencius lived to see the realization of his doctrine, yet the effects of the doctrine is now felt in Chinese culture every day. Confucian teaching is not a knowledge that can necessarily solve a specific

problem, although its effects are felt every day. To solve specific problems, one must still have other kinds of knowledge. All three schools of thought, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, are great doctrines that can determine a person's basic direction. But none of them can necessarily solve a specific problem. For example, a knowledge of economics would still be required to solve an economic problem. It would be nonsense to say that Wang Yangming [1472-1528]'s theory of *liangzhi* [good knowing, one's moral capacity] would be able to solve such a problem. The Confucians did not in their time teach their doctrine as philosophy, but for convenience's sake we may treat it as philosophy and take a look at the structure of this system. In my *Xinti yu Xingtì* [*Mind-substance and Nature-substance*, also *Moral Mind and Moral Nature*], I discussed six hundred years of Song [960-1127] and Ming [1368-1644] Confucian doctrine, which means that a discussion of pre-Qin Confucianism was included. You may look at that book for a more detailed understanding of all of this.

So how are we to properly understand the system called Confucianism? This is an important question. To understand the nature of a system we must of course understand its principal questions and ideas, for it is through these questions and ideas that the system is formed. What are the core ideas of Confucianism? In understanding the Confucian system, this is where the test lies, and this is where one cannot just utter baseless nonsense. Many people who explain the *Analects* and *Mencius* think they understand them but they don't really understand them. Even if you give your interpretation, how good is it? That is quite a problem. Nowadays, beginning with the leftists, too many people explain the *Analects* and *Mencius* this way and that, distorting, interpolating, pulling and tugging and not making any sense. I must say we are in a most uncongenial era for teaching Confucianism! This is because Confucian principles are much too plain and straight. There is nothing extraordinary about them, whereas people today [1978] have a taste for the deviant and in academics lean heavily towards technology. That is why they cannot respond to the ordinary plain and straight. And since they cannot respond, even if the principles are taught, they are mostly vitiated. We are not going to denounce you one by one but we can use a general standard to determine whether you are right or wrong. There are three criteria to go by. One is language, one is logic, and then there is insight. If we are to understand the ancients, we must first go

through language, and even if the language of the ancients is in some respects not sufficiently clear, the language itself being ambiguous, it does not mean that it is ambiguous everywhere, and so you cannot just talk nonsense. Another thing to remember is that even if you have mastered the language, you still won't understand what the ancients meant if you don't have enough insight.

We have just said that in order to understand the pre-Qin Confucians we will not just try to understand any one individual but will try to understand them by looking at the development of the Confucians as a whole. We have also said that although the ideas in the five Confucian books are complex, they are all connected. But many people nowadays take a different view, looking at the five books in two different ways. Let us take a look at these two different theories.

One theory is that Confucianism is limited to morality, with Confucius discussing *ren* [humanity, humaneness] and Mencius teaching that “[human] nature is good” [*xing shan*], and that it does not involve the question of being. Those who hold this view maintain that Confucianism is only concerned with questions of ought, and not involved with questions of being. Since they have thus circumscribed Confucianism, they dislike *The Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Yijing* Commentaries. As soon as they hear *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries talk about the universe, they lump them with Dong Zhongshu [c. 179-104 BCE], saying that *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries are cosmology-centered. Actually, to discuss cosmology does not necessarily mean that the discussion is cosmology-centered. Dong Zhongshu’s writings were undoubtedly cosmology-centered, and furthermore were centered on a cosmology based on *qi* [material force]. But *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries are not cosmology-centered. If we accepted their view, then Confucianism would be purely morality and not involved with questions of being, and if so, then aside from the *Analects* and *Mencius* belonging to Confucianism, there would later be only Lu Xiangshan [1139-93], for even Wang Yangming would not be pure. Wouldn’t that make Confucianism much too forlorn? Of course this viewpoint is not without its rationale, for it is based mainly on Kant’s moral philosophy.

Let us take a moment to look at Kant's theory. First, let us explain what Kant [1724-1804] meant by metaphysics when he spoke of the metaphysics of morals. Did he mean what we normally mean by metaphysics? No. When we speak of metaphysics we usually treat metaphysics as an independent discipline dealing with cosmology and ontology, which is the original meaning of metaphysics. But when Kant talked about metaphysics, he was referring only to the purely moral part, calling it the metaphysics of morals. This metaphysics was a figure of speech, not what is ordinarily meant by metaphysics. His emphasis was not on metaphysics but on morality. But when we ordinarily treat metaphysics as an independent discipline, we do not necessarily talk about morality when we talk about metaphysics. Thus Kant's use of the word metaphysics was different from our ordinary use of the word. Kant's metaphysics of morals dealt with the *a priori* and the purely moral; he removed the entire part of experience. The people who nowadays study morality through anthropology and psychology would not be "pure" in Kant's eyes. Kant's metaphysics of morals dealt mainly with morality, totally ignoring the realm of being. But normally metaphysics must deal with being, with ontology, and also with becoming, which is cosmology. Metaphysics is basically composed of these two parts, and this would be the proper meaning of metaphysics. But Kant's "metaphysics of morals" only analyzes the concepts of morality, leaving out the rest. So in order to understand his metaphysics of morals, we cannot treat it as metaphysics. Kant only used the term metaphysics as a figure of speech. His "metaphysics of morals" is equivalent to the metaphysical exposition of morals. Thus Kant's metaphysics meant what we would call "metaphysical exposition".

That is why, prompted by Kant's thought, people have interpreted the "nature" of Mencius's "[human] nature is good" [*xing shan*] as referring to morality and having nothing to do with being. They maintain that the "nature" in "nature is good" was intended to explain morality, constituting an analytic approach to the concept of morality. The concept of one's nature [*xing*] came out of analysis for the sake of accomplishing morality; it had no relation to being but was confined to morality. But was this indeed the Confucian attitude? For if this were the case, then would not the *Yijing* Commentaries and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, which involve the question of being, conflict with *Mencius*? That is why as soon as these people see *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing*

Commentaries they lump them with Dong Zhongshu, calling them cosmology-centered. Their attitude is based on Kant's thought, but did Kant himself totally ignore ontological questions as they do?

As a matter of fact, even though Kant himself in his *Metaphysics of Morals* dealt with morality and did not touch upon being, he was not confined merely to the concept of morality. Of Kant's three postulates, the postulate of freedom belongs to the sphere of morality. But he also had two other postulates, namely the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. These are not merely questions of morality. And besides, these three postulates are related. Kant also acknowledged that practical reason has a necessary object, namely the highest good, which belongs to the sphere of practical reason, to the sphere of morality. However, Kant insisted on tracing this concept of the highest good to the existence of God. The transition from the concept of the highest good to the existence of God required touching upon the question of being. The crossover from the necessary object of freedom to God's existence is not called metaphysics in Kant but is called moral theology. Kant must have moral theology; you cannot excise it. You may not like theology, but you have to account for the question of being. To whom are you going to turn over the question of being? In the West, being is turned over to God. Unless you state this, how are you going to solve the question of being? If you disapprove of extending freedom towards God, would not being then become void? That is why Kant at this point talked about moral theology. A term that is the converse of moral theology is theological ethics. According to Kant, moral theology is permissible, theological ethics is impermissible. Theological ethics means establishing morality on the foundation of theology, basing morality on theology, which is unacceptable. To establish morality from theology is cosmology-centered, namely the sort of thing Dong Zhongshu wrote about. Kant acknowledged moral theology, but did not acknowledge theological ethics, a very important distinction.

This helps us understand the Confucian attitude. Is Confucianism merely confined to the morality discussed by Mencius? Did it never touch upon being? But there is the concept of "heaven" [*tian*] in Confucianism. There are those who would like to get rid of "heaven". But how can you get rid of "heaven" arbitrarily? Of course they've got an

explanation. They explain heaven into what we normally call fate, turning heaven into a series of material conditions belonging to the world of phenomena. But where can you find this meaning of heaven in Confucianism? Perhaps these people can grasp the “morality” discussed by Mencius but they are unable to grasp the full implications of this concept. Instead they have so constricted it as to kill it. Kant did not constrict it to death. Not only did he speak of freedom, he also spoke of the highest good and of God. Of course there was also a crux in his arguments, namely, he made freedom the focus and the center. Kant made his whole rational system return to the question of freedom. Both the highest good and God’s existence were seen through this locus of freedom. How is being explained? It is explained through the highest good. Here Kant does not use the term metaphysics. According to Kant, there are two levels of metaphysics, namely transcendent metaphysics and immanent metaphysics. We can have knowledge of immanent metaphysics but we cannot have knowledge of transcendent metaphysics. If we think of the term in transcendent metaphysics it would be theology, moral theology. Kant has moral theology but not theological ethics. Christianity, Catholicism, St. Thomas Aquinas [1255/6-1278] are all theological ethics, all impermissible from Kant’s point of view. In this respect Kant was a great turning point in the history of Western philosophy. The same Kantian point of view was shared by the Confucians, though Confucianism did not discuss theology. Mencius’s discussion of nature being good was based on Confucius’s *ren* [humaneness, humanity]. Although his discussion of nature being good directly elucidated morality, the “nature” of the Confucian “nature is good” is not confined to morality; nor is its *ren* confined to morality. Confucianism did not only discuss ought without reference to the question of being. Its *ren* cannot be sealed up, even though Confucius and Mencius were not explicit on this point. Not being a professional philosopher, Confucius did not teach truth with the attitude of a philosopher. Nor was he much interested in metaphysics. Such things as ontology and cosmology the Sage did not discuss, or rather, we could say he did not speak about them with the attitude of a philosopher. But notwithstanding the fact that the Sage did not discuss these things, his and his wisdom could penetrate into that area. Through what ideas could he penetrate into being? Through the idea of “heaven.”

We have just said that in the West the question of being has been turned over to God; it is understood through the idea of God. The Chinese idea of “heaven” is also responsible for the existence of the myriad things [the phenomenal world]. Hence “The Way of heaven procreates and transforms.” The idea of heaven has existed since the time of the Three Dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou. By the time of Confucius, although his focus was *ren*, he certainly did not deny “heaven.” That is why it is unacceptable for people to erase “heaven” and turn it completely into something material. From this standpoint, the Confucian metaphysics of morals implies a moral metaphysics, just as Kant’s metaphysics of morals implies a moral theology. Kant spoke only of a moral theology and not of a moral metaphysics. The “moral” in moral metaphysics and moral theology is an adjective. It is to say that this religion, this metaphysics, is based on morals. Confucianism speaks not of a moral theology but of a moral metaphysics, since Confucianism is not a religion. In Confucianism there is a heaven to be responsible for being. Confucius’s *ren* and Mencius’s *xing* [human nature] were certainly in communion with heaven, certainly in communion and therefrom united with heaven. This *ren* and *xing* cannot be sealed off. Therefore the Confucian metaphysics of morals necessarily implies a moral metaphysics. To speak of cosmology is not necessarily to be cosmology-centered, just as to speak of theology does not necessarily imply theological ethics. Kant also spoke of theology, but his theology did not contain theological ethics. On the contrary, he spoke about moral theology. Theological ethics makes religion the basis of morality. Moral theology makes morality the basis of religion. The emphases of the two are completely different, and are as a matter of fact diametrically opposed.

From the Confucian standpoint, Confucianism has *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing Commentaries* [*Yi Zhuan*] which can extend toward that area. Although they can extend towards the question of being, they constitute moral metaphysics. This metaphysics is still based on morality. Confucianism is not metaphysical ethics, whereas teachings like those of Dong Zhongshu are metaphysical ethics. Dong Zhongshu is cosmology-centered, making cosmology the basis of morality, and requiring the establishment of cosmology before discussing morality, which is unacceptable. It is unacceptable to Confucianism, for *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing Commentaries* do not take this road. So it is unacceptable for people to treat *The Doctrine of the Mean*

and *Yijing* Commentaries as cosmology-centered and therefore exclude them. The character of the Confucian system is that although each of the books in the system only features one idea, it did not stop with that idea. When the ancients spoke they were not deliberately creating a system. But in the Confucian system, the lives of the *Analects* and *Mencius* down to *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries are all interrelated. You cannot leave out *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries.

Beside the attitude we have just discussed, there is another attitude, diametrically opposed to the first. These people dislike the School of Reason/Principle philosophers [*lixuejia*, Neo-Confucians, also translated Rationalists], nor do they like the *Analects* and *Mencius*. They like *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries. This road leads to metaphysical ethics, exactly the converse of the previous attitude. They dislike talking about the moral subject, for they do not have enough moral consciousness. They discuss Confucianism from an aesthetic impulse, asserting that the *Analects* is nothing but “trite words and trite actions,” therefore unsatisfying, and that only *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries are satisfying. Never ever in history has anyone, however brilliant, dared belittle the *Analects*, not even the great monks of Buddhism. As for *Mencius*, they of course cannot deny that Mencius is a Confucian, but they can still say that he does not belong to the highest plane, for the highest plane lies in *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries. Strictly speaking, their discussing Confucianism with an aesthetic sensibility is irresponsible. You cannot just say this is how I see it, this is my taste. That won't do.

Although the proponents of this school of thought are of diverse backgrounds, they share the common inability to grasp the substance of Confucianism. Do we have any basis for saying that they cannot grasp the substance of Confucianism? Of course we have. You cannot make groundless statements about a body of thought. We have already stated previously that there are three criteria in scholarship, the first being language, the second logic, and the third insight. In tracing the development of pre-Qin Confucianism from Confucius and Mencius down to *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries, it is quite clear that their lives are mutually resonant. They are vitally interrelated and you cannot use the *Analects* and *Mencius* to exclude *The Doctrine of the*

*Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries; nor can you use *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries to belittle the *Analects* and *Mencius*. Even though Confucius and Mencius are separated by more than one hundred years, and separated from *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries by two or three hundred years, the lives of these thinkers are like parts of a tally that fit together, as if they were threaded together. Although Confucius accepts heaven, he is reticent about it. "One does not hear the Master talk about nature and the Way of heaven." (*Analects* 5.11). Confucius's emphasis was on *ren*. To emphasize the discussion of *ren* is to throw open the moral subject. When one's moral consciousness is strong, then one must emphasize the subject. For *ren* is my own affair. "If I desire *ren*, then *ren* will be here." (*Analects* 7.29). "If one day men can restore propriety [*li*], then that day the empire will return to *ren*." (*Analects*, 12.1). From what standpoint does Confucius point out *ren*? Confucius points out *ren* from the standpoint of whether your mind [*xin*] is at ease or not. Confucius's student said that observing a mourning period of three years for one's parents was too long and asked if one year would do. Confucius asked him: "Would your mind be at ease if [during the three years] you ate rice and dressed in brocade?" (*Analects* 17.21.4). Zai Yu said: "Yes, I would be at ease." Confucius then said that he was not *ren*. If to be at ease is not *ren*, then if you felt uneasy would not this *ren* appear? This is self-awareness. In present-day parlance it is what we call moral self-awareness. The morally self-aware mind is of course the moral subject. If you are talking about moral consciousness how can you not talk about the subject? It is only because the moral consciousness is strong that the subject will appear before everything else. If you dislike talking about the subject, then how can you talk about Chinese culture? Not only does Confucianism emphasize the subject, the subject is also the emphasis in Daoism and Buddhism. The difference between Chinese philosophy and Western Christianity lies here. Can you respond to Chinese philosophy if you oppose talking about the subject? Some people maintain that if you talk about the subject there will no longer be an object. Actually, there will still be an object, but the question is how you talk about it. Both Chinese culture and Eastern culture commence from the point of the subject. To throw open the subject is not to do away with heaven, for heaven cannot be obliterated. The subject and heaven can be connected, this being the most characteristic and distinctive feature of Eastern culture. Here lies the crux of the

difference between Eastern culture and Western culture. Some people dislike metaphysics and dislike heaven. They assert that Confucian principles are for everyday use in normal human relations, and since people share common sense and feelings and common sense and feelings produce common reasoning, then those principles have universality. Nor is this view mistaken, for there is this side to Confucianism. That is why “Treading the path of the *Doctrine of the Mean*, it is extremely lofty and clear.” You may emphasize this side, but you cannot on account of emphasizing this side deny the other side.

In recent times there are still other people who dislike talking about morality. The minute they hear talk about morality, they behave like Sun Wukong [the monkey in the novel *Travels to the West*] on hearing the curse that locks his head in a vise and feel uneasy all over. Now why are you scared of morality? Your fear of morality simply shows a deficiency in you. People nowadays tend to think that morality is here to bind them, which is why they dislike morality, and because the moral consciousness of the Song and Ming dynasties *lixuejia* [Neo-Confucian] philosophers was too strong they loathe them too. Actually, morality is not here to constrict people; it is here to liberate, to fulfill them. Once this is understood you need have no fear. Unless our hearts and minds are open and broad, how can we be liberated from our personal temperaments, habits, and transgressions? The continuous talk about ideals means that people want to be liberated from the actual, and the only way to be liberated is through morality.

By making these points I am laying out the character of the Confucian system for you. Since we say Confucianism emphasizes the moral subject, we may ask which ideas in these five Confucian classics represent the subject. We must realize that the emphasis in Confucianism is on the subject and that the object is received and drawn in through the subject; the subject projecting into the object and drawing it back to the subject. Which is to say that even if Confucianism deals with metaphysics, it is based on morality. *Ren* is an example of an idea in the Confucian classics that represents the subject. We may also say that *ren* is *li* [reason, Principle, Universal Truth], *ren* is Dao [the Way]. If *ren* is regarded as *li* or Dao, then *ren* may also be regarded as something objective. But something objective is not necessarily the object, nor does it necessarily indicate that it is

something external. When we say that *ren* may be something objective, we mean that it is determined by the universality of *li* and Dao. Why are *li* and Dao objective? To use Kant's words, because they have the two characteristics of universality and necessity. Furthermore, Kant's universality and necessity issued from the subject. Don't the twelve categories have universality and necessity? They issue from the subject but they are not external objects! This is what we mean when we say objective. However, much as we may explain Confucius's *ren* as *li* and Dao, it is not necessarily only *li* and Dao; *ren* is also mind. When Confucius used the mind's being at ease or not to point to *ren*, it meant that men should have "awareness" [*jue*, feeling] here, for being at ease or not is an awareness of the mind. Once the ability of *ren*-awareness is gone, *li* and Dao will also disappear. That is why *ren* is not only *li* and Dao, it is also mind.

That is why when we come to Mencius he uses mind to explain [human moral] nature [*xing*]. Mencius spoke of nature precisely because he emphasized the idea of the subject. The "nature" in the Confucian "[human] nature is good" [*xing shan*] is real subjectivity. This real subjectivity is not the subjective subject that we normally talk about; it is an objective subject, in which everyone is alike, and in which the sage and I are also alike. Everyone has this good nature, the problem being whether it is manifested or not. Such being the case, this nature is then an objective subjectivity. The subject of psychology is then a subjective subject.

Besides the *Analects* and *Mencius*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *Yijing* Commentaries also talk about the subject, and so does *The Great Learning*. When *The Doctrine of the Mean* says "be vigilant in solitude," it is speaking about the subject; it is opening up the subject from the aspect of practice [moral cultivation]. *The Great Learning* also talks about vigilance in solitude [*shendu*]. *The Doctrine of the Mean* talks about "sincerity [*cheng*]." The Christian religion can also talk about sincerity, but Christianity cannot talk about the subject, which is why Christianity cannot open the road of "*shendu*" [vigilance in solitude], and the door to the subject is not thrown open. The idea of vigilance in solitude is based on having a firm grip on moral consciousness. The idea of vigilance in solitude is not found in Confucius nor in Mencius. If you want to trace this idea to its historical origin, whom should you trace it to? It should be Zeng Zi. Vigilance in solitude is a strict moral consciousness. Who among the Confucians had the

strongest moral consciousness? Zeng Zi. On what basis do we say that vigilance in solitude is an idea that began with Zeng Zi? Can we find a clue in the written record? Did not Zeng Zi say: "I examine myself three times a day?" (*Analects* 1.4). Mencius once used two words to describe Zeng Zi, namely the two words "*shou yue*" [holds fast to constraint]. [*Mencius* 2A.2.8]. Holding fast to constraint means the spirit of vigilance in solitude. That is why the idea of vigilance in solitude came down closely bound with the Confucians. As a result both *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *The Great Learning* teach vigilance in solitude. How does *The Doctrine of the Mean* talk about vigilance in solitude? The first chapter of *The Doctrine of the Mean* says: "Heaven's command is called one's nature [*xing*]. Following one's nature is called Dao. Cultivating Dao is called teaching. Dao is something that cannot for a moment be departed from. Anything departing from Dao is not Dao. Therefore the noble man [*junzi*] is guarded and vigilant where he is not seen, is fearful where he is not heard. Nothing is as apparent as the hidden, nothing as prominent as the minute. Therefore the noble man is vigilant in his solitude...." This vigilance in solitude is achieved through one's inner moral capacity [*xingti*, nature-substance] of "Heaven's command is called one's [moral] nature". One's moral capacity is mentioned first. The moral capacity is the subject, but this subject must go through the discipline of vigilance-in-solitude before it can be manifested. The solitude of vigilance-in-solitude, the solitude itself [*du*, being alone] comes from the idea of one's inner moral capacity [*xingti*, nature-substance].

*The Great Learning* also discusses vigilance in solitude, approaching it from sincerity: "That which is called sincerity is not deceiving oneself, as in disliking bad smells and liking beautiful forms, which is called self-sufficiency. Therefore the noble man must be vigilant when he is alone. The small man commits misdeeds when he is idle, there being nothing he will not do. When he sees the noble man he then conceals it, covering his faults and emphasizing his goodness. Since others see him as if they see his lungs and liver, of what avail is it to conceal his faults? This is what is called the sincerity inside appearing outside. Therefore the noble man must be vigilant when he is alone. Zeng Zi said: 'You are one whom ten pairs of eyes are looking at, whom ten hands are pointing at. How stern they are!' Wealth enriches the house, virtue enriches the body, an expansive heart accompanies a robust body. Therefore the noble man must

make his mind sincere.” All of which is strict moral consciousness. That is why vigilance in solitude is of the greatest importance. Later when Wang Yangming taught *liangzhi* [one’s moral capacity], it was developed out of the discipline of being vigilant in solitude. If you simply teach *liangzhi* as an empty word, the meaning of the subject would not be revealed; that is why he had to “bring forth *liangzhi* ” [*zhi liangzhi*]. It was because *liangzhi* is a solitary entity that he said: “When there are no sounds and no smells, and the mind is knowing alone, that is the foundation of all beings in heaven and earth.”

Let us now return to the *Yijing* Commentaries. Even though the *Yijing* Commentaries is strongly imbued with cosmology and metaphysics--for when it touches upon existence it is interpreted from the idea of heaven’s Dao [*tian Dao*, heaven’s Way]--yet its discussion of heaven’s Dao is connected to the nature of the [moral] subject and does not merely take place in a vacuum. The *Yijing* Commentaries talks about “Fulfill the spirit, know transformation [*qiong shen zhi hua* [*Yijing*, “Xici Xia (Appended Statements B)”]. How should we understand “spirit” [*shen*] here in accordance with Confucianism and with the *Yijing* Commentaries? By spirit we mean that which is “most wondrous over the myriad things” [*miao wan wu*]. (*Yijing*, “Shuo Gua [Remarks on the Trigrams]”). The spirit is to be explained through sincerity. It is not a spirit like the God of the Christian religion, nor is it spirit based on *qi*. Ordinarily when we say a person has *shencai* [an excellent countenance], or *shenqi de hen* [brimming with confidence], the *shencai* and *shenqi* here are material, belonging to *qi* [material force], and are a physical concept. The *shen* [spirit] of the Confucian *Yijing* Commentaries is metaphysical.

On the basis of what idea do we determine it to be metaphysical? On the basis of “*cheng*” [sincerity, being true]. Both *The Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Yijing* Commentaries speak of sincerity, which is a virtue and belongs to morality. Thus this spirit [*shen*] is metaphysical, not material. So if you interpret the *shen* of the *Yijing* Commentaries with the concept of *qi*, then you are mistaken. On the other hand, if you interpret it as a personal God, that too is a mistake, for the Chinese did not have that idea. The spirit that *Yijing* Commentaries speaks of is one that presents itself through the subject. Only by exhausting/fulfilling the spirit can you know transformation [*hua*, also

transcendence]. It explains heaven's Dao and *qian Dao*, namely the Dao of creation, through the spirit. Thus when Confucianism developed to the stage of *The Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Yijing* Commentaries, it had to have the statement "Cosmic order is moral order," where the two had to be unified and could not be separated. According to the two previously described attitudes, these two cannot be unified, and therefore it would not be possible to say "Cosmic order is moral order." Because these two are unified, the *Yijing* Commentaries cannot be understood apart from moral consciousness, even though it says "How great the creative-heavenly One [*qian yuan*], all things beginning here," and appears to have a strong metaphysical flavor; but actually its underlying basis is moral. Therefore the *kun wenyen* [comments on the Receptive/Earth principle in the *Yijing*] says: "Straight refers to the upright, square refers to the dutiful. The noble man is reverent so as to be straight internally, is dutiful so as to be square externally. When reverence and dutifulness are erected, then virtue is not alone. Great will be the straight and square. It will not be extinguished. Nothing will be disadvantageous." Some people have explained the "straight" and "square" in "Great will be the straight and square" [*zhi fang da*] as the straight and square of geometry, and "great" as infinite space; that would not be explaining from the standpoint of morality. But "Great will be the straight and square" clearly refers to "is reverent so as to be straight internally, is dutiful so as to be square externally," which clearly refers to morality. How can you explain it as geometry?

Lastly, we will say a few words about *The Great Learning*. *The Great Learning* talks about the three cardinal principles and the eight articles [eight steps]. It also defines the Confucian sphere of practice, from subjective practice to objective practice, but its own direction is uncertain. It has enumerated these principles of spiritual practice, but has not given any explanation of the principles. For example, *The Great Learning* says: "Illuminate luminous virtue," but what is "Illuminate luminous virtue" "Arrive at the ultimate good." [*Zhi yu zhizhan*] What is "ultimate good?" Where does it lie? None of it is explained in *The Great Learning*. As a result, there are many different attitudes towards this, and many different explanations. The most typical interpretations are those of Wang Yangming and Master Zhu [Zhu Zi]. Master Zhu's interpretation explains *The Great Learning* by following *The Great Learning*, a path that most people find easy to follow. Master Zhu takes *The Great Learning* as a standard in explaining Confucianism.

Yet however natural Master Zhu's method--for example going from "extending knowledge, investigating things" [*zhizhi gewu*] to "investigating things, thoroughly understanding the pattern of things" [*gewu qiongli*] is very natural--he has a flaw. He takes *The Great Learning* as the criterion for determining the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Yijing Commentaries*, and the results are all wrong. On the other hand, if you explain *The Great Learning* like Wang Yangming, that would also be awkward, for how would you know that the knowledge of "extending knowledge" [*zhizhi* ], is *liangzhi* [good knowing, one's moral capacity]? That is very troublesome. "Extending knowledge" [*zhizhi*], and "investigating things"[*gewu*], are not necessarily what Wang Yangming explains them to be. What Wang Yangming does is to fit his doctrine of *liangzhi* into *The Great Learning*, a method that is not supported by the language. But there is one merit in his method, and that is that where meaning is concerned, his method of exegesis is in agreement with the meaning of Confucianism. Wang Yangming uses the *Analects* and *Mencius* to scope *The Great Learning*, while Master Zhu employs *The Great Learning* to determine the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Yijing Commentaries*. And so the Confucian system splits into different directions.

Then how should we approach *The Great Learning*? *The Great Learning* simply lays down the principles for practice. But on how to practice, what direction to take in practicing those guiding principles, *The Great Learning* is not clear. How to practice? What are the basic principles behind this moral practice? Here we should take the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Yijing Commentaries* as a standard and use them to define *The Great Learning*. We cannot do the reverse and use *The Great Learning* as a standard to determine the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Yijing Commentaries*. As to what exactly are the principles of *The Great Learning*, this is a vexing question. Perhaps Mr. Tang Junyi [1909-1978]'s approach to the original meaning of *The Great Learning* is a better one. (See *The Original Teaching of Chinese Philosophy* [*Zhongguo Zhexue Yuanlun*]: Introduction, "Tracing the Origin of *Zhizhi Gewu*" [*Yuan Zhizhi Gewu*]). Because *The Great Learning* is itself obscure, we do not give it great attention when discussing Confucianism. In the past scholars gave it importance because of the immense authority of Zhu Zi, and so everybody taught *The*

*Great Learning*. Even Wang Yangming began his studies with *The Great Learning*, but he turned around Zhu Zi's approach. Wang Yangming stressed the study of *Mencius*, his teaching of *The Great Learning* being based on the study of *Mencius*. Master Zhu's *Great Learning*, on the other hand, was based on the approach of Cheng Yichuan [1033-1108].

We have just discussed the five classics of pre-Qin Confucianism. Through them we may understand the character of the Confucian system, as well as its major ideas and concerns. If we regard Confucianism as a philosophy, then the Confucian system may be compared and contrasted with the Kantian system of thought. You should all have a firm grasp of these major features. This is the only way to explain Confucianism, there is no other way. This is the only relevant, proper way to understand Confucianism. Nowadays there are people who explain Confucianism through Aquinas or through Plato or Aristotle, all of which are unacceptable. Whether you agree with Confucianism or not is another matter--you may well disagree—but you should first have a proper understanding of the original meaning of the teaching of Confucianism itself. To first attempt to understand it is one problem. After understanding it you may agree or disagree; that is a second problem. You cannot right away use Thomas Aquinas and Plato's theories to explain Confucianism. That would be interpolation and conjecture, which would be an unacceptable approach.

It is now very difficult for us to discuss Chinese thought, for the writings of China were not as systematic as those of Western philosophy; the thought was not so clearly and neatly laid out for you. Frequently the writings are scattered, with a sentence appearing here, a sentence appearing there. So you have to be familiar with the literature, and cannot simply look at a sentence alone, because looking at it alone might lead to several different interpretations. This is precisely where foreigners have difficulty with Chinese writings. Because their understanding of the language is narrow and rigid, they may look at sentences alone, and forget that they must be seen in context. Of course, it often happens that the sentence does not appear in context, and then what are you to do? At this juncture, we must take the entire corpus of Confucian thought to be its context. If it happens that you do not understand Confucian thought, then you will interpret this sentence erroneously, for this statement is based on the entire Confucian canon. For

example, Cheng Mingdao [1032-85] made the statement: “Observe the phenomena of heaven and earth procreating things..” [*Guan tiandi shengwu qixiang* 觀天地生物氣象] In his *Yu Lu* [*Recorded Conversations*]. This statement appears out of the blue, without a context. This statement is a very simple sentence, with no grammatical complexity. Wouldn't it be simple to translate into English? If you understood the Confucian classics, then you would understand its meaning right away. If you didn't understand the Confucian classics and looked at it in isolation, then you would not understand it and would mistranslate it. Not only might foreigners mistranslate, but even the Chinese could mistranslate. Many Chinese interpret the “*sheng wu* ” in the sentence as a noun, as “livings things,” which is wrong. This *sheng wu* should be explained in the context of the *sheng wu* of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, which says: “The Dao of Heaven and Earth can be put in one sentence: ‘It makes all things according to an unchanging principle and it procreates all things [*sheng wu*] inscrutably.’” *Sheng wu* means procreates the myriad things, where *sheng* is a verb. This is the only proper understanding of the word.

What I have done today is to give you, in a simple fashion, a look at the Confucian system and its major ideas and concerns. If you wish to understand Confucianism in greater detail, I would suggest that you take a look at *Xinti yu Xingti* [*Moral Mind and Moral Nature*].

Transcribed by Po-cheng Chen 陳博政

Copyright©2004,2014 Julie Lee Wei