

Moral norms and physical necessity: Zhu Xi on the concept of *Li*

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to analyze one of the key concepts in Zhu Xi's thought, *Li* 理, from the perspective of Confucian ethics and to stress its importance in the strategic synthesis of Confucian thought realized by Zhu Xi in the 12th century. Focusing on the fundamental concepts of Neo-Confucian thought—*Li* (principle), *Qi* 氣 (vital force), *Dao* 道 (the way/nature), *Ren* 仁 (humanity) and *Xin* 心 (mind-heart)—the paper turns its attention to the inseparability of metaphysical and ontological perspectives on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the ethical perspective in the new Confucian paradigm. Taking into consideration the various definitions given to the concept *Li*, this paper attempts an interpretation of the concept based on the ineluctability of the Confucian moral norms stated by Zhu Xi, according to which in the order of the world everything happens under the unavoidable sign of the necessity of its issuance. These findings suggest that *Li* is a concept composed of a sum of various aspects (*li*) resulting from the different instances of its issuance in the world with which the mind-heart governed by it is confronted, therefore proving that *Li* is the sum of moral norms that encompass humanity, righteousness, rites and wisdom, the pillars of the Confucian moral order.

Zhu Xi and his strategic synthesis of Neo-Confucian concepts

Zhu Xi, the Chinese philosopher whose prestige earned him a place among the sacred classic thinkers Confucius, Mencius, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, gave new meaning to Confucian thought. The system that he proposed has dominated for centuries not only Chinese thought, but also Korean and Japanese philosophies, and has served as the basis of the Confucian paradigm throughout Asia. Zhu Xi's contribution was not limited to the spheres of thinking, ethics or governing, but it had preponderant influence in these fields. Zhu Xi adopted the concept of humanity (*ren* 仁) from Confucius, the doctrine of virtue and humanity from Mencius, the idea of authenticity (*cheng* 誠) from the *Zhong yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*),¹ and the methods of reaching the correct way described in the *Da xue*² (*The Great Learning*), which he

¹ *Zhong Yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*), initially a chapter of the classical book *Li ji* (*The Book of Rites*), was included by Zhu Xi in the collection of the *Four Books* (*Si shu*), the new Confucian canon from the Song.

² 大学 *Da xue* (*The Great Learning*) was, similarly to *Zhong yong*, initially a chapter of the classic *Li ji*, later to be included by Zhu Xi in the Confucian canon of the *Four Books*.

combined with Daoist elements such as the cosmic forces *yin-yang*, with the five elements (water, fire, wood, metal and earth), and with Buddhist concepts, realizing a synthesis of the most important ideas of the neo-Confucian scholars at the beginning of the Song Dynasty in China (12th century). Zhu Xi thus established an orthodoxy of transmitting Confucian thought from Confucius and Mencius through Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, his fundamental innovation consisting in selecting and grouping the four Confucian classics, known as the Four Books (*The Analects*, *The Book of Mencius*, *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*), in a canonical corpus. As a result, these books were commented on and interpreted in a new light, not only by Zhu Xi, but also by his successors. Zhu Xi himself followed the Confucian scholarly tradition of transmitting the classical texts, which he also reinterpreted and brought up to date (to the beginning of the Song Dynasty) giving them a new complexity. Some of Zhu Xi's most influential works, reunited in the collection *Zhu zi yu lei* (*Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*), are a synthesis of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist texts and fundamental concepts, but at the same time, it is an original, primary work. The originality of Zhu Xi's synthesis can be easily seen in his approach to the problem of *Li* 理 (Principle) and *Qi* 氣 (vital force or manifestation), major concepts of Neo-Confucian thought and, due extensively to Zhu Xi's work, concepts that form the common basis of Neo-Confucian metaphysics and ethics in East Asia (China, Korea, and Japan).

The synthesis-consistency of the paradigm

The Master says:

‘The accomplished scholar is not a utensil’ (*Lunyu* 2.12)³

The fundamental concepts of Neo-Confucian thought—*Taiji* 太極 (the Great Ultimate), *Li* (principle), *Qi* (vital force), *Dao* 道 (the way/nature), *Ren* (humanity)—discussed by various Chinese thinkers before Zhu Xi, were developed and systematized by Master Zhu in an effort to explain, as clearly as possible, the Confucian doctrine according to which the human being finds his harmonious place in the universe. This cosmological vision is based on the fundamental idea of the integration of the micro-universe into macrocosmic structures in the context of inter-relations established on the axis *tian* 天 (Heaven)-*di* 地 (earth/ world)-*ren* 人 (man). From a phenomenological perspective, the world is governed by *Dao*, on the fundamental elements of which, *Li* (principle) and *Qi* (manifestation), existence as a whole depends. On the ethical level, universal harmony is reflected in society and governed by the sum of all principles, *Tai ji* (the Great Ultimate), which makes it possible for all the manifestations of

³ ‘子曰：君子不器。’

human nature to integrate in the *Dao*. Having as a starting point the concept of *Tai ji*, explained thoroughly by the Neo-Confucian master Zhou Dunyi,⁴ and combining it with the concept *Li*, proposed by the Cheng brothers,⁵ Zhu Xi developed his thesis that declared *Tai ji* has no physical form but is the principle *par excellence*, the complete and perfect rendition of *Li* (*Zhu zi yu lei* 49).⁶ What then is *Li*?

From metaphysical and ontological perspectives, all principles are reunited in the *Tai ji*, which is present in all things as a whole and in each and every thing in particular. The relationship between the governing principle of the universe and that of each individual thing is the relationship between the *whole* and *parts*. Wing-tsit Chan rightfully compares this relationship to the moonlight that shines over various things in nature; each thing has its own reflection, but the moonlight itself remains one. What becomes obvious in each thing is the principle of the things (*Li*), made overt by the presence of the vital force (*Qi*). Then *Li* becomes the fundamental principle for the understanding of the world and of the universality of things. *Li*, as explained by Cheng Yi and after him by Zhu Xi, is immaterial, one, whole, eternal and unchanging. It constitutes the essence of things, but it does not create, it does not give birth to the myriad things. The agent of creation is the vital force *Qi*, the necessary basis or program for the manifestation of *Li*. *Li* and *Qi* cannot be separated. Zhu Xi explains the interdependence of *Li* and *Qi* by an idea inherited from his predecessor, Cheng Yi: *Li* (the Principle) is one, but its manifestations in the world are multiple. The various aspects of *li*, which are to be found in all things and phenomena, are the individual *li*, and the one *Li* that they all share is the universal *Li*, which could be defined as the sum of *lis*. Zhu Xi also provides a condition for its existence: ‘*Li* inevitably exists where *Qi* coagulates’ (*Zhu zi yu lei* 1.3).⁷ All things consist of a structure in which *Li* (principle) and *Qi* (matter) are bound together. The *Li* of things arises from the encounter with a certain situation or state of affairs (as we shall see later), while the *li* of a thing resides in its own nature, real and definite—*xing* 性. Original nature is pure, unchanged *Li* and is good in essence, while by taking shape and becoming something, it is not pure anymore since it merges with the vital force, *Qi*, and passes, on the ontological level, into a new state which includes the notions of both good and bad. On the phenomenological level, the two types of *xing*—the original nature (pure

⁴ Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), also known as Master Lin Qi, was the first to explain the principles of Neo-Confucian metaphysics and ethics in his works *Tai ji tu* (*The Diagram of the Great Ultimate*) and *Tai ji tu shuo* (*The Diagram of the Great Ultimate Explained*).

⁵ Cheng Hao (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107) were Neo-Confucian philosophers (and brothers) with similar opinions on the essence of Confucianism and who developed their thoughts on the idea of *Li*.

⁶ ‘理氣上，太極天地上：‘氣理也。’

⁷ ‘只此氣凝取處理便在其中。’

Li) and the derived nature (*Qi*)—are bound together, one being the essence and the other the manifestation of things. According to Zhu Xi, that which unites them is the mind-heart (*xin* 心), the embodiment of the manifestation of *Qi*. The concept *xing*, with its value of human nature adopted from Mencius, has a crucial importance for the Neo-Confucian thinkers, as it has a direct influence on the idea of morality and also on the idea of knowing. Governed by the principle (*li*), human nature (*xing*), just as the universal nature of things, is opened to the possibility of knowing since all the things in the universe are interrelated and experience reciprocal influence. Thus, the human has the possibility of chiselling his nature and thereby perfect himself. This requires the constant effort of investigating things (*ge wu* 格物) or ‘apprehending the principle in things’ (Gardner 1990, 117) and reaching knowledge. Zhu Xi adopts the ideas of Cheng Yi about the necessity of understanding and knowing the principle *Li* through the effort of investigating things.⁸ For Zhu Xi, propagator of traditional Confucian values and ideals, the utmost knowledge and the supreme understanding of things is knowing *ren* (humanity). The evaluation of this concept culminates with Zhu Xi’s description stating that *ren* is the principle of goodness above all, thus having the status of cosmic virtue. From this perspective, the concept of humanity identifies with *Li*. Thus, we can see that *Li* encompasses several different meanings that we will discuss further.

***Li*—causality and necessity**

As Yung Sik Kim mentions in his book, *The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi*, the term *Li* is difficult to define. This difficulty is further deepened by the fact that it is almost impossible to translate the term, as there is no one single Western word to encompass all the possible meanings of *Li*. *Li* is most often translated as ‘principle’.⁹ But *Li* has also been translated as *reason, law, rule, order, form, pattern, and coherence*. Wing-tsit Chan gives an account of the different translations of *Li* in the chapter ‘On Translating Certain Chinese Philosophical Terms’ of his book *Reflections on Things at Hand*. Yung Sik Kim mentions that Willard Peterson suggested *coherence* as an alternative translation of the concept in his article *Another Look at Li* (1986). Joseph Needham (1985) suggests the term *organization*, based on the idea of organic philosophy that all things are made of parts which work together on the basis of a

⁸ Cheng Yi gives special importance to learning, being convinced that the physical world and the ethical one are governed by a rational principle (*Li*), which man has to know and comply with. Zhu Xi adopted this idea and developed on its basis his theory about the investigation of things.

⁹ Zhang Dainian translated by Edmund Ryden in Zhang Dainian 2002; Gardner 1990; Chan Wing-tsit 1963; *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* Tomoeda 1985; Berthrong 2005; Shimada 1992; Yun 1990; etc.

guiding principle. A.C. Graham (1986) translates it as a *pattern* that governs things and events, while Fung Yulan (1953)¹⁰ saw in *Li* an equivalent of the Platonic *form*. Each interpreter of Zhu Xi's texts reconstructs the concept, proposes a new dominant dimension of it, and redefines it. We propose an interpretation of the concept *Li* based on the moral norms that trigger the physical necessity of the principle.

Zhu Xi did not provide an explicit definition of *Li*, but he did explain that there are many individual *li* for all things, phenomena, state of affairs, etc. and that there is the one *Li* for the whole of the myriad things. All the individual *li* are manifestations of the one *Li*.¹¹ *Li* has two main features that apply to each thing in nature: the reason by which a thing is as it is and the rule according to which things ought to be. For all things under heaven there must be a 'reason by which a thing is as it is (所以然之固 *suo yi ran zhi gu*)' and a 'rule according to which things ought to be (所当然之则 *suo dang ran zhi ze*)'. These are called *li* (*Daxue huowen* 1.11b–12a).

Although the issue of why *a thing is as it is* is different than that of *what a thing ought to be*, they are directly linked and always combined, as Zhu Xi's idea of *Li* includes both natural and moral norms. In *Daxue huowen* (*Questions and Answers on the Great Learning*), Zhu Xi states:

Truly everything has what is rightful/what ought to be and cannot be otherwise. We should however delve into the reason why things are as they are. The reason why things are as they are is *Li*. Being such, *Li* is unchangeable. When one sees a child drowning in a well, he feels fright and pity. The feeling arising in this situation is what cannot be avoided as it is what ought to be. Why so? It is because there inevitably exists the unchanging way (*dao li*) (*Daxue huowen* 57.13a1).¹²

The phrase *suo dang ran* can be translated as *what ought to be* or *dang wei* (当为), which can also be translated as *acquainted/confronted with so and so*. Then the phrase would read: What cannot be abandoned when confronted with such state of affairs/myriad things/objects and phenomena of the world. Being confronted with the sight of a child drowning in a well anyone would unavoidably feel pity. In this case we can say that *suo dang ran* could be read as *coming in contact with a certain state of things*. *What ought to be* is found in the following term, *bu rong ji* (不容己), *what cannot be otherwise*. What ought to be and cannot be avoided for Zhu Xi occurs only when someone is *confronted with this state of things*. In this case, the issue of *why things are what they are* is directly connected with *being confronted with a certain state of*

¹⁰ Graham 1986; Fung Yulan 1953.

¹¹ 'All things have *li*. As a whole they are simply the one *Li*' (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 94.8bo).

¹² The concept *dao li* 道理 is often translated as *moral principle*. However, since *Li* is a holistic concept that comprises not only the norms of the natural order by which a thing is what it is and not able to change into something else, but also the norms of moral order by which a thing *ought to be* what it is and cannot determine its own acts, we chose to translate *dao li* as the unchanging way.

things and *what things ought to be*. This is because there inevitably is the unchanging way. In other words, as we are confronted with the state of things, something that cannot be avoided (what ought to be) occurs in our mind. The reason for this is the unchanging way. Therefore, the unchanging way is a necessary condition. Not only the state of things and what ought to be, but also what ought to be and its necessity are connected in a conditional circle. From a relational perspective, if the reason for a thing is necessary, the thing itself is also necessary. If the reason for what ought to be is necessary, then what ought to be is also necessary. In this case, Zhu Xi's statement can be read as *what cannot be avoided when confronted with the state of things is the unchanging way*. Therefore, what *ought to be* in Zhu Xi's context is a sufficient condition of necessity.

Necessity is a property of *Dao*, the reason for what ought to be and *cannot be avoided when confronted with the state of things*. For Zhu Xi, the state of things that man is confronted with is important (the things that man is not acquainted with have little significance). The following lines illustrate this: 'As we look at something immediate to us, our own body, we can see that all *li* are present in it' (*Reflections on Things at Hand* 1: 33). The necessity of *Li* exists where there is what ought to be. If *Li*, possessing necessity as its property, resides in the state of things, consequently, what ought to be exists in that state of things. On the other hand, there is the importance of being confronted with the state of things as a condition, in which case what ought to be resides in one's mind. The mind confronting a state of things results in a resonance between the *li* of the mind and the *li* of things. 'The mind of man embraced the myriad manifestations of principle [i.e. *Li*]; thus, as it confronted things, the mind could through a sort of resonance sense the principle in those things. A natural response occurred between principle in one's mind and in the things [i.e. state of things] before that mind' (Gardner 1990, 53).

Zhu Xi, conceptualizes the mind-heart as a physical space of just half an inch (*fang cun* 方寸) in which the moral mind originating in the Principle (*Li*) becomes one with the human mind (with feelings and desires) originating in the vital force (*Qi*). The human mind constantly gives in to human desires, while the moral mind is subtle and responds to moral duty, possible only through moral discipline. Moral discipline presupposes *nourishing* (*cun yang* 存養) the original moral mind when the Principle is still not manifested, but also *self-examination* (*xing cha* 省察) when *Li* starts acting through the vital force *Qi*. Zhu Xi thus insists that this moral effort is necessary and at the same time unavoidable since it is also part of the natural order of things.

The aspects of *Li*

‘[Li] Principle is not some separate thing in front of us; rather it’s in our minds’
(*Zhu Zi yu lei* 9.7b:1/155:9; Gardner 1990, 3.27, p. 124).

If there is a rule of *what ought to be* governing *the way things are* then the *li* of one state of things with which the mind is confronted is an aspect of *Li*, of that one *Li* which in Zhu Xi’s opinion things and the mind share. The *li* in things and the mind are originally one thing. The two do not have even a small gap between them. But it is necessary that I should respond to them [i.e., the *li* in things]. Things and the mind share this *li*. The various aspects of *li* that are to be found in all things and phenomena are the individual *li*, and the one *Li* that they all share is the universal *Li*, which could be defined as a sum of *lis*.

When confronted with the state of things, the mind comes in contact with the various aspects of *Li*. ‘The mind embraces the myriad manifestations of the principle. The myriad manifestations of principle are embodied in the one mind’ (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 9.7a:3/155:1; Gardner 1990, 3.23, p. 123). Then what is the *Li* of the mind, that which governs the *ought to be* of things? In Zhu Xi’s own words: ‘Humanity (*ren*) is the correct *Li* of the mind’ (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 45.4b3). Having as a characteristic *that by which things ought to be*, *Li* is also the sum of moral norms. Therefore it encompasses 仁 (humanity), 义 (righteousness), 礼 (rites), and 知 (wisdom), the pillars of the Confucian moral order. Recent studies in Neo-Confucianism agree that the moral side of the definition of *Li* is predominant for Zhu Xi (de Bary 1989; Kim 2000; Tillman 1992; etc.), as are his illustrations in terms of *what things ought to be* rather than *what makes a thing be as it is* (Kim 2000, 24).

Zhu Xi makes clear the conditional relation of the two concepts: only after there is *Li* is there *Qi*, and there has to be *Qi* in order for *Li* to exist (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 1.1b7, 4.15a2, 95.13a21.1b7, 87.23b2). ‘When there is *Li*, but no *Qi*, *Li* has nowhere to stand. Only after there is *Qi* does *Li* have somewhere to stand’ (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 94.14a2). So *Li* is provided a place to ‘stand’ by *Qi*, which becomes the expression of *Li*. This would be the ontological side of the *Li-Qi* relationship. On the other hand, Zhu Xi establishes a logical aspect of the relationship between *Li* and *Qi*: ‘When there is *Li* for “this”, then “this” *Qi* flows, moves, grows and nourishes the myriad things’ (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 1.1bo).¹³ *Li* comes to be realized in the process of being localized by *Qi*. If *Qi* is the substance or the form, then *Li* appears to have little additional content beyond the things or state of things of which it is the *li*, becoming thus the definition of things (Kim 2000, 26). *Li* cannot be seen by Zhu Xi as having an existence apart from the things or phenomena

¹³ ‘有此理,便有此氣流行發育。’

of which it is the *li*, because for him *Li* is in *Qi* (which constitutes everything in the world) or in the mind (which is confronted with everything in the world) (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 1.2b1, 5.3b6, 9.6b1).

Hearing the Way

‘If a man in the morning hears the right way, he may die in the evening without regret’ (*Lunyu* 4.8)¹⁴

Zhu Xi’s intellectual approach can be included in what is called by Confucius ‘hearing the Way’. The Way (*Dao* 道) can be the way of the mind, which seizes the *li* of what ought to be in a strictly ethical interpretation, but it can also be the way of the old, the models of human perfection, and the way of understanding everything in the world. The Way is either revealed for the ones who are born learned (*sheng ren* 聖人) or it is known through continuous intellectual effort by a continuous and gradual process of learning (*zhi* 知). For Zhu Xi, learning and knowing are part of *Dao*, in its utmost expression *Li*, the sense, reason and principle of things, which serves more effectively to explain the transformation of unity into multiplicity. Zhu Xi’s Way is that of moral self-cultivation, for which he identifies steps to be followed in order to perfect oneself. At the heart of his prescriptive efforts lies study, or learning. In one chapter of the *Greater Learning*, Zhu Xi states: ‘The first step of the instruction in greater learning is to teach the student, whenever he encounters anything at all in the world, to build upon what is already known to him of principle and to probe still further, so that he seeks to reach the limit’ (Gardner 1990, 118). In this way one can become enlightened and is able to understand the *Li* of things. Another step in perfecting oneself is gaining reverent seriousness. Zhu Xi says: ‘I heard Cheng Yi say that self-cultivation requires reverent seriousness (*jing* 敬)’ (*Zhu Zi yu lei* 12:338). Reverence and seriousness, encompassed in the concept *jing* are, as Zhu Xi himself states, fundamental ideas in the Confucian school since they are proof that the mind-heart (*xin*) is its own master. This is a quality that is inborn for the sage (*sheng ren*) and cultivated for the scholar (*shi* 士). Confucius says about the latter: ‘The scholar dedicates himself wholly to the Way’ (*Lunyu* 4.9).

For the superior man (*jun zi* 君子), reverent seriousness is accompanied by authenticity/truthfulness (*cheng* 誠).¹⁵ The concept first appeared in the Confucian classic *Zhong yong*, but with Zhu Xi’s reiteration it reached the status of a concept with a fundamental role in the Confucian system of thought. By authenticity, Zhu

¹⁴ ‘子曰：朝聞道，夕死可矣。’

¹⁵ Concept adopted by Zhu Xi from the Neo-Confucian thinker Zhou Dunyi, who defines the quality of the sage by the term *cheng*.

Xi understands the capacity of the human being to actualize his moral potential and render valuable his good human nature.¹⁶

Zhu Xi transfers the idea of authenticity from the level of individual moral perfection to the level of intellectual chiselling. He follows this model of practical training himself. He knows how to approach the object of study and how to proceed to understand it. In the case of a text, he possesses the art of analyzing and understanding the text and grasping its essence. Like Zhuang Zi's butcher Ding, who masters the art of cutting open ox carcasses, Zhu Xi knows how to open up the text, to operate hermeneutically, and to see not with the eyes, but with his spirit.¹⁷ It is a ceremony, a ritual of appropriation in the sense identified by Baudrillard in the concept of ceremony, which 'exalts the definitively factual and conventional order of the world, the occult objectivity that shines behind the subjectivity of appearances' (Baudrillard 1996). Desire and hazard are excluded from the ceremony. This is the art of apprehending the principle of things with one's mind-heart (*xin*). In the order of the world, everything happens under the unavoidable sign of the necessity of its issuance. Thus the circle closes and the Neo-Confucian master reiterates the ideas of the iconic Confucian master. In the *Analects*, Confucius says: 'In his dealings with the world the superior man is not invariably for or against anything. He will follow what is as it ought to be' (*Lunyu* 4.10).

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¹⁶ Idea adopted from Mencius, who stated that human nature is originally good, and that it needs to be recovered and cultivated.

¹⁷ 'In the beginning, when I started cutting up the oxes, I could only see the ox as being made of bones and meat. For 3 years, I didn't see the ox as a whole. Now I don't see it with my eyes, but with my spirit'. 《莊子》養生主: '始臣之解牛之時, 所見无非全牛者。三年之後, 未嘗見全牛也。方今之時, 臣以神遇而不以目視, 官知止而神欲行。'

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