

# Congruity (*li*) as ethical notion in Zhu Xi's theory of *renxing*

Vytis Silius

Vilnius University

**Abstract.** This article deals with the cosmology and ethics of Zhu Xi (朱熹) and reconstructs the relation between these two fields of inquiry in Zhu Xi's philosophy. This article opposes the still common view in contemporary scholarship that portrays Zhu Xi as a metaphysical thinker who introduced metaphysical notions into the Confucian discourse. The true originality and innovation of Zhu Xi was his attempt to appropriate the notion of *li* 理, which was the key term in the metaphysical speculations of Chinese Buddhism and was also adopted by the early Song neo-Confucians in their cosmological investigations, and to show its relevance and conformity to the classical Confucian ethical thought. The article demonstrates how Zhu Xi turns *li* 理 into a key ethical concept through identifying it with the particular course of the growth (*xing* 性) of things and ultimately, with the particular course of *human growth* (*renxing* 人性).

## Introduction

Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) is generally acknowledged as a great synthesizer of Chinese thought. Without a doubt he is a central figure in Chinese philosophy, and his influence has reached far beyond his own time and place. Zhu Xi's writings were adopted as an official ideology in China, but his thought provoked discussions in Imperial China as well as among contemporary scholars.

The prevailing view in the contemporary scholarship depicts Zhu Xi as a thinker who had developed a highly sophisticated metaphysical system. It is claimed that this system, which is concentrated around the notion of *li* 理, served Zhu Xi as an ontological foundation for the classical Confucian assertion of the goodness of 'human nature' (*renxing* 人性). By developing this system—as the prevailing interpretation has it—Zhu Xi renewed the classical Confucian thought and at the same time purportedly departed from it by introducing the metaphysical dimension to the Confucian way of thinking.

The new 'concept cluster' that Zhu Xi employs in his writings makes it obvious that he did renew the classical Confucian thought. However, the goal of this present

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essay is to find out what the nature of Zhu Xi's innovation is. Does Zhu Xi ground his ethics and the notion of *renxing* 人性 on the metaphysical foundation? In order to answer this question we will have to see what role *li* 理 plays in Zhu Xi's system, and how it is related to the notion of *renxing* 人性 and to Zhu Xi's ethical considerations. In this essay, I claim that Zhu Xi's theory is best understood as cosmology rather than ontology, as he is interested only in the things experienced in our natural world and does not pursue the question of the nature and essence of being as such. Thus, *li* 理 is also best explained in accordance to this naturalistic worldview, without any references to the transcendent metaphysical reality. In Zhu Xi's time, the notion of *li* 理 was an important part of the metaphysical speculations of Chinese Buddhism and was also adopted by the early Song neo-Confucians. However, I claim that Zhu Xi's philosophy is best understood not as an attempt to use *li* 理 in order to provide an ontological foundation to the classical Confucian ethics, but rather as an attempt to appropriate *li* 理 into his natural cosmology and to show its relevance and conformity to the Mengzian version of classical Confucian ethics.

In the first part of this essay I give a brief account of the naturalist understanding of the term *li* 理 in pre-Buddhist Chinese thought. In the second part I give a general description of the meaning of the term in Zhu Xi's philosophy. I suggest 'congruity'—meaning the dynamic state or quality of appropriate and fitting relationality, as a translation for *li* 理. In the third part, I mostly analyze *The Selected Sayings of Master Zhu* (*Zhuzi yu lei* 朱子語類) to show that his philosophy is not concerned with the nature and essence of being as such, but rather concentrates on the natural world as experienced by humans. In this Zhu Xi remains strictly in line with the 'this-worldly' sensibility of classical Confucians and does not engage in metaphysical speculations. In the fourth part, I demonstrate that the identification of the *congruity* (*li* 理) with *the particular course of growth* (*xing* 性) of things provides Zhu Xi with a link between his cosmological and ethical concerns. In the fifth part, I demonstrate that Zhu Xi links his cosmological notion of *li* 理 to the notion of *renxing* 人性 (the particular course of human growth). Zhu Xi adopts the Mengzian idea of the four sprouts (*siduan* 四端) as a quality of human sensibility (*xin* 心) that enables fruition of specifically human excellences in their interactions with the natural and social environment (*ren yi li zhi* 仁義理智). Zhu Xi attributes these human excellences of interactions to the cosmological notion of *li* 理, understood as the general and pervasive interrelatedness of all things, and brings the notion of congruity *li* 理 to the very centre of Confucian ethics.

### The background of the use of *li* 理 in pre-Qin thought

The term *li* 理 has been used by Chinese thinkers for more than two thousand years, but its meaning and its content have varied through the different times and the different

schools of thought. The ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 indicates that the character *li* 理 refers to the treatment of a piece of jade (*zhi yu ye* 治玉也; *Shuowen jiezi*). Earlier, it also meant 'dividing the land into cultivated fields in a way consistent with the natural topography' (*Book of Songs* 210, cit. from Hall and Ames 1995, 212). What is common in these two early meanings of the term is that they both describe the interaction of humans with their environment. Brook Ziporyn points out that in the earliest stage *li* 理 is used as a verb rather than as a noun (Ziporyn s.d., 8). This correlation and active aspect of the term will be important to keep in mind in our subsequent discussion on its meaning in Zhu Xi's philosophy.

During the Warring States period (*Zhanguo* 戰國, 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE) the meaning of the term gradually changed; it acquired a philosophical significance and became more complex. Although we don't find *li* 理 in the early Confucian and Daoist texts—*Lunyu* 論語 and *Daodejing* 道德經—the Confucian scholars Mengzi 孟子 and Xunzi 荀子, the Daoist Zhuangzi 莊子 and the Legalist thinker Hanfeizi 韓非子 were among the first ones to use the term with philosophical implications (Zhang 1982, 52). In the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 the term has strong cosmological connotations and is used to account for the world order as it is in flux: 'It is this inscrutable *li* 理 of the heaven and earth that is a condition of the myriad of things'<sup>1</sup> (*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 17). In the more authentic Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, the term appears only once in the famous passage about the Cook Ding 庖丁 cutting up an ox for the ruler Wen Hui 文惠. The Cook Ding explains that his knife has not become blunt in nineteen years of use because he cuts up an ox 'observing natural lines' (*yi hu tianli* 依乎天理), letting his knife slide through the crevices without striking bones or ligaments (*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 3). Here *li* 理 is understood as natural lines of both separation and conjunction within a larger natural entity (for example, the marbling in the flesh that constitutes an ox). This connotation of relating with or sticking together will also be important in our subsequent discussion.

In the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, *li* 理 is used extensively, but there is one particular meaning of the term in this text that deserves our special attention. In the *Jie Lao* 解老 chapter of the *Hanfeizi* it is said: 'As for *li* 理, it is what differentiates square from circular, short from long, coarse from fine, hard from fragile' (*Hanfeizi* 20.25). Here Hanfeizi refers to pairs of related antithetical qualities. That is, any of these qualities can exist, can be thought of or named, only as they stand in relation with some quality other than themselves. In another passage from the same chapter it is said that '*Li* 理 are the lines of things' formations'<sup>2</sup> (*Hanfeizi* 20.23). From this usage we see that

<sup>1</sup> 是未明天地之理，萬物之情者也。All quotations from primary or Chinese language secondary sources are my own translations, unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> 理者，成物之文也。

*li* 理 denotes not only relationality, as in previous cases, but is also understood as underlying what the particular thing *is* in its context.

In the *Mengzi*, *li* 理 is already used in an ethical context. Mengzi explains that just as ‘mouths have the same preferences in flavors, ears have the same preferences in sounds, eyes have the same preferences in attractiveness’,<sup>3</sup> equally so everyone’s heart-mind (*xin* 心) has something in common, and that is *li* 理 and ‘appropriate conduct’ (*yi* 義) (see *Mengzi*, 6A7). Mengzi didn’t develop this idea further, and thus in the Western translations we find many different interpretations of what *li* 理 means here. According to James Legge, what is common to everyone’s heart-mind (*xin* 心) are ‘the principles of our nature [*li* 理], and the determinations of righteousness [*yi* 義]’ (*italics* in the original, Legge 2001, 406). In his commentary Legge explains *li* 理 and *yi* 義 apparently using the Christian ideas as well as the vocabulary of the later, neo-Confucian tradition: ‘理=心之體, “the mental constitution”, the moral nature, and 義=心之用, that constitution or nature, acting outwardly’ (*ibid*). Later translators have rendered *li* 理 in this passage into *reason* (Lau 1970, 164), *principle* (Edmund Ryden in Zhang 2005, 27), and *order* (van Norden 2008, 151). In yet another passage Mengzi uses the term in relation to a musical performance:

In a complete symphony, the bells announce the beginning, and then the jade chimes bring it to a close. The bells’ sounding is to begin the harmonious patterns [*li* 理]. The ‘jade chimes being struck’ is to close the harmonious patterns. To begin the harmonious patterns is the task of wisdom. To end the harmonious patterns is the task of sagacity.<sup>4</sup> (*Mengzi*, 5B1)

Because of the lack of references, the meaning of *li* 理 as it is used by Mengzi remains somewhat unclear. However, we may conclude that for him the term is describing the re-appearing, meaning-generating, and communally recognizable cultural patterns. The important fact, however, is that this notion in his book is explicitly linked to one of the most important Confucian ethical notions, both in the classical and the neo-Confucian periods, *yi* 義—‘appropriate interaction’. This correlation between *li* 理 and *yi* 義 will be important to the further development of Confucian thought.

### ***Li* 理 as the ‘congruity’ in Zhu Xi’s thought**

Although in the classical period *li* 理 was marginal in the philosophical discourse, it becomes the cornerstone for the whole system of Zhu Xi’s philosophy. *Li* 理 is the central category in Zhu Xi’s thinking because it helps to explain all other cosmological, philosophical, and ethical notions inherited from his predecessors and synthesizes them into one coherent system. The centrality of the term is revealed in the fact that

<sup>3</sup> Translated in van Norden 2008, 151.

<sup>4</sup> Translated in van Norden 2008, 132.

Zhu Xi's teachings were called 'li learning' (*li xue* 理学). Zhu Xi claims to follow the tradition of the *Lunyu*, the *Mengzi* and the earlier Song 宋 dynasty thinkers: Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, Zhang Zai 張載, and the brothers Cheng Hao 程顥 and Cheng Yi 程頤. However, Zhu Xi has to be acknowledged as an originator (together with Cheng Yi) of the systematic usage of the term. As Brook Ziporyn notes, the term *li* 理

came into prominence as the central metaphysical category rather gradually, seemingly through the intervention of Buddhist usages, taking on its decisive role only in Cheng Yi's thought, and further developed by Zhu Xi, who then reads it back into the pre-Buddhist tradition, although its actual appearance in the early texts is sparse and problematic. (Ziporyn s.d., 3)

The neo-Confucian use of *li* 理 has been variously translated into Western languages.<sup>5</sup> The prevalent rendition of *li* 理 in the last two decades has been 'principle'<sup>6</sup> or 'pattern'.<sup>7</sup> Deficiencies of these early translations are fully addressed in the works of Willard Peterson (1986), David Hall and Roger Ames (see particularly Hall, Ames 1995, 211–16), Brook Ziporyn (s.d.), and Stephan C. Angle (2009), and therefore I will not repeat them here. My understanding of the term depends heavily on the works of these scholars who use 'coherence' for translating the term, and also on the work of Yung Sik Kim (2000) who simply transliterates rather than translates it.

Peterson, who was the first to suggest 'coherence' as the closest translation for *li* 理, intends it 'to be taken in the straightforward sense of "the quality or characteristic of sticking together", with the connotations varying according to context' (Peterson 1986, 14). Hall and Ames are 'borrowing freely' from Peterson's analysis and use it in their investigation of the classical usage of *li* 理. In addition, they point out that besides the other early connotations *li* 理 also indicates the 'intelligibility' of things (Hall, Ames 1995, 213; also see *ibid.*, n. 65, 303). Ziporyn also adopts Peterson's translation and spells out the important aspect of 'coherence' as the characteristic of sticking together: 'I adopt the crucial idea of *li* as coherence, meaning both the sticking together of the *component parts* of a thing and its way of sticking together with its *environment*' (Ziporyn s.d., 29, emphasis added). Here, Ziporyn addresses a crucial conviction of Chinese thinkers, that is, the continuity between a thing and its environment. All these scholars emphasize that in the philosophy of Zhu Xi, *li*

<sup>5</sup> The list of English translations can be found in Wing-tsit Chan's translation of *Jinsilu* 近思錄 (Chan 1967, 367). The fullest early investigations into *li* 理 in English are in Needham 1956, Graham 1958, and Chan 1964. *Li* 理 was also translated as 'universal order' (translated by Foster and Hartman in Gernet 1996), 'universal pattern' (Graham 1990), also as 'die Idee' (the idea) in German (Geldsetzer, Hong 1998).

<sup>6</sup> See various works of Wing-tsit Chan, also see Gardner 1990, Wittenborn 1991, Yao 2000, Zhang 2005, and others.

<sup>7</sup> See Graham 1990, van Norden 2008, and others.

理 has not only a descriptive, but also a normative meaning (see Peterson 1986, 23; Hall, Ames 1995, 216). However, Ziporyn is the one who gives the most attention to this aspect of *li* 理. This can be seen from his proposition that ‘*li* is not just any togetherness: it is a valued togetherness’ (Ziporyn s.d., 31). Ziporyn concludes that:

Coherence, in *li* [理], must cover at least these four senses: sticking together of parts, sticking together with the environment, intelligibility and value. ... For value is built into the notion of *li*, rather than imposed upon ... (Ibid., 30)

In order to convey the importance of the normative aspect of *li* 理 coherence, Ziporyn says that it is ‘a harmonious coherence’ (ibid., 36).

Fully agreeing with Ziporyn’s analysis, I would, therefore, suggest that ‘congruity’ might possibly be a more appropriate term for translating *li* 理. In my opinion, ‘congruity’, meaning the characteristic of ‘exhibiting harmony of parts’, being ‘appropriate or fitting’, and also ‘a point of agreement’, best encapsulates all four senses of *li* 理 listed by Ziporyn. Thus, the *li* 理 of any phenomena is the congruity of its constitutional structure, both intrinsic and extrinsic, without any meaningful way of talking about these two aspects as existing separately. As Hall and Ames explain, in this Chinese correlative way of thinking ‘things are continuous with one another, and thus are interdependent conditions for each other’ (Hall, Ames 1995, 214). In this worldview, limits of any phenomena are always relative and provisional in the sense that an ‘extrinsic’ relation to other things is at the same time a part of an ‘intrinsic’ constitution of each particular thing. The congruity *li* 理, as a function of reciprocal conditioning of things, is also the way that the particular phenomenon comes into presence (ontological aspect) and the way it is presented in the human mind (epistemological aspect). At the same time, *li* 理 not only describes what is present at any given moment (*suo yi ran* 所以然), but, being a processual term, also implies the possibilities of further expansion and amplification of the congruity (*suo dang ran* 所當然). Because all things present themselves through their congruity, the process of growth can be described as pursuing the complete congruity (*zhi li* 至理 or *qiong li* 窮理). Thus, *li* 理 provides a normative standard for making congruity increasingly more appropriate, fitting, and versatile.

To sum up, the congruity *li* 理 in its most general usage in Zhu Xi’s philosophy denotes the dynamic state of ‘appropriate or fitting relationality’. It is fully consistent with the early meanings of *li* 理 because it is dynamic and processual, and incorporates interaction with an environment (*Shuowen jiezi*), because it involves correlation and continuation (*Zhuangzi*), because it is a source of what a thing *is* in its context (*Hanfeizi*), and because it involves a normative aspect, that is, appropriateness of relation (*Mengzi*). In this light, the use in the *Mengzi* of *li* 理 and *yi* 義 (appropriate conduct) as close correlatives in the ethical realm becomes

even more understandable: just as everyone's mouth enjoys appropriate food and everyone's ears enjoy appropriate sounds, so every human's sensibility (*xin* 心) is satisfied by appropriate, suitable, and fitting interactions (*li yi* 理義, *Mengzi*, 6A7). I will further ground this interpretation of Zhu Xi's notion of the congruity *li* 理 in the following analysis of its use in his philosophy and will show how the term was incorporated into the ethical discourse.

### **The congruity *li* 理 as a necessary condition of things being present**

It is widely accepted that Zhu Xi's philosophy developed, in a large measure, as a response to the Buddhist philosophical and religious challenges. Buddhism raised many questions that were very different from any of the early Chinese schools of thought. At the same time Buddhists appropriated and deployed an importantly different philosophical vocabulary. The neo-Confucian attempt to revive Confucian ideas and their prestige required a proper intellectual response and, therefore, necessitated the formulation of a new philosophical language among neo-Confucian scholars. However, the exact meaning of this new language and the degree of innovation as opposed to the revitalization of old concepts remains a topic of debate in the contemporary scholarship.

The notion of *li* 理 has always been considered a cornerstone of that new, specifically neo-Confucian vocabulary because of its obvious disproportionate importance in the post-Buddhist Confucian tradition. Large numbers of contemporary scholars both in China and in the West associate the introduction of *li* 理 as a key notion of the neo-Confucian vocabulary with an alleged shift towards a metaphysical orientation and a newly-found interest in a transcendent realm of pre-determinate forms or universal normative principles in neo-Confucian philosophy. For example, Arthur F Wright describes a Buddhist monk Zhi Dun 支遁 (314–366) as someone whose 'philosophical innovation' was

investing the old Chinese naturalistic notion of *li*, 'order', with a new metaphysical meaning drawn from Mahayana philosophy; in this new sense the term came to mean the transcendental absolute principle as opposed to the empirical data of experience. (Wright 1965, 47)

The twentieth century Chinese scholar Fan Shoukang 范寿康 claims that in China from early on a 'metaphysical essence (形上學的本體) was called *dao* 道. It seems that it was under the influence of the Huayan School 華嚴 that Cheng Yi changed the traditional term *dao* 道 into *li* 理' (Fan 1983, 187). Acknowledging that Zhu Xi criticized many Buddhist dogmas, Julia Ching traces some of his own ideas directly to Huayan:



The relationship that Zhu explains between *li* and *qi* [氣] ... appears parallel to what Buddhism, especially Huayan Buddhism, which influenced Chan [禪], has to say about the noumenal and the phenomenal, emptiness and its manifestations. (Ching 2000, 184)

This position is not entirely unsupported by Zhu Xi's language. *Li* 理 is interwoven with the notions of the Great Ultimate *taiji* 太極, the *dao* 道, vital matter-energy *qi* 氣, the myriad of things *wanwu* 萬物, and *xing* 性 (most commonly translated as the 'nature' of things), all of which are notions on a fairly abstract and theoretical level. *Li* 理 is described as being 'above' the physical shape<sup>8</sup> (*Zhu Zi yu lei*; hereafter—ZZYL, Ch. 95), and to have existed before there was heaven and earth<sup>9</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1). However, understanding *li* 理 in terms of congruity allows us to see Zhu Xi's philosophy as a systematic and consistent whole without any recourse to the notions pertaining to something outside of the natural world.

Zhu Xi develops a theory, which is better conceived as cosmology rather than ontology because he only talks about things (*wu* 物)<sup>10</sup> that are present (*you* 有 or *cun* 存) in our lived world, but never about the nature of existence or being as such. The basis for Zhu Xi's cosmology is the claim that there are two different aspects of each thing being present, and that this holds for everything – from the smallest ant to the entire world. These two aspects are *qi* 氣—*what* is present, and *li* 理—*how* it is present. *Qi* 氣, or *what* is present, is a multitude of diverse shapes, forms, various degrees of concentration and different propensities of movement of the vital matter energy. This is the active 'fabric' from which everything consists, from the finest steam (this, most likely, was the initial meaning of the term) to the most solid rock, from our dreams to the bodily fluids that sustain the lives of plants, animals, and people. *Qi* 氣, according to Zhu Xi, has a physical shape, a position, and an appearance<sup>11</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 95), and therefore is generally perceivable to our senses. Zhu Xi makes a distinction between the thing-like *qi* (*qi zhi* 氣質 or *xing qi* 形氣) that we actually perceive through our senses (like tangible objects) and, what Yung Sik Kim translates as 'merely *qi* 氣' and 'rotating wind' (*xuan feng* 旋風) that our senses do not register because of its rarefied quality (like a breath). Importantly, Zhu Xi is not talking about different kinds of *qi* 氣, but about differences in the

<sup>8</sup> That which is above the physical shape, is without a contour or a shadow—that is *li* (形而上者無形無影，是此理)。

<sup>9</sup> 未有天地之先，畢竟是先有此理。

<sup>10</sup> *Wu* 物 in ancient Chinese can mean any thing, creature, or entity that is there and makes up the whole world (*wanwu* 萬物). This understanding of *wu* 物 is also present in contemporary Chinese, where such words are used as *shengwu* 生物 or 'living-thing' for 'organism'; *renwu* 人物 or 'human-thing' for 'human, character, outstanding person'; *dongwu* 動物 or 'moving-thing' for 'animal'; *shiwu* 事物 or 'event-thing' for 'thing, object'. In this paper I am using the English word 'thing' in this most broad way as anything that can be addressed by the pronouns 'this, that'.

<sup>11</sup> 形而下者有情有狀。



concentration, speed, and texture of the same unbroken dynamic quantum of *qi* 氣. From the abundance of suggested equivalents for *qi* 氣 in other languages, it is clear that this term is by no means easier to translate from Chinese than *li* 理. However, as Yung Sik Kim points out, *qi* 氣

does not seem to have been a difficult or problematic concept for Zhu Xi himself. Except when used in such technical subjects as medicine, geomancy, and divination, *ch'i* [*qi* 氣] was not even a technical concept. Zhu Xi and his interlocutors used the term in a quite matter-of-factly manner. (Kim 2000, 31)

A new development in Confucian thinking, especially after Cheng Yi, was that Zhu Xi starts to question closely—and in an abstract manner—*how* things come to be present in both an ontological and cognitive sense. His answer is: a thing comes to be present through *li* 理, that is, through the congruity of a thing's 'intrinsic' constitution and through the congruity of a thing with its 'extrinsic' environment. This congruity is unitary, as the environment and a thing are interdependent, with only provisional boundaries being negotiated continuously between them. As Zhu Xi explains, 'congruity has no inner, nor outer'<sup>12</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1), and 'if we talk about congruity, then there is no segmentation'<sup>13</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 4). In other words, every single thing (*wu* 物) that is present (*you* 有 or *cun* 存) in our world of experience, according to Zhu Xi, is not without congruence. In Zhu Xi's own words, 'If this congruity is not present, there is no heaven and earth, there is no people or things—and nothing can be conveyed'<sup>14</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1). At the same time, for Zhu Xi there is a sense in which we can say that things *qua* things are present *because* they are congruent as a unitary entity, that is, as a particular thing, and as a part of some larger whole. Stephen Angle calls this element of *li* 理 in Zhu Xi's thought the 'causal role' of *li* 理 (Angle 2009, 41–4). In Zhu Xi's philosophy, this 'causal role' is formulated as the question of the primacy (*xian* 先) of *li* 理. Zhu Xi says that 'Even when a certain thing is not yet present, the congruity of it is already there'<sup>15</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 95). And also, 'Before the presence of heaven and earth, all that is there is simply congruity. It is because this congruity is present that heaven and earth are present'<sup>16</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1).

Thus *li* 理, in Zhu Xi's philosophy, denotes the fundamental relationality between everything that is present in our world of experience. According to Zhu Xi's explicit assertion (though not thoroughly consistent),<sup>17</sup> as the state of relationality, congruity

<sup>12</sup> 理無內外。

<sup>13</sup> 以理言之，則無不全。

<sup>14</sup> 若無此理，便亦無天地，無人無物，都無該載了。

<sup>15</sup> 未有這事，先有這理。

<sup>16</sup> 未有天地之先，畢竟也只是理。有此理便有此天地。

<sup>17</sup> In at least one occasion Zhu Xi uses the term 'thing' (*wu* 物) while talking about *li* 理: 'what are called congruity and *qi* 氣, certainly are two things' (所謂理與氣，決是二物; *Da Liushu wen* 答

is ‘not a thing on its own’ because it has no physical shape or body (理無形體; ZZYL, Ch. 1). *Li* 理 is a shapeless (*xing er shang* 形而上) course or a way (*dao* 道) of all that is in the world. At the same time the term also indicates the root (*ben* 本) of something coming into presence<sup>18</sup> (*Da Huang Dao fu* 答黃道夫, cited from Zhang 1982, 58).

Explaining Zhu Xi’s understanding in terms of congruity, we see the continuity between earlier uses of *li* 理 in agriculture as the pathways established to designate and divide up fields under cultivation, and the inscribing of a piece of jade. Technically being not a thing itself, congruity shapes things and their surroundings, brings them into presence, makes things distinct, and organizes them from out of the constant flux of *qi* 氣. This process is what Zhu Xi calls *sheng* 生. In the Chinese language, *sheng* 生 depicting the sprout of a plant appearing from the ground does not entail a distinction between the momentary ‘being born’ and the continuous ‘to live’. In this worldview ‘to be born’ *sheng* 生 means to come into relation and to assume a shape and distinctness through constant correlation with the surroundings.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, ‘to live’ *sheng* 生 is a process of continuously being ‘born’ into new or renewed relations. This dynamic process of life as continual generation of congruence is forcibly expressed in the mantra: ‘the unceasing process of procreation’ (*shengsheng buxi* 生生不息). ‘Once heaven and earth have taken up their positions, the congruity in change can never be exhausted, and thus the procreation of the heavens and the earth never cease’<sup>20</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 96). According to Zhu Xi, the congruity *li* 理 stands as a root of this process (*sheng wu zhi ben* 生物之本) facilitating as it does the growth of something into more fitting, more appropriate, and more extended relations.

An important aspect of this cosmology is that Zhu Xi is not referencing *li* 理 as some transcendent entity that is a source or a creator of existence *ex nihilo* that would in turn also determine the course of development among its creations. According to Zhu Xi, ‘Congruity, indeed, is without an affection or intention, has no plan or measurement, and does not create or initiate’<sup>21</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1). As Hall and Ames point out, ‘In the absence of teleological guidance, there is only an ongoing process of correlation and negotiation’ (Hall, Ames 1995, 214). For these reasons it seems

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劉叔文, cit. from Zhang 1982, 59). W. Peterson is evaluating this instance as *lapsus linguae* on the part of Zhu Xi: ‘Zhu Xi’s vocabulary may have failed him here’ (Peterson 1986, 19). Angle, on the other hand, maintains that Zhu Xi had a ‘problematic tendency to reify *li*’ (Angle 2009, 38). Kim has similar position (see Kim 2000, 27). However, Zhu Xi’s assertions that *li* 理 is not ‘a thing’ (‘congruity is not a separate thing on its own’; 理非別為一物; ZZYL, Ch. 1), in my opinion, are much more explicit and prevailing.

<sup>18</sup> 理也者，形而上之道也，生物之本也。

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that in traditional Chinese way of age reckoning a newborn starts at one year old at the birthday. Being in the relation with one’s mother during the pregnancy apparently makes one being born before coming into the world.

<sup>20</sup> 天地設位，而變易之理不窮，所以天地生生不息。

<sup>21</sup> 理卻無情意，無計度，無造作。

more fitting to avoid the ontological language of 'being' or 'existence', and to use the existential language of 'to be present' or 'to come into presence' instead. It seems that for Zhu Xi the fundamental cosmological question is not 'where the existence comes from', but rather 'how do the myriad of things *wu* 物 crystallize out of the everlasting flux of *qi* 氣?' His answer is—through the process of growing congruence *li* 理 of the physical (*xing er xia* 形而下) entity—*qi* 氣. Stephen Angle points out:

According to Neo-Confucians, a 'thing (*wu* 物)' is a dynamic configuration of the matter-energy they call '*qi* 氣'. ... This, in turn, helps to explain why Neo-Confucians saw no real difference between a 'thing' and an 'event (*shi* 事)'. (Angle 2009, 38)

Here we can see the clear continuation of ideas from classical to Song Confucianism. Roger Ames is addressing this same issue when he insists that:

The phenomenological world in classical China is an endless flow, evidencing its formal character only as 'trans-form-ation'. ... What we take to be 'things' are in fact a ceaseless, processive flux of 'events', where it is the interstices among the shifting dispositionings of these events that is the fecund source of all life and growth. (Ames 2010, 80)

In this sense, congruity is a necessary condition of the way that everything in our world becomes present, including the world itself: 'It is only after there is this congruity, that there is this *qi* 氣. At the same time, only when there is this *qi* 氣 that this congruity has a place to settle. Whether [it is] as big as the world or as small as a mole cricket or an ant, all things come into presence this way'<sup>22</sup> (答楊志仁, cit. from Zhang 1982, 59).

Seen from this perspective, *li* 理, in Zhu Xi's philosophy, can by no means be interpreted as a transcendent,<sup>23</sup> 'other-worldly', or a context-independent entity. Nor can it be taken as a 'rule' or 'principle' guiding the development of the myriad of things. In Zhu Xi's system, no 'rule' or 'principle'—be it outside or inside—facilitates the birth, growth, or decay of things. It is a function and an outcome of the vast web of interactions among multiple entities, negotiating their boundaries and exhibiting at least minimal congruency. Because of these 'lines' of sticking together appropriately (*li* 理), it becomes possible to comprehend a thing as coherent in itself and distinguishable from other things as *one* particular thing. Describing the congruity *li* 理 as a metaphysical term does not do it justice, because, according to Zhu Xi, there is no congruity without the psycho-physical 'stuff' *qi* 氣<sup>24</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1). In Zhu Xi's own words, 'Congruity is not a separate thing in itself but is rather present in the

<sup>22</sup> 有此理後，方有此氣，既有此氣，然後此理有安頓處。大而天地，細而螻蟻，其生皆是如此。

<sup>23</sup> I am using here Hall's and Ames' description of 'strict transcendence': 'A is transcendent with respect to B if the existence, meaning, or import of B cannot be fully accounted for without recourse to A, but the reverse is not true' (Hall, Ames 1998, 190).

<sup>24</sup> 天下未有無理之氣，亦未有無氣之理。

midst of *qi* 氣. If *qi* 氣 is not present, then congruity does not have a place to hang on'<sup>25</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1).

If congruity is not present without *qi* 氣, in what sense does than Zhu Xi maintain that congruity comes 'before' (*xian* 先) all things, the entire world, and *qi* 氣 itself? Contemporary Zhu Xi scholar Chen Lai 陳來 explains this claim by saying that concepts of 'the former and the latter' (*xian hou* 先後) for Zhu Xi can only be used in its logical rather than in its temporal sense<sup>26</sup> (Chen 2004, 129). From the accounts of Zhu Xi's conversations with his interlocutors, it seems quite obvious that for Zhu Xi himself this question of priority did not arise as problematic. I believe that Zhu Xi was not a dualist, even if we can quote him saying that *li* 理 and *qi* 氣 'are certainly two things'<sup>27</sup> (*Da Liushu wen* 答劉叔文, cit. from Zhang 1982, 59). He is essentially concerned with things or events (*wu* 物 or *shi* 事) that we experience in our lived world (*tiandi* 天地), and he sees these things as unitary, although constantly changing, entities. For Zhu Xi, *li* 理 and *qi* 氣 are not two separate entities among others things, but an explanatory vocabulary that enables us to talk about two sides of any particular thing, and from which we can approach each and every object of our interest, comprehend it, and explain it. However, because Zhu Xi's interlocutors were apparently pressing him on the priority question, he had to allow that on the *conceptual* level congruity has a priority over the *qi* 氣. Angle makes this same point:

Since *li* serves to explain or constrain the movement of *qi*, then it must be conceptually prior to *qi*. It cannot merely be an after-the-fact description or summary of the patterns through which *qi* moved. (Angle 2009, 40)

That the priority is only conceptual and not empirically temporal is well expressed by Zhu Xi's constant reservation that only when talking from the perspective of abstraction (*xing er shang* 形而上) and only when we want to make a logical inference (*tui* 推) can we describe 'so called *li* 理 and *qi* 氣' as former and latter. Zhu Xi says:

Fundamentally there is nothing that can be said about what comes first and what comes later. Even though this is so, if we want to infer what follows, then we would have to say 'formerly there is congruity'.<sup>28</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1)

With respect to *li* 理 and *qi* 氣 fundamentally there is nothing that can be said about what comes first and what comes later. However, when we make an inference (*tui* 推) about them, then it would seem that *li* 理 is former and *qi* 氣 is latter.<sup>29</sup> (Ibid.)

<sup>25</sup> 然理又非別為一物，即存乎是氣之中；無是氣，則是理亦無掛搭處。

<sup>26</sup> 理在氣的“先”是指邏輯上的在先，而不是時間上在先。

<sup>27</sup> 決是二物。Also see my n. 17 for comment.

<sup>28</sup> 此本無先後之可言。然必欲推其所從來，則須說先有是理。

<sup>29</sup> 理與氣本無先後之可言。但推上去時，卻如理在先，氣在後相似。

With respect to what is called *li* 理 and *qi* 氣, they are certainly two 'things', but when we look from the perspective of any specific thing, then these 'two things' merge, and one cannot separate each into a separate places.<sup>30</sup> (*Da Liu shu wen* 答劉叔文, cit. from Zhang 1982, 59)

Someone asked: 'You have said that if *li* 理 is present, *qi* 氣 is present. And it also seems that you say that it cannot be discerned which is former and which is latter'. [Zhu Xi] answered: 'To summarize, formerly there is *li* 理. However, it cannot be said that today there is *li* 理, but only tomorrow there is *qi* 氣.'<sup>31</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1)

One can hear an echo of irritation on Zhu Xi's part in the persistence of his interlocutors in asking about the priority of something that Zhu Xi naturally sees as one non-analytic whole:

Someone asked about the notion that formerly *li* 理 is present, and only afterwards *qi* 氣 is present. [Zhu Xi] answered: 'There is no need to say this. Could we possibly know if, in their union, *li* 理 is formerly present, and *qi* 氣 is present afterwards? Or perhaps *li* 理 is present afterwards, and *qi* 氣 is present beforehand? Such claims cannot be sustained'.<sup>32</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1)

In Zhu Xi's view, it is only when there is congruity—that is the appropriate and fitting relationality—that the flux of *qi* 氣 acquires direction of its circulation and rough lines emerge that enable the particular shapes and manifestations of particular things in the empirical world. On the other hand, only when there is *qi* 氣—that is the psycho-physical stuff of the universe—there is a possibility for something to come into relation and congruity has a place to unfold. Zhu Xi says: 'Under the heaven there is no such *qi* 氣 that would be present without congruity *li* 理; similarly, there is no such congruity *li* 理 that would be present without *qi* 氣' (ZZYL, Ch. 1).

The necessary presence of congruity does not determine either the strict 'nature' of things, or the ultimate goal of their development. As contemporary Zhu Xi scholar Chen Lai puts it: 'When it is said that the myriad of things have one *li* 理 that does not mean that the particular pattern constituting each thing is one and the same'<sup>33</sup> (Chen 2004, 132). The implicit significance of Zhu Xi's claim on inseparability of *li* 理 and *qi* 氣 is that the congruity *li* 理 gets its specific content only from the specific elements that are standing in mutual relation at any given moment. According to Hall and Ames, *li* 理 'may never be considered as independent of context' (Hall, Ames 1995, 214). To let these particular elements that are standing in the congruous relation out of sight and consideration would mean to look past the *li* 理. In Zhu Xi's own

<sup>30</sup> 所謂理與氣，決是二物，但在物上來看，則二物渾淪，不可分開個在一處。Also translated in Peterson 1986, 19.

<sup>31</sup> 問：「有是理便有是氣，似不可分先後？」曰：要之，也先有理。只不可說是今日有是理，明日卻有是氣。

<sup>32</sup> 或問先有理後有氣之說。曰：「不消如此說。而今知得他合下是先有理，後有氣邪；後有理，先有氣邪？皆不可得而推究。

<sup>33</sup> 所謂萬物一理，不是指萬物的具體規律的直接同一。

words: ‘If there were only congruity *li* 理, there would be only a void and open world without a shape or a trace. *Li* 理 cannot create, indeed’<sup>34</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 1). Hall and Ames call this position *ars contextualis*:

*Ars contextualis* suggests a ‘this–that’ rather than a ‘one–many’ or ‘part–whole’ model. Since there is no overarching context determining the shape of other contexts, the world is an open-ended affair comprised by ‘thises’ and ‘that’s’ construable from any number of distinct perspectives. There is no One behind the many; there are, rather many ones, many particular foci that organize the fields about them. The art of contextualization involves the production of harmonious correlations of the myriad unique details (*wan wu* 萬物 or *wan you* 萬有) that make up the world. (Hall, Ames 1998, 40)

To sum up what has been discussed so far, we have to conclude that Zhu Xi in his account of congruity *li* 理 and *qi* 氣 and their nexus, has engaged in a cosmological rather than an ontological discussion. The ultimate concern of Zhu Xi is not the nature of existence or being as such. Instead he is interested in how our experienced things come into the presence (*sheng* 生) and the ways in which they are present (*you* 有 or *cun* 存) with each other and to our human senses. At the same time, we cannot claim that Zhu Xi is a dualist, as the only reality for Zhu Xi is our natural world of things, events, and people as lived and experienced by us every day in both a changing and in a consistent way. In Zhu Xi’s texts we don’t find anything close to the Platonic realm of *eidōs* or Kantian realm of *noumena*. Zhu Xi’s congruity *li* 理 has no existence apart and independent from the energy-matter *qi* 氣 that constitutes all natural phenomena. In this sense, Zhu Xi does not depart from the fundamental philosophical orientation of classical Confucianism. According to our reading of *li* 理 as ‘congruity’, Zhu Xi’s philosophy remains strictly ‘this worldly’, anti-essentialist, and processual. The changes in the philosophical vocabulary of Zhu Xi as compared to the classical period can be explained as a Buddhist challenge, but this change is largely apparent in the form rather than in the content of Zhu Xi’s arguments. As Joseph Needham points out, Zhu Xi actually ‘removed *Li* [*li* 理] from its Buddhist context and restored it to its ancient naturalistic place’ (Needham 1978, 239). On the other hand, this change in form is a very important one as Zhu Xi does raise the level of abstraction in Confucian thinking and, as I will claim in the next section of this essay, introduces this level of abstraction into the ethical discourse.

### **The process of the actualization of the congruity *li* 理 as the particular course (*xing* 性) of things**

The most important realm for Zhu Xi, just as it was for classical Confucians, is the physical world as lived and perceived by humans, where shapes and forms of things

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<sup>34</sup> 若理，則只是箇淨潔空闊底世界，無形跡，他卻不會造作。Also translated in Angle 2009, 40.

and phenomena unfold. In explaining how congruity *li* 理 functions in the empirical world, Zhu Xi employs a formula expressed by his forerunner Cheng Yi—‘*Li* 理 is one, but its manifestations are many’ (*li yi fen shu* 理一分殊). Zhu Xi develops this idea further by explaining what makes congruity, the foundation of everything that is present in the world, to manifest itself in such a variety.

Zhu Xi's position is that everything that finds its expression in the empirical world does so in a particular place and, more importantly, is bound by particular relations with other things. That is why the shape of that particular thing—be it a form of an object or the character of a human being—is always unique and different from others. Yet the foundation for that particular manifestation is one, common, formless, and persistent—it is the congruity *li* 理, or in other words, the specific relationality among things. Zhu Xi said:

Take rooms for an example, all of them have one *li* 理, although there is a drawing-room and there is a hall; take plants for an example, all of them have one *li* 理, although there is a peach and there is a plum; take this group of people for an example, all of them have one *li* 理, although there is Zhang San and there is Li Si. Li Si cannot be Zhang San, and Zhang San cannot be Li Si. ... That is what is meant by saying ‘*li* 理 is one, but its manifestations are many’.<sup>35</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 6)

As we can see, every particular human or thing has a common way of being present—they all share congruence, that is, they all have the quality or the state of corresponding with other things or humans around them. At the same time, every human or thing is unique in Zhu Xi's view and cannot be identified with any other. The unique location in the world makes the congruity of each and every human or thing particular and one of a kind. It is exactly because it is impossible for two things to stand in exactly the same relations with exactly the same environment; no thing can replicate the unique congruity of any other thing. Ames is making the same point in his account of an interpretative context of Confucian philosophy:

The uniqueness of each particular as a nexus of specific relations attended by its own possibilities precludes any notion of strict identity among them—no two things are precisely the same. (Ames 2010, 80)

Thus, the congruity *li* 理 in Zhu Xi's philosophy is also responsible for distinctness and uniqueness of each and every thing in the world. Congruity is that by which a thing is as it is. In Zhu Xi's words, ‘Certain because congruity is present is it that a boat can only move on the water, and a cart can only move on the land’<sup>36</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 4). Having in mind how the mainstream Western ontology since Plato has tended to designate that which makes a thing what it is, Peterson allows that ‘It is not

<sup>35</sup> 如一所屋，只是一箇道理，有廳，有堂。如草木，只是一箇道理，有桃，有李。如這眾人，只是一箇道理，有張三，有李四；李四不可為張三，張三不可為李四。...言理一分殊，亦是如此。

<sup>36</sup> 固是有理，如舟只可行之於水，車只可行之於陸。



surprising that the *li* of a thing has been partially understood as its cause, principle, function, definition, form or description, but none of these are sufficient' (Peterson 1986, 22–3).<sup>37</sup> We would add that each of these taken separately for explaining *li* 理 is also too much. It is important here to resist the temptation to essentialize and substantialize the notion of *li* 理. In Zhu Xi's worldview a thing is as it is not by the virtue of some innate predetermined quality, independent from the thing itself. Thus, the talking about 'essences' and 'nature' of things (and people) becomes problematic. As Peterson puts it,

In a world of flux, where all things are transitory and thus unreliable, we can have the start of certainty when we accept that each thing has coherence [*li* 理] and its coherence [*li* 理] is that by which it is as it is, but is not separable from that which it is. (Peterson 1986, 23)

Having this image of the 'world of flux' as an 'open-ended affair' suggests that the congruity *li* 理, between a thing and its environment, is also a process that is ever-changing though also displaying a certain consistency. To account for this process of a particular thing coming into presence (*sheng* 生) and unfolding in a specific manner as *this* particular thing, Zhu Xi uses the notion of *xing* 性. This term is usually translated as the *nature* of things.<sup>38</sup> This translation suggests many implications (the notion of innateness, predetermined potentiality, essential as opposed to accidental features) that are not necessarily relevant to this Chinese way of thinking. As Graham maintains in his analysis of early Chinese thought:

Early Chinese thinkers who discuss *hsing* [*xing* 性] seldom seem to be thinking of fixed qualities going back to a thing's origin, except when they are considering inanimate things such as water; rather they are concerned with developments which are spontaneous but realise their full potentialities only if uninjured and adequately nourished. (Graham 1990, 8)

Graham suggests that the *xing* 性 'of a thing, then, is its proper course of development during its process of *sheng* [生]' (ibid., 10). While cautious about Graham's use of the notion of 'the realisation of full potentialities', I fully embrace his definition of *xing* 性 and I would maintain that Zhu Xi's understanding of the term is in a large measure the same. Thus, the *xing* 性 of a thing in Zhu Xi's philosophy has to be understood as *the particular course of growth* (*sheng* 生) of that thing. In Zhu Xi's own words, 'The congruity of growth is what we call the course of a particular thing'<sup>39</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 5). In Zhu Xi's philosophy the particular course of growth of a thing (*xing* 性), just as its

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<sup>37</sup> For the refutation of reading something like Platonic *eidōs* (that is, *boat-ness* or *cart-ness*) into the previous passage of Zhu Xi see Peterson 1986, 25.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Chan 1963, and others. For processual reading of *xing* 性 see Graham 1990. For processual interpretation of *xing* 性 as specifically related to the question of the humans (*renxing* 人性), see Ames 1991. For arguments against Ames's position see Bloom 1994. My reading of *xing* 性 relies heavily on works of Graham and Ames.

<sup>39</sup> 生之理謂性。

congruity *li* 理, cannot be seen as transcendent to that thing. According to Zhu Xi, 'Under the heavens there is no thing without a course of growth (*xing* 性), thus when this thing is present, then this course of growth is present. And when this thing is not present, then this course of growth is not present'<sup>40</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 4).

We see that the notions of congruity *li* 理 and the particular course of a thing *xing* 性 are conceptually linked in Zhu Xi's philosophy. Zhu Xi has promoted and further developed the idea initially formulated by Cheng Yi that 'The course of growth of a thing is nothing other than its congruity'<sup>41</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 4). Since congruity *li* 理 for Zhu Xi is the way in which the thing is present (*you* 有 or *cun* 存) through the constant process of that thing coming into relations with its immediate environment (*shengsheng* 生生), the particular course of that thing's growth (*xing* 性) is indeed the reference to the same notion of congruity *li* 理. The difference between these two notions, for Zhu Xi, is a matter of a different focus of attention. When we are concentrating on how something is presented, we are talking about its congruity *li* 理. On the other hand, when we are concentrating on the sequence of the many specific manifestations in the congruity of the particular thing, we are talking about its *xing* 性, or the particular course of growth of that thing. In Zhu Xi's words, 'The course of growth of a thing is the many instances of congruity spread across its place'<sup>42</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 5). The very idea that the cluster of key terms in Zhu Xi's system is best understood as a multi-dimensional structure that looks different from the different focus points is suggested by Graham (see Graham 1990, 426). Paraphrasing Graham, since congruity *li* 理 runs through everything that is present in this multifaceted world, it itself is comprehended and designated differently once seen from different angles. So when the congruity is seen as how all things—material and non-material—come into presence and are presented to our senses and our minds, it is called the way *dao* 道; when it is observed that the conditions for the congruity cannot be determined by subjective desires and will, it is understood as the environment *tian* 天; when perceived that from a particular standpoint a succession of spontaneous reactions to the environment originate in order to facilitate congruity, it is called a particular course of growth (*xing* 性) of a thing. This point is well supported by Zhu Xi's own claims. Zhu Xi says,

The way (*dao* 道) is nothing but the course of growth of a thing (*xing* 性), and the course of growth of a thing is nothing but the way. Obviously, it is one thing. Therefore, we need to look from which perspective it is approached (*huan* 喚) and made into the 'course of growth', and from which into the 'way'.<sup>43</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 5)

<sup>40</sup> 天下無無性之物。蓋有此物，則有此性；無此物，則無此性。

<sup>41</sup> 性即理也 (when quoting Cheng Yi), or 性便是理 in Zhu Xi's own words.

<sup>42</sup> 性是許多理散在處為性。

<sup>43</sup> 道即性，性即道，固只是一物。然須看因甚喚做性，因甚喚做道。

The course of growth of a thing (*xing* 性) is nothing but its congruity (*li* 理). When entertained as one's perception, it acts as a course of growth, when entertained from the perspective of an event, it acts as congruity.<sup>44</sup> (Ibid.)

Once growing things appear, from the beginning we name (*ming* 名) it the course of the growth of things. But when we take this congruity, from the perspective of our environment (*tian* 天) we call it the propensity of circumstances (*ming* 命), and from the perspective of humans we call it a particular course of growth.<sup>45</sup> (Ibid.)

Thus, *xing* 性 in Zhu Xi's philosophy is ultimately seen as a continuous fruition of congruity *li* 理 (*xing shi shi li* 性是實理; ZZYL, Ch. 5) throughout the career of a particular thing. From Zhu Xi's adoption of the idea that 'Li 理 is one but its manifestations are many' (*li yi fen shu* 理一分殊), we see that for him every particular instance of the congruity of a thing and its environment is a manifestation of the uniting congruity of the world (*tianxia* 天下) and the myriad of things (*wanwu* 萬物) in it. In turn, the interconnection of *li* 理 and *xing* 性 in Zhu Xi's philosophy means that, by extension (*tui* 推), from realization of a particular course of a thing (*xing* 性) we are also able to reach a full comprehension of the congruity *li* 理 of the totality. This idea is a cornerstone of Zhu Xi's theory of knowledge as presented in his doctrine of *gewu* 格物, or the investigation of things. Zhu Xi says,

The full comprehension of congruity by investigation of things lies in reading the Classics and the Histories, in dealing with things and events, and in realizing what each thing is. All that is called the investigation of things.<sup>46</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 15)

It is obvious from the above quotation that for Zhu Xi, *gewu* is not solely a cognitive exercise but necessarily also has practical implications.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the interconnection of the categories of *li* 理 and *xing* 性 are also made to serve as the cornerstone of Zhu Xi's ethical thought in his theory of *renxing* 人性, conventionally rendered as 'human nature' within Western academia. Let us now finally turn to the question of how Zhu Xi incorporates *li* 理 cosmology into his ethical system.

### Zhu Xi's theory of *renxing* 人性 and attribution of the four sprouts (*siduan* 四端) to *li* 理

The foundation for Zhu Xi's philosophical system is his developed cosmology of congruity *li* 理, but its real purpose is to provide a basis for Zhu Xi's theory of *renxing* 人性. From the identification of *li* 理 with the particular course of the growth of things (*xing* 性) Zhu Xi goes even further showing the relation between the *li* 理 and *renxing*

<sup>44</sup> 性即理也。在心喚做性，在事喚做理。

<sup>45</sup> 生物得來，方始名曰『性』。只是這理，在天則曰『命』，在人則曰『性』。

<sup>46</sup> 窮理格物，如讀經看史，應接事物，理會箇是處，皆是格物。

<sup>47</sup> More on practical and moral implications of the *gewu* 格物 see Kim 2000, 22–5.

人性。When Zhu Xi is reflecting on the general cosmological issue of the interaction of congruity *li* 理 and matter-energy *qi* 氣, he directs his statements equally to all things (*wu* 物) under the heaven (*tianxia* 天下). All these things together make up the totality of our experienced world (*wanwu* 萬物), and humans are part of this myriad of things.<sup>48</sup> However, when Zhu Xi starts to concentrate on the particular course of growth of various things (*xing* 性), he clearly distinguishes between humans (*ren* 人) and the rest of the 'things' of this world. In this respect, once again, Zhu Xi does not depart from the classical line of thought of the early Confucians. Confucius himself famously lamented that we 'cannot take birds and beasts as our own kind. If I am not a fellow among other people, with whom may I then associate?' (*Lunyu* 18.6).

Because Zhu Xi accepts the idea that the congruity of each of the things under the heavens—including human beings—is just a manifestation of one pervasive congruity, this requires a more nuanced argument and more detailed observation from Zhu Xi as to why and how humans are after all different from the myriad of things (*wanwu* 萬物) when it comes to their particular course of growth (*xing* 性). When someone asks, whether the particular course of growth (*xing* 性) of humans and other things is the same, Zhu Xi answers positively, but also adds: 'The particular course of growth is most difficult to explain. If one wants to say that it is the same for people and other things, one can make this point; if one wants to say that it differs, one can make this point as well'<sup>49</sup> (*ZZYL*, Ch. 4). Then someone again asks:

'The particular course of the growth of humans and things has one source. What, then, constitutes the difference?' Zhu Xi replies: 'The particular course of growth of a human can be described in terms of brightness and dimness, whereas the particular course of the growth of a thing is just slanted and obstructed. That which is dim can be illuminated, whereas that which is already slanted and obstructed cannot be cleared out. Heng Qu (橫渠)<sup>50</sup> says, "From all the things, there is none that does not have its particular course of growth. In the ability to penetrate occlusions and eliminate obstructions lies the difference between humans and other things"'<sup>51</sup> (*ZZYL*, Ch. 4)

Zhu Xi is not arguing here that the particular course of human growth is never obstructed. Zhu Xi often quotes the opening lines of *Zhongyong* 中庸, a short treatise elevated by him to the status of a Confucian canon: 'What the environment (*tian* 天) dictates (*ming* 命) is called the course of growth (*xing* 性)<sup>52</sup> (*Zhongyong* 1). This indicates that the particular course of one's growth cannot be a mere projection of one's subjective will. The world that surrounds us asserts itself as a multitude of

<sup>48</sup> For the scope of reference of the notion 'thing' *wu* 物 in Chinese, see my comment in n. 10.

<sup>49</sup> 性最難說，要說同亦得，要說異亦得。

<sup>50</sup> This is another name of Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077).

<sup>51</sup> 「人物之性一源，何以有異？」曰：「人之性論明暗，物之性只是偏塞。暗者可使之明，已偏塞者不可使之通也。橫渠言，凡物莫不有是性，由通蔽開塞，所以有物之別。

<sup>52</sup> 天命之謂性。

conditions that we have to reckon with. Zhu Xi also makes it clear that the ideal conditions revealed in the abstract and pervasive notions of *li* 理 and *xing* 性 in actuality appear distorted, or in Zhu Xi's language, 'muddied' (*hun zhuo* 昏濁) or 'blocked' (*ge* 隔) by the matter-energy *qi* 氣, or simply the rough physicality (*zhi* 質) of the world's phenomena (ZZYL, Ch. 4). However, according to Zhu Xi, humans have the capacity to discern what stands in the way conditioning the natural course of a particular person (*renxing* 人性) and therefore can act to accommodate it. Zhu Xi says,

Humans have a congruity that can penetrate any occlusion. However, when we come to birds and beasts, their particular course of growth (*xing* 性) is constrained by their physical bodies. They do not have the wherewithal to penetrate whatever occlusion they arrive at during their growth (*sheng* 生).<sup>53</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 4)

We have to ask, what is it that allows humans to accommodate the restrictive conditions in the particular course of human growth (*renxing* 人性)? Zhu Xi points out that in the case of humans, any course (*xing* 性) of growth (*sheng* 生) towards the ultimate congruity (*zhi li* 至理 or *qiong li* 窮理) is more subtle and nuanced, as it complies with four different aspects of interaction among humans and their environment: the empathic sensibility (*cinyin zhi xin* 惻隱之心), aesthetical sensibility (*xiu'e zhi xin* 羞惡之心), socio-cultural sensibility (*cixun zhi xin* 辭遜之心), and cognitive sensibility (*shifei zhi xin* 是非之心). This is a direct borrowing from the famous argument in *Mengzi* on 'four sprouts' (*siduan* 四端)—the core idea in the Mengzian view on *renxing* 人性 and arguably the central concept in the Confucian ethical thought since Mengzi's time. Mengzi understands the notion of the course of a particular person<sup>54</sup> (*renxing* 人性), or more conventionally translated as 'human nature', as something that distinguishes the human from the beast. Mengzi finds this difference in the function of human sensibilities *xin* 心.<sup>55</sup> Mengzi maintains

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<sup>53</sup> 然在人則蔽塞有可通之理；至於禽獸，亦是此性，只被他形體所拘，生得蔽隔之甚，無可通處。

<sup>54</sup> The rendition of *renxing* 人性 as the 'the course of particular person' should be distinguished from another notion widely used in both classical and Song periods—*rendao* 人道, or the 'human way'. The difference is that the latter means the generalized way or manner that humans pattern their interactions with the surrounding. *Renxing* 人性, on the other hand, while also referring to something shared among all humans, specifically denotes the particular course of a unique person living in this world. In other words, *renxing* 人性 is seen as the actualized and concrete instance of a *rendao* 人道. Zhu Xi refers to the *dao* 道 as to the term with a broad scope (*dao zi bao de da* 道字包得大); *dao* 道 it is said 'can be explained as a road; generally speaking, it is a common human road' (道訓路, 大概說人所共由之路; ZZYL, Ch. 6).

<sup>55</sup> The term *xin* 心 is usually translated as the 'heart-mind', indicating both cognitive and affective capacities of humans. Although it is not a bad translation, it has its own limitations. On the one hand, it seems too static and substantial once applied to the worldview, in which, as Ames and Rosemont claim, 'it is frequently observed that, with respect to the human body, physiology has priority over anatomy, and function takes precedence over site' (Ames, Rosemont 1998, 56). On the

that everyone would be naturally moved by seeing an infant about to fall into a well. Therefore, he claims that 'All humans have the sensibility (*xin* 心) that reacts to the unbearable situations of others'<sup>56</sup> (*Mengzi* 2A6). *Mengzi* concludes that:

If there is no sense of empathy, there is no human being. If there is no sense of disgust, there is no human being. If there is no sense of deference, there is no human being. If there is no sense of approval, there is no human being.<sup>57</sup> (*Ibid.*)

*Mengzi* calls these four aspects of human sensibilities the four sprouts (*siduan* 四端) and indicates that these are the starting points for the development of the four human excellences in their interactions: 'The sense of empathy is the sprout of attentive conduct (*ren* 仁); the sense of disgust is the sprout of appropriate conduct (*yi* 義); the sense of deference is the sprout of ritualized conduct (*li* 禮); the sense of approval is the sprout of wise conduct (*zhi* 智)'<sup>58</sup> (*ibid.*). *Mengzi* sums it up in his famous saying that the particular course of human growth leans towards the good<sup>59</sup> (*ren xing shan* 人性善).

Zhu Xi incorporates this idea of the four sprouts into his own system and ascribes these to the *renxing* 人性. Zhu Xi says: 'In humans, attentiveness, appropriateness, rite observance, and knowing are the course of growth (*xing* 性)' (ZZYL, Ch. 4). Since for Zhu Xi every particular course of growth of a thing (*xing* 性) is also a particular instance of that thing's congruity (*li* 理), which, in turn, is a manifestation of the pervasive *li* (*yi li* 一理), it is natural that Zhu Xi attributes the four distinctly human aspects of their course of interaction to the pervasive and the world generating congruity: 'The course of growth of a particular thing (*xing* 性) is the fruition (*shi* 實) of congruity (*li* 理) that encompasses attentiveness, appropriateness, observance of the rites, and knowing'<sup>60</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 5). The result of this identification of specifically human excellences with a pervasive cosmological notion of congruity *li* 理 is twofold. On the one hand, Zhu Xi provides a cosmological argument to the long standing dispute on the goodness of natural human tendencies (*renxing* 人性). *Renxing* 人性 cannot be anything but the course of growth towards the good because the world generating pervasive congruity *li* 理 and the particular course of human growing *renxing* 人性 share the same qualities of interaction. This does not mean that all humans are good, because Zhu Xi, just like *Mengzi* before him, saw the four

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other hand, since in *Mengzi* *xin* 心 is understood as initiating a response to the cognitive or affective experience, the connotation lacking in the term 'heart-mind'. I translate *xin* 心 as 'sensibility' and define it as a reaction triggering perception of external stimuli.

<sup>56</sup> 人皆有不忍人之心。

<sup>57</sup> 無惻隱之心，非人也；無羞惡之心，非人也；無辭讓之心，非人也；無是非之心，非人也。

<sup>58</sup> 惻隱之心，仁之端也；羞惡之心，義之端也；辭讓之心，禮之端也；是非之心，智之端也。

<sup>59</sup> For reading of *shan* 善 as an inclination rather than ready-made quality see Ames 2010, 141.

<sup>60</sup> 性是實理，仁義禮智皆具。For attribution of the four sprouts (*siduan* 四端) to the *li* 理 also see ZZYL, Chapters 1, 4, 9, 14, 25, 83.

sprouts (*siduan* 四端) as something that has to be brought to the fruition in the course of growth rather than as fixed qualities that are ready for humans to use:

Someone asked Zhu Xi, ‘does the particular course [of humans] entail benevolence, appropriateness, observance of rites, and knowing?’ Zhu Xi replied: ‘This is more likely when said about “the particular course of the one who fully realized [himself]”’.<sup>61</sup> (ZZYL, Ch. 4)

This brings the cosmological notion of *li* 理 to the very center of Zhu Xi’s ethical doctrine. This term for neo-Confucian forerunners—the Cheng brothers, Zhang Zai, Zhou Dunyi—was the axis of their cosmological and ontological speculations. Zhu Xi made it into an ethical category.

On the other hand, Zhu Xi also dramatically expands the meaning and function of *renxing* 人性. This development had an important influence on Zhu Xi’s practical philosophy because the identification of *renxing* 人性 with the cosmological notion of congruity *li* 理 explains how, according to the *Daxue* 大學 canon, the development of one’s own person can ultimately lead to the harmonization of the whole world (see *Daxue*). Thus, Zhu Xi provides a theoretical ground for the classical Confucian understanding about the fundamental relatedness of all things under the heaven, to the extent that cultivation of one’s person has not only private personal or common socio-political outcomes, but also inevitably leads to the changes in the cosmos. This understanding can be seen in an old dictum found in the classical Confucian text, the *Zhongyong* 中庸:

Only those of utmost creativity (*zhicheng* 至誠) in the world are able to make the most of their natural tendencies (*xing* 性). Only if one is able to make the most of one’s own natural tendencies is one able to make the most of the natural tendencies of others; only if one is able to make the most of the natural tendencies of others is one able to make the most of the natural tendencies of processes and events (*wu* 物); only if one is able to make the most of the natural tendencies of processes and events can one assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth; and only if one can assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth can human beings take their place as members of this triad. (*Zhong Yong* 22; translation from Ames, Hall 2001, 105)

## Conclusion

The prevailing claim in a large part of contemporary scholarship is that the nature of Zhu Xi’s renewal of classical Confucian thought lies in the fact that in his theory of *li* 理, Zhu Xi provides an ontological (or metaphysical) foundation to classical Confucian ethics. The untold assumption behind this claim is that the ontology deals with more essenti[al], more basic reality than ethics, which is only derivative and

<sup>61</sup> 問：「性具仁義禮智？」曰：「此猶是說『成之者性』。」



supplementary. Therefore, ethical concerns purportedly need justification in some outside realm. In this paper we have showed shown that for Zhu Xi, such separation of cosmology, that is, the general inquiry into the presence of things, from ethics, that is, the inquiry into the specifically human attitude to his or her environment, is not a relevant question. It seems that the question of the foundations of morality or the moral motivation (why to be moral?) that contemporary moral philosophers are asking, for Zhu Xi, would seem as feasible as the question of the imaginable 'ontological motivation' (why to be?). Just as one has to be in order to be able to ask the latter question, equally one already has to have ethical concerns in order to be able to ask the former. That means that ethical feelings come to human experience as the primary and immediate reality. Therefore, in the view of the classical Confucians as well as Zhu Xi, to anyone inquiring into our world of experience ethics, paraphrasing Emmanuel Levinas, is the first philosophy.

This essay has shown that the realms of inquiry that can be called cosmology and ethics do closely correlate in Zhu Xi's philosophy through linking the cosmological notion of persistent congruity (*li* 理) as a necessary condition for all things to be present with a notion of a particular course of growth (*xing* 性) of things. This ultimately allows Zhu Xi to show the link between the *li* 理 and the concept of a particular course of human growth (*renxing* 人性) that entails a classical Confucian ethical notion of specifically human sensibilities (*xin* 心) and excellences in human interrelation with the environment (*ren yi li* 仁義理智). By linking the neo-Confucian cosmological notion of *li* 理 with the classical Confucian ethical notion of *renxing* 人性 Zhu Xi does in the sense provide a cosmological foundation for Confucian ethics. After all, that provides him with an argument for the Mengzian claim that a particular course of human growth tends toward goodness (*xing shan* 性善). However, it seems that Zhu Xi's main concern was to appropriate the term *li* 理, which in his time was widely used in Buddhist metaphysical speculations and was also adapted by the early neo-Confucians in their cosmological discussions, and to show its relevance and conformity to the ethical teachings of classical Confucian way.

In this essay it was demonstrated that the Zhuxian notion of *li* 理 is in accordance with the naturalistic understanding of the term during the classical period of Chinese thought. In the Zhuxian cosmology, *li* 理 facilitates the generation of things in the world, but is not seen as a metaphysical concept referring to the transcendent source of reality. At the same time, Zhu Xi's philosophy should not be seen as an ontology that inquires into the nature and essence of the being as such. According to Zhu Xi, what from the general perspective of the whole world is seen as congruity (*li* 理), that is, a persistent and necessary condition of all things present, appears as a particular course of growth (*xing* 性) when seen from the perspective of each particular thing.

By the virtue of the specifically human sensibility (*xin* 心), a particular *human* course of growth (*renxing* 人性) exhibits the most subtle and refined ways of the congruity (*li* 理), that is, the correlation with the environment. This brings the cosmological notion of *li* 理 to the very center of Zhu Xi's ethical doctrine. The identification of *li* 理 and *renxing* 人性 not only gives a cosmological basis for Confucian ethics, but, more importantly, makes *li* 理 into a key ethical notion in the Confucian tradition. In this way, Zhu Xi extends the specifically human and moral sphere to encompass even the inanimate nature and enlarges the range of human agency and the scope of its impact to the ability to transform the world structure.

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VYTIS SILIUS (vytis.silius@oc.vu.lt), doctoral student at Vilnius University; lecturer of Chinese philosophy at the Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University

✉: Universiteto 5, LT-01513 Vilnius, Lithuania