

THE NATURE AS PRINCIPLE
By Zhu Xi

Introduction

“Neo-Confucianism” is a general term used to refer to the renaissance of Confucianism during the Song dynasty following a long period in which Buddhism and Daoism had dominated the philosophical world of the Chinese and also to the various philosophical schools of thought that developed as a result of that renaissance. Neo-Confucianism had its roots in the late Tang, came to maturity in the Northern and Southern Song periods, and continued to develop in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. As a whole, Neo-Confucianism can best be understood as an intellectual reaction to the challenges of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy in which avowedly Confucian scholars incorporated Buddhist and Daoist concepts in order to produce a more sophisticated new Confucian metaphysics.

As Neo-Confucianism developed, two trends of thought emerged out of the Southern Song philosopher and official Zhu Xi’s synthesis of the “learning of Principle” and the “learning of the Mind and Heart.” Both trends agreed that all the myriad things of the universe are manifestations of a single “Principle” (*li*) and that this Principle is the essence of morality. By understanding the Principle that underlies the universe (just as Buddhists understood all things in the universe as manifestations of the single Buddha spirit), then, men may understand the moral principles that they must put into practice in order to achieve an ordered family, good government, and peace under heaven. The two trends of thought differed, however, on the way in which human beings are to understand Principle.

In the following document Zhu Xi (1130-1200) states his opinion on this matter. Zhu Xi is most famous for having put together the various Neo-Confucian ideas of his time into one systematic philosophical package. His version of Neo-Confucianism came to be accepted as orthodoxy by the Ming and Qing imperial governments and the government of Tokugawa Japan.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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42:6a The Way is identical with the nature of man and things and their nature is identical with the Way. ...

42:6b ... Cheng Yi put it best when he said that “the nature is the same as principle.”

42:9b-10a Original nature is an all-pervading perfection not contrasted with evil. This is true of what Heaven has endowed in the self. But when it operates in human beings, there is

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differentiation of good and evil. When humans act in accord with it, there is goodness. When humans act out of accord with it, there is evil. How can it be said that the good is not the original nature? It is in its operation in human beings that the distinction between good and evil arises, but conduct in accord with the original nature is due to the original nature. ... We fall into evil only when our actions are not in accord with the original nature.

42:14b-15a ... In my opinion, what is called human desire¹ is the exact opposite of the Principle of Heaven [Nature]. ... in its original state the Principle of Heaven is free from human desire. It is from the deviation in the operation of the Principle of Heaven that human desire arises.

Questions:

1. If you accept Zhu Xi's analysis of the relation between nature, Principle, and human desire, then how would a person go about understanding Principle? Where would one search for it?
2. How does Zhu Xi's understanding of Principle differ from that of Lu Jiuyuan?

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42:6a The Way is identical with the nature of man and things and their nature is identical with the Way. They are one and the same. But we must understand why it is called the nature and why it is called the Way.

42:6b After reading some essays by Xun² and others on the nature, the Teacher said: In discussing the nature it is important to know first of all what kind of thing it really is. Cheng Yi put it best when he said that "the nature is the same as principle." Now if we regard it as principle, then surely it has neither physical form nor shadow. It is nothing but this very principle. In human beings, humaneness, rightness, ritual decorum, and wisdom are his nature, but what physical shape or form have they? All they have are the principles of humaneness, rightness, decorum, and wisdom. As they possess these principles, many deeds are carried out, and human beings are able to have the feelings of commiseration, shame, deference and compliance, and of right and wrong. ... In human beings, the nature is merely humaneness,

¹ "Human desire" here refers to selfish desires as opposed to those serving the common good, as symbolized here by the Principle of Heaven.

² Huang Xun (1147-1212), a disciple of Zhu Xi.

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rightness, decorum, and wisdom. According to Mencius, these four fundamental virtues are rooted in the mind-and-heart. When, for example, he speaks of the mind of commiseration, he attributes feeling to the mind.

42:9b-10a Original nature is an all-pervading perfection not contrasted with evil. This is true of what Heaven has endowed in the self. But when it operates in human beings, there is the differentiation of good and evil. When humans act in accord with it, there is goodness. When humans act out of accord with it, there is evil. How can it be said that the good is not the original nature? It is in its operation in human beings that the distinction of good and evil arises, but conduct in accord with the original nature is due to the original nature. If, as they say, there is the original goodness and there is another goodness contrasted with evil, there must be two natures. Now what is received from Heaven is the same nature as that in accordance with which goodness ensues, except that as soon as good appears, evil, by implication, also appears, so that we necessarily speak of good and evil in contrast. But it is not true that there is originally an evil existing out there, waiting for the appearance of good to oppose it. We fall into evil only when our actions are not in accord with the original nature.

42:14b-15a In your letter you³ say that you do not know whence comes human desire. This is a very important question. In my opinion, what is called human desire⁴ is the exact opposite of the Principle of Heaven [Nature]. It is permissible to say that human desire exists because of the Principle of Heaven, but it is wrong to say that human desire is the same as the Principle of Heaven, for in its original state the Principle of Heaven is free from human desire. It is from the deviation in the operation of the Principle of Heaven that human desire arises. Cheng Hao says, "Good and evil in the world are both the Principle of Heaven. What is called evil is not originally evil. It becomes evil only because of deviation from the Mean." Your quotation, "Evil must also be interpreted as the nature," expresses the same idea.

³ He Shujing.

⁴ See footnote 1, above.