



THE GREAT LEARNING

by

Confucius



THE GREAT LEARNING

This text, which, along with the *Doctrine of the Mean*, is traditionally dated to the fifth century, soon after the death of Confucius, was most likely composed late during the third century B.C., shortly after Xunzi's heyday and, perhaps, during the brief Qin Dynasty (221-208 BCE). The *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, from the twelfth century CE on, occupied a place of supreme importance in the dominant ideology of Late Imperial China, which is known as "neo-Confucianism." The interpretation that the neo-Confucians gave to these texts probably strayed far from their original intent. For us, these two Confucian texts from the very end of our period represent a full flowering of certain persistent themes that we have encountered in both Confucianism and Daoism.

The *Great Learning* is divided into two sections: a brief "Text" followed by ten sections of "Commentary," dating from the last days of the Zhou Dynasty. The arrangement that we now use employs certain sensible editorial rearrangements of the text introduced by the great Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE), and, for the most part, the translation here follows his arrangement.

If you read the work straight through, it may seem analytically half-baked and mushy. That mushiness can be made substantially crisper if you bear in mind the structure of the text.

The "Text" portion of the work introduces a total of eleven central notions upon which the "Commentary" enlarges. The first three are known as "Guidelines," the remaining eight as "Stages." The "Great Learning" is a portrait of a progression from ordinary human existence to Sagehood through the Eight Stages of practice, as governed by the principles of the Three Guidelines. Here is a list of the Guidelines:

The Three Guidelines:

- 1. Making one's "bright virtue" brilliant**
- 2. Making the people new**
- 3. Dwelling in the highest good**

These are discussed, in sequence, in Section A of the Commentary.

The Eight Stages: [Commentary B sections are in brackets]

- 1. Straightening out affairs** [§ 1-2]
- 2. Extending understanding** [also § 1-2]
- 3. Making intentions genuine** [§ 3]
- 4. Balancing the mind** [§ 4]
- 5. Refining one's person** [§ 5]
- 6. Aligning one's household** [§ 6]
- 7. Ordering the state** [§ 7-8]
- 8. Setting the world at peace** [also § 7-8]

Read through the entire work bearing in mind that the Commentary is tracking the basic concepts introduced in the Text and presenting a portrait of the practical path to Sagehood. *The typographical arrangement of the text is for purposes of clarity only: the text is not a poem; it is written in ordinary, balanced prose.*

THE GREAT LEARNING (*Daxue* 大學)

TEXT

A. The Three Guidelines

The Dao of great learning lies
 in making bright virtue brilliant,
 in making the people new,
 in dwelling at the limit of the good.

These three initial dimensions form the basic outline of this text. “Making the bright virtue brilliant” carries the sense of nurturing one’s innate moral luster to social visibility.

The Guideline that I have translated as “making the people new” is more often translated in the sense of “staying close to the people.” That is, in fact, the way the current text reads. However, the Ming Dynasty Neo-Confucian, Wang Yangming (1472-1579), among others, maintained that the current text version involved a misreading: in Zhou times, the character for “staying close to” (*qin* 親) and that for “new / make new” (*xin* 新) were sometimes used interchangeably. Since the commentary on this guideline (Commentary A.2, below) clearly addresses the idea of “newness,” it seems likely that the original commentator was reading a text with the word “new,” and adopting that view, this translation follows Wang. Since Confucianism presented itself as a revival of the “old,” the injunction to “make the people new” may have been intentionally provocative.

Only after wisdom reaches this dwelling does one possess certainty;
 only after one possesses certainty can one become tranquil;
 only after one becomes tranquil can one become secure;
 only after one becomes secure can one contemplate alternatives;
 only after one can contemplate alternatives can one comprehend.

This rhymed sequence was clearly composed for easy memorization.

Affairs have their roots and branches, situations have their ends and beginnings.
 To know what comes first and what comes after is to be near the Dao.

“Roots and branches” points towards causes and consequences; “ends and beginnings” points towards continuity in the flow of apparently sequential events. Effective action in the midst of life requires the identification of priorities and a vision of receding consequences.

B. The Eight Stages

Note that this section begins with the first Guideline.

In ancient times, those who wished to make bright virtue brilliant in the world
first ordered their states.

Those who wished to order their states
first aligned their households.

Those who wished to align their households
first refined their persons.

Those who wished to refine their persons
first balanced their minds.

Those who wished to balance their minds
first perfected the genuineness of their intentions.

Those who wished to perfect the genuineness of their intentions
first extended their understanding.

Extending one's understanding lies in straightening out affairs.

Only after affairs have been straightened out
may one's understanding be fully extended.

Only after one's understanding is fully extended
may one's intentions be perfectly genuine.

Only after one's intentions are perfectly genuine
may one's mind be balanced.

Only after one's mind is balanced
may one's person be refined.

Only after one's person is refined
may one's household be aligned.

Only after one's household is aligned
may one's state be ordered.

Only after one's state is ordered
may the world be set at peace.

From the Son of Heaven to the common person
for all alike

refining the person is the root.

That roots should be disordered yet branches ordered is not possible.

That what should be thickened is thin yet what is thin becomes thick:
this has never yet been so.

This is called "knowing the root."

The dynamic in this section is highly formulaic. Commentary B, on the Eight Stages, explains in some detail how each stage works and how all eight link together to express the path of learning followed by the Sages – a path any person can follow.

In Zhu Xi's editorial version, the last phrase is treated as an extraneous insertion and is deleted. See Commentary B.1-2 on this issue.

COMMENTARY

A. Commentary on the Three Guidelines

1. Commentary on “Making bright virtue brilliant.”

The *Announcement of Kang* says,

“Able to make virtue brilliant.”

The *Taijia* says,

“Regard this bright mandate of Heaven.”

The *Canon of Di* says,

“Able to make sheer virtue brilliant.”

In all of these brilliance was spontaneous.

The texts quoted here are all supposedly from the canonical *Book of Documents* (*Shang shu*); the *Announcement of Kang* is indeed preserved in the current version of that book and accepted by most scholars as an early Zhou text; the other chapters cited here are now lost, as is the “basin inscription” quoted in the next section.

One of the most important strategies for Warring States thinkers was to ground their innovative ideas in short quotations borrowed from much older “authoritative” sources – in the contexts of those earlier sources, the cited phrases often conveyed ideas quite different from what they seem to say once appropriated.

2. Commentary on “Making the people new.”

The *Basin Inscription of Tang* says,

“Truly new each day. New each and every day. Again, new each day.”

The *Announcement of Kang* says,

“Make a new people.”

The *Poetry* says:

*Though the Zhou is an ancient country
Its mandate is new.*

For this reason, the *junzi* never fails to strive to the utmost.

3. Commentary on “Dwelling in the highest good.”

The *Poetry* says,

*The capital district a thousand li square;
The people dwelt therein.*

The *Poetry* says,

*Many the twittering orioles,
Dwelling on the crest of the hill.*

Confucius commented: “‘Dwelling’ – they know wherein to dwell;
can we believe that human beings are not so good as birds?”

The *Poetry* says,

*So awesome was King Wen,
Dwelling in the unquenchable gleam of reverence.*

When acting as a ruler of men, dwell in *ren*.
When acting as a subject of a ruler, dwell in reverence.
When acting as a man’s son, dwell in filiality.
When acting as a son’s father, dwell in kindness.
When interacting with men of your state, dwell in faithfulness.

The *Poetry* says,

*See the bend of the River Qi,
Thick bamboo so green;
A junzi there, so elegant,
As though cut and filed,
As though carved and polished.
Solemn – oh, exacting!
Formidable – oh, awesome!
A junzi there, so elegant,
Never can we forget him.*

“As though cut and filed”: learned in the Dao.

“As though carved and polished”: he has refined his person.

“Solemn – oh, exacting”: alert with apprehension.

“Formidable – oh, awesome”: awe-inspiring in manner.

“Never can we forget him”: this says that abundant virtue and
greatest goodness are things that the people can never forget.

The *Poetry* says,

Oh! We do not forget the former kings!

The *junzi* treats as wise those whom these kings would have treated as
wise, and cleaves to those whom they would have cleaved to; the petty
man delights in what they delighted in and takes as profit that which they
took as profit – thus until the end of the ages they shall never be forgotten.

The thrust of these sections of commentary, all of which consist principally of
selections from pre-Classical texts, concerns the manner in which the founders of
the Zhou exemplified the Three Guidelines – their “bright virtue” by nature shone
in society; its influence in affairs transformed the people unceasingly, and their
attractive and transformative powers are eternal.

Note how within this “commentary” section, sub-commentary on the
canonical passages is included. The editors did not simply wish to impress readers
with citations of authoritative text, they were anxious to make certain that their
reading of these texts was understood by readers.

B. Commentary on the Eight Stages

1-2. Commentary on “Straightening out affairs and extending one’s understanding”

Confucius said, “In hearing lawsuits, I am no better than others. What is imperative is to make it so that there are no lawsuits!”

Not permitting those whose claims have no substance to exhaust their explanations, acting in great awe of the will of the people: this is the meaning of “knowing the root.” This is the meaning of “the extension of understanding.”

Late commentators believe that the commentary on “straightening out affairs” has been lost and take this to describe “knowing the root and extending one’s understanding,” rather than “straightening out affairs.” It is certainly true that the latter phrase does not appear in it. If we leave “knowing the root” at the close of the “Text” section (as Zhu Xi did not), the context at that point would indicate that “knowing the root” means knowing the priority of essential matters and the order of the Eight Stages. This root, according to the Text, begins with straightening out affairs, the meaning of which does seem to be provided here. In its gloss on Confucius’s statement, the text indicates that straightening out affairs means learning to respond to affairs with the will common to people – the innate moral responses of our common nature – rather than by futilely attempting to penetrate the obfuscating screen of words with which social affairs are generally surrounded. If we do not assume that a significant portion of the text has been lost, then the process of straightening out affairs would, in itself, be the process of extending knowledge – that is, action in applying the spontaneous values of the mind is the means of broadening our mind’s ability to understand.*

What I have translated as “straightening out affairs” is usually interpreted rendered quite differently, for example, as “investigating things,” and this is the way it was often read once the authors of the Song Dynasty elevated it to centrality in the Confucian canon during the 11th century CE. The literal meaning of the phrase might be rendered: “putting things into a grid,” and the translation here is based on the notion that the citation of Confucius’s on lawsuits reflects the meaning of this phrase, which would then be about beginning self-cultivation not with a type of reflective study, but with attentive attempts at ethical action.

*The Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian, Cheng Yi, added the following interesting commentary to this section (section 2) [I have substituted for “straightening out affairs” the phrase “investigating things,” which better expresses Cheng Yi’s reading, though should be borne in mind that the word for “things” in the latter rendering was often used in the sense of “affair.”]: “The statement that extending one’s understanding lies in investigating things means that wishing to extend our understanding we must go straight to things and fully penetrate their principles. Most likely, the spirituality of the human mind never lacks the power to understand and the things of the world never lack principles [that may be understood]. It is only that there are sometimes principles that have not been fully penetrated, and thus understanding may not be fulfilled. For this reason, the first teachings of the *Great Learning* necessarily make the learner go straight to the various things of the world. In every case, one relies upon the principles one already understands and increases one’s penetration, seeking to reach to the limit. After one has exerted oneself at this for a long time, suddenly – all at once – things all link up. Then one can reach all the inner and outer aspects of things, their fine and coarse points, and in every instance, the full body and great operation of our minds is brilliant.”

3. *Commentary on “Making the intentions perfectly genuine.”*

Making the intentions perfectly genuine means being without self-deceit.

It is the same as when we hate a bad odor or like a beautiful color.

It describes a process of perfect inner correspondence.

This paragraph gives the key to this section of commentary. Its main thrust is to explain by means of a clear analogy what is meant by being without self-deceit and so being alert to the moral responses of the innately good Mencian mind.

For this reason, a *junzi* is inevitably alert when alone.

The small person will do bad things when at his ease; there is nothing he may not do. When he is observed by a *junzi*, however, he will cover up the bad things that he has done and exhibit any good ones. But the *junzi* casts upon him a glance that sees through as to his very lungs and liver – of what use is concealment? This is why it is said that when one is perfectly genuine within it may be seen externally.

For this reason, a *junzi* is inevitably alert when alone.

Zengzi said, “Ten eyes see and ten hands point: how austere!”

Wealth graces one’s home; virtue graces one’s person: when the mind is broad the body is full.

Therefore the *junzi* inevitably makes his intentions perfectly genuine.

4. *Commentary on “Balancing one’s mind.”*

Concerning the phrase, “refining one’s person lies in balancing one’s mind”:

If one possesses anger and resentment one’s mind will not be fully balanced.

If one is in fear one’s mind will not be balanced.

If one takes pleasure in delights one’s mind will not be balanced.

If one is anxious and fretful one’s mind will not be balanced.

When the mind is not focused one does not see what one is looking at, hear what one is listening to, or know the taste of the food one eats.

Once again, the text gives a clear analogy drawn from ordinary life to convey the symptoms of a moral capacity or defect. To grasp the shared experiential background that the text is counting on readers to possess, it’s important here to refer to one’s own encounters with times when fear, anger, pleasure, or lust may have screened the senses from awareness of their surroundings or sensual encounters.

This is the meaning of the phrase, “refining one’s person lies in balancing one’s mind.”

5. *Commentary on “Refining one’s person.”*

Concerning the phrase, “aligning one’s household lies in refining one’s person”:

When people come to those for whom they hold kinlike affection they are partial.

When they come to those whom they view as base and evil they are partial.

When they come to those whom they revere with awe they are partial.

When they come to those whom they pity and feel sorrow for they are partial.

When they come to those whom they disdain and hold in contempt they are partial.

Thus it is rare to find in the world one who can
 love, but know the bad points of those he loves;
 hate, but know the good points of those he hates.

Here is a shared defect of prejudice that most, or perhaps all of us can discover in our own experience, particularly, perhaps, the live knowledge of the good points of those we may hate. Note that the list in the paragraph preceding this covers a very broad range of partiality – the goal is clarity of awareness and fairness in response, not simple good-heartedness. It relates to the model of the “unblinded mind” we see in Xunzi.

Thus the saying goes,

“None know their children’s faults;
 none know when their seedlings have reached their limit.”

This is the meaning of the phrase, “aligning one’s household lies in refining one’s person.”

6. *Commentary on “Aligning one’s household.”*

Concerning the phrase, “to order one’s state one must first align one’s household”:

There are none who cannot instruct their households but can instruct others.

Hence the *junzi* perfects the teaching in his state without leaving his household.

Filiality is what one takes to serve one’s ruler.

The behavior of the younger brother is what one takes to serve one’s elders.

Kindness is what one takes to preside over the masses.

This is one of the clearest expressions we find of the idea that the family context is the training ground for mastering the skills of role playing that are necessary to be truly human and fit to contribute to the social world.

The *Announcement of Kang* says,

“Be it like tending a newborn babe.”

If one genuinely seeks the way to do so in one's own mind, though one may miss the mark, one will not be far off.
There has never been one who learned to raise a child before marrying.

The *Poetry* says,

*The cherry tree with blossoms fresh,
And leafy branches flourishing.
This lady is off to be married,
May she make a good mate.*

Only after there is a good mate may one instruct the people of one's state.

The *Poetry* says,

Elder and younger, fit brothers.

Only after one's brothers are fit may one instruct the people of one's state.

The *Poetry* says,

*With flawless aspect
Rectify the four states.*

Only after those who act as fathers, sons, elder and younger brothers are adequate to serve as exemplars will the people emulate them.

This is the meaning of the phrase, "to order one's state one must first align one's household."

7-8. Commentary on "Ordering one's state and setting the world at peace."

Concerning the phrase, "Setting the world at peace lies in ordering the state":

When the ruler treats the elderly as the elderly should be treated,
the people rise up with filiality.

When the ruler treats his elders as elders should be treated
the people rise up with behavior fitting the younger.

When the ruler treats the orphaned with compassion
the people do not turn their backs.

Hence the ruler fulfills the *dao* of the carpenter's square.

What you detest in your superior
do not employ upon your subordinates.

What you detest in your subordinates
do not employ to serve your superior.

What you detest in those who are before you
do not employ to lead those behind you.

What you detest in those who are behind you
do not employ to follow those before you.

What you detest in him on your right
do not employ when engaged with him on your left.
What you detest in him on your left
do not employ when engaged with him on your right.
This is the *dao* of the carpenter's square.

The *Poetry* says,

*Happy the junzi!
Father and mother of the people.*

To love what the people love and hate what the people hate –
this is the “father and mother of the people.”

Note that this formulation, “To love what the people love and hate what the people hate,” effectively takes us back to the task with which the entire enterprise was begun: “[A]cting in great awe of the will of the people: this is the meaning of ‘knowing the root’” (Commentary B.1-2). The practice of sagehood begins in the action of social life, through aligning one’s decisions with the shared dispositions of all, even the common people – detecting and becoming fully sensitive to the universally possessed ethical promptings of the human heart. That practice reaches its apogee with the True King, whose role and success is simply the product of virtuoso mastery of the first stage.

The *Poetry* says,

*How tall is South Mountain!
Its boulders tower high.
Awe-inspiring is Marshal Yin,
The people all gaze upon him.*

Those who rule a state cannot but be cautious;
if they are partial, they will be destroyed by all the world.

The *Poetry* says,

*Before the Yin lost its peoples
It was a worthy match for the Lord on High.
We should view ourselves in light of the Yin –
The great mandate is not an easy thing!*

That is to say, if one gains the masses one gains the state;
if one loses the masses one loses the state.

Therefore the *junzi* is first cautious concerning virtue.

If one has virtue, one has men.

If one has men, one has land.

If one has land, one has goods.

If one has goods, one has means.

Virtue is the root, goods are the branches.

If you take the root to be outer and the branches to be inner

then you will contest with the people over distribution and expropriation.

Thus it is that where goods are concentrated, the people disperse.
Where goods are dispersed, the people concentrate.

Thus it is that where words are proclaimed with hostility,
hostile words will be returned.
Where wares are expropriated with hostility,
they will be seized back with hostility as well.

The *Announcement of Kang* says,

“The mandate is not constant.”

If one’s Dao is good one will get it; if not, one will lose it.

The *Book of Chu* says, “There is no treasure in Chu; goodness alone is its treasure.”

Jiu Fan* said, “The royal exile has no treasure; to be *ren* in cleaving to others is the treasure.”

The *Oath of Qin* says,

“If there were only a minister who possessed this one ability and no other:
to be all excellent in mind and yet to be accommodating of others –
to view others’ abilities as though they were his own,
to love the sage words of others with all his heart,
almost as though they were uttered from his own mouth –
truly accommodating
– to have such a man to protect my descendants and my people –
this would be of the greatest benefit indeed!

One who views abilities with hate born of envy,
who discards the sage words of others and blocks them from the ruler –
truly without accommodation of others:
– to have such a man to protect my descendants and my people –
this would be danger indeed!”

Indeed, a man of *ren* would banish such a one to the tribes of the four quarters and
refuse to allow him to dwell with them in the Central States of China.

This is why it is said of the *ren* that only they can cherish others and hate others.

That one may see a worthy man and be unable to raise him up, or raising him be unable
to place him first: this is fate.

But that one should see a bad man and be unable to make him retire, or having made him
retire be unable to keep him at a distance: this is to err.

To love what others hate and hate what others love is called acting counter to human
nature: calamity shall inevitably reach such a person.

*A maternal uncle to an exiled prince of the state of Jin.

The great Dao to becoming a *junzi* is this:

inevitably, one gains it by means of devotion and faithfulness,
and loses it by means of arrogance and extravagance.

The great Dao that gives birth to plenty is this:

let the producers be many,
let the consumers be few,
let those who craft be eager,
let those who employ be easy.

In this way, goods will always be adequately plentiful.

The *ren* manifest their persons by means of wealth;

those who are not *ren* manifest their wealth by means of their persons.

Never has there been a ruler who loves *ren* whose people do not love righteousness.

Never has there been one who loves righteousness whose affairs have not come to completion.

Never has there been one who could keep his storehouses filled with goods not his own.

Meng Xianzi* said,

“He who possesses horses and chariots does not inquire
into matters of raising chickens and pigs.

The household that has stored ice to chip does not raise
dogs and sheep.

The household of a hundred chariots does not keep servants
to collect taxes –

rather than harbor tax collector, better to harbor brigands.”

This is to say that a state does not take profit as profit; it takes righteousness as profit.

One who leads a state and concentrates on goods is inevitably guided by small minded men and takes what they do as a standard.

If small men control a state in this way, calamities and disasters will come;

though there may be good men, the ruler will not know how to use them.

This is why it is said that a state does not take profit as profit; it takes righteousness as profit.

The Mencian approach of the text is underscored by the text's close, which is precisely the theme with which the text of the *Mencius* opens.

*A grandee of the state of Lu.