

THE GREAT LEARNING

AND

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

AN ONLINE TEACHING TRANSLATION

ROBERT ENO

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PREFATORY NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

These translations of *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* are revisions of versions that I used for many years in teaching classes at the college level. My principal goal in preparing these translations, in addition to saving students the cost of paying for copyrighted materials and eliminating the need to use class time to argue with other scholars' translations, was to find a way to convey the general coherence of these two texts, which, like many Confucian texts, often seem dull and preachy to students without background in Chinese thought, perhaps especially when read in English translation.

These texts have been translated and interpreted in various ways by other scholars, some more devoted to them and more deeply immersed in their interpretive histories than I. No one should mistake these translations for definitive renderings of these great works. I have tried, wherever I have diverged from common practice in my readings, to signal that I have done so, and to provide my reasons. However, in this "teaching translation," most of these points have been signaled in the introductions to the texts, rather than in the running glosses, so as not to burden students reading for general information with issues that would be beyond their current interests. An alternative version of this translation, which includes much more annotation and goes into considerably more detail on points of scholarship, appears online as [*The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: Translation, Commentary, and Notes*](#).

My base text for both *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* has been Zhu Xi's *Sishu zhangzhu* 四書章句. Although I rely on Zhu Xi's critical editions of the texts and have frequently benefited from his commentary, I do not adopt in my interpretations the Neo-Confucian metaphysical framework that is so important to Zhu's commentary. In a number of other respects, specified in the Introductions to the texts and running comments, I have proposed modifications to Zhu's editing work. Moreover, I have made explicit through a section numbering scheme the overall structure of *The Great Learning* that I believe is entailed in Zhu's edition, and added to Zhu's chapter divisions of *The Doctrine of the Mean* an outline framework, intended to guide readers through the logic of that text.

These translations can be used alongside two other open access texts: [*The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation*](#) and [*Mencius: An Online Teaching Translation*](#). Together, these provide freely available English language classroom versions of the "Four Books," the basic core of Confucian texts that was established as primary canon in traditional China after the development of Neo-Confucianism in the 11th and 12th centuries CE. The first of these has been available in various versions for a number of years: I know from web analytics that it has been widely consulted, and personal communications have made clear that it has been adopted as a text in various high school and college courses. Naturally, I'm pleased to know that these translations are being used. But I hope that their easy availability will not obscure the fact that there are many excellent print versions of these works available that provide different scholarly interpretations, philosophical perspectives, and literary features. I have benefited from studying many of them and have undoubtedly missed many insights offered by those I have not consulted.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Great Learning (*Daxue* 大學) and *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) have been among the most influential texts in the intellectual history of China. Short, pithy overviews of early Confucian doctrine, for many centuries these two texts were memorized at an early stage by the male children of families with aspirations and means adequate to provide their sons with an education. Portions of the texts spread through popular culture on a broader scope. Although the prestige of other texts, such as the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu*), *Mencius*, *Yijing*, and other classics may have been greater in some respects, the succinctness of *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* gave them a special role in shaping the template of understanding through which the educated class understood traditional norms of ethical and political discourse and commitment.

It was not always so. Although these texts were composed in the ancient era, they were originally preserved not as independent documents, but as chapters of a large compendium of texts, many concerned with forms and interpretations of ritual, assembled during the second century BCE: the *Liji* 禮記, or *Book of Rites*. In that sprawling anthology, the tiny *Great Learning* was listed as chapter 42, the somewhat longer *Doctrine of the Mean* as chapter 31. While the *Liji* as a whole came to be regarded as authoritative canon during the Former Han era (202 BCE – 9 CE), these two chapters were not initially singled out for special note. The earliest extant commentary on the *Liji*, by the Latter Han scholar Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200 CE), accords them no special treatment, and Zheng's comments are, in general, routine. However, in the case of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, the historical text *Hanshu* 漢書 records in its bibliographical chapter the existence of an *Explanation of the Doctrine of the Mean*, now lost, under the category of "ritual texts." This tells us that by the first century CE, the particular interest of *The Doctrine of the Mean* had been noted. Nevertheless, it does not appear that either of the two texts was more broadly recognized as having special prestige for many centuries thereafter.

There is no indication in the *Liji* that these two texts were ascribed to any identified author. All other texts in the *Liji* are anonymous, as was the norm in early China, where even texts named for a specific thinker were generally composed by others. However, over time it came to be understood that *The Great Learning* had been written by Zeng Shen 曾參 (Zengzi, c. 505-436 BCE), a prominent junior disciple of Confucius, and that *The Doctrine of the Mean* was the work of Confucius's grandson, Zisi 子思 (c. 483-402 BCE). These two men were among the most revered masters honored by the Confucians of the pre-Imperial period, and in the *Mencius*, they are the Confucians whom Mencius (c. 390-305 BCE) most frequently cites as authorities, after Confucius himself. Although these authorial attributions were almost universally accepted in traditional China, scholars today generally view them as inventions devised to justify the prestige that the texts acquired.

The rise in attention to the texts parallels the decline of Han-style Confucianism, with its heavy reliance on esoteric cosmological models and arts of prognostication, and increasing attention to individual ethical commitment, often associated with the approach of Mencius. The best known Tang Dynasty innovators in Confucian doctrine were among the first to draw attention to these two *Liji* chapters: Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) cited *The Great Learning* as authoritative tradition, and 李翱 (774-836) wrote on *The Doctrine of the Mean*. But the status of the texts was most dramatically altered from the 11th century CE, when they were freshly interpreted by the founders of the Neo-Confucian movement.

The most important contributors to this reassessment were the brother philosophers Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), the most influential of the “Five Masters of the Northern Song,” and the Southern Song era Neo-Confucian synthesizer, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200). As discussed in detail below, *The Great Learning*, in the form preserved in the *Liji*, was a problem text, truncated by lost fragments and distorted by editorial disarrangement. The Cheng brothers made initial attempts to restore the text through critical editing, showing elements of coherence where they had been missing before, with Cheng Yi’s editorial work being of particular importance. Zhu Xi built upon the Cheng brothers’ work with these texts, as he did in so many other respects. In particular, he significantly improved on Cheng Yi’s critical edition of *The Great Learning*, developing a theory of the text that brought out its internal logic and illuminated its ethical insights. Zhu also worked to bring out the coherence of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, providing it with chapter divisions still used today.

While the Cheng brothers and others had extracted the two *Liji* chapters for special treatment, Zhu went further. He incorporated them as parts of a set of unified commentaries on what he called the “Four Books,” combining them with the *Analects* and *Mencius* to create a new canonical core of the most authoritative works of early Confucianism. Zhu’s commentaries to these works, which particularly acknowledged his debts to Cheng Yi, reframed them in terms of Neo-Confucian ethical and metaphysical theory, enhancing the credibility of this approach with rigorous philological scholarship. When Zhu’s Neo-Confucian approach was endorsed by the Imperial Yuan Dynasty rulers as a new orthodoxy in the 14th century, his commentary editions of the Confucian canon became the standard basis of the civil service examinations, which formed the gateway to official position, wealth, and social status for the next half millennium. The Four Books became the gateway into that syllabus. In this way, *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* came to be treated as seminal Confucian texts.

Intellectual context: ancient philosophical sources

The translations here owe a great debt to the Song Neo-Confucians. Zhu Xi’s critical edition of *The Great Learning* and his thirty-three chapter division of *The Doctrine of the Mean* are adopted as base texts here, though potential emendations are noted. However, the interpretations that govern translation choices often diverge from the philosophical orientation of Zhu’s

commentary, with its Neo-Confucian orientation, seeking reference points in other Confucian texts of the Warring States era (453-221 BCE), particularly the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*.

The influence of the *Mencius* on these texts has never been in doubt. Both *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* draw on the portrait of human nature that Mencius was famous for, one that held that all people are uniformly endowed with moral senses by Tian 天, the Zhou high divinity, generally portrayed with a mix of attributes appropriate for an anthropomorphic god and for a naturally operating cosmic force. *The Great Learning* places great emphasis on how individuals can reconnect with the spontaneous operation of these moral senses, while *The Doctrine of the Mean* stresses that these senses are held in common, and therefore serve as the key political connection between rulers and their people. Together, both texts enlarge on the idea, found throughout the *Mencius*, that self-cultivation and social leadership to create a perfect world order equally depend on responsiveness to the ethical dispositions that constitute the distinguishing characteristic of humankind. (The connection between the *Mencius* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* is also signaled in simple textual overlap: sections (d) and (e) of the *Doctrine's* Chapter 20 appear almost verbatim as *Mencius* 4A.12.)

Another text that has become significant in understanding the Mencian tradition is the *Wuxing* 五行, or “The Five Forms of Conduct,” a text that has been archaeologically recovered in two different versions in recent decades, one from a grave dated c. 300 BCE and the other from one closed in 168 BCE, the latter including an early commentary. Although “The Five Forms of Conduct” is not an exceptional text, its title is noted in the *Xunzi* as the characteristic doctrine of a Confucian faction he identifies as the school of Zisi and Mencius. Scholars therefore treat “The Five Forms of Conduct” as a newly available means of understanding the tradition we treat as Mencian, often referred to as the Si-Meng Tradition. And, indeed, resemblances exist between “The Five Forms of Conduct” and *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, especially the latter.

Although it is clear that the dominant intellectual tradition for both these texts is the Mencian tradition, there are significant indications of elements characteristic of the school of Xunzi (c. 320-235 BCE) as well, particularly in *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Although during the third century BCE the Mencian and Xunzian schools of thought were in opposition on the issue of the moral nature (*xing* 性) of human beings, and the question of whether our ethical dispositions are innate or learned, in many other respects they were aligned or complementary, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, in particular, seems to draw on both. One instance is worthy of mention here. A shared feature of *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* is the occurrence in each of the somewhat cryptic phrase, “the *junzi* is cautious of his solitude” (*junzi shen qi du* 君子慎其獨). This is a phrase we find also in “The Five Forms of Action,” which underscores the link with the Mencian tradition. However, the *Mencius* itself never employs this phrase. Yet it is found in the *Xunzi*, and there it appears in a context that resonates more closely than do any passages in “The Five Forms of Action” with the language of *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

Thus the two texts here seem to reflect a confluence of Confucian themes that most clearly reflect the intellectual environment of the third century BCE, the years following the lifetime of Mencius, when the philosophy of Xunzi was coalescing.

Historical context: dating the texts

As mentioned above, *The Doctrine of the Mean* seems to draw upon elements of the Confucian tradition associated with the *Xunzi*, a text that is no earlier than the third century BCE. Although this does not mean that *The Doctrine of the Mean* postdates the *Xunzi*, it highlights a problem in the dating of the text, one that *The Great Learning* shares. Both these texts are highly sophisticated *summa* of Warring States era Confucian doctrine, reflecting the mature development of Confucian thought over those centuries, yet their authorship is traditionally ascribed to Confucian disciples of the fifth century BCE, when Confucianism was in its earliest phases.

It makes far better sense to recognize these texts as anonymous works, attributed to their supposed authors only centuries after their initial circulation. The third century BCE intellectual environment they seem to reflect is probably our best dating guide, and there are, in fact, strong arguments for viewing both these texts as products of the eras *following* the end of the Warring States period, either the Qin Dynasty era (221-208 BCE), the initial decades of the Han Dynasty, following its founding in 202 BCE, or the time of chaos in between. A Qin Dynasty date would have been rejected out of hand by traditional scholars, because it was understood that the Qin was an era of Confucian persecution and a time when no new textual production would have been tolerated. But contemporary scholarship has cast doubt on the accuracy of this celebrated portrait, which was based on a picture painted by Confucian sources composed after the fall of the discredited Qin, a picture that benefited the Confucians of the early Han by portraying their school as a victim of the Qin.

While a reading of historical evidence unfiltered by the narrative of Confucians as Qin victims opens up the possibility of Confucian literary creation in the early years of the new empire, we also find in both *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* internal evidence of composition after the establishment of the Qin. For example, by far the longest citation in *The Great Learning* comes from the “Oath of Qin,” the *Book of Documents* chapter that celebrates the ruling tradition of the pre-Imperial Qin state, and it foregrounds an ideology of dramatic political change with its call for radical renewal: “Truly new each day; new each and every day; again, new each day,” a theme that echoes the revolutionary approach of the Qin after 221 BCE. *The Doctrine of the Mean* says, “In the world today, carts are built with axles of standard length, texts are written in script of standard style, conduct is performed in roles of standard form.” All these are policies imposed by the Qin Imperial state in its effort to erase the regional differences that had characterized the Eastern Zhou era, after the fall of the unified Zhou empire in 771 BCE. In the detailed notes to these translations, additional points that seem to reflect a post-Warring States era date of these texts are indicated.

Thus it seems most likely that these two texts were composed after the unification of China under the Qin in 221 BCE. This conforms with the evidence that the texts were composed in full awareness of the intellectual developments within Confucianism during the third century BCE.

Format of the translations

Both *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* are short, tightly structured texts. In Chinese the texts taken together include just over 5000 characters (about the length of one of the seven books of the *Mencius*), *The Great Learning* including about 1750 and *The Doctrine of the Mean* about twice that total. Nevertheless, because much of the language is formulaic and English translation lacks the taut rhetoric of the Chinese, approximately doubling the word count, it is easy for readers to lose their way. For that reason, I have added structural indications throughout these translations, tracking the outline of the texts by inserting explanatory section titles in gray typeface. In the case of *The Great Learning*, although these section divisions track Zhu Xi's chapter divisions, I have used a numbering system that is not standard in English translations in the hope of adding greater clarity than simple consecutive enumeration can provide. For *The Doctrine of the Mean*, I have superimposed my own understanding of the text outline in a set of nine section divisions that differ from the standard thirty-three chapter division that Zhu Xi devised. I have, however, retained Zhu Xi's chapter numbering to allow easy comparison with the Chinese text and other translations.

Further discussion of general issues appears in the specific introductions to each text, below, and in the commentary and notes to individual sections.

THE GREAT LEARNING

INTRODUCTION TO *THE GREAT LEARNING*

The Great Learning is a beginner's handbook in how to perfect oneself ethically and become capable of transforming the world into a universal utopia. It shares with the thought of all early Confucianism a boundless optimism about the unlimited potential for human self-perfection and social transformation. The opening sentence of the text sets the standards for that transformation. It pictures perfect virtue in individual leaders of society as the engine that can rejuvenate human society, altering the behavior of others as though inhabiting the world with a fresh population, reaching a state unblemished by immorality. This vision is then broken down into eight stages of personal and political development that are the practical means to accomplish it. If the end goals seem excessively idealistic, the stages are thought through pragmatically, identifying a small number of key principles for self-cultivation and offering ways to think about them that are down to earth: ideas that can motivate sustained effort and that address key features of personal and social maturity in ways that can help people leverage personal discipline and become socially authoritative.

In this way, *The Great Learning* is not intended as ethical theory: it is a self-help manual for the aspiring ethical actor, or *junzi* 君子, the term that denotes persons of recognized moral authority and accomplishment. While the utopian goals of the text, expressed in its initial sections and portrayed again at its close, may seem unrealistic to us, the central portions of the text can and were used as a practical guide by generations of people in traditional China, and constitute moral exercises that any person can with profit consider. The theoretical basis of this training lies in the Mencian claim that all people share an innate sense of morality that is largely identical in all of us. Without debating this proposition in detail, it is probably not controversial to grant that for some range of dispositions and responses that we customarily view as ethical, such as a dependent attachment to parents and tendency to obey them, people, like other species of conscious organisms, share intrinsic characteristics that uniformly predispose them in certain directions. Nor are many of us likely to object to a modification of the Mencian claim that argues that within any culture, a more extended set of ethical dispositions may be acquired through early processes of socialization to such a degree that by the point that a child is ready for the type of formal education provided by *The Great Learning*, those dispositions may present to the individual as if they were spontaneous, universal to all people, and therefore innate.

This is the raw material on which *The Great Learning* seeks to build. The combination of dispositions to act towards others in certain ways that society conventionally judges to be good are pictured as innate characteristics of our cognitive minds and affective feelings, a combination that Confucian texts refer to as the "heart" (*xin* 心), and our hearts are understood to have been structured by a divine force, Tian 天 (often translated as "Heaven"), which endows us with these dispositions for a purpose: the creation of a perfectly ethical world. Given this theory, *The Great Learning's* basic message to those who use it as a self-help guide is simply this: *You already*

know how to be moral; all you need to learn is how to turn that knowledge into action. That is what *The Great Learning* can teach you.

For Mencian Confucianism, the reason we are, in fact, not spontaneous moral actors is because our moral nature is not all we are. Other elements of our natural endowment draw us in other directions through tendencies that are self-regarding, rather than other-regarding. Our appetites, our fears, our individual biases, our distance from other people: all these obscure our moral dispositions or compete with them for our attention and obedience. *The Great Learning* is a primer in being aware of these impediments to realizing our innate moral potential and starting on the path to overcoming them. It is often observed that Confucianism is a Golden Rule philosophy, its cardinal virtue of “humanity” (*ren* 仁) resting on the formula of “reciprocity” (*shu* 恕): Do not do to others what you would not wish done to you, a formula we find in the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and in *The Great Learning* (II.B.6 and II.B.7-8). There are many Golden Rule philosophies in world history – who doesn’t approve of the Golden Rule? But who can follow it for long? *The Great Learning* may be viewed as a training regimen we can apply to turn us into firmly grounded Golden Rule actors, in accord with our innate nature, as the Mencian tradition of Confucianism sees it.

The text describes the path to self-perfection in a sequential way, each type of obstacle pictured as being overcome in an ever-broadening scope of social mastery, beginning with mastery over oneself, extending through mastery of the arts of being a family member and a social leader. If the reading of the text conveyed through this translation is correct, however, *The Great Learning* pictures these sequential steps as taking place through a process of self-transformation that is, from the start, fully engaged in social effort and action, each step being a focus of attention in the midst of our lives as they are, rather than a program that begins with withdrawal to a separate sphere, where we rehearse the person we wish to become outside of the confusion of everyday life. (This point rests on the reading of II.B.1-2 offered here.)

In this way, from the time *The Great Learning* became established as an elementary text in the Confucian canon, to be memorized at an early age and available for instant recall thereafter, it may have functioned as an extended mantra for those who internalized it when young, its pithy maxims constantly rising to mind in situations of ethical stress.

Structure of the Text

The Great Learning was divided by Zhu Xi into two sections: a brief “Text” (literally, “classic”: *jing* 經) followed by ten sections of “Commentary” (*zhuan* 傳), and most scholars today adopt this structure as the original conception of the work. If *The Great Learning* is read without attention to this structure, it may seem to be a series of empty platitudes. But when read as a careful interpretation of an originally vague set of maxims, it is actually tightly argued and imaginatively conceived. The “Text” portion of the work introduces eleven central notions upon which the “Commentary” enlarges: the first three are traditionally 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. Coming to rest in the highest good**

These phrases are cryptic and largely meaningless in themselves, and when first encountered in the "Text" section of *The Great Learning* (Section I.A), the language that explains them, while intriguing, is also mysterious. Our understanding of the Three Guidelines is enhanced in the "Commentary" section (II.A), but even there, this portion of *The Great Learning* remains more inspirational than instructional.

The "Text" also provides a brief introduction to the "Eight Stages," which are more clearly an ordered path of self-cultivation. Here is a list of the Stages:

The Eight Stages:

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

The "Text" does little more than list these stages in forward and backward order, using a type of rhetoric that late Warring States texts were prone to employ, called, in classical rhetoric, *sorites*, or "chain syllogism," which takes the form, "If A then B; if B then C; if C then D . . ." and so forth. It is a form supremely well suited for memorization, but as a reading experience, it is less than entirely enthralling.

It is in the "Commentary" discussion of the Eight Stages that the brilliance of *The Great Learning* emerges. Whether the "Commentary" was the product of the same author who composed the "Text" is unknown, but in Sections 3-6 of the "Commentary" on the Eight Stages (II.B.3 – II.B.6), we encounter a writer who seems thoroughly confident about the potential power of the Eight Stages as practical ethical lessons, and who is able to convey the grounds of that confidence with unusual literary clarity. Whether the interpretation was actually the one that the original author of the "Text's" Eight Stages intended cannot be known, but that is not really material: the value of *The Great Learning*, what made it a seminal text in traditional Confucianism, lies in the interpretation we absorb from the "Commentary."

It should be noted that this core of clarity does not extend throughout the entire "Commentary." The commentary on Sections 1 and 2 of the Eight Stages is textually corrupt,

and this is where it is most necessary to guess what the writer may have intended. Any solution is speculative – the textual gaps are simply too large to allow certainty. As for Sections 7 and 8 of the Eight Stages commentary, which seem to be combined in a single extended section, they clearly deal with levels of self-cultivation beyond the experience of the author (or the authors of source texts on which the author of *The Great Learning* drew), and the argument becomes more formulaic: a summary of authoritative teachings, rather than an expression of personal insight. The closing section of *The Great Learning* lacks the focus of the core sections of the text, and there are reasons to believe that the closing portions of the original text have been lost.

In this translation, the structure of Zhu Xi's arrangement of the text is underscored through added headings that do not appear in the original text. The provisional nature of these divisions is signaled by the use of gray font. They also provide a numbering system for reference. Zhu Xi's "Text" and "Commentary" are Sections I and II; the discussions related to the Guidelines and Stages are designated A and B, respectively, and the Three Guidelines and Eight Stages are numbered as subsections of the A and B portions of Section II. It should be noted that the section designated as II.B.1-2 (a combined Commentary on the first two Stages) is the portion of *The Great Learning* that is generally acknowledged to be defective. Zhu Xi interpreted these passages as commentary on a portion of the text that relates neither to a Guideline nor a Stage, believing that the Commentary to Stages 1 and 2 was entirely lost. I interpret this passage as part of the original Commentary to Stage 1, with a fragment of the lost Commentary to Stage 2 appended.

THE GREAT LEARNING

I. TEXT

I.A *The Three Guidelines*

The Dao of Great Learning lies in making bright virtue brilliant; in making the people new; in coming to rest at the limit of the good.

Only after wisdom comes to rest 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.

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.

I.B *The Eight Stages*

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 aligning affairs.

Only after affairs have been aligned 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

Lines in gray type are not part of *The Great Learning*. They have been added to clarify the structure of the text.

On the word "Dao," see the Glossary.

This is a how-to manual: steps cannot be skipped.

"Roots and branches" concerns priority and causation. "Ends and beginnings" can be interpreted as pointing to critical points of effort (start and finish) or to the unceasing flow of events and consequences (endings are always beginnings). "What comes first" concerns priorities.

"Aligning affairs" is a contested phrase; it is discussed in the Glossary.

Here, "refining the person" appears to include Stages 1-5.

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 has never yet been so. [This is the meaning of "knowing the root."]

II. COMMENTARY

II.A *Commentary on the Three Guidelines*

II.A.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 Tian.

The *Canon of Di* says,

Able to make sheer virtue brilliant.

In all of these, brilliance was spontaneous.

II.A.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.

A "Son of Heaven" rules over a unified world of civilization.

Most editions move the sentence in brackets to II.B.1-2, below.

Commentary on the Three Guidelines is principally through citations of authoritative texts.

The *Announcement of Kang*, *Taijia*, and *Canon of Di* are all chapters in the *Book of Documents* (see the Glossary). The *Taijia* is a lost chapter; the *Canon of Di* is titled the *Canon of Yao* in the received text.

On "Tian" ("Heaven"), see the Glossary.

Tang was the Shang Dynasty founder, c. 1600 BCE, well before the invention of writing in China. The text referred to is unknown.

"The *Poetry*" refers to the *Book of Poetry*. See the Glossary.

The term *junzi* denotes a Confucian ethical ideal: a "prince" in terms of moral worth. See the Glossary.

II.A.3 Commentary on “Coming to rest 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,
Coming to rest on the crest of the hill.

Confucius commented: “‘Coming to rest’ – they know where to come to rest. Can we believe that human beings are not so good as birds?”

The *Poetry* says,

So awesome was King Wen,
Coming to rest in the unquenchable gleam of reverence.

When acting as a ruler of men, come to rest in humanity. When acting as a subject of a ruler, come to rest in reverence. When acting as a man’s son, come to rest in filiality. When acting as a son’s father, come to rest in kindness. When interacting with men of your state, come to rest 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!

A *li* is a measure of distance, roughly one-third of a mile.

The phrase “coming to rest” (literally, “to stop” or “to stay”) is the same used in the third Guideline.

King Wen (r. 1099-1050 BCE) was a predynastic Zhou king who effected a cultural transformation of the Zhou people.

On the terms, “humanity” and “filiality,” see the Glossary.

The following two *Poetry* citations do not appear relevant to the third Guideline. The Song Dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200) moved them to this point in the text, but it is not clear that this is where they belong.

The text here interprets the poem in ways relevant to the program of *The Great Learning*.

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.

II.B *Commentary on the Eight Stages*

II.B.1-2 *Commentary on “Aligning 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.”

II.B.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.

For this reason, a *junzi* is inevitably cautious of his solitude. 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 cautious of his solitude. 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.

Comments on this and the preceding poem both concern the unforgettable character of the sage. It may be that they originally belonged to a section of the text where this theme was a better fit – perhaps a final section now lost.

The cited remark appears as *Analects* 12.13.

The text is corrupt here. The bracketed sentence, appears duplicated from Section I.B, and elements of text have been lost. The way this commentary understands the first two Stages is debated. See the Glossary: “Aligning affairs.”

“Perfectly genuine,” renders a single key word in the text; see the Glossary.

The Great Learning uses everyday examples to convey key points. Our immediate responses to odors and colors illustrate experiences of judgment that admit no self-deception, and this is how it interprets “making intentions genuine.”

Zengzi (Zeng Shen) was a disciple of Confucius.

II.B.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.

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

II.B.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. Thus the saying goes,

None knows his children’s faults; none knows when his seedlings have reached their limit.

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

II.B.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

The commentary takes “balancing the mind” to concern emotional calm and focus. It uses everyday experiences, such as failing to notice what one sees or the taste of one’s food, to convey in concrete terms what balancing the mind involves.

The phrase, “refining one’s person” is broad and vague. The Commentary narrows its meaning to issues of bias and impartiality.

Again, concrete examples are provided so readers can grasp the point.

One treats parents, brothers, and children

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.

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.

When a single family is humane, humanity arises throughout the state. When a single family practices deference, deference arises throughout the state. When a single man is greedy and vicious, the entire state is filled with chaos. Such are the triggers of things. As they say, a single phrase can ruin an affair, a single man can set a state right. Yao and Shun led the world with humanity and the people accorded with it. Jie and Zhòu led the world with violence and the people accorded with it – those kings' commands were counter to what they themselves loved to do and the people would not follow them.

Thus the *junzi* seeks for things in others only once he possesses them within himself, and forbids things in others only once he has no trace of them in himself. Never has there been a person who has not stored up within himself the disposition to treat others with reciprocity, but who is able to persuade others to follow him.

Therefore, ordering the state lies in aligning one's household.

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

differently from rulers, elders, and the masses, but the skills are adapted from the family context. ("Kindness" translates a term that connotes parental love.)

This section on leading by moral example seems to break the flow of the commentary here, and may be inserted. It looks ahead to the political context of the final section.

Yao and Shun are exemplary sage kings of the legendary past. Jie and Zhòu are tyrants whose wicked conduct led to the overthrow of their dynasties, the Xia and the Shang.

"Reciprocity" denotes the disposition to act by the Golden Rule.

In the prior quote from the *Announcement of Kang*, parenting is a metaphor for the first step of learning how to care for others; here, choosing a good spouse or learning to be one is a prior step for gaining the authority of social maturity.

Even before marriage, preparation for leadership begins among siblings.

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.”

II.B.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 those senior to him as those senior to him should be treated the people rise up with behavior fitting those who are 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. That which you detest in your superior, do not employ upon your subordinates. That which you detest in your subordinates, do not employ to serve your superior. That which you detest in those who are before you, do not employ to lead those behind you. That which you detest in those who are behind you, do not employ to follow those before you. That which you detest in him on your right, do not employ when engaged with him on your left. That which 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 to be the “father and mother of the people.”

The *Poetry* says,

This final section, commenting on the public role of the *junzi* at state and world levels, draws on Confucian political formulas.

The “Dao of the carpenter’s square” concerns “reciprocity,” a Golden Rule formula: “That which you do not desire, do not do to others” (*Analects* 15.24).

Loving and hating as all people do is to be in touch with natural moral dispositions, as in loving a beautiful color or hating a bad smell (commentary on Stage 3).

How tall is South Mountain!
 Its boulders tower high.
 Awe-inspiring is Marshal Yīn,
 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 receive 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 exile has no treasure; his treasure lies in his humanity and bonds to others.

The *Oath of Qin* says,

If there were only a minister who possessed this one ability

Marshal Yīn was a general of the Western Zhou era. The lesson drawn from him here concerns maintaining impartiality (Stage 4).

“Yin” is an alternative name for the Shang Dynasty. (There is no connection with the Marshal Yīn in the poem above.)

The “Mandate” is Tian’s mandate for kings to rule.

This echoes the Text section on the Three Guidelines: “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.”

The *Book of Chu* is a lost text. Chu was a powerful southern state.

Jiu Fan (Uncle Fan) was the uncle of Duke Wen of Jin (r. 636–628 BCE), a storied ruler. Jiu Fan advised the Duke with great wisdom during a long period of exile.

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 humanity 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. This is why it is said of the humane 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.

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 humane employ wealth so that the person will blossom; the inhumane employ the person so that wealth will blossom. Never has there been a ruler who loves humanity 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 collectors, better to harbor brigands.

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

The *Oath of Qin* is a chapter of the *Book of Documents*.

The “central states” are those we consider ancestral to China.

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 DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

INTRODUCTION TO *THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN*

The Doctrine of the Mean is significantly longer and more complex than the *Great Learning*. Zhu Xi distinguished thirty-three chapters in the originally undivided text, and these have been preserved in this translation. However, Zhu's divisions do not clarify the overall structure of the text, and a set of section divisions have been added here in order to guide readers through the shifting topical areas that *The Doctrine of the Mean* engages. In the case of one particularly long chapter in Zhu's classification (Chapter 20), a mid-chapter topic pivot is obscured by Zhu's arrangement, and for that chapter subsections have been added.

The title of the text is not without problems. Literally, it may mean, "the central ordinary-practice," or, perhaps, "bring centered in ordinary practice," both somewhat puzzling ideas. The notion of "ordinariness" is important to the text. One of its key points is that morality is a characteristic feature of ordinary, everyday spontaneity, and that our ordinary experience, rather than any elusive or esoteric wisdom, is the raw substance of the Dao. Interestingly, the word glossed with the compound term "ordinary-practice" (*yong 庸*) is encountered in a related sense in a key passage of the *Zhuangzi* chapter, "Seeing Things as Equal," which reads, "Things cannot have any completeness or impairment – all are in the final analysis comprehended as one. Only the person of full attainment knows how to comprehend them as one. He affirms nothing as so. His affirmation is lodged in *ordinary practice*. Ordinary practice means use; use is comprehension; to comprehend is to grasp – once you grasp it you're nearly there!" The *Zhuangzi* claim is that by a readjustment of perspective, from one that seeks wisdom through truth statements about what is so to one that is immersed in action without attachment to assertions and denials of any kind, a person can both understand and act perfectly within the dynamic flow of affairs. I believe that there is, in fact, a significant area of convergence on this point between the Daoist ideas of the *Zhuangzi* and the very Confucian *Doctrine of the Mean*, which seeks to unite the person with the creative flow of Nature – "heaven and earth" – through an abiding sensitivity to the simple moral responses that pervade our daily lives, and that are the focus of *The Great Learning*.

Structure of the text

It can be difficult to keep track of *The Doctrine of the Mean*'s underlying unity of theme. The style of the text changes as it proceeds, moving from a form anchored around quotes from Confucius, which dominates the first half of the text, to a succession of poetic celebrations of the power of holistic wisdom to transform the human world and the cosmos. In providing a structural framework for this translation, I have tried to convey my personal sense of the musicality of the text. I do not mean to claim that the text is dominated by rhymed or metrically regular passages

that could have been set to music. I suggest music as a metaphor, drawing attention to the varied textures of the “Doctrine’s” prosody, starting from the almost oracular drama of the opening lines, and ending with the haunting calmness of its final section, which evokes its stated topic of soundlessness. If there is a unity of underlying intellectual theme, it is conveyed through a variety of prosodic dynamics that build towards a crescendo and then subside.

I have marked the opening chapter (that is, the text Zhu Xi identified as a unified initial statement, which he labeled Chapter 1) as the “Theme.” The theme introduces a cluster of key terms that play important roles throughout the text: Tian 天, our nature (*xing* 性), the Dao 道 (the path or “Way” we are meant to travel in ethical action), the ideal moral character of the *junzi* 君子, and “centrality” (*zhong* 中), or the mean. The message of the “Doctrine” concerns the way in which a person can become a Sage by maintaining the centrality characteristic of the Dao and of our Tian-endowed nature, and in so doing become the equal partner of heaven and earth. The initial chapter ties these ideas together with the image of something beyond sight and sound that we must search out. As we will discover at the end of the final chapter, which I have marked as the “Coda,” this invisible and inaudible quality is possessed by both the *junzi* and the cosmos. Commentators have tended to agree that the concept that corresponds to this elusive, linking quality is *cheng* 誠, a key term for the “Doctrine,” translated here by the awkward phrase, “perfect genuineness.”

The first half of *The Doctrine of the Mean* takes us towards this concept in stages. In Section I (Chapters 2-11), a string of quotes from Confucius tells us that the main obstacle to following the Dao – the pathway – is not learning what it is, but the enormous effort of staying on it. Its secret does not lie in “strange arts”; it lies in finding the persistence to walk it forever: to be “centered” in ordinary practice until death. In Section II (Chapters 12-16) we learn that so far from being a mystery, the Dao is actually present to ordinary people in ordinary practice. These chapters reinforce the Mencian notion that every person is an incipient sage, and that it is our common intuitions that we should seek guidance. Our journey on the Dao starts from common experience, but by the end of the section, we see the *junzi* following the Dao to exalted heights, and catch a glimpse of the invisible world of the spirits and the subtle quality of perfect genuineness, manifestations of the invisible thread that binds all that Tian has destined for human destiny. Section III (Chapters 17-19) reframes the greatness of the heroes of history – the sage kings celebrated in all early Confucian texts – in terms of the most fundamental framework of moral action: the ordinary practice of filiality, or obedient service to parents. Their world-shaping accomplishments are represented as no more than the ultimate extension of filial service, linking the moral life of every person to the unimaginable perfection of these sages.

Taken together, Sections I – III share a stress on the topic of the common root of all moral practice, from the most ordinary, everyday action to the grandest political achievements. The common farmer and his wife practice the Dao without knowing it (Chapter 12), and the

greatest sages are simply filial children, like all of us (Chapters 17-19). Section IV (Chapter 20, parts (a) and (b)) begins with a break in the flow of the text. For the only time in the text, we hear a personal voice other than the narrator's or Confucius's, that of Duke Ai of Lu, who asks about the practical issue of governance. Section IV (a) is Confucius's response, and his answer is that the key to governance lies in placing in positions of power people who have grasped the Dao: *junzis*. Giving virtue the lead is the way the world is set in order. A longer quotation from Confucius follows (Section IV (b)), spelling out "nine canons" of governance. These are something like a "Great Learning" for rulers, tracing the steps from self-perfection to perfecting one's relationship to an ever widening circle of people, until the entire world falls within your circle of concern.

Section V (Chapter 20, part (c) through Chapter 26) is, in many ways, the climax of the text as a whole. It begins with passages found in the *Mencius*, providing a transition from political relationships back to a focus on the individual, where the root of all success is found in the force of perfect genuineness. Genuineness is the theme of the entire section. It is pictured not merely as a vector of moral understanding and action in people, endowed within them by Tian as their distinguishing nature and as their intended destiny, it is the creative force of the cosmos itself, a human expression of the teleological unfolding of the world of things and affairs. This is where the text most clearly links the ethics of Mencius to the metaphysics of Xunzi, who saw the birth of the human species as Tian's final creative act: the generation of an independent sage capacity which could complete the order of the cosmos and fulfill its destiny. Chapter 22 reads, "Only those in the world who are perfectly genuine to the utmost can exhaust their natures. Those who can exhaust their natures can exhaust others' natures. Those who can exhaust others' natures can exhaust the natures of things. Those who can exhaust the natures of things can participate in the nurturing transformations of Tian. Those who can participate in the nurturing transformations of Tian can form a triad with heaven and earth." The outcome of acting as a creative force on a par with Nature (forming a triad with heaven and earth: *yu tiandi can* 與天地參), a formula found repeatedly in the *Xunzi*, is here rooted in Mencius's precept of exhausting one's nature (*jin qi xing* 盡其性).

Section VI (Chapters 27-29) translates this image of co-creation between heaven, earth, and human beings to the social world, where its emblem is "ritual" (*li* 禮), that is, the networks of human convention that sage creators elaborated as the enduring social expressions of human nature. This too is a theme far more characteristic of Xunzi than Mencius. The *Xunzi* conveys a similar notion in this phrasing: "In the heavens, nothing shines more brightly than the sun and moon; on earth, nothing shines more brightly than water and fire; among objects, nothing shines more brightly than pearls and jade; amidst humanity, nothing shines more brightly than ritual and propriety."

Section VII (Chapters 30-32) celebrates the sage who brings the three realms of heaven,

earth, and humankind together, praising first the former kings, whom Confucius took as models, and then the general character of the sage, who is described as the apotheosis of humanity, performing as a cosmic actor. The “Coda” (Chapter 33) closes the argument with a long string of poetic passages, interpreted as invoking the invisible, transformative power of this cosmic sage.

These sectional divisions, listed below with Zhu Xi’s corresponding chapter divisions indicated, are provisional and particular to this translation. They are not part of any commentarial tradition, and are provided solely as guides to readers in following what seem to be the general contours of the sustained argument of *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

Theme:	The source of the center (1)
Section I:	Cleaving to the central mean (2-11)
Section II:	The common basis of the Dao (12-16)
Section III:	Confucius on the sages and filial perfection (17-19)
Section IV:	On government (20 (a) and (b))
Section V:	Perfect genuineness (20 (c) – 26)
Section VI:	Ruling by the Dao of Nature and <i>li</i> (27-29)
Section VII:	The sage’s power of virtue (30-32)
Coda:	The invisibility of ultimate greatness (33)

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

Theme: The source of the center

[1] That which is ordained by Tian is called our nature; to lead by our nature is called the Dao; to cultivate the Dao is called the teaching.

One may not deviate from the Dao for so much as an instant; that from which one may deviate is not the Dao.

Thus the *junzi* is alert and cautious about what he does not see, is fearful about what he does not hear. Nothing is more visible than the obscure, nothing is plainer than the subtle. Hence, the *junzi* is cautious in his solitude.

Pleasure and anger, sorrow and joy: before they emerge they are called centered; emerging by the proper rhythms they are called harmonious. *Centered*: this is the great root of the world. *Harmonious*: this is the ultimate Dao of the world. Reaching centered harmony, heaven and earth take their proper places and the things of the world are nurtured thereby.

Section I: Cleaving to the central mean

[2] Confucius said, “The *junzi* keeps to the mean in action; the small man reverses the mean in action. The mean of the *junzi* is such that he is always exact in his timeliness; the reversal of the mean of the small man is such that he will scruple at nothing.”

[3] The Master said, “The mean in action is the ultimate! Few among the people can long cleave to it.”

[4] The Master said, “That the Dao will not be put into practice, I know it. The wise go beyond it and the ignorant do not reach it. That the Dao will not be made brilliant, I know it. The worthy go beyond it and the unworthy do not reach it.

“No one does not eat, but few can know the taste.”

[5] The Master said, “The Dao is not put into practice.”

[6] The Master said, “How great was the wisdom of Shun! Shun

[Theme]

The initial chapter links human morality to a source, Tian, accessible to human beings through their moral dispositions, or their “nature,” which provides them direct knowledge of the dictates of ethical action, expressed in the Dao.

[1] On the terms “ordained,” “Tian,” “Dao,” and “*junzi*,” see the Glossary.

Attention to the invisible is a theme that reemerges at the close of the text.

The notion of a state of human disposition that exists prior to the activity of life is unusual, and stresses the text’s link between Tian and human beings.

[Section I]

Chapters 2-11 all consist of quotes from Confucius.

[3] *Analects* 6.29: “The Master said, “The mean in action is where virtue reaches its pinnacle. Few among the people long cleave to it.”

[4] Compare *The Great Learning*: “When the mind is not focused one does not . . . know the taste of the food one eats” (Commentary, Stage 4).

loved to ask questions and loved to inquire into teachings near at hand. He put evil in the shadow and raised up good. He grasped both ends, but employed the center in ruling the people. Was this not Shun!”

[7] The Master said, “Men all say, ‘I am wise.’ Drive them into a net or catch them tumbling into a trap; none knows how to evade them!

“Men all say, ‘I am wise.’ But let them choose the mean in action and none can keep to it for a round month!”

[8] The Master said, “Hui was a man who, having chosen to cleave to the mean in action, would clutch any point of goodness tight in his fist, press it to his heart and never lose it.”

[9] The Master said, “One may level all the states of the world, decline high rank and salary, tread upon naked blades, and yet be unable to cleave to the mean in ordinary practice.”

[10] Zilu asked about strength. The Master said, “The strength of the South or the strength of the North? Or do you mean your type of strength? Instructing through leniency, not responding in kind to unjust acts: such is the strength of the South: the *junzi* dwells in this. To sleep in one’s armor, to die unflinchingly: such is the strength of the North: your type of strong man dwells in this.

“The *junzi* acts harmoniously but does not join in vulgarity – the strength of the strong! He stands at the center and does not lean – the strength of the strong! When the state possesses the Dao, he is unchanged from when his way was blocked – the strength of the strong! When the state is without the Dao, he remains unchanged even though it means death – the strength of the strong!”

[11] The Master said, “Those who seek to live in hiding and practice strange arts will still be spoken of in later ages, but I do not do these things. A *junzi* may guide his way with respect to the Dao and fall by the wayside midway, but I cannot cease. A *junzi* may cleave to the mean in action by fleeing from the world, but to live unknown and feel no regret is something only a sage can do.”

Section II: The common basis of the Dao

[12] The Dao of the *junzi* is broad yet hidden. Any husband or wife may partake in knowledge of it, yet reaching to its ultimate nature,

[6] Shun was a legendary ruler of the distant past, often cited as an example of perfect sagehood.

[8] Yan Hui was the disciple Confucius regarded as being of highest moral attainment.

[9] The final clause, from “to cleave,” simply translates the two characters of the text’s title, here used as a verbal phrase (“to ‘center’ in practice.”)

[10] Zilu was Confucius’s senior disciple, known for impetuous valor.

[11] Many early Confucians withdrew from political engagement, but those who chose more fundamental escape from society are generally associated with the ideas of Daoism. This passage pictures the *junzi* as a lesser ideal, in contrast to the sage; see the Glossary.

[Section II] Texts in the Mencian tradition picture the

there is that which even the sage does not know of it. Even an unworthy husband or wife may practice of it, yet reaching to its ultimate nature, there is that of it which even the sage cannot practice. Heaven and earth are great indeed, yet there are still those things which lead men to despair in them.

So it is that when the *junzi* speaks of what is great, there is nothing in the world that can bear it up; yet when he speaks of what is small, there is nothing in the world that can split it. The *Poetry* says:

The kite flies high, striking the heavens;
The fish leap in the abyssal depths.

That is to say that both high and low are fully delved.

The Dao of the *junzi* forges its basis on the common husband and wife; yet reaching to its ultimate nature, it delves into heaven and earth.

[13] The Master said, “The Dao does not depart far from man. If a man creates a *dao* that departs far from others, it cannot be taken as the Dao. The *Poetry* says,

When cutting an axe handle,
The model is never far.

Say you hold an axe handle to cut an axe handle, but glance aside when looking at the handle in your grasp: that would be to treat it as a distant thing. The *junzi* governs humans by means of what is human, and once they are reformed, he stops. Devotion and reciprocity are not far from the Dao. If you would be unwilling to have something done to you, do not do it to others.

“There are four aspects to the Dao of the *junzi*: not one am I able to fulfill. To serve my father with that which I seek from my son – I cannot do it! To serve my ruler with that seek from my subordinates – I cannot do it! To serve my elders with that which I seek from my juniors – I cannot do it! To first practice towards my friends what I seek from them – I cannot do it!

“In the practice of common virtue, in exercising care in normal speech, if you fall short, dare not fail to exert yourself; if you overstep, do not carry on to the end. In speaking, look to your action. In action, look towards your speech. How can a *junzi* fail to be ever alert?”

[14] The *junzi* simply acts according to his position; he does not long for what is outside of it. If he is naturally in a position of wealth

moral senses that guide the greatest sage as present in every person.

[12] The *Book of Poetry* is an early anthology of verse, celebrated as a classic source of sage wisdom by Confucians. (See the Glossary.) *The Doctrine of the Mean* cites from 18 of the *Poetry*'s 305 odes.

[13] Devotion and reciprocity (*zhong shu*) are identified in *Analects* 4.15 as the unifying thread of Confucius's teaching. The Golden Rule maxim given here appears as in *Analects* 15.24 as the formula for reciprocity alone.

and high status, he acts according to the norms of wealth and high status. If he is naturally in a position of poverty and low status, he acts according to the norms of poverty and low status. If he is naturally placed among the nomad tribes, he acts according to the norms of the nomad tribes. If he is naturally placed amidst confusion and trouble, he acts as is appropriate for times of confusion and trouble.

There is no situation in which the *junzi* is not fully self-possessed. When in high position, do not be arrogant towards those below. When in low position, do not prevail upon those above. Make yourself upright and do not seek what you wish in others, then you will encounter no resentments. Above, do not bear resentment towards Tian; below do not blame men. Hence the *junzi* dwells in what is simple, awaiting his destiny. The small man engages in precipitous practices in search of a lucky fortune.

The Master said, “There is in archery that which resembles the *junzi*. Should one miss the target, he seeks for the cause within himself.”

[15] The Dao of the *junzi* may be compared to the saying that a distant journey must begin from nearby, that a climb to great heights must begin from below. The *Poetry* says:

Wife and children in loving concert,
Like zither strings all thrummed.
Brothers all in unison –
In happy harmony and joy.
How sound, your household!
Take joy in wife and offspring.

The Master said, “How these parents have acted in accord!”

[16] The Master said, “How abundant is the virtue of ghosts and spirits! You look at them and do not see, listen to them and do not hear, yet they inhabit affairs without exception. They make all the people of the world fast and don ritual robes in offering up sacrifices. Thrilling, how they seem to hover above, how they seem to be at every side. The *Poetry* says,

The arrival of the spirits
Cannot be anticipated,
Much less may one be remiss.

The plain clarity of the subtle: in just this way perfect genuineness cannot be obscured.

[14] Compare *Analects* 14.35: “The Master said, ‘Above, I do not bear resentment towards Tian; below, I do not blame men. I study what is lowly and so get through to what is exalted. Is it not Tian who recognizes me?’”; see also *Mencius* 2B.13.

On “awaiting destiny,” see *Mencius* 7B.33; on “destiny,” see the Glossary.

[15] The words for “music” and “joy” were, in ancient times, homophones represented by a single written graph.

[16] The common religion of early China was ancestral worship through ritual sacrifice. The spirits of the dead were understood to descend and partake of the food and wine (though they left much unconsumed).

The term “genuineness” is a keyword in the text: see the Glossary.

Section III: Confucius on the sages and filial perfection

[17] The Master said, “Did not Shun fulfill great filiality? His virtue was that of a sage; he was exalted as the Son of Heaven; his wealth was the possession of all within the four seas; his ancestors were feasted by him at the clan shrines; and his descendants protected them.

“Thus it is that great virtue inevitably gains its proper position, inevitably gains its proper stipend, inevitably gains its proper fame, inevitably gains its proper longevity. Thus it is that when Tian gives birth to a thing it treats it with generosity according to its potential. Hence when plants are cultivated they should be nurtured, but when they lean askance, they should be cut down. The *Poetry* says:

The *junzi* of great goodness,
How abundant his fine virtue!
Fit for the people, fit for all others,
He receives his stipend from Tian
Which protects and assists him with the Mandate
Extended from Tian.

Thus great virtue inevitably receives the mandate.”

[18] The Master said, “Utterly without care: would this not characterize King Wen? His father was King Ji; his son was King Wu. His father initiated it; his son continued it.

“King Wu extended the thread from King Tai, King Ji, and King Wen. As soon as he donned the clothes of war the world was his. His brilliant fame in the world was never diminished, he was exalted as the Son of Heaven, his wealth was the possession of all within the four seas, his ancestors were feasted by him at the clan shrines and his descendants protected them. In the end, King Wu received the Mandate.

“The Duke of Zhou perfected the virtue of Wen and Wu. He conferred posthumous royal titles on King Tai and King Ji, and in sacrifices to the former lords he employed the rituals for the Son of Heaven.

“This rule is then extended to the patrician lords, the grandees, and the common people. If the father is a grandee and the son a mere knight, bury the father as a grandee, sacrifice to him as a knight. If the father is a knight and the son a grandee, bury the father as a knight, sacrifice to him as a grandee. The mourning period of a

[Section III]

The three passages in this section discuss exemplary sages, Shun and the revered three founders of the Zhou empire, in terms of the way that their accomplishments as political figures represent the fulfillment of filial responsibility.

[17] On filiality, see the Glossary.

Shun was a legendary sage ruler particularly celebrated in the Mencian tradition for his filial virtue.

[18] The historical exemplars in this passage are all connected with the founding of the Zhou royal lineage as the dynastic ruling house of China, after its conquest of the Shang Dynasty, in 1045 BCE. Kings Tai, Ji, and Wen were all lineal rulers of the pre-conquest Zhou people. King Wen’s son, King Wu (r. 1049-1043) was the first to rule over the empire after the conquest. Dying young, his brother, the Duke of Zhou, ruled as regent for the young heir and completed a new state design.

The new rule, conferring higher status on

year is extended to all grandees. The mourning period of three years applies to the Son of Heaven. But when mourning a parent, there are no distinctions of rank: all are the same.”

[19] The Master said, “King Wu and the Duke of Zhou, were they not of ultimate filiality! The filial son extends well the intentions of his father and carries on his father’s affairs. In spring and autumn he repairs the ancestral shrines, sets out the ancestral vessels, lays out the ancestral robes, and offers up the food of the season.

“The rituals of the ancestral shrines are the means of ordering the lines of descent, alternating the generations of *zhao* and *mu*. The ordering of ritual ranks distinguishes the exalted from the humble. In ordering the ceremonial affairs, distinctions reflect degrees of worthiness. In the rituals of toasting, superiors toast inferiors, extending the rites to the humble. In the closing banquet the white-haired take the places of honor to represent ordering by age.

“To occupy his post, to carry out his rituals, to perform his music, to respect what he honored, to love what he cherished, to treat the dead as one treats the living, to treat the departed as one treats those who remain: this is the ultimate of filiality.

“The suburban rite of sacrifice ministers to the Lord on High; the rituals of the ancestral shrines minister to one’s forbears. He who comprehends the rite of the suburban sacrifice or the meaning of the great spring and autumn sacrifices can rule a state as though it lay in his palm.”

Section IV: On government

[20](a) Duke Ai inquired about governing. The Master said, “The governance of Kings Wen and Wu is laid out in the bound records. When men such as these live, such governance is implemented; after they die it withers away. It is the Dao of humankind to be quick at government as the Dao of earth is to be quick at growing things. Governments grow like rushes.

“The success of a government thus lies in the men it chooses. In selecting men, judge by your own person. Refine your person by means of the Dao. Refine the Dao by means of humanity.

“‘Humanity’ means ‘human’: cleaving to one’s kin is its foremost element. ‘Right’ means ‘appropriate’: honoring the worthy is its foremost element. The degrees that govern cleaving to one’s kin and the ranks that govern honoring the worthy are the things that give birth to ritual.

“Hence the *junzi* cannot fail to refine his person: intending to

the late father of a newly eminent son, is a function of the filiality celebrated here.

[19] Zhou clan organization sorted alternate generations into lineage moieties, called *zhao* and *mu*. The practical function is not well understood.

The suburban rite was an outdoor sacrifice offered to the high god, variously called the Lord on High (a Shang term) and Tian (a Zhou term).

[Section IV]

Chapter 20 is very long and has multiple themes. It is broken into subsections here, the first three comprising a discussion of the Dao of governance.

[20/a] Duke Ai of Lu reigned 494-465 BCE.

Mencian thought prioritizes virtue in people over correctness of rules.

“Humanity” (*ren* 仁) and “human” (*ren* 人) were cognate words. Mencian thought

refine his person, he cannot fail to minister to his parents; intending to minister to his parents, he cannot fail to understand others; intending to understand others, he cannot fail to understand Tian.

“There are five things that extend throughout the world and three means of practicing them: ruler and minister; father and son; husband and wife; elder and younger brother; friend meeting friend. These five form a universal Dao for the world. Wisdom, humanity, valor: these three form the universal virtues for the world. There is but a single means of putting them into practice.

“Some are born understanding it, some study to understand it, some come to understand it only in circumstances of duress. But once they understand it, they are all one. Some practice it through natural ease, some practice it to benefit thereby, some practice it by forcing themselves. But once they succeed by means of it, they are all one.”

(b) The Master said, “Loving learning is close to wisdom. Assiduous practice is close to humanity. Knowing shame is close to valor. He who knows these three things knows how to refine his person. He who knows how to refine his person knows how to rule others. He who knows how to rule others knows how to rule the states of the world.

“There are nine canons for ruling the states of the world: refine your person, honor the worthy, cleave to your kin, respect high ministers, empathize with all officers, treat the common people as your children, attract the skilled craftsmen, treat those distant from you with gentleness, cherish the patrician lords.

“When your person is refined the Dao is established; when you honor the worthy you become free from confusion; when you cleave to your kin, your father, uncles, and brothers will have no complaint against you; when you respect high ministers, you will not be deceived; when you empathize with all your officers, gentlemen will respond with great ritual courtesies; when you treat the common people as your children, the people will be exhort one another; when you attract the skilled craftsmen, you will have a sufficiency of goods; when you treat those distant from you with gentleness, the four quarters will flock to you; when you cherish the patrician lords, then the world will be in awe of you.

“Fasting and purification, the ritual robes, no movement not in accord with ritual: this is the means to purify your person. Ridding yourself of flatterers and keeping sexual attractions at a distance, treating goods as cheap and virtue as dear: this is the means to encourage the worthy. Exalting their positions and providing

stressed that all human beings had an innate disposition to be humane. “Right” (or “righteousness”: *yi* 義) and “appropriate” were near homophones. See the Glossary.

[20/b] This is a formula for unified rule over China. The empire was divided into many states, ruled by “the patrician lords,” after 771 BCE, until reunification, first under the Qin (221 BCE) and then the Han (202 BCE) royal houses. “Cherish the patrician lords” may be a prospective prescript, if this text was a Warring States era product, or an advisory comment to one of the initial Imperial era ruling houses, if the text was composed after the Qin reunification.

generous emoluments, loving and hating as they love and hate: this is the means to encourage your kin. Well staffed offices with adequate responsibilities: this is the means to encourage high ministers. Devotion and trustworthiness, generous emoluments: this is the means to encourage gentlemen. Seasonable labor service and light taxation: this is the means to encourage the common people. Daily supervision and monthly reviews, provisions corresponding to works, this is the means to encourage skilled craftsmen. Welcoming them when they come and sending them off well when they depart, with praise for their accomplishments and compassion for their inabilities: this is the means to be gentle with those distant. Restoring lines of broken succession and reviving abolished states, ordering chaos and supporting those in danger, setting regular times for their visits to court, asking they bring little when they come and sending them off with much: this is the means of cherishing the patrician lords.

“These are all the nine canons for ruling the states of the world. There is but a single means of putting them all into practice.”

(c) In all things, when plans are well laid, stand by them; when they are not, discard them. When words are settled in advance there is no stumbling. When affairs are settled in advance there are no tight straits. When actions are settled in advance there is no flaw. When the Dao is settled in advance it is inexhaustible.

Section V: Perfect genuineness

(d) If those in inferior positions do not gain the trust of their superiors, the people cannot be ruled. There is a Dao to gaining the trust of superiors: if you are not faithful to friends, you will not gain the trust of your superiors. There is a Dao to being faithful to friends: if you are not obedient to your parents, you will not be faithful to friends. There is a Dao to being obedient to your parents: if in reflecting upon yourself you are not perfectly genuine, you will not be obedient to your parents. There is a Dao to perfecting your genuineness: if you are not clear about the good, you will not perfect your genuineness.

(e) Perfect genuineness is the Dao of Tian. Making things perfectly genuine is the Dao of humankind.

One who is perfectly genuine hits the mark without effort, succeeds without forethought. To keep to the center of the Dao at perfect ease is to be a sage.

Under the Qin, all patrician ruling houses lost their privileges, while the Han rulers restored many of them. Confucians in each era favored restoring such houses.

[Section V]

The subject of this section, “genuineness” (see **Glossary**), is often viewed as the core of *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

[20/d] This section is close in language to the major portion of *Mencius* 4A.12 (and see below).

[20/e] Compare this to the latter portion of *Mencius* 4A.12: “Thus genuineness is the Dao of Tian and aspiring to genuineness is the Dao of man. There has never been a man who has been thoroughly

One who makes things perfectly genuine is one who chooses the good and invariably grasps it tight.

(f) Study broadly, inquire probingly, contemplate carefully, distinguish clearly, practice sincerely.

If there remain things unstudied, do not act upon what you have not mastered. If there remain things unprobed, do not act upon what you do not understand. If there remain things un contemplated, do not act upon what you have not grasped. If there remain aspects indistinct, do not act upon what is not clear to you. If there remain aspects unpracticed, do not act upon what you cannot sincerely do.

When others can do one, demand that you do one hundred; when others can do ten, demand that you do one thousand.

He who fully masters this Dao, though ignorant, shall surely become enlightened, though weak, shall surely become strong.

[21] Spontaneously genuine in clarity: it is this that we refer to as our nature. Spontaneously clarifying genuineness: it is this that we refer to as the teaching. If one is perfectly genuine one will have clarity. If one has clarity then one will be perfectly genuine.

[22] Only those in the world who are perfectly genuine to the utmost can exhaust their natures. Those who can exhaust their natures can exhaust others' natures. Those who can exhaust others' natures can exhaust the natures of things. Those who can exhaust the natures of things can participate in the nurturing transformations of Tian. Those who can participate in the nurturing transformations of Tian can form a triad with heaven and earth.

[23] The next best is to master a single aspect. If one can perfect genuineness in one aspect, that genuineness will appear in one's form; appearing in one's form it will become plain; becoming plain it will shine forth; shining forth it will move; moving it will responsively change; responsively changing it will transform things. Only those in the world who are perfectly genuine to the utmost can transform things.

[24] Through the Dao of being perfectly genuine one may possess foreknowledge. When a state is about to flourish, there must be auspicious omens. When a state is about to perish, there must be omens of its demise. Just as these omens become manifest through milfoil and turtle shell, so for such a one they course through his four limbs. When blessings or disasters are about to arrive, if it is good,

genuine yet been unable to move others; there has never been a man without genuineness who has been able to move others."

[21] Clarity and genuineness both relate to morality. Our innate moral senses provide clear ethical intuitions, which teaching can articulate. Perfect genuineness aligns action with those senses effortlessly.

[22] The word "exhaust" here carries the sense of "fulfill to the utmost."

[23] Compare *Mencius* 7A.21: "What the *junzi* takes as his nature are humanity, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom. Rooted in his heart, they bloom richly in his visage, course down his back and through his four limbs – he moves unspoken and is understood."

[24] Milfoil and turtle shell were instruments of traditional divination. The spirits reveal

he will surely know it first; if it is bad, he will surely know it first. Hence one of utmost genuineness resembles the spirits..

[25] Perfect genuineness spontaneously completes things; the Dao spontaneously guides them. Perfect genuineness is the cycle of things ending and beginning anew. Without genuineness there would be no things.

For this reason the *junzi* treats perfect genuineness as of greatest value. Perfect genuineness is not merely the perfection of oneself; it is the means of perfecting all things. Perfecting oneself is humanity. Perfecting things is wisdom. It is the virtue of our nature to conjoin the Dao of inner and outer; hence it is applied with the appropriateness of timeliness.

[26] Hence the utmost of perfect genuineness never ceases. Never ceasing, it endures. Enduring, it is manifest. Manifest, it reaches distant. Reaching distant, it is broad and deep. Broad and deep, it is high and bright. Broad and deep is that which bears all things. High and bright is that which covers all things. Distant and enduring is that which completes things. Broad and deep, complementing earth. High and bright, complementing heaven. Distant and enduring: without end.

One who is like this glimmers though unseen, changes though unmoving, achieves though taking no action.

The Dao of heaven and earth may be thoroughly described in a single phrase: As a thing, it possesses no duality, hence the way it gives birth to things cannot be fathomed. The Dao of heaven and earth is broad, is deep, is high, is bright, is distant, is enduring.

Now, heaven is but the composite of many tiny lights, but when it extends to its endlessness, it suspends the sun, moon, planets, and stars, and the world of things covered by it. Earth is but the composite of many pinches of soil, but when it extends to its breadth and depth, it carries the peaks of Hua and Yue upon it without their being heavy, it bears the rivers and seas upon it without their leaking away, and all the world of things is borne upon it. A mountain is but the composite of many round stones, but as it grows to its breadth and greatness, grasses and trees are born upon it, birds and beasts dwell upon it, and precious jewels arise within it. A river is but the composite of many dipperfuls of water, but as it reaches its unfathomable depths, turtles and lizards, dragons and fish are born within it, and goods are increased by sailing above it. The *Poetry* says,

outcomes through them mysteriously, beyond the ken of people. The insight of the sage into the unfolding of affairs is similarly mysterious to others.

[25] “Things” may refer to objects or affairs in the world: human situations.

[26] The phrase “taking no action” (*wuwei*) is closely associated with Daoist texts, such as the *Dao de jing*. It appears once in the *Analects* (15.5) to denote the action of the perfect ruler, Shun, and it seems both there and here to represent a targeted cooptation of Daoist rhetoric.

Hua and Yue refer to mountains in central China.

The Mandate of Tian,
Oh, how endless!

Surely speaking of the manner in which Tian is heavenly.

Oh, glimmering!
The purity of King Wen's virtue!

Surely meaning that the manner in which King Wen was patterned lay in endless purity.

Section VI: Ruling by the Dao of Nature and ritual

[27] How great is the Dao of the sage! Brimming, it nurtures the things of the world, and towering, reaches the pole of heaven. Enormous in its hugeness!

The ceremonies of ritual number three hundred and the ceremonies of etiquette number three thousand: all await the right man before they can be put into practice. Thus it is said, if one does not extend virtue, the ultimate Dao will not coalesce therein.

Hence the *junzi* honors his virtuous nature and takes learning as his Dao. He extends to the broadest expanse and exhausts the essence of the minute. He reaches to the pole of the high and bright and takes the mean in action as his Dao. He breathes warmth into the old and understands the new, and is deeply sincere in his exaltation of ritual. Thus when he occupies the superior role he is not arrogant, and in the inferior role he is not insubordinate. When the state possesses the Dao, his counsel can raise it up high. When the state does not possess the Dao, his silence can accommodate it. The *Poetry* says:

Both bright and shining,
So guarding his person.

Does it not mean precisely this?

[28] The Master said, "Ignorant yet fond of acting by his own lights; of low station yet fond of relying only on himself; born in this generation and returning to the Dao of old: disaster will surely reach such as these."

If one is not the Son of Heaven, one does not discuss matters of ritual, one does not delineate a system of rules and measures, one does not make assessments of patterns of culture.

In the world today, carts are built with axles of standard length, texts are written in script of standard style, conduct is

Literally, "the manner in which Tian is Tian."

King Wen's posthumous name. *wen* 文, denoted the patterns of civilization expressed through the many forms of *li*: that is, formal ritual and ordinary social ceremony, or etiquette.

[Section VI]
Developing the theme that closes Chapter 26, which linked Tian to the patterns of civilization, the focus now shifts to the linkage of nature and ritual.

[27] The great sage kings of the past were all conceived as initiating new phases of civilization through the innovation of ritual forms that responded to the times.

"He breathes warmth . . ." Cf. *Analects* 2.11, "A person who breathes warmth into the old while understanding the new is worthy to take as a teacher."

[28] The legitimacy to innovate social forms goes together with the license Tian grants when it bestows the Mandate to rule.

performed in roles of standard form.

Though one occupies the office, if one lacks the virtue, one must not presume to innovate ritual and music. Though one possesses the virtue, if one lacks the office, one must also not presume to innovate ritual and music.

The Master said, “I can describe the ritual of the Xia, but the state of Qī is insufficient to confirm them. I have studied the ritual of the Yin, the state of Song preserves them. I have studied the ritual of the Zhou, we now use them. And we follow the Zhou.”

[29] In ruling the world, if one attends to the three weighty matters, one’s errors will be few. If the former rituals, though good, lack confirmation, then lacking confirmation, they will not be trusted, and not being trusted, the people will not follow them. If the latter rituals, though good, are not honored, then in not being honored, they will not be trusted, and in not being trusted, the people will not follow them.

Thus the Dao of the *junzi* is rooted in his own person, confirmed in the common people, assessed against the kings of the Three Eras, all without flaw. When established within heaven and earth it is not rejected. When put to examination by the ghosts and spirits it is not doubted. If one could await its employment by a sage a hundred generations hence, he could apply it and be without confusion. “When put to examination by the ghosts and spirits it is not doubted”: such is its understanding of Tian. “If one could await its employment by a sage a hundred generations hence, he could apply it and be without confusion”: such is its understanding of man.

Thus the motion of a *junzi* can be the Dao of the world for every generation; his actions can be the model of the world for every generation; his words can be the standard of the world for every generation. Those from whom he is distant will gaze towards him; those towards whom he draws near will never grow tired of him. The *Poetry* says,

Over there none hate him,
Over here none weary of him,
Unceasing day and night,
Ever praising him to the end.

Never has there been a *junzi* who has failed to be like this, yet has early earned praise in the world.

Unified measures and script were innovations of the Qin era (221-208 BCE).

Xia, Yin (an alternative name for the Shang), and Zhou are the dynasties of the past (the “Three Eras”); the descendants of the Xia and Shang lived in the states of Qī and Song. The comment here is close to *Analects* 3.9.

[29] It is not entirely clear what the “three weighty matters” are. Zhu Xi took them to be discussing (that is, setting) matters of ritual, delineating a system of rules and measures, and making assessments of patterns of culture, three items mentioned in Chapter 28.

“Early” seems to be used in the sense of “prematurely.”

Section VII: The Tian-like virtue of the sage

[30] Confucius recounted Yao and Shun as ancestral, he emblazoned Wen and Wu as regulating models. Above, they took the seasons of heaven as rule; below, they accorded with the flow of the waters and lands.

This may be compared to heaven and earth, nothing do they fail to bear or to cover. This may be compared to the succession of the four seasons, or the alternating brilliance of the sun and moon, or the things of the world, which are nourished side by side and do not harm one another.

Their Daos were walked side by side and were not contradictory.

The powers of lesser virtue flow as in the current of a river; the powers of great virtue deeply transform. This is the way in which heaven and earth are great.

[31] Only the greatest sage in the world possesses the keen powers of listening and seeing, penetration and wisdom that fit him to approach men as a ruler; the magnanimity, generosity, gentleness, and flexibility that fit him to accommodate others; the vigor, strength, firmness, and resolution that fit him to take a firm grip; the focus, seriousness, balance, and uprightness that fit him to be reverent; the pattern, order, concentration, and incisiveness that fit him to discriminate among different things. As arching vastness, as depthless springs, he brings forth all this according to the times. As *arching vastness*: he is like the heavens. As *depthless springs*: he is like the deep. When he appears, none fail to respect him; when he speaks, none fail to have faith in him; when he acts, none fail to be content.

For this reason, his singing fame overflows the central states and is carried forth even to the tribes of north and south. Wherever boats or carts travel or human labor reaches, whatever heaven covers or earth supports, wherever the sun and moon shine or frosts and dews descend, none of blood and breath do not revere and cleave to him. Hence, he is said to be the match of Tian.

[32] Only the most perfectly genuine man in all the world can thread together all the great constant norms of the world, plant the great roots of the world, and understand the nurturing transformations of heaven and earth. How would he rely on any other than himself? How sincere he is in his humanity! Depthless – like the abyss! Vast – like Tian!

Apart from one who is keen of hearing and sight, sage in wisdom, and fulfilled in Tian-like virtue, who could understand this?

[Section VII]

The chapters of Section VI drew a parallel between the ritual form of the ideal state and Tian; now the parallel is extended to the sage himself.

[30] Yao and Shun are, in Warring States era Confucian legend, civilization's initial kings. Wen and Wu were the kings credited with delineating the institutions of the Zhou state.

Coda: The invisibility of ultimate virtue

[33] The *Poetry* says,

Over the brocaded robes,
A plain dress.

She disliked displaying the patterns. Thus the Dao of the *junzi* is hidden dark and grows brighter every day. The Dao of the small man strikes the eye but fades every day. The Dao of the *junzi* is limpid, and one never tires of it; simple yet patterned, gentle yet ordered.

He who knows that the distant shall be near, he who knows that moral influence has a source, he who knows that subtle shall be manifest – with such a one, you may enter into virtue. The *Poetry* says,

Though they be submerged in concealment,
They are yet so plain to see.

Hence the *junzi* examines himself and is without flaw, with no evil in his will. The manner in which the *junzi* surpasses others lies in what others cannot see. The *Poetry* says,

Looking into your chambers,
Let there be nothing shameful even in the inmost corner.

Hence men respect the *junzi* though he does not act, have faith in him though he has not spoken. The *Poetry* says,

Approaching without words,
And so without strife.

Hence the *junzi* persuades the people without issuing rewards; is without anger, yet the people are awed as if by an axe. The *Poetry* says,

Brilliant his virtue!
The many lords emulate him.

Hence the *junzi* is profoundly reverent, and the world is at peace.
The *Poetry* says,

I cherish bright virtue,
With no great sound or appearance.

The Master said, “Sound and appearance having nothing to do with transforming the people.” The *Poetry* says,

Virtue light as a hair.

[Coda]

The verses of the *Book of Poetry* were intoned with musical accompaniment, and this final chapter may be understood as a semi-musical conclusion of chant and comment, singing the praises of the sage as a force of virtue beyond the power of sound or sight to grasp.

Yet there remain things comparable to a hair.

The revolutions of heaven above
Possess neither sound nor smell.

That is the ultimate!

GLOSSARY

Book of Documents (Shu 書). The *Book of Documents (Shang shu 尚書)* one of the “Five Confucian Classics,” along with the *Book of Poetry* (below). The *Documents* includes speeches and narratives, all in archaic, difficult language, chronologically arranged, from tales of the legendary kings Yao and Shun through the Zhou era, with one final text, the “Oath of Qin,” purporting to date from the Spring and Autumn era (771-453 BCE). A small number of these chapters seem to be records of statements by early Zhou leaders that were recorded as texts not long after the time of their purported authorship, but most of the chapters seem to be much later in date, probably from the Warring States or shortly after.

Book of Poetry (Shi 詩). The *Book of Poetry*, is an anthology of 305 poems dating from approximately the time of the Zhou conquest in the eleventh century to the seventh century BCE. Unlike the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Poetry* was essentially complete by the late Spring and Autumn era, the time of Confucius. Although the poems are varied in authorship and nature, the anthology was understood to have been compiled by sagely men, including Confucius, who was believed to have ordered the poems. The odes of the *Book of Poetry* were part of the education of young elite men, who memorized them and learned how to chant them (they were all as much songs as poems), and who were taught that they even the lighthearted love songs among them were pregnant with meaning that led the sage anthologists to include them.

Dao (dao 道). The term “Dao” (often translated as “Way”) denotes the ideal moral path for individuals, rulers, and states to follow in order to realize a perfection of character and life that is destined for humankind, if only humankind summons the will to follow its natural calling. The basic meaning of the term *dao* is “path,” and it often is used metaphorically in this sense: the Dao can be “walked” or “traveled,” just as a path can be. However, there is also a secondary meaning of “method” or “formula.” Many different schools of Warring States era thought called their central teachings “the Dao,” most famously the school of Daoism, which used the term in a cosmological sense so distinctive that it was later applied as the name of the school. The Confucian Dao focuses on various forms of ethical conduct on the personal, social, and political levels, associated with sage rulers of the past.

Destiny. See *Ming* 命.

Filiality (*xiao* 孝). Filiality pertains specifically to the relationship that a child (for early Confucians, a son) bears towards his parents, usually conceived in terms of the father. Mencian theory lays great emphasis on innate moral dispositions, and in the *Mencius* it is explicitly presumed that every person possesses at birth an unqualified disposition to love his or her parents. The preservation and extension of this love are the building blocks of adult morality. Filiality was a pervasive value in early Chinese folk ethics. Confucianism was conservative in promoting it as a cardinal virtue, but radical in both the degree of stress placed on it and the ethical generalizations that it drew from filiality. Both *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* view adult morality as unthinkable without filiality. *The Great Learning* emphasizes the necessity to cultivate and expand filial dispositions so as to master familial dynamics and

become capable of social leadership. *The Doctrine of the Mean* analyzes the most exalted political achievements as expressions of filial devotion.

Human Nature (*xing* 性). The phrase “human nature” renders the single word *xing*. *Xing* is actually the nature of any living thing, and sometimes texts preface the term with *ren* 人 (person) to clarify that it is human, rather than, say, an animal’s nature that is under discussion, though this is never at issue in *The Great Learning* or *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Both those texts adopt the Mencian view that human nature is innately endowed with moral dispositions, and is thus the seat of goodness. The schools of Mencius and Xunzi debated this point – the *Xunzi* includes a chapter arguing that human nature is bad, defining *xing* in terms of our innate self-regarding appetites – but *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* do not argue the issues: the Mencian position is axiomatic for both texts.

Humanity (*ren* 仁). The term “humanity” or *ren*, was a Confucian keyword, the meaning of which was much affected by context. Its employment as an ethical term may well have been an innovation of Confucius. In the *Analects*, *ren* is treated as a mysterious term; disciples repeatedly ask Confucius what he means by it, and in most cases in that text *ren* seems to denote a comprehensive moral disposition, embracing all others. In other Confucian texts, however, the meaning of the terms seems more restricted, corresponding to a disposition towards care and concern for others, rooted strongly in family love, but extending towards others in varying degrees of strength, which may be increased through a regimen of ethical self-cultivation. It is often discussed as one in a set of cardinal virtues, among which righteousness (*yi*; discussed below) is its most regular partner.

Genuineness (*cheng* 誠). A difficult term to translate, *cheng* is, perhaps, the central concept of the *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and some scholars believe that it is equally the pivot of the *The Great Learning* (this was the position of the Ming Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming). Its basic meaning is probably best described in *The Great Learning*, II.B.3: “It describes a process of perfect inner correspondence.” The correspondence is between the innate moral dispositions, our awareness of them, our judgments about the thing or affair that has triggered that disposition, and our expression of all these in action. The person who proceeds from genuineness responds to the world with feelings that stem directly from a spontaneous moral sense of liking or disliking, approving or disapproving, and that response takes the form of action appropriate to affect the world in a way that will effectively express that response. The life of the perfectly genuine person is an ongoing iterative flow of such spontaneous responses and actions, naturally good and naturally perfect in the same manner as the natural creative flow of cosmic creation and action. This notion, embryonic in the *Mencius* and *The Great Learning*, but expressed more clearly in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, became a foundational notion in Neo-Confucian thought from the eleventh century CE onwards, and accounts for the Neo-Confucian promotion of *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* as core Confucian canon. For more on specific issues associated with the translation of the term *cheng*, see the headnote to *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Section V.

***Junzi* 君子.** The term *junzi* translates literally as “ruler’s son,” or “prince.” It originally referred to members of the hereditary nobility, but came to be associated more with their superior manners than with their birth. In this sense, the term is parallel to “gentleman,” and it commonly

translated in that way. However, although *junzi* sometimes simply refers to an ordinary ruler or a member of the elite class, it more often denotes an ideal of human excellence that was at the center of Confucian ethics. Some texts employ the term as part of a lexical set denoting ascending levels of moral perfection, with *junzi* denoting a relatively modest attainment. Other texts allow the term to denote much higher levels of ethical perfection, and in *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it can serve as an equivalent for the term “sage,” which refers to the most celebrated type of moral exemplar. Because the term is used with such a broad range of applications, some translators render it with relatively unfamiliar phrasing, such as, “noble person,” or “authoritative person.” It is left in transcription here to indicate its relatively indeterminate force.

Li 禮 (ritual, rites). The term *li*, poorly rendered as “ritual,” denotes a vast formal and informal code of stereotyped conduct that ranges from ordinary etiquette to intricately choreographed ceremonies of court and religion. The reason that “ritual” is a poor translation is that in the modern West, ritual sometimes signifies triviality – “mere ritual” – whereas for most of the educated elite in ancient China, *li* was an essential component of good human conduct. What unites the various categories of *li* is the common feature of form: action according to *li* exhibits respect for others and for oneself by marking it with the syntax of civilization; those who act without *li* are behaving like the non-Chinese barbarian tribes – speaking a foreign language of interpersonal conduct that has not yet been touched, in the Chinese view, by the influence of ethics and virtue. Confucians were invested in *li* beyond ethical commitment. They were trained as masters of *li*, arbiters of ordinary etiquette and expert directors of formal ceremonial events. Many ordinary Confucians made their way in the world by serving as masters of court and religious ceremony, or as experts in family rituals, such as coming of age rites, community feasts, marriages, and funerals, for which they were available for hire. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Confucian thought, *li* is viewed as the principal means of self-cultivation and the perfection of ethical sensibilities and skills. *The Doctrine of the Mean* integrates *li* into its portrait of the ideal society designed through sage wisdom. *The Great Learning*, however, never uses the term *li*, an unusual feature in a Confucian text, even more surprising since the text was originally anthologized in the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites).

Ming 命 (mandate; ordained; fate; destiny). One of the more complex concepts in Confucianism, *ming* is translated flexibly here because of its many different shades of meaning. Readers of the Chinese text, however, would always react with attention to any of these uses because of its important philosophical force. The most famous use of this term is in the phrase “Tian *ming*” 天命, or “The Mandate of Heaven,” which, according to Zhou era belief, was a license to occupy the throne of universal ruler that was bestowed by divine fiat. Although the term *ming* is used in that sense in *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, the term “Tian *ming*” also refers to that which Tian ordains as our moral endowment (“That which is ordained by Tian is called our nature,” *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 1; “Regard this bright mandate of Tian,” *The Great Learning*, II.A.2, read as a comment on “Making bright virtue brilliant”). Additionally, although the term *ming* may refer to outcomes that cannot be influenced by effort, or “fate,” and we see that usage in *The Great Learning* (“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,” II.B.7-8), it also may refer to our “destiny,” a role intended by Tian that requires our effort to

fulfill when the opportunity to do so presents itself (“Hence the *junzi* dwells in what is simple, awaiting his destiny,” *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 14).

Ordained. See *Ming* 命.

Perfect Genuineness. See **Genuineness.**

Right; Righteousness (*yi* 義). Mencian theory holds that among the dispositions human beings innately possess, there is a sense of right, or *yi*, by which Mencius means righteousness: a sense of moral right and wrong. Even though Xunzi disputes Mencius’s portrait of human nature, he claims that humans do, indeed, possess a sense of *yi*, but he does not mean by this a moral sense; he means a sense of appropriateness, or fit, as when we may say that a painting crookedly hung is not “right.” Although the term *yi* does not play a major role in *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* we do find in the latter text that it is paired with “humanity,” glossed by the term “appropriate,” and, in Mencian fashion, linked to a moral framework: specifically, honoring the worthy (Chapter 20 (a)).

Ritual. See *Li* 禮.

Sage (*sheng* 聖). The term “sage” denotes a supreme level of both moral perfection and wisdom in a hierarchy of terms that includes *junzi* 君子. When applied to individuals, “sage” generally denotes an exemplary person of historical importance. Yao and Shun, the great legendary founders of civilization, according to Confucian myth, are models of sages: they pair moral perfection with the highest levels of political accomplishment.

Aligning affairs (*ge wu* 格物). This phrase, which is identified as the starting point of self-cultivation in *The Great Learning*, is perhaps the most contested in the text. Just at the point where we would expect the phrase to be explained, there is a textual gap, and it is unclear whether part of the explanation remains or it is entirely missing. The Chinese phrase is not itself clear: the first of the two characters (*ge*) may mean “to come,” “to go to, or reach,” or “to align or rectify,” while the second (*wu*) may mean “thing” is the sense of an object, or an affair, or both. The standard English rendering, popularized in Wing-tsit Chan’s translation and his studies of Neo-Confucian thought, is “investigating things,” reflecting the interpretation of Zhu Xi. Zhu understood the literal meaning of to be, “to reach things and affairs,” which captured the idea of immersing oneself in the world of objects and events – or even texts – in order to grasp the normative order of the cosmos: “The phrase means to exhaustively arrive at the principles of matters, missing no point as one reaches the ultimate.” The Ming Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming, who disputed many aspects of Zhu’s editing and interpretation of *The Great Learning*, glossed the phrase very differently, believing that it denoted a dynamic of coming to understand the world through the effort to perfect it, reflecting his own philosophical maxim, “knowledge and action are one.” The interpretation in this translation is based on identifying the fragmentary comment in II.B.1-2 as pertaining to the phrase *ge wu*, which leads to a reading that is compatible with Wang’s approach: it is through the effort to align things in the world with our spontaneous moral will that we perfect our grasp of both the world and our will.

Tian 天. Tian was the high deity of Zhou state religion. Originally, Tian was solely worshipped by the small ethnic group of the Zhou, who, prior to the conquest of the Shang in 1045, were located on the outskirts of the region united, to greater and lesser degrees, but the Shang royal house. The state religion of the Shang included a pantheon, at the apex of which resided a different high deity, Di 帝. After the conquest, texts suggest that the Zhou chose to identify Tian and Di, treating these as alternative names for a single deity. During the Warring States period, certain texts, both Confucian and otherwise, include instances where Tian seems stripped of any character of conscious agency, and in those cases, it more closely corresponds to Western concepts of “Nature,” in the sense of a cosmic order. The *Xunzi* sometimes uses the term in this explicit sense, and this accords well with some instances in *Doctrine of the Mean*. The word *tian* means “sky,” and the word is often translated “Heaven.” It is left untranslated here except in cases where it seems to carry the meaning of “sky,” as in the phrase *tiandi* 天地: “heaven and earth,” which, as a compound term, is itself close to the sense of “Nature.”