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Studies

Li Revisited and Other Explorations

Allen Wittenborn

In understanding the Chinese mind a good deal of water has passed under the bridge since the appearance in 1952 of Derk Bodde's translation of A History of Chinese Philosophy by Fung Yu-lan. We owe a debt to such pathfinders as Wing-tsit Chan, Joseph Needham, Carsun Chang, A.C. Graham, E.R. Hughes, and Theodore de Bary, to name only a few, all of whom at one time or another have dealt with the great intellectual movements of the Sung and Ming, trying to come to grips with such elusive concepts posited by the "new" Confucians as tao, t'ai-chi, jen, li, ch'i, and hsin. Let no one doubt that we have gained important ground in dealing with these perplexing ideas and in demonstrating that Chinese thinking, like all modes of thought, is ultimately comprehensible. We are also very learned about the ways of occidental thinkers. Yet who would claim that no problems remain and that our understanding here is perfect and certain? Indeed, the truism that the more we know the less we understand is only too apropos. The problems we face in Chinese philosophy may not be so numerous as they once were, but they are at least as profound and beguiling*.

In light of this never-ending search for answers, I wish to address the concept of li,¹ which I call "constitutive principle," as it was used by

*Editor's note: Dr. Wittenborn is putting this discussion before us (he tells me) not so much out of the conviction of blazing new paths but of the need to pursue and reconsider several issues of critical importance whose full implications are too often left unexplored.

1. Li, as principle, in one aspect, approached the comprehensiveness of the Great Ultimate (t'ai-chi) and tao as a sort of universal truth of universal order. But unlike these other two concepts, li is also the primary individualizing agent in specific things. Wing-tsit Chan's excellent account of "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of Li as Principle," Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies, new series 2 (February, 1964), 123-148, traces its development and emphasizes that both Mo-tzu and Chuang-tzu had developed the concept to a higher level than did either Confucius or Mencius, respectively. Still, it was the Neo-Taoists (such as Wang Pi, 226-249) and the Buddhists (especially Tao-sheng, d.434 A.D., and Fa-tsang, 643-712; and the Hua-yen and Ch'an schools) who carried it to its greatest extent as "principle."

According to Chan, the basic and earliest meaning of li was to put in order, the secondary notion of order or pattern developed from this, and eventually culminated in the third extended meaning of principle, as used especially by the Buddhists and Neo-Confucians. It is interesting to note that Chan does not mention any association of li with polishing jade (chih-li) in this central development, which is a commonly accepted

the Chu Hsi school. For the sake of precluding further argument on this score, I will refer to li in this paper simply as "principle," a choice of term which, while not completely adequate, is nevertheless commonly accepted in lieu of anything better. At the risk of advertising my own shortcomings in comprehending this concept, I will consider six problem areas that, I feel, are still much in need of study and explication and that, until they are fully clarified, will continue to plague us in our effort to achieve complete comprehension of Neo-Confucian thought.

1. How do we, or how can we, know li?

This is probably the single most difficult problem area concerning the concept of principle, although it is one which is seldom recognized and even less discussed.

The Chu Hsi school maintained that for everything there must first be li² which then interacts with some form of ch'i to bring into existence the thing in question to which it accords in its makeup and function. Thus, the li of a ship is that it is of a certain design which best enables it to float on water, and the li of a cart provides for wheels so that it can better move on land. Li is, moreover, necessary. Without it nothing can come into existence, and whatever we perceive is indispensably imbued with its li. These two criteria of priority and necessity, however, open up an obvious dilemma, for li is

basic meaning of li. However, if one consults any authoritative source (in my case the Chung-wen ta tz'u-tien and the Dai Kanwa jiten), even though the first meaning listed is that of polished jade, this meaning is that given by the Shuo-wen chieh-tzu, a Han work of about 100 A.D. Furthermore, the Shuo-wen chieh-tzu cites as its earliest sources the Chan-kuo ts'e and the Han Fei-tzu, both comparatively late works, at least in relation to the development of the Chinese characters. On the other hand, an earlier instance is to be found in the Book of History ("Chou-kuan,"³) in the sense of "to correct or regulate" (glossed as cheng). But very possibly the earliest use of li is the one instance that it appears in the Classic of Poetry (Ode 210) where it refers to the borders or boundary lines marking off areas in a field. Here it appears in conjunction with chiang and is explained as "to divide into lots (or parcels of land)" (fen-ti). Therefore, I suggest that it is only because of the inordinate influence of the Shuo-wen chieh-tzu that li has come to be explained as originally the veins in jade, whereas, in fact, it originally meant boundary lines of fields and croplands, although very possibly lines which ran naturally with the lie of the land rather than perfectly parallel and perpendicular man-made furrows or embankments. If this is the case, then li as the veins or striations in uncut pieces of jade is actually a derived meaning, taken from the earlier use as symbols of the patterns in fields or other topographical terrain, rather than a basic meaning.

2. Chu Hsi, Hsü chin-ssu-lu (Supplement to Reflections on Things at Hand), comp. by Chang Po-hsing, Taipei: Shih-chieh shu-chü, 1974, 27. Hereafter cites as HCSL. Also see Chu Hsi, Ta-hsüeh chang-chü (Commentary on the Great Learning), in the Ssu-shu chü-chu (Collected Commentaries on the Four Books), Taipei: Shih-chieh shu-chü, 1971, 3.

imperceptible and inexperiential; we can know li only by deducing it from observing its form in ch'i. But how do we really know li until we completely know ch'i? In order to assert that there is a certain li of something and that it operates in some particular fashion, we must first understand its ch'i manifestation or actualization.

Suppose for a moment that this manifestation and/or its function, or at least our understanding of it, changes. For instance, the cart may actually be able to float on water and to function just as well there as it does on land, just as well as does the boat which supposedly has a different li.³ Since the li of a thing is assuredly not open to change, then we can only conclude that we were mistaken in the first place. This leads us inevitably into the quagmire of Cartesian doubt, for if we were mistaken in the beginning we can never be completely certain that we will not be mistaken again. The logical conclusion is that we can always be mistaken, and thus it will be impossible for us to be perfectly correct all the time about our understanding of a thing and its li; or if we are correct we can never be certain that we are. How, then, can we ever be sure of our belief that there are li at all? Just as we may always be in error about the makeup or function of some ch'i, so we may also be in error about its li, and so we may be in error about the whole concept of li.

The only way we know that there are any li at all is because we can perceive their ch'i manifestations. But in that case, how do we account for error? If we can be wrong about one thing, and there is no doubt that we can be, then we can be wrong about anything. The common answer to this conundrum is that our error stems basically from some cloudiness in our ch'i, in the ch'i which forms our body and mind, the same ch'i which also accounts for bad and evil in the world. But since this is the manner in which li is made manifest, then our knowledge of li is always uncertain. That is, our knowledge of li is directly and necessarily dependent upon the very medium which is responsible for error and mistaken thinking. Thus, the notion of ch'i takes on the role of Descartes' "evil demon": how can we ever know that we are not being tricked in absolutely everything that we think? How can we ever be certain that our understanding of ch'i is correct? Perhaps ch'i, all ch'i, is always cloudy, perhaps not. But how do we know?

Descartes extricated himself from the quagmire by standing on a firm bed of an indubitable thought: the fact that he was thinking at all, even though all his other thoughts may have been fallible, was completely certain. And

3. It has been suggested, only partly in jest, that it then becomes a square boat with wheels.

from this one certain and infallible fact, Descartes built his entire epistemological edifice.

But the Chinese did not develop such a theory of knowledge. Following the trail of Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi, the most rock-solid assumption or presupposition was the very li which has been drawn into question. In their eyes there could be no doubt that such principles, or ideas, existed, and that these were precisely as they perceived them to be. In doing this, they came very close to the "common sense" philosophy of G.E. Moore, who believed that the "good" is directly apprehensible, and Moore became known as an "ethical intuitionist," a moniker that might very well fit Chu Hsi.⁴ The accuracy of this is problematical, but the point is that both philosophers said that there is Good (or the goodness of li) because one can use one's own common sense to see that there is and no amount of speculation can change that.

In short, it appears that Chu Hsi, or anyone who held a similar view of principle, bluntly presupposed the concept of principle to be self-evident, just as a geometer takes it for granted that two parallel lines will never intersect or as a logician assumes that something cannot be both A and not-A yet, without providing any proof or verification. We are asked to accept as axiomatic something that simply is not.

2. Is li prior to ch'i and, if so, what does this mean?

Chu Hsi and most other Neo-Confucians consistently talked about the necessary relationship between li and ch'i, that neither can exist without the other, and that we cannot even really conceive of their being separate. Nevertheless, we are faced with the moment when Chu was pushed hard by his students and finally forced to admit that li is prior to ch'i, although he immediately tempered this admission by reverting back to his stock treatment that they can not at all do without each other.⁵ This response is only superficially satisfying, for when we reflect on the significance of his statement, doubts begin to arise. If we consider for a moment any physical object, such as a child's building block, we may note that its appearance derives from its shape and its color. Neither of these properties can be physically isolated, nor can we even imagine such a case in which it would be. This is likely close to what Chu had in mind when he so strenuously argued for the mutual dependence of li

4. See, however, the interesting article by Huang Siu-chi, "Chu Hsi's Ethical Rationalism," Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 5:2, (June, 1978), 175-193.

5. Chu Hsi, Chu-tzu yü-lei (Cassified Conversations of Master Chu), comp. by Li Ching-te, 1473 ed., 8 vols., Taipei: Cheng-chung shu-chü, 1962, 1:4. Hereafter cited as CTYL.

and ch'i. However, as noted above, he also states, albeit hesitantly, that li is, after all, prior to ch'i. What can we make of this?

Li is not, as Chu Hsi explicitly remarked, "first" in the temporal or the existential sense. Hence, he must have had in mind that li is logically or transcendently prior to ch'i. If this is his meaning, (what else may he have intended?), then it appears that li determines the pattern or configuration or constitution of things: "What we call principle is the reason why things are what they are, and the standard of what things should be."⁶ Of course, li possesses no being or nature of itself; in fact, li cannot be said to be a "thing." But li does have the capability of causing something else to achieve being, namely ch'i, and this is simply another way of saying that li has the potential of determination. Li is the potential organizing pattern of all there is.⁷

We must be careful, though, for it is not strictly valid to say that li itself is potential. For when we normally speak of something as being potential we mean that it does not now manifest or evince any sign of existence or activity, but that it has the capability of doing so at some later time. By emphasizing the word "now" we are forced to speak of li in a temporal sense. But most observers correctly argue that li transcends both space and time, so that we cannot properly speak of li in terms of "now" or "later" or "before and after." Because we are bound by time, because we as human beings are limited by and necessarily exist in time and are subject to its limitations, in order to speak about li at all we are forced to impose the constraints of time upon it.⁸ Yet, it is probably more correct to speak of li as the potential state of ch'i before (in the logical sense) ch'i is "actualized," or comes into being.

One is also tempted to understand this aspect of li as cause. If "something" is a potentially organizing pattern of what is eventually to take place or to be actualized, this appears to "cause" that final coming-to-be. However, there are a number of problems associated with the concept of causation which has evolved through a number of accepted meanings (including Aristotle's four). The matter is still in fact far from decided. Partly because of the rise of

6. Quoted in Fan Shou-k'ang, Chu-tzu chi ch'i che-hsüeh (Chu Hsi and His Philosophy), Taipei: Taiwan k'ai-ming shu-tien, 1964, 81.

7. HCSL, 26.

8. It is interesting to speculate that this may have been what Lao-tzu was trying to say when he argued that we cannot speak of tao (in the opening chapter of the Tao-te-ching). Just because we are bound by time while tao transcends time and it is both illogical and impossible to confuse the two categories, so we cannot even discuss it.

physical science and the accompanying demise of Aristotelian modes of thought, the concept of cause now generally employed is what Aristotle called an "efficient" cause and what John Stuart Mill referred to as a "physical" cause -- namely, a cause by which some change is wrought.⁹ Admittedly, this Western logician's view does not appear particularly appropriate to the case of li and ch'i, unless we are willing to think of li as bringing about a change in ch'i in the sense of creating it ex nihilo, and this clearly will not do. Having raised the issue, I shall leave it to further inquiry in hopes that some reader may be able to offer a definitive explanation.

3. Is li subjective or objective?

The grounds for raising this question are provided by the dual statements that on the one hand, li, in combining with ch'i to form a thing, necessarily inheres in the ch'i of that thing, while on the other hand, li is (or are) contained within the mind. But how can this possibly be the case? How can li both exist in something in the real world and, at the same time, inhere in a human mind? (To speak of the "existence" of li may be begging the question, but I do so purely for convenience, since it is in no way certain that such a property can be attributed to what appears in many ways to be simply a mental concept.) Are they different li? Or different kinds of li? None of the sages, to my knowledge, has directly addressed this issue, and so we are left to fend for ourselves.

In my unpublished manuscript, "Mind: The Psychological Dimension of Chu Hsi's Philosophy," I have attempted to deal with this problem. As I analyze it there, the mind is the "receptacle" of li. That is, the mind embraces or possesses (pao) all principles, and all principles are complete (chü) within the mind¹⁰ and therein known as the Great Ultimate (t'ai-chi).¹¹ Chu at one point

9. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. by Paul Edwards, 8 vols., New York: MacMillan/Free Press, 1967, 2:56-57.

10. Chu Hsi, Chu-tzu ch'üan-shu (Complete Works of Master Chu), ed. by Li Kuang-ti, Kuang-hsüeh ts'ung-k'an ed., 2 vols., Taipei: Kuang-hsüeh she-yin shu-kuan, 1977, 2/4b, 44/2b. Hereafter cited as CTCS.

11. T'ai-chi, the Great Ultimate (or Supreme Ultimate), is the primary source of all reality and the final cause which controls the alternating forces of yin and yang and, through them, the operations of the five agents (wu-hsing). Specifically for Chu Hsi, t'ai-chi is the sum total of all principles as well as Principle in its oneness, which means that there is only one t'ai-chi, yet each individual thing has t'ai-chi complete in it; that is, every thing is a complete system in itself. However, at times, Chu says that the Great Ultimate is not itself something but is simply the name for all that there is.

even states that the mind and principle are one.¹² (This should not be taken to mean that Chu is equating mind with principle and is therefore in agreement with Lu Hsiang-shan's assertion that the mind is the universe. For Chu Hsi goes on to qualify his statement by explaining that principle is not next to -- literally, not in front of, pu tsai ch'ien-mien -- but lies within the mind -- tsai hsing-chih-chung.) Liu Shu-hsien reminds us that "the mind and principle do have a very close relation between them, even though it falls short of identity. Chu Hsi maintains that the mind embraces all principles." Chu goes on to say that "without the mind, principle would have nothing in which to inhere."¹³ And so, concludes Liu, "mind and principle are two, but the relation between them is that of inherence. It is in this sense that from the very start they pervade each other."¹⁴

We may also say that mind has a relation to principle similar to that of ch'i. The diffusion of principle (from its quality as t'ai-chi) permeates ch'i just as it permeates the mind; only its diffusion and permeation of ch'i is an occurrence in nature, while its diffusion and permeation of mind occurs within a mental or psychological realm. Just as in cosmology li cannot be separated from and is dependent on ch'i, so in human affairs it cannot be separated from and is dependent on the mind. Therefore, both ch'i and mind (itself a spiritual or rarified form of ch'i) are what give meaning to li in that they act as agents for the expression of principle.

This view may or may not be acceptable. But the problem remains: is li subjective -- inherent in the mind --, or is it objective -- inherent in a thing? Or is this the wrong question to ask, like "climbing a tree in search of a fish"? By falling back on the notion of t'ai-chi as the ultimate source of li regardless of li's state or status, we might very well wash our hands entirely of having nearly created a problem where none existed. In other words, t'ai-chi could be taken as the responsible factor for all that there is by virtue of its generating yin and yang and the "five agents" (wu hsing), so that li are the transcendental results of this process wherever they may be. But the fact remains that li are still accountable as both physical phenomena and as psychological concepts. In Western modes of thinking, at least, this cannot be possible. We must either assure ourselves that such a situation can take place in Chinese thought processes, or else explain in some other fashion why they cannot. The question remains.

12. CTCS, *ibid.*

13. CTCS, 44/2a.

14. "The Function of the Mind in Chu Hsi's Philosophy," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 5:2 (June, 1978), 197.

4. Is li a form of what things are or a standard of what they should be?

This problem is related to the previous one, for regardless of the validity of the subjective/objective argument, li is viewed in two different relationships to the things for which li is responsible. Thus, li is the form or the constitution by which a thing necessarily is what it is, or what it is perceived to be, and it is also the standard of what a thing should be. Furthermore, the form by which a thing necessarily is what it is belongs to the sphere of phenomena, while the standard of what a thing should be belongs to the sphere of ideas, or mental concepts. However, Chu Hsi and his followers failed to distinguish between these two, between a law of necessity (a formal or constitutive law) and a deontic, or morally obligatory law (a standard).

Chu subsumed (1) the law of what ought to be in the sphere of ideas under (2) the law of what necessarily is in the sphere of phenomena, and then considered the existential world of necessity as the ideal world of moral obligation. That is to say, the idealistic law of what should be (as the perfection of goodness, beauty, etc.) came to be based on the phenomenal nature of what things necessarily are, with the result that all things must realize their greatest potential.¹⁵ However, when a Confucian extols the standard social relationships, he is prescribing what ought to be the case (not describing what is the case): the benevolence of a lord, the loyalty of a vassal, the compassion of a father, the filial piety of a son are all indications of what ought to be the behavior of these persons. But it is obvious that not all men measure up to what they ought to be, that they do not realize their greatest potential, which has obvious implications for the realization of the fundamental relationships. The problem arises because Chu Hsi, and most other Chinese philosophers, blurred the distinction between the descriptive "is" and the prescriptive "ought" to near equality.

In spite of the occasional emphasis on li as a principle of being, li is primarily a moral principle; li stands for the moral ideals or standards according to which we must perform if we are to realize the full range of being a true (or whole) person. But if we do not measure up to li as a moral standard, which clearly some of us at least some of the time do not, how can we reconcile this fact with the notion that a person must realize their greatest potential? We may look to Mencius for a possible solution.

Mencius was once asked why it is that some men follow what is great in themselves while others follow what is little in themselves. Mencius replied to the effect that even though the mind of all men has the (potential) faculty

15. Cf. Fan, Chu-tzu chi ch'i che-hsüeh, 81-82.

for thinking, not all men use it, i.e., some men do not think.¹⁶ Thus, Mencius saw that the mind is the source from which knowledge comes. He believed that there is a universal agreement, or standard, according to which all men may aspire if they will but make the effort. It is simply that the sage apprehends this standard, or principle, whereas others do not make the intellectual effort to do so. In other words, we can realize our potential only if we exercise our rational faculties in coming to understand just what that potential is. Given that we know our potential for being a person, unless we realize this potential then we cannot be said to be a true person, a sage.¹⁷

Another way of seeing the ambiguity between the law of what is and the standard of what ought to be is to understand that li was used as the rationality of the mind and the rationality (and hence the "knowability") of the order of nature. The word "reason" in English has the same ambiguity: we can speak of the reason for something as its cause, and the reason for something in that we can know it as a rational ground or motive. To the Neo-Confucians reason as a cause in human terms is actually our moral virtue; that is, the moral ideal of man gives purpose to man. The highest of these moral virtues is jen (humanheartedness), and the principle of jen is innate in the mind. Everyone, as Mencius so poignantly illustrated,¹⁸ will react in the same way under the same conditions because of this a priori moral law. Furthermore, it is the essence of our moral life to know this principle of jen which is absolute and universal. Once we know these moral principles, it is incumbent upon us, that is, it lies in our human nature, necessarily to act in accordance with them; otherwise how can we be said to be or act as a person?

Hence, it appears that li stands as both form and standard, whether actually or semantically is uncertain. Perhaps the Chinese system of logic is flexible enough to accommodate both these definitions of form and standard. However, I feel bound to indicate two reasons why in Western philosophy it would be unacceptable, to make the transition from "is" to "ought." There is

16. See the Mencius, 6A; 15.

17. Implicit in this whole argument is the notion of the "rectification of names" (cheng-ming), i.e., that there is a precise and unequivocal definition of actions and relations. The doctrine was specifically espoused by Confucius (Analects, 13.3) and especially by Hsün-tzu (Chapter 22 of his Collected Works), but strongly alluded to by Mencius (1B:8, 4A; 2.4, 5B:9, etc.), employed in the Spring and Autumn Annals by Tung Chung-shu (cf. Fung Yu-lan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, 2:87), although it was possibly the Legalists who made the greatest explicit use of the idea (see Fung, 1:323-325). For it is only by actualizing through ch'i the potential of li that li and ch'i come to be brought in accordance with each other (i.e., rectified).

18. Mencius, 2A:6.

first the principle that no "ought" conclusion can be derived from exclusively "is" premises, i.e., that purely factual descriptive premises cannot logically justify any moral conclusion. The reason for this contention is that nothing can appear in the conclusion of a valid deductive inference which is not, from the very meaning, implicit in the conjunction of the premises. Because this view infers an "ought" conclusion from premises in which "ought" or some word definitionally related to it does not appear, the inference is invalid.

A second logical counterargument is based on what logicians refer to as material implication. Among the theorems of this logic is the proposition that a false statement materially implies any statement, including an ought statement. Thus, a morally obligatory statement is logically derivable from any false statement, e.g., "The moon is made of green cheese" materially implies the disjunction (an "either/or" set of statements) of itself and any other statement. In other words, "The moon is made of green cheese" materially implies "The moon is made of green cheese or I ought to tell the truth." These inferences of ought statements from is statements, however, are obviously vacuous since any statement could be substituted for the ought statement without affecting the validity of the inference.

The above analysis, of course, takes for granted the supposition that these Western sets of analytical tools can be equally applied to Chinese thought processes, a supposition which I have only assumed but not shown to be the case.

5. What accounts for the differentiation of things?

"Fundamentally there is only one Great Ultimate, yet each of the myriad things has been endowed with it and each in itself possesses the Great Ultimate in its entirety. This is similar to the fact that there is only one moon in the sky but when its light is scattered upon rivers and lakes, it can be seen everywhere. It cannot be said that the moon has been split.¹⁹

Thus did Chu Hsi launch the now well-known idea that "principle is one but its manifestations are many." (For all practical purposes we can read "principle" for Great Ultimate in the opening quotation.) Anyone interested in the philosophy of China is certainly familiar with this refrain. Its words are repeated incessantly, and yet, what are we to make of them? We may understand the utterance that there is one principle (i.e., *t'ai-chi*) and that its manifestation or appearance shows up in all things, yet the logic of the

19. A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, 638.

statement is not quite so clear.

Fung Yu-lan notes that according to these statements every object, in addition to its own particular principle which makes it is, also holds within itself the Great Ultimate, that is, the totality of all principles. But we must ask, can the principle governing a certain class of objects be manifested simultaneously in all the individual objects belonging to that class? Unfortunately for those of us who wish to move beyond a mere metaphor, "Chu Hsi fails to speak clearly."²⁰ And so we are faced with more persisting questions: Are the li of different things themselves different? Or are they the same in that they are simply "manifestations" of t'ai-chi, and it is only ch'i which is/are different? In other words, what differentiates things? If it is ch'i, then what is/are li?

Given all that has been written about li and ch'i, it seems fair to say that ch'i is the element which accounts for the "difference" in things, as least as we perceive them. The problem, then, is whether li is a unity, or a multiplicity. It cannot be both. If it were then our entire way of thinking, our complete thought processes and forms of reasoning would have to be seriously reconsidered, and probably discarded. If it is the one li, the t'ai-chi, that is "real," then "the many" must be mere apparitions. Perhaps "reflections" is better, since this is implied by the moon-rivers analogy. But the li "in" things is clearly more than appearance; these li are the actual formative patterns and not just the appearance of being such.

It may be that the li in things are simply names for those things. Chu Hsi does, at one point, say this: "Between heaven and earth there is but one principle, although it everywhere appears as innumerable names" (hsü-to ming-tzu).²¹ However, elsewhere he asserts that "the one principle disperses to become many affairs" (or events or things, shih).²² We cannot even be certain of the reality of li. On the other hand, it may be that the many individual li are real while it is the one principle that is an appellation. In the Chu-tzu wen-chi Chu Hsi explains that the li of all things in the universe come together and constitute the Great Ultimate, and that this "Great Ultimate" did not originally have this name, but that the name was applied to it by man.²³ Regardless of the drift of the argument, we should note that in speaking about the

20. Fung, 2:541-542.

21. CTCS, 1/168.

22. CTCS, 1/174.

23. Chu-tzu wen-chi (Collection of Literary Works by Master Chu; hereafter CTWC), 94.7; cited in Fung, 2:537.

application of names a human intervention is essential. And this brings into consideration the subjectivity of li. If we are faced with a case of nominalism, then a whole new problem is encountered.

Finally, does it not begin to appear that we are faced with something similar to the issue of "universals" which has so bedevilled generations of Western thinkers and which continues to command intense attention? Whether we decide that li is real, or simply a reflection or a manifestation, or only a name, there is the problem of trying to decipher the riddle of determining just how to account for the relation between a universal concept and individual particulars. In reality, there are particular things, but when we wish to think or talk about them, we are predisposed to assign them to certain categories, and these, whether mental or nominal, will be sufficiently similar to allow us to use some means of describing them all. It is the means by which we humans come together with nature in seeking to understand its phenomena.²⁴

6. What is the scope of li?

In much the same way that the universal-particulars problem in Western philosophy concentrates on things that are concrete, or at least perceptible, so too do discussions of li and ch'i revolve around such "things." When we talk about substantial or tangible phenomena, we are on relatively firmer ground, despite the persistence of the problem. But are li confined to this substantial realm? That is, what about the li/ch'i of ideas? Is there li/ch'i of numbers, actions, beliefs, etc.? If we answer in the affirmative then what can we say about ch'i? Even more significant, if there are li of purely mental concepts, then on what do they "hang," to what do they inhere?

At one point in criticizing Buddhism Chu Hsi mentioned that when the Buddhists spoke of emptiness, a notion which Chu otherwise condemned since it would leave no room for moral acts, he did concede that emptiness, too, has principle.²⁵ The translator of Fung's History, Derk Bodde, includes an explanatory footnote: "I.e., there can be 'emptiness' only in contrast to some sort of underlying reality."²⁶ In the same passage, Chu tries to expand his view by likening the case to a pool of clear water, of which the coldness extends all the way to the bottom. His point is that we may not see the water and so believe the pool to be empty. It is only when we extend our hand and touch

24. It should be noted that my raising the universal-particulars issue is strictly as an analogy with li/ch'i for explanatory purposes only, and should in no way be construed as equating the two cases. They decidedly are not the same.

25. CTWC, 126.9, in Fung, 2:567-568.

26. Fung, ibid.

27. Ibid.

its coldness that we know there really is water there.²⁷

Of course, the analogy is not at all appropriate, only serving to illustrate how hard pressed Chu is to make his explanation tenable. Moreover, the remarks in question by Fung and Bodde show how difficult it is to apply the idea of li to a concept or an idea. What Chu is forced to do is to fall back on the age-old practice of seeing anything as a combination of property and then trying to argue, if not expressly, then at least implicitly, that the something which underlies these properties is (something such as) li. In the West, Locke did the very same thing in positing the idea of a "substratum," and his arguments ultimately (might we say inevitably?) led to the total idealism of Hume, a trek that some might say also occurred in China with the advent of Wang Yang-ming. At that point, Kant came along to rescue Hume from his vertigo, but China had no Kant.

Elsewhere²⁸ I have tried to understand the li/ch'i relationship as a two-sided process. That is, I perceived them as (1) "transcendent/immanent" pairs, and (2) as "potential/realizable (or actualizable)" pairs. Granted that the nomenclature is a bit unorthodox, I believe there is justification for the idea if not for the language. The first pair is one which we normally ascribe to li and ch'i. Simply by virtue of their being designated as existing "above shapes" and "below (or within) shapes," it should not be difficult to understand li as a transcendental concept or even a transcendental "thing," if that is possible, and to accept ch'i as something immanent, i.e., within reality, regardless of its exact physical makeup.

On the other hand, as I have noted also in this paper, li can be considered an element of potential being or becoming. Because li is prior to ch'i (in one sense) and because it is that according to which ch'i takes place, li clearly seems to play a "potential" role; it has a potentializing function. The converse of potential, of what is possible, is the actual event. The end result, so to speak, of potentiality is actuality, and hence, my second li/ch'i pair is to be seen in terms of potential and actual or realizable. What is especially important is that this second pair can be applied to the realm of noumena as well as to the sphere of phenomena. In other words, if we wish to apply the theory to my having a thought, that thought is actually the final realizable ch'i whose initial potential is provided by li. The potential of a thought is that, however absurd or illogical the thought may be, it has the capability of being conjured up in the mind.

28. Unpublished dissertation, The Mind of Chu Hsi: His Philosophy with An Annotated Translation of Chapters One through Five of the "Hsü ch'in-ssu-tu" (University of Arizona), 1979.

29. Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, 784.

We can also apply this two-fold reasoning of li and ch'i to an action in, for instance, considering an airplane. The transcendent li of the physical aircraft is its specific design which enables it, as a heavier-than-air thing, to keep from crashing under normal conditions. The ch'i of this physical airplane consists of its parts and materials (its "nuts and bolts") which are in all respects so constructed as to accord with its principle as a flying machine. On the other hand, the purpose for which the airplane is intended and designed is to fly through the air. This "purpose" is its principle. The "fact" that it actually does fly, the condition it is in when it is flying, is its ch'i. The act of flying is the actualized state of the airplane's potential, or purpose, to fly.

I do not offer this as a convincing argument; rather I wish simply to suggest a possible explanation for what I see as not merely a moot point but truly a significant problem.

One final note may be in order here concerning the prevailing view of ch'i, which I usually designate as "constitutive energy," or "constitutive element."

The most common translation of ch'i, following the lead of Wing-tsit Chan, is "material-force." In his justification for this translation, Chan²⁹ attempts to capture the ideas of both matter and energy, which ch'i clearly includes, and concludes that unless one prefers transliteration, "material-force" seems best. Nearly every other commentator also tries to retain the sense of power and substance which is seen as basic to ch'i: the "matter-energy" of Needham;³⁰ the "ether" of A.C. Graham;³¹ Bodde's "matter" or "ether";³² Bruce's several equivalents including "matter," "ether" and "plenum";³³ Metzger's calling it both "ether of materialization" and "inner flow of vital force";³⁴ Carsun Chang's leaving it untranslated.³⁵ However, as Chan and Metzger both

30. Joseph Needham, Science and Civilisation in China, Vol.2, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1956, 472.

31. A.C. Graham, Two Chinese Philosophers, Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng Yi-ch'uan, London: Lund Humphries, 1958.

32. Fung, A History of Chinese Philosophy.

33. J.P. Bruce, Chu Hsi and His Masters, London: Probsthain, 1923.

34. Thomas A. Metzger, Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

35. Carsun Chang, The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought, 2 vols., New York: Bookman Associates, 1975.

specify and others occasionally hint, ch'i does have another dimension to it besides just that of being a "building block" of the universe.

The properties of ch'i range from pure spirit³⁶ to hard and coarse tangible objects and, thus observers infer the states of force and matter from these descriptions and from the ability of ch'i to change its inner state. Perhaps ch'i's basic meaning of breath or vapor contributed in some way to its being seen as having power of force. Whatever the correct etymology, I disagree with the notion that a concept of force is basic to or encompassed by the term "ch'i," unless it be in a purely analogous sense. Rather, it seems clear to me, "energy" is a far more exact equivalent.

There are two reasons why I disagree with the choice of "force" for ch'i. As we have seen, ch'i is both the immanent materializable constituent, acting as the effect of and in accordance with the transcendent inherent pattern of li which appears in some perceptible configuration, and also the realizable or actualizable agent which objectifies li by giving reason to it as potential pattern. But in and of itself there is no inherent movement or action. Li is its pattern; t'ai-chi, through the generation given to yin and yang is the ultimate mover or motivating agent of ch'i. The "force" in the universe is actually yin/yang. Because the general and accepted meaning of force denotes the faculty of or the power to overcome resistance, or in a very physical sense, that entity which changes or tends to change this state of rest or of motion of a body, then it is clearly mistaken to equate ch'i in any way with force.

In addition, it is probably the work of Isaac Newton who more than any other scientist or philosopher has made "force" a household word. While certain natural philosophers before Newton, particularly Kepler, occasionally used the term, Newton made it a cornerstone of his entire scientific system. He did this in the need of finding some phenomenon that would account for two basic operations in nature: the difference in the magnitude of a cause required to move bodies of a different mass, and to account for the acceleration of motion. Newton thereby took these magnitudes of causal motion as force, and from here developed his basic laws of motion. What is important for us, however, is that Newton applied the notion of the qualitative aspects of force principally to the study of gravitation. But the idea of gravity by definition specifies an action at a distance, and it has long been recognized or believed that such action at a distance is impossible, our present-day misuse of "force" and "gravity" notwithstanding. Even though critics admit that terms such as "force," "gravity," and "attraction" are convenient for purposes of

36. CTYL, 1/14.

understanding or computation, in fact they are simply hypostatizations of mental concepts as metaphysical entities. "Force is merely a construct in the conceptual scheme of physics and should not be confounded with metaphysical causality."³⁷ Hence, since force is not a valid entity at all it would certainly be wrong to conceive of ch'i as some form of force.

The situation with energy is much different. While force is generally conceived to include its own force or power, energy is simply the equivalent of or the capacity for doing work. Energy is more of a measure of a capacity to do something than it is the work itself. Furthermore, and this lends itself even more relevantly to the idea of ch'i, energy can either be associated with a material body, or it can be independent of matter, as in light or radiation passing through a vacuum. Thus, in contrast to "force" "energy" is clearly a defensible rendering of ch'i.

37. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 3:212.

Glossary

Chan-kuo ts'ie 戰國策 : Records of the Warring States, early Han historico-fiction work

cheng 正 : to correct or regulate

cheng-ming 正名 : "rectification of names"

ch'i 氣 : constitutive energy

chiang 疆 : boundary, border, frontier

chih-li 治理 : to polish jade

chü 具 : complete (within)

Chung-wen ta tz'u-tien 中文大辭典 : Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Chinese Language

Chu-tzu chi ch'i che-hsüeh 朱子及其哲學 : Chu Hsi and His Philosophy

Chu-tzu ch'üan-shu 朱子全書 : Complete Works of Master Chu

Chu-tzu wen-chi 朱子文集 : Collection of Literary Works by Master Chu

Chu-tzu yü-lei 朱子語類: Classified Conversations of Master Chu

Dai Kanwa jiten 大漢和辭典: The Great Sino-Japanese Dictionary
by Morohashi Tetsuji

fen-ti 分地: to divide (a field) into lots

hsin' 心: mind

Hsü chin-ssu-lu 續近思錄: Supplement to Reflections on Things
by Chu Hsi

hsü-to ming-tzu 許多名字: innumerable names

jen 仁: humanheartedness, humanity, benevolence

li 理: constitutive principle

pao 包: to embrace, encompass, possess

shih 事: event, affair, matter; thing

Shuo-wen chieh-tzu 說文解字: Explanation of Words, an analytical dictionary of characters by
Hsü Shen

Ssu-shu ch'i-chu 四書集注: Collected Commentaries on the
Four Books

Ta-hsüeh chang-chü 大學章句: Commentary on the Great Learning

t'ai-chi 太極: Great or Supreme Ultimate, the composite unity of
li

tao 道: Tao, the Way

Tao-te-ching 道德經: Classic of the Way and its Virtue

tsai hsin-chih-chung 在心之中: within the mind

wu-hsing 五行: the Five Agents, or "elements" (metal, wood,
water, fire, earth)

yin-yang 陰陽: Yin and Yang

pu tsai ch'ien-mien 不在前面: not in front of, "not next to"