INSTRUCTIONS FOR PRACTICAL LIVING
AND OTHER NEO-CONFUCIAN WRITINGS
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Emperor Yao commended Hsi and Ho, “In reverent accord with the luminant heaven, calculate and delineate the movements of the sun, the moon, and the stars.” The importance here lies in seriously providing the people with definite times to determine the seasons. Emperor Shun depended on gem-inlaid astronomical instruments. The importance here lies in regulating the sun, moon, and five planets. They all unremittingly carried out the governmental measures to nourish the people, with the mind of being humane to all people. Here is the foundation of regulating the calendar and determining the seasons. The learning of Hsi and Ho may not have been matched by Kao and Hsieh or by Yu and Chi or even by Yao and Shun, whose wisdom did not extend to everything. Nevertheless, up to the present time generations have followed the method of Hsi and Ho and practiced their art. Even men with limited knowledge and small wisdom, and shallow astrologists, can make astronomical calendars and foretell weather without error. Shall we say that the people of limited knowledge and small wisdom of later generations are superior to Yu, Chi, Yao, and Shun in virtue and wisdom?

The theories of sacrificing to Heaven, mountains, and rivers are even more absurd. They are the products of later deceitful, flattering scholars who wanted to please their rulers. These scholars exaggerated matters to confuse the rulers’ minds and to waste national funds, and as such were outstanding cases of shamelessly cheating Heaven and entrapping the people, unworthy of being mentioned by a superior man. It is for this reason that Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju [179-117 B.C.] was ridiculed by the world and later generations. You consider this [details, such as varieties of ceremonies and music] something a Confucian scholar should study, perhaps due to the fact that you have not seriously thought about it.

A sage is a sage because he is born with knowledge. But a commentator on the Analects said, “What is known at birth is moral principle only. As to the changing events of past and present and the names and varieties of ceremonies and music, they surely require study before their validity can be verified in practice.” If the names and varieties of ceremonies and music and the changing events of past and present really had anything to do with the effort to become a sage, and a sage had to depend on study to obtain knowledge, then a sage cannot be said to have been born with knowledge. When a sage is said to be born with knowledge, it means moral principles only and not such things as the names and varieties of ceremonies and music. It is clear that such things as the names and varieties of ceremonies and music have nothing to do with the effort to become a sage. Since by a sage’s being born with knowledge is meant his possession of moral principles only and not such things as the names and varieties of ceremonies and music, then to know through study means to study and know these moral principles only, and learning through hard work also means learning through hard work these moral principles only. Nowadays students who study to become sages are not able to study and know what the sage is able to know, but unceasingly seek to know what the sage cannot know, as though it were learning. Don’t they thereby lose the means by which they hope to become sages? In what I have said above, I have taken the things you have in doubt and explained them to some extent, but have not touched upon the doctrine of “pulling up the root and stopping up the source.”

PULLING UP THE ROOT AND STOPPING UP THE SOURCE (Sections 142-143)

These sections are so important and so outstanding that they have often been singled out as a separate essay. Just as the Inquiry on the “Great Learning” represents the essence of Wang’s philosophy, so this essay represents the height of his ethics. It centers on his two basic doctrines of the extension of innate knowledge which is “common to the original minds of all men” and of “forming one body with Heaven and Earth and all things.” In this latter doctrine, it ranks with China’s most celebrated essays on the theme, notably the “Evolution of Rites,” which envisages a “great unity” or universal state in which all distinctions disappear, and Chang Tsai’s Western Inscription in which Heaven and Earth are conceived of as one’s parents and all men as brothers.

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The special importance of the essay lies not only in these teachings themselves but also in their application to society and history. Elsewhere discussions on innate knowledge are by and large inclined to the individual, to the human mind, to what is common to all men, and to ethical problems. Here, however, the emphasis is on its relation to society, to one's talents and ability, to individual differences, and to social and political problems. With innate knowledge as the central theme, Wang vigorously attacks the four tendencies that had dominated the social and political scene for many years, namely, the stress on "hearing and seeing," the habit of "memorization and recitation," "the indulgence in flowery compositions," and the philosophy of "success and profit." He condemns especially the last, for he considers utilitarianism the wicked way of despots, and responsible for China's decline. His analysis of history is of course quite subjective, but there can be no mistake as to where his attention is directed. Wang still looks upon the past as the golden age and is confined to traditional Confucian concepts of value. But his spirit of challenge and his sense of responsibility, together with his powerful, direct, and sincere manner of expression, make the essay an inspiration.

142. If the doctrine of pulling up the root and stopping up the source does not clearly prevail in the world, people who study to become sages will be increasingly numerous and their task increasingly difficult. They will then degenerate into animals and barbarians and still think this degeneration is the way to study to become a sage. Though my doctrine may perhaps temporarily be made clear and prevail, the situation will ultimately be like that in which the cold abates in the west while the ice freezes in the east, and the fog dissipates in front while clouds rise in the rear. Though I keep on talking until I die in distress, I shall at the end not be the least help to the world.

The mind of a sage regards Heaven, Earth, and all things as one body. He looks upon all people of the world, whether inside or outside his family, or whether far or near, but all with blood and breath, as his brothers and children. He wants to secure, preserve, educate, and nourish all of them, so as to fulfill his desire of forming one body with all things. Now the mind of everybody is at first not different from that of the sage. Only because it is obstructed by selfishness and blocked by material desires, what was originally great becomes small and what was originally penetrating becomes obstructed. Everyone has his own selfish view, to the point where some regard their fathers, sons, and brothers as enemies. The Sage worried over this. He therefore extended his humanity which makes him form one body with Heaven, Earth, and all things, to teach the world, so as to enable the people to overcome their selfishness, remove their obstructions, and recover that which is common to the substance of the minds of all men.

The essentials of this teaching are what was successively transmitted by Yao, Shun, and Yu, and what is summed up in the saying, "The human mind is precarious [liable to make mistakes], the moral mind is subtle [follows the moral law]. Have absolute refinement and single-mindedness and hold fast the mean."91 Its details were given by Emperor Shun to Hsieh, namely, "between father and son there should be affection, between ruler and minister there should be righteousness, between husband and wife there should be attention to their separate functions, between old and young there should be a proper order, and between friends there should be faithfulness, that is all."92 At the time of Yao, Shun, and the Three Dynasties, teachers taught and students studied only this. At that time people did not have different opinions, nor did families have different practices. Those who practiced the teaching naturally and easily were called sages, and those who practiced it with effort and difficulty were called worthies, but those who violated it were considered degenerate even though they were as intelligent as Tan-chu.93 People of low station—those in villages and rural districts, farmers, artisans, and merchants—all received this teaching, which was devoted only to the perfection of virtue and conduct. How could this have been the case? Because there was no pursuit after the knowledge of seeing and hearing to confuse them, no memorization and recitation to hinder them, no writing of flowery compositions to indulge in, and no chasing after success and profit. They were taught only to be filially pious to their parents, brotherly to their elders, and faithful to their friends, so as to recover that which is common to the substance of the minds of all men. All this is inherent in our nature and does not depend on the outside. This being the case, who cannot do it?

The task of the school was solely to perfect virtue. However, people differed in capacity. Some excelled in ceremonies and music; others in government and education; and still others in public works

92 Book of Memoirs, 3 A. 4.
93 The son of Yao. See ibid., 5 A. 6.
and agriculture. Therefore, in accordance with their moral achievement, they were sent to school further to refine their abilities. When their virtue recommended them to government positions, they were enabled to serve in their positions throughout life without change. Those who employed them desired only to be united with them in one mind and one character to bring peace to the people. They considered whether the individual's ability was suitable, and did not regard a high or low position as important or unimportant, or a busy or leisurely job as good or bad. Those who served also desired only to be united with their superiors in one mind and one character to bring peace to the people. If their ability matched their positions, they served throughout life in busy and heavy work without regarding it as toilsome, and felt at ease with lowly work and odd jobs without regarding them as mean. At that time people were harmonious and contented. They regarded one another as belonging to one family. Those with inferior ability were contented with their positions as farmers, artisans, or merchants, all diligent in their various occupations, so as mutually to sustain and support the life of one another without any desire for exalted position or stripe for external things. Those with special ability like Kao, K'uei, Chi, and Hsieh, came forward and served with their ability, treating their work as their own family concern, some attending to the provision of clothing and food, some arranging for mutual help, and some providing utensils, planning and working together in order to fulfill their desires of serving their parents above and supporting their wives and children below. Their only concern was that those responsible for certain work might not be diligent in it and become a heavy burden to them. Therefore Chi worked hard in agriculture and did not feel ashamed that he was not a teacher but regarded Hsieh's expert teaching as his own. K'uei took charge of music and was not ashamed that he was not brilliant in ceremonies but regarded Po-I's understanding of ceremonies as his own. For the learning of their mind was pure and clear and had what was requisite to preserve the humanity that makes them and all things form one body. Consequently their spirit ran through and permeated

all and their will prevailed and reached everywhere. There was no distinction between the self and the other, or between the self and things. It is like the body of a person. The eyes see, the ears hear, the hands hold, and the feet walk, all fulfilling the function of the body. The eyes are not ashamed of their not being able to hear. When the ears hear something, the eyes will direct their attention to it. The feet are not ashamed that they are not able to grasp. When a hand feels for something, the feet will move forward. For the original material force feels and is present in the entire body, and the blood and veins function smoothly. Therefore in feeling itchy and in breathing, their influence and the speedy response to it possess a mystery that can be understood without words. This is why the doctrine of the Sage is the easiest, the simplest, easy to know and easy to follow. The reason why the learning can easily be achieved and the ability easily perfected is precisely because the fundamentals of the doctrine consist only in recovering that which is common to our original minds, and are not concerned with any specific knowledge or skill.

143. As the Three Dynasties declined, the kingly way was stopped and the techniques of the despot flourished. After the passing of Confucius and Menius, the doctrine of the Sage became obscure and perverse doctrines ran wild. Teachers no longer taught the doctrine of the Sage and students no longer studied it. Followers of despots stole and appropriated what seemed to be the teaching of ancient kings, and outwardly made a pretense of following it in order inwardly to satisfy their selfish desires. The whole world followed them in fashion. As a result the Way of the Sage was obstructed as though stopped by weeds. People imitated one another and every day searched for theories to acquire national wealth and power, for schemes to destroy and deceive, for plans to attack and invade, and for all sorts of tricks to cheat Heaven and entrap people and to get temporary advantages in order to reap fame or profit. There were numerous such people, like Kuan Chung [d. 645 B.C.], Shang Yang [d. 338 B.C.], Su Ch'in [d. 317 B.C.], and Chang I [d. 309 B.C.]. After a long time, the calamity of war and plundering became infinite. Thus people degenerated to the status of animals and barbarians, and even despotism itself could no longer operate.

86 Economist, legalist, and experts on diplomacy, respectively. All of them stressed success as the central goal and have been condemned by Confucians as immoral.
Confucian scholars of [Han] times were sad and distressed. They searched and collected the literature, documents, laws, and systems of ancient sage-kings and salvaged the remains left from the Burning of the Books and mended them. Their purpose was to restore the way of the ancient kings.

Since Confucian doctrines were discarded and the tradition of the technique of despotism had become strongly entrenched, even the virtuous and wise could not help being influenced by it. The doctrines elucidated and embellished in order to make them clear to the people, make them prevail, and restore them to the world, merely served to fortify the strongholds of despots. As a result, the door of Confucianism was blocked, and it was no longer to be seen. Therefore the learning of textual criticism developed and those perpetuating it were regarded as famous. The practice of memorization and recitation developed and those advocating it were regarded as extensively learned. The writing of flowery compositions developed and those indulging in it were regarded as elegant. Thus with great confusion and tremendous noise they set themselves up and competed with one another, and no one knew how many schools there were. Among tens of thousands of paths and thousands of tracks, none knew which to follow. Students of the world found themselves in a theater where a hundred plays were being presented, as it were. Actors cheered, jeered, hopped, and skipped. They emulated one another in novelty and in ingenuity. They forced smiles to please the audience and competed in appearing beautiful. All this rivalry appeared on all sides. The audience looked to the left and to the right and could not cope with the situation. Their ears and eyes became obscured and dizzy and their spirit dazed and confused. They drifted day and night and remained for a long time in this atmosphere as if they were insane and had lost their minds, and none had the self-realization to return to his family heritage [Confucianism]. Rulers of the time were also fooled and confounded by those doctrines and devoted their whole lives to useless superficialities without knowing what they meant. Occasionally some rulers realized the emptiness, falsehood, fragmentariness, and unnaturalness of their ways, and heroically roused themselves to great effort, which they wished to demonstrate in concrete action. But the most they could do was no more than to achieve national wealth, power, success, and profit, such as those of the Five Despots. Consequently the teachings of the Sage became more and more distant and obscured, while the current of success and profit ran deeper and deeper. Some students turned to Buddhism and Taoism and were deceived by them. But at bottom there was nothing in these systems that could overcome their desire for success and profit. Others sought to reconcile the conflicting doctrines within the Confucian school. But in the final analysis there was nothing in these doctrines that could destroy the view of success and profit. For up to the present time it has been several thousand years since the poison of the doctrine of success and profit has infected the innermost recesses of man's mind and has become his second nature. People have mutually boasted of their knowledge, crushed one another with power, rived each other for profit, mutually striven for superiority through skill, and attempted success through fame. When they came forward to serve in the government, those in charge of the treasury wanted also to control the departments of military affairs and justice. Those in charge of ceremonies and music wanted also to have one foot in the important office of civil appointments. Magistrates and prefects aspired to the high office of a regional governor. And censors looked forward to the key position of the prime minister. Of course one could not take a concurrent position unless he could do the work and one could not expect any praise unless theories were advanced to justify the practice. Extensive memorization and recitation merely served to increase their pride. Substantial and abundant knowledge merely served to help them do evil, enormous information merely served to help them indulge in argumentation, and wealth in flowery compositions merely served to cover up their artificiality. Thus that which Kao, K'uei, Chi, and Hsieh could not manage on the side young students of today want to justify in doctrine and to master in technique. Using slogans and borrowing labels, they say they want to work together: with others to complete the work of the empire. In reality their purpose lies in their belief that unless they do so they cannot satisfy their selfishness and fulfill their desires.

Alas! on top of such affectation and such a motive, they preach

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58 See above, sec. II, n. 46.
59 Reading zhiao [education] as ao [pride].
such a doctrine! No wonder that when they hear the teachings of our Sage they look upon them as useless and self-contradictory. It is inevitable that they consider innate knowledge as deficient and the doctrine of the Sage as useless. Alas! how can scholars living in this age still seek the doctrine of the Sage? How can they still discuss it? Is it not toilsome and difficult, is it not rugged and hazardous for scholars living in this age to devote themselves to study? Alas! how lamentable!

Fortunately, the Principle of Nature is inherent in the human mind and can never be destroyed and the intelligence of innate knowledge shines through eternity without variation. Therefore when they hear my doctrine of pulling up the root and stopping up the source, surely some will be pitifully distressed and compassionately pained, and will indignantly rise up, like a stream or a river which cannot be stopped, bursting its banks. To whom shall I look if not to heroic scholars who will rise up without further delay?

LETTER TO CHOU TAO-T'UNG

144. The students Wu and Tseng² came and told me fully about your keen desire to cultivate the Way. It is most gratifying. A person like you, Tao-t'ung, may be said to be steadfast in belief and strong in the desire to learn. Being in the midst of mourning,¹ I did not talk with them in detail. But they have determination and are willing to make effort. Each time I saw them it seemed they had made some progress. I humbly believe that I have not failed to fulfill the objectives of their long journey and, on their part, they also have not failed in their goal. Now that they are about to leave and have come to me with this folio and, expressing your wishes, have asked me to write a few words in it, I am too distressed and confused to say anything. In answer to their kind request I shall merely put down a few words in response to questions raised in your letter. Written hurriedly, my words will not be at all thorough. However, I am sure the two students can orally express all that I have in mind.

Your letter says, "The task of daily application consists entirely in making up the mind. Of late I have often realized your teachings through personal experience and have understood them better and better. However, I have not been able to be away from friends for a moment. Only when there are friends around to discuss things with does my mind become strong and broad and full of the spirit of life. If for three or five days there are no friends to discuss things with, it seems to become weak. When things happen it is troubled and it often may forget. On days when there are no friends to talk with, I just sit in meditation or read, or pleasantly walk back and forth in a certain place. I utilize whatever I see or do to nourish my mind, and feel to some extent peaceful and at home. Nevertheless it is not as good as to be together with friends and to talk with them; in which case, the mental energy is more active and the spirit of life greater. What can people living in isolation do to handle the situation?"

This paragraph testifies to your accomplishment in efforts of daily application. This is just about the way the effort should be applied. The main thing is to have no interruption. When the practice has become familiar and smooth one's feeling will be quite different. Generally speaking, the great basis in our task of learning consists only in making up the mind. What you say about its being troubled and forgetful is due purely to its lack of earnestness. People who love sex do not have trouble or forget, because their minds are earnest. Knowing his own itch, one must feel that he must scratch it. One must weigh and consider for himself what the Buddhists call the convenient way. Other people can hardly help. And there is no other way.

145. Your letter says, "Shang-ts'ai [Hsieh Liang-tso, 1050-1105] once asked I-ch'üan [Ch'eng I], 'What is there in the world to think about or to deliberate about?"² Ch'eng I answered, "There is such a principle, but you have discovered it too early.'"² The task of a student consists of course in always doing something and

¹ Reading lui [able] as t'ang [has, did].