

## ESSENTIALS OF THE MORAL WAY

Han Yu's "Essentials of the Moral Way" ("Yuandao") is among the most important texts in the history of Chinese thought. It is nothing less than an attempt to define the distinguishing characteristics of Chinese civilization. In other words, it states the case for civilization versus countercultural conceptions of the Way. The first two sections are prologue: Han Yu defines terms and explains the historical trends that have led to the demise of Confucian teachings in his day. The third and fourth sections present the economic argument against Buddhist and Daoist monasticism: monks (the new fifth and sixth classes of society) are nonproductive and exist on the labor of others, thus creating economic and social dislocation.

The fifth section, with its opening quotation from the *Great Learning* (see chapter 10), is the crux of the text. Confucian spirituality, unlike that of the Buddhists and Daoists, links the private, moral life of the individual with the public welfare of the state. In antiquity a personal unity of thought and action made possible the political and social unity of the state. The sages of antiquity achieved this unity and laid the foundations of Chinese civilization. This new conception of sagehood as spiritual wisdom expressed through political action was to form the intellectual basis for the spiritual and political world of Neo-Confucianism.

1. To love largely<sup>42</sup> is called humaneness (*ren*); to act according to what should be done is called rightness (*yi*). To proceed from these principles is called the moral Way (*dao*); to be sufficient unto oneself without relying on externals is called inner power (*de*). The first two, *ren* and *yi*, are fixed concepts; but the latter two, *dao* and *de*, are relative terms. Thus there is the Way (*dao*) of the superior man and the way of the petty man; and inner power (*de*) can work either for good or for evil.<sup>43</sup>

Laozi belittled humaneness and rightness; he disparaged and spoke ill of them. Yet his view was limited. Just because one sits in a well and says the sky is small does not mean the sky is really small. For Laozi humaneness meant a small kindness and rightness meant a petty favor, so it was natural that he belittled them. Therefore, the moral way and the inner power that he spoke of and put into practice are not the same as what I mean by the Way and its Power.

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42. Han Yu's choice of the expression *bo ai* (lit., "to love largely, amply") sets his idea apart from the Mohist concept of *jian ai* ("universal love"). Consideration of the semantic range of the two graphs (*bo*, "vast, large, ample" versus *jian*, "combine, unite") suggests that for Han Yu *bo ai* emphasizes the idea of love given generously yet always to known individuals with specific social relationships to the donor. It thus allows for particularity and heterogeneity, while avoiding the Mohist implication of an indiscriminate, homogenized love addressed to humankind in general.

43. *De*, often translated in this volume as "virtue," is rendered here as "inner power" to accommodate Han Yu's sense of it as a power that can work for good or ill.

Whenever I use these terms, they encompass both humaneness and rightness — which is the common interpretation of the whole world. Laozi's use divorces humaneness and rightness from the Way and from inner power; and this is the private interpretation of only one man.<sup>44</sup>

2. After the traditions of the Zhou dynasty declined and Confucius passed away, there was the burning of the books in Qin and the rise of Daoism in the Han and of Buddhism in the Jin, Wei, Liang, and Sui dynasties. During these times those who spoke of humaneness and rightness, of the Way and its power, were either followers of Yang Zhu or Mozi, Laozi or Buddha. To adopt one of these, one had to reject the others; so when believers took these men as their masters and followed them, they despised and defamed Confucius. And those of later ages who might wish to hear of the teachings on humaneness and rightness, the Way and its power, had no one to listen to.

The followers of Laozi and Buddha both maintained that Confucius had been a disciple of their masters. And the followers of Confucius grew so accustomed to hearing these theories that they began to enjoy such calumnies and belittled themselves, acknowledging that the Master himself had indeed taken Laozi or the Buddha as his master. They not only said such things but also recorded them in their books. Those of later ages who might have wished to hear of the teachings on humaneness and rightness, the Way and its power, had no one from whom to seek them. How great has become men's fondness for the fantastic! They do not inquire into fundamentals or essentials but wish only to hear of the fantastic.

3. In antiquity there were four classes of subjects; now there are six. In antiquity only one class were teachers; now there are three. For each farmer there are six people that consume his produce. For each craftsman six use his products. For each merchant, there are six people who must live off his profits. Under such conditions, is it any wonder the people are impoverished and driven to brigandage?

In ancient times men confronted many dangers. But sages arose who taught them the way to live and to grow together. They served as rulers and as teachers. They drove out reptiles and wild beasts and had the people settle the central lands. The people were cold, and they clothed them; hungry, and they fed them. Because the people dwelt in trees and fell to the ground, dwelt in caves and became ill, the sages built houses for them.

They fashioned crafts so the people could provide themselves with implements. They made trade to link together those who had and those who had not

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44. This attack against Laozi is directed against *Daodejing* 18: "When the great Way declined, / There were humaneness and rightness" and 38: "Therefore after the Way was lost there was virtue, / After virtue was lost there was humaneness, / After humaneness was lost there was rightness, / And after rightness was lost there was ritual propriety." See ch. 5.

and medicine to save them from premature death. They taught the people to bury and make sacrifices [to the dead] to enlarge their sense of gratitude and love. They gave rites to set order and precedence, music to vent melancholy, government to direct idleness, and punishments to weed out intransigence. When the people cheated each other, the sages invented tallies and seals, weights and measures to make them honest. When they attacked each other, they fashioned walls and towns, armor and weapons for them to defend themselves. So when dangers came, they prepared the people; and when calamity arose, they defended people.

But now the Daoists maintain:

Till the sages are dead,  
theft will not end . . .  
so break the measures, smash the scales,  
and the people will not contend.<sup>45</sup>

These are thoughtless remarks indeed, for humankind would have died out long ago if there had been no sages in antiquity. Men have neither feathers nor fur, neither scales nor shells to ward off heat and cold, neither talons nor fangs to fight for food.

4. And so for this reason, the ruler is the one who issues commands. His ministers effect their ruler's commands and transmit them to the people. The people produce grains and rice, hemp and silk, make implements and exchange commodities in order to serve their superiors. If the ruler issues no commands, then he loses his reason for being ruler. If the ministers do not effect their ruler's commands and transmit them to the people, if the people do not produce grains and rice, hemp and silk, make implements and exchange commodities in order to serve their superiors, they are punished.

But now the Buddhist doctrine maintains that one must reject the relationship between ruler and minister, do away with father and son and forbid the Way that enables us to live and to grow together — all this in order to seek what they call purity and *nirvāṇa*. It is fortunate for them that these doctrines emerged after the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties and so were not discredited by the ancient sages and by Confucius. It is equally unfortunate for us that they did not emerge before that time and so could have been corrected by the same sage.

The titles of emperor and of king are different, yet they are sages for the same reason. To wear linen in summer and fur in winter, to drink when thirsty and to eat when hungry — in both cases the concern is different, yet the logic

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45. Han Yu here excerpts two couplets from a long passage in *Zhuangzi*, ch. 10; trans. Watson, pp. 109 ff.

is the same. But now the Daoists advocate "doing nothing" as in high antiquity. Such is akin to criticizing a man who wears furs in winter by asserting that it is easier to make linen, or akin to criticizing a man who eats when he is hungry by asserting that it is easier to take a drink.

5. According to a traditional text, "Those in antiquity who wished to illuminate luminous virtue throughout the world would first govern their states; wishing to govern their states, they would first bring order to their families; wishing to bring order to their families, they would first cultivate their own persons; wishing to cultivate their own persons, they would first rectify their minds; wishing to rectify their minds, they would first make their thoughts sincere."<sup>46</sup> And so what the ancients called rectifying the mind and making thoughts sincere were things they actually put into practice.

Yet today those who would rectify their minds do so by rejecting the empire and the state and by abrogating the natural principles of human relations: although they are sons, they do not regard their fathers as fathers. Although ministers, they do not regard their ruler as ruler. Although subjects, they do not attend to their duties.

When Confucius wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, if the enfeoffed lords followed the usage of the barbarians, he treated them as barbarians. If they progressed to the level of the central states, then he treated them as central states. The classic says: "The barbarians with their rulers are not the equal of all Xia without them."<sup>47</sup> The Ode says: "The Rong and Di barbarians, them he withstood; Jing and Shu, those he repressed."<sup>48</sup>

Yet today we elevate barbarian practices and place them above the teachings of our former kings. How long will it be before we ourselves have all become barbarians?

6. What is the teaching of the former kings? To love largely is called a sense of humaneness; to act according to what should be done is called rightness. To proceed from these principles is called the moral Way; to be sufficient unto oneself without relying on externals is called inner power. Its texts are the *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Its methods are the rites, music, chastisement, and government. Its classes of people are scholars, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants. Its social relationships are ruler and minister, father and son, teacher and pupil, guest and host, older and younger brother, husband and wife. Its dress is hemp and silk; its dwellings are houses; its foods are rice and grains, fruits and vegetables, fish and meat. Its ways are easy to explain; its teachings are easy to execute.

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46. The quotation is from the *Great Learning*. See ch. 10.

47. *Analects* 3:5.

48. Ode 300.



And so

Take it unto yourself; find ease and happiness  
use it with others; be loving and fair  
take it to your own mind; find peace, quietness  
use it for empire and state; find it works everywhere

And so

in life they held to human feeling  
and in death fulfilled their obligations,  
so the spirits of Heaven came to their altars  
and the manes of mortals received their libations.

7. What Way is this? It is what I call the Way, not what the Daoists and Buddhists have called the Way. Yao passed it on to Shun, Shun to Yu, Yu to Tang, Tang to King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou; then these passed it on to Confucius, who passed it on to Mencius. But after the death of Mencius it was not passed on. Xunzi and Yang Xiong

Excerpted it but not its essence,  
Discussed it but not in detail.  
Before the Duke of Zhou  
Our sages were kings,  
And things got done.  
After the Duke of Zhou  
Our sages were subjects  
And long theory won.

This being so, what can be done? Block them or nothing will flow; stop them or nothing will move. Make humans of these people, burn their books, make homes of their dwellings, make clear the way of the former kings to guide them, and “the widowers, the widows, the orphans, the childless, and the diseased all shall have care.” This can be done.<sup>49</sup>

[*Changli xiansheng wenji* (SBCK) 11:1a–3b — CH]

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49. This final quotation is from “Evolution of Rites,” *Record of Rites* (trans. in ch. 10), where Confucius characterizes the utopian age of Grand Commonalty (*Datong*) as one where even persons without family were cared for. The quotation implies that “this can be done” by following the “great moral Way” that Han Yu has outlined in his text. There may also be a more subtle implication. Buddhist monasteries managed most charitable works in the Tang and provided economic subsistence to those left without resources by the established social order. Han Yu argues that realization of the “Grand Commonalty” of ancient times will reform this social order so as to provide for the welfare of these people.