

CHANCE AND NECESSITY IN ZHU XI'S CONCEPTIONS OF HEAVEN AND TRADITION

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Abstract. Discussion of the relationship between chance and necessity in the West goes back at least to Democritus in the fifth century BCE, and was highlighted again in the twentieth century by Jacques Monod in *Chance and Necessity*. Monod contrasted “teleonomic” (directional but not directed) biological evolution with “teleologic” (purpose-driven) Biblical theology. This article uses that distinction in examining Zhu Xi’s concepts of Heaven (in particular the “mandate” or “givenness” of Heaven) and tradition (focusing on the normative Confucian tradition, the “succession of the Way” or *daotong*). The result sheds light on the unique combination of rationality and transcendence in Neo-Confucian thought.

I. INTRODUCTION

Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) conceptions of Heaven and tradition were central to the philosophic framework of his system of Confucian thought and practice. Heaven (*tian* 天) provided an absolute point of *synchronic* orientation that legitimized the system by anchoring his values in the natural world. His conception of the Confucian tradition – the “succession of the Way” (*daotong* 道統) – functioned as a *diachronic* anchorage in the continuous “outflowing” (*liuxing* 流行) of the “principle of Heaven” (*tianli* 天理), or the natural ordering process. Given these central roles, an examination of the two concepts can shed fresh light on some of the basic features of Zhu Xi’s system – in particular, the way it combines a rationalizing tendency with an openness to transcendence.

Zhu's understanding of Heaven and tradition are both revealed in the campaign he waged in the 1170s to persuade the "Neo-Confucians" of the Song dynasty (960-1279) that Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1073) had been the first true Confucian sage since Mencius (Mengzi 孟子), 1400 years earlier. This was an iconoclastic campaign, as the prevailing wisdom at the time was that Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) had been the first to revive the Confucian *dao* 道 in the Song. Cheng Hao and his brother, Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), were in fact the core during the 11th century of what became the Cheng-Zhu school of Confucianism (so-called after them and Zhu Xi), and until Zhu Xi's campaign Zhou Dunyi was relatively uninfluential. While the Cheng brothers had studied with him for about a year when they were teenagers, Zhou's philosophical influence on them appeared to be minimal.¹ Therefore, when Cheng Hao died and Cheng Yi, in his eulogy, said that his elder brother had been the first to apprehend and revive the heart of Mencius' teachings, very few questioned the claim. Yet Zhu Xi, with his friend Zhang Shi 張栻 (1133-1180), eventually overturned this consensus by arguing that Heaven had "chosen" Zhou Dunyi to revive the true Confucian tradition – what Mencius had called the "Way of the Sages" (*shengren zhi dao* 聖人之道) and Zhu Xi called the "succession of the Way" (*daotong* 道統).²

II. HEAVEN

Early Confucian conceptions of Heaven varied from a mysterious, semi-personalistic source of life and moral authority (e.g. for Confucius/Kongzi 孔子, 551-479 BCE) to a completely amoral realm of the natural world (e.g. for Xunzi 荀子, 3rd century BCE). Mencius (4th century BCE) occupied a middle ground on this spectrum, retaining the moral concern of Heaven's Mandate (*tian ming* 天命) but speaking of *ming* (mandate, decree) more abstractly. For Mencius, *ming* 命 refers to the conditions of life that are beyond human control – what is simply "given," like the assumptions of a geometric theorem. The realm of *ming* includes

¹ Probably the only direct influence was Cheng Yi's special appreciation of Confucius' disciple Yan Hui 顏回, whom Zhou Dunyi also admired. Cheng's essay, "What Master Yan Loved to Learn," was written only a few years after the brothers had studied with Zhou, and contains some parallels with Zhou's *Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說 (Discussion of the *Taiji* Diagram).

² For a thorough discussion of the whole issue see Joseph A. Adler, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

the brute facts of our lives, such as where, when, and to whom we are born, which determine some of the parameters or limiting conditions within which our lives unfold.³ From the perspective of the individual, *ming* is the realm of necessity: that which we cannot control. Human nature (*xing* 性) is also given or endowed by Heaven (as in the first line of the *Zhongyong*⁴), but according to Mencius the goodness of human nature is given only in potential form, as certain moral feelings or dispositions (the “four beginnings”), which must be actively cultivated into the “four constant [universal] virtues.” So *xing*, for Mencius, concerns an area of life over which we do have some control.⁵

The Neo-Confucians of the Song followed Mencius in thinking of Heaven in mostly naturalistic terms, yet still with a moral dimension. However, both *tian* and *ming* were partly reinterpreted: Heaven was the source of the cosmic order (*li* 理), which comprised both the natural order (*tianli* 天理) and the moral order (*daoli* 道理).⁶ In the human being, one’s nature (*xing*) was the instantiation of that order.⁷ The good nature that Mencius had discussed was now called more specifically the “nature of Heaven-and-earth” (*tiandi zhi xing* 天地之性) or the “original nature” (*ben xing* 本性).⁸ *Ming* (the given) continued to refer to the realm over which we have no control, but was now understood in terms of *qi* (psycho-physical-spiritual stuff), specifically the “endowment of *qi*”

³ For good discussions of *ming* see Michael Puett, “Following the Commands of Heaven: The Notion of *Ming* in Early Chinese Thought”, in Christopher Lupke, ed., *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), pp. 49-69; and Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “Simple Twists of Fate: The Daoist Body and its *Ming*”, *ibid.*, pp. 151-168.

⁴ “What is given (*ming*) by Heaven is called the nature.” *Xing* (nature) as Mencius uses it primarily denotes human nature (*ren xing* 人性), but the word itself means the “nature” of any thing, although not a static essence (more on this below).

⁵ *Mencius* 2A.6, 6A.6. Mencius discusses the relationship of *xing* and *ming* in 7A.2 and 7B.24, both of which will be discussed below.

⁶ The Song Confucians did not use these terms consistently with these meanings (often they are synonymous); these are my usages.

⁷ Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi said, “The nature is just principle/order” (性即理也). For Cheng Yi see, e.g. *Henan Chengshi Yishu* 22A, in *Er Cheng ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 292. For Zhu Xi see, e.g., *Zhongyong zhangju*, in Zhu Jieren, Yan Zuozhi, Liu Yongxiang, eds, *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 (Zhu Xi’s Complete Works), 27 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe; Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 6:32 (hereafter *Zhuzi quanshu* 2002).

⁸ This terminology came from Zhang Zai in the 11th century and was picked up by Zhu Xi in the 12th century.

(*qi bing* 氣稟) given by Heaven, or the “physical nature” (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性).⁹

Zhu Xi was less optimistic than Mencius had been concerning the ordinary person’s possibility of becoming a Sage (*shengren* 聖人). Mencius, he said, had focused only on the “original nature” and its moral potential, while ignoring the physical nature in which the moral nature was embodied. That physical nature was responsible for feelings or dispositions (*qing* 清), not all of which were good. Selfish human desires (*renyu* 人欲), for example, obstructed the mind’s ability to apprehend its moral nature. Until and unless the mind (*xin* 心) could become fully aware of its inherent morality it could not act as a proper guide for human behavior, and so the person could not put into effect in practice his or her moral nature, becoming an “authentic” (*cheng* 誠) human being. Thus the concept of the physical nature was the Cheng-Zhu answer to the problem of theodicy, in Mencian terms: if human nature is good, why is there evil?

III. THE DAOTONG

Since the continuity of the Confucian tradition depended on the appearance of sages who could fully actualize their moral potentials, the problem of the gaps in the tradition – for example the roughly five hundred year gap between the founders of the Zhou dynasty (11th century BCE) and Confucius – was the cultural reflection of the problem of theodicy.¹⁰

⁹ For *qibing* see Zhu’s commentary on Zhou Dunyi’s *Tongshu*, section 7 (*Zhuzi quanshu* 2002, 13:104). For *qizhi zhi xing* see Zhang Zai, *Zhangzi quanshu* (Sibu beiyao ed.), 2:18b. Translating *ming* in a general sense as “given” is justified by Zhu Xi’s use of the phrase *tianming*, *tiantao* 天命天討 (Heaven gives, Heaven take away/punishes) in his commentary on *Mencius* 1B.4. The phrase is an allusion to *Shujing*, “*Gao Yao mo*” 皋陶謨, 2: 「天命有德，五服五章哉。天討有罪，五刑五用哉。」 In Legge’s typically florid translation: “Heaven graciously distinguishes the virtuous - are there not the five habiliments, five decorations of them? Heaven punishes the guilty - are there not the five punishments, to be severally used for that purpose?” Available at: <<http://ctext.org/shang-shu/counsels-of-gao-yao>> [accessed 6/3/2016].

¹⁰ Mencius also notes five hundred year gaps between Yao (and Shun) and Tang (founder of the Shang dynasty), and between Tang and King Wen of the Zhou (*Mencius* 7B.38; see also 2B.13) – a dispensational theory of history, as Mark Csikszentmihalyi points out (in his *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 192-200). Since Mencius was born roughly one hundred after Confucius died, that puts Zhou Dunyi at another five hundred year interval, i.e. roughly 1500 years after Confucius. However, I am not aware of Zhu Xi ever pointing this out.

Therefore it was explained by the same mechanism: the physical nature. For members of the Cheng-Zhu school in the 11th and 12th centuries CE, the most troubling gap was the most recent one, for it weakened their competitive position vis-à-vis Chan Buddhism and Daoism. Both of these traditions claimed, in different ways, to have direct access to the *dao* (more on this below). The Confucians, therefore, needed to do the same, but this required that they identify someone who had revived the Confucian *dao* since its occultation since Mencius. Cheng Yi made that claim for his brother shortly after Cheng Hao died:

After the demise of the Duke of Zhou, the Way of the sages was not carried on, and after the death of Mencius the teaching of the sages was not transmitted. When the Way was not carried on there was no good government for a hundred generations, and when the teaching was not transmitted, there were not true scholars for a thousand years. Even without good government, scholars could explain the way of good government for the edification of men and transmission to later generations, but without true [Confucian] scholars the world fell into darkness and people lost their way, human desires ran amok, and heavenly principles were extinguished. The Master [Cheng Hao] was born 1,400 years after Mencius and was able to recover the untransmitted teachings that survived in the classics, resolving to enlighten the people with this Way.¹¹

Cheng Yi's account was accepted by the great majority of the brothers' many followers, including those in the early Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279). It was questioned only by members of the Hu family of Hunan, who instead championed Zhou Dunyi as the first sage of the Song. Hu Hong 胡宏 (1106-1161), for example, said, "Master Zhou revealed Mencius' untransmitted learning to the elder and younger Chengs, returning at once to the brilliance of the myriad ancients."¹² This view was conveyed to Zhu Xi by Zhang Shi, who had been a student of Hu Hong. Beginning in 1169, Zhu and Zhang conducted a campaign to make Zhou Dunyi the first true Confucian sage since Mencius, replacing Cheng Hao – this despite the fact that the teachings of the Cheng brothers formed the core of Zhu Xi's celebrated "synthesis" of Song Confucian

¹¹ Cheng, *Er Cheng ji*, 640; translated by Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Neo Confucian Orthodoxy*, pp. 3-4. Cheng Yi outlived his brother by twenty-two years.

¹² Hu Hong's "Preface to Zhou Dunyi's *Tongshu*" (Penetrating the Scripture of Change), in *Hu Hong ji*, pp. 160-62.

orthodoxy. Part of this campaign was their support for a series of new or rebuilt shrines to Zhou Dunyi, for which they wrote commemorative dedications explicitly identifying Zhou as the first sage since Mencius. Zhu Xi wrote seven of these and Zhang Shi wrote five.¹³

In addition to shrine dedications Zhu Xi wrote at least nine other pieces making the claim that Zhou Dunyi had first revived the Way of the Sages. One of these is especially useful as a window into Zhu's understanding of heaven and tradition: the "Record of the reconstruction of Zhou Dunyi's library/study in Jiangzhou," written in 1177.¹⁴ In this piece he deals not only with Zhou Dunyi but also with the question of the ontological status of the Way during periods when it is neither being practiced nor taught. As mentioned above, these gaps threatened to invalidate the Song Confucians' claim to have authentic access to the ultimate "principle of the Way" (*daoli*). They thereby weakened the Confucian position in their competition with contemporary Buddhists and Daoists for the hearts and minds of Song literati, since both of those groups had ways of justifying their claims to afford direct access to the *dao*. Chan Buddhism, which was extremely popular among Song literati,¹⁵ claimed to have an unbroken lineage of "patriarchs" (actually "ancestors," *zu* 祖) dating back to the Buddha, through whom the "mind to mind transmission" of the Buddha's Dharma gave them direct access to the enlightened mind of the Buddha. Similarly, Daoists claimed that their psycho-physical-spiritual practices of visualization, meditation, and manipulation of *qi* throughout the body enabled them to transform that *qi* into spiritual embodiments of the Dao. Therefore Zhu Xi argued that the Confucian "learning of the Way" (*daoxue* 道學) likewise enabled people to "hear the Way" despite the long gaps in its historical propagation:

The Way has never been lost from the world. It is only that its being entrusted to man [to carry out] has sometimes been interrupted and

¹³ See Adler, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao*, pp. 50-53, 58.

¹⁴ *Jiangzhou chongjian Lianxi xiansheng shutang ji* 江州重建濂溪先生書堂記, in *Hui'an xiansheng Zhu wengong wenji*, 78: 3739-3741 [hereafter *Wenji*], in *Zhuzi quanshu* 2002.

¹⁵ Zhu Xi himself seriously studied Buddhism before becoming a student of Li Tong 李侗 (1093-1163). He once visited the most famous and influential Chan Buddhist of the Song, Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163), who called him "Layman Zhu" (*Zhu jushi* 朱居士) – suggesting that Dahui considered Zhu to be (unofficially) a member of the lay *sangha*. See Shu Jingnan 束景南, *Zhu Xi nianpu changbian* 朱熹年譜長編 (Zhu Xi's Chronological Record, Extended Edition), 2 vols. (Shanghai: Donghua shifan daxue chubanshe, 2001), p. 188.

sometimes been continuous. Thus in its practice in the world there have been periods of clarity and periods of obscurity. This is all the result of the Decree of Heaven (*tianming* 天命); it is not something that the power of human wisdom is capable of achieving.

Of the variety of individual things produced and supported by the two [modes of] *qi* [i.e. *yin* and *yang*] and the Five Phases, in their mixed and confused rising and falling and coming and going throughout Heaven above and earth below, nothing lacks a definite pattern/order/principle (*li*). The greatest of these are the human nature [consisting] of humanity, rightness, propriety and wisdom,¹⁶ and the human relations of master and servant, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, friend and friend.¹⁷

This being the case, the cyclical flow [of the *dao*] includes everything without exception.¹⁸ So how can we think that the [alternation of] order and disorder from ancient times to the present is [evidence for] the existence and perishing [of the *dao*]?¹⁹

In the circulation of *qi* there are inequalities [in terms] of homogeneity and heterogeneity, discontinuity and unity, so in the human endowment there are differences [in terms] of purity and turbidity, dullness and clarity. Therefore, how the *dao* is entrusted to man and carried out in the world is only due to what Heaven confers and humans receive. It is certainly not due to the clever and presumptuous individual's ability to speculate and conjecture. [For example] the River Chart (*Hetu* 河圖) came out [of the Yellow River] and the Eight Trigrams were drawn; the Luo Writing (*Luoshu* 洛書) appeared and the Nine Regions were arranged.²⁰ Confucius, in reference to the flourishing and decline of "this

¹⁶ The "four constant virtues" in *Mencius* 2A.6 and 6A.6.

¹⁷ The "five human relations" in *Mencius* 3A.4 and *Zhongyong* 20.

¹⁸ That is, the *dao* is the dynamic flow of cosmic order (*li* 理), which is immanent throughout the natural and social worlds.

¹⁹ That is, although social and political order can break down, it is nevertheless the case that things happen for reasons. Thus the presence of disorder in society does not mean that the natural and moral order (*li*) has ceased to exist.

²⁰ Paraphrasing *Yijing*, *Xici* (Appended remarks) A.11.8 (*Zhouyi benyi*, 3:15a). The River Chart was a numerological diagram that appeared to the mythical sage Fuxi on the back of a dragon horse coming out of the Yellow River, and was used by him in his creation of the hexagrams and divination system of the *Zhou Yi* (or *Yijing*, Scripture of Change). The Luo Writing was a similar drawing that appeared to the mythical Yu the Great (founder of the Xia dynasty) on the shell of a spirit-tortoise as he was controlling the flooding of the Yellow River, and figured into his laying out of the Nine Regions of ancient China. Both diagrams had been associated with the *Yijing* ever since the Han

culture” (*siwen* 斯文),²¹ never failed to attribute it to Heaven. It is clear that the Sage did not deceive us in regard to this.

As for Master [Zhou] Lianxi, if he did not receive the propagation of this *dao* conferred by Heaven, how did he continue it so easily after such a long interruption, and bring it to light so abruptly after such extreme darkness?

With the decline of the Zhou and the death of Mencius, the propagation of this *dao* was not continued; even less so from the Qin through the Han, Jin, Sui and Tang, until our Song. Then the Sage-ancestor [Taizu, founding father of the Song] received the Mandate. The Five Planets were in conjunction in Kui 奎, marking a turning point in culture.²² Only then did the heterogeneous *qi* homogenize and the divided [*qi*] coalesce; a clear and bright endowment was received in its entirety by one man, and the Master [Zhou Dunyi] appeared. Without following a teacher, he silently registered the substance of the Way, constructed the Diagram and attached a text to it,²³ to give an ultimate foundation to the essentials.

At that time, the Cheng [brothers] were among those who saw and knew [Zhou Dunyi], and they subsequently expanded and clarified his teaching. They caused the subtlety of Heavenly principle, the manifest human relations, the multitude of phenomenal things, and the mystery of ghosts and spirits all to be fully joined together into one [system]. Thus the tradition of the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, and Mencius was brilliantly illuminated again in that era, and determined literati were able to study and respectfully practice [the Way], without losing its correctness, like those who appeared before the Three Dynasties [Xia, Shang and Zhou]. Ah! Such grandeur! Were it not for what Heaven conferred [on Zhou], how could we participate in this? ...

I have been fortunate to have heard the teachings of the Chengs, and consequently read the Master’s writings and saw how he was as a man. ... I have inquired into how the Master received the Way from

dynasty. See Joseph A. Adler, trans., *Introduction to the Study of the Classic of Change* (Provo: Global Scholarly Publications, 2002), pp. 1-14.

²¹ See *Analects* 9:5: “If Heaven intended this culture to perish, it would not have given it to those of us who live after King Wen’s death” (trans. Slingerland, *Confucius*, p. 87).

²² Kui, or “Straddler” in Schafer’s translation (*Pacing the Void*, 76), one of the twenty-eight “lunar lodges” (*xiu* 宿), was associated with Wenchang 文昌, the god of literature and civil service examinations (Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, pp. 213-214).

²³ Zhou’s “Discussion of the Supreme Polarity Diagram” (*Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說).

Heaven and transmitted it to others, in order to likewise transmit the events of his life, to enable later gentlemen to contemplate, examine, and promote it. ...²⁴

Zhu Xi's chief concerns here are the question of access to the *dao* across the long span of time since Mencius and the place of Zhou Dunyi in the lineage of Confucian sages. But in the course of addressing these points he reveals a set of assumptions about Heaven (*tian* 天) and tradition – specifically the “transmission of the succession of the Way” (*daotong zhi chuan* 道統之傳) – and it is these ideas that are the focus of the present paper.

Zhu Xi's answer to the question of the metaphysical status of the Way during periods when it is not being practiced or taught is that even during these gaps it still resides in human nature (*xing*), and in fact is immanent in the *li* that orders the universe. This is the result of Heaven's decree (*tianming*), which is to say that it is natural, necessary, and beyond human control. He makes this claim about Heaven *six times* in the above text. The point has an important bearing on what it means to be a Confucian sage. In one respect there seems to be an element of chance, in terms of Zhou Dunyi having been born when the five planets were in conjunction in a region of the heavens associated with the god of literature and examinations – the business of *ru* 儒 (scholars). It is also significant that Zhu stresses that “what Heaven confers and humans receive ... is certainly not due to the clever and presumptuous individual's ability to speculate and conjecture” – seemingly minimizing the uniqueness of the sage. In Zhu Xi's *Yixue qimeng* 易學啟蒙 (Introduction to the study of the *Yijing* 易經) he says something similar about the primordial sage, Fuxi 伏羲, the creator of the hexagram divination system. Fuxi, being the first sage, could only have perceived the *dao* on his own. His ability was natural and spontaneous (*ziran* 自然), which is to say that it was “given by Heaven.”

How could this have been achieved by the Sage's cogitation and wise deliberation? [I.e. it was not.] It was simply the naturalness of the particular phases [allotment?] of *qi*, formed into the patterns and images seen in the [River] Chart and [Luo] Writing, that exposed this to his mind, and he lent his hand to it.²⁵

²⁴ Wenji, 78:3739-3741.

²⁵ Zhu Xi, *Yixue qimeng*, p. 1203.

Here too we might be tempted to say that it is simply a matter of chance. But later in the *Yixue qimeng* he says of the River Chart and Luo Writing, “They both originate from the intention (*yi* 意) of Heaven.”²⁶ The same was true of Zhou Dunyi:

Only the Master’s Learning of the Way was profoundly excellent; he received its transmission from Heaven. He succeeded Confucius and Master Yan [Hui], and in turn enlightened (*qi* 啟) the Chengs. He enabled students of that generation to perceive a thousand generations of past sages and worthies, as if hearing their voices and seeing their faces [like Chan students with their masters]. Giving and receiving in a direct line, ordering all affairs, handing down the eternal without failing to be correct, his merit was extremely abundant. Since Mencius there have been none [like him].²⁷

Similarly:

Only the Master received Heaven’s gift and continued the succession of the Way (*daotong*), in order to connect the beginnings and ends and to help us later men.²⁸

And Zhu Xi’s student, Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178-1235), put it this way:

Man could not have achieved this without the aid of Heaven. Likewise with the learning of the Four Masters, how could they have offered such novel views and put forward new interpretations, such as their predecessors had not been able to arrive at, were it not simply due to Heaven?²⁹

What we have in these texts is a curious combination of chance and intentionality. Attributing the rare appearance of sages to Heaven is exactly like attributing something to “an act of God,” which implies something beyond human control but (if taken literally) a willful act of a purposeful deity. In both cases the attribution can be taken literally or metaphorically. The Cheng-Zhu Confucians understood it

²⁶ *Yixue qimeng*, p. 1210.

²⁷ “*Feng’an Lianxi xiansheng ciwen*” (Commemoration of the shrine to Master Lianxi at Feng’an, 1179), *Wenji* 86:4038. See also Shu, *Zhu Xi nianpu changbian*, p. 623.

²⁸ “*Shu Lianxi guangfeng jiyue ting*” (On Lianxi’s pavilion of the light breeze and clear moon), *Wenji* 84:3984.

²⁹ Zhen Dexiu, “*Nanxiong zhouxue si xiansheng citang ji* (Record of the memorial hall to the Four Masters at the Nanxiong provincial school); the Four Masters are Zhou Dunyi, the Cheng brothers, and Zhu Xi. Translated by de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, p. 10, with Wade-Giles changed to *pinyin* romanization.

metaphorically. The seemingly chance occurrences were neither random nor willful. In the “Record of the reconstruction of Zhou Dunyi’s library” Zhu Xi says, “nothing lacks a definite *li*,” which is to say that everything happens for a reason. Therefore it is not random. And while Heaven seems to have a will or a mind (Cheng Yi had spoken of “the mind of Heaven and Earth to produce things”³⁰), that seeming intentionality is revealed in *natural* processes. In other words, natural, non-intentional processes result in events that may seem to be intentional but are not – like the modern understanding of biological evolution, which is *directional* (teleonomic) but not *directed* (teleologic).³¹ The classical “Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming* 天命) similarly straddled this line between intentional and non-intentional action. Most people probably understood it as the willful choice of Heaven – conceived at least partly as a personalistic deity – to remove the authority to rule from one family and confer it on another, like the Biblical God choosing a person to be his prophet, or a Chinese deity possessing a spirit-medium.³² But as we shall see, the Neo-Confucians rationalized *tianming*, much as they did the popular notion of “ghosts and spirits” (*gui-shen* 鬼神). They accepted the existence of ghosts and spirits but understood them as natural, not supernatural, phenomena. For example, Zhu Xi said that ghosts and spirits are natural manifestations of *qi*: “*Gui* and *shen* are nothing more than the growth and dispersion of *yin* and *yang*.”³³

³⁰ This is from Cheng Yi’s commentary on hexagram 24 (Fu, Return) of the *Yijing*, in *Er Cheng ji*, p. 819. See Smith, et. al., *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*, p. 247. Cheng Yi also said, “The Way spontaneously produces all things” (*Er Cheng ji*, p. 149; see also Chan, *Source Book*, p. 553). “The mind of Heaven and Earth” (*tiandi zhi xin* 天地之心) had earlier appeared in the “*Liyun*” 禮運 chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (Record of Ritual), section 20.

³¹ Jacques Monod makes use of the teleonomy/teleology distinction in his landmark book, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology* (NY: Knopf, 1971). Democritus, in 5th century BCE Greece, had identified chance and necessity as the basic principles of physics. See G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 411-413.

³² See de Bary’s discussion of the prophetic nature of “repossessing the Way” in his *The Trouble with Confucianism*, and my review of the book in *Journal of Chinese Religions*, no. 21 (1993), 137-142, where I discuss the “prophetic” issue.

³³ Quoted in Hu Guang, *Xingli daquan shu* 性理大全書 (Great Compendium on Human Nature and Principle; 1415) (Siku quanshu ed.), 28:2a, 2b, p. 609. See my discussion of this in Joseph A. Adler, “Varieties of Spiritual Experience,” in Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds, *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 2 (NY: Crossroad, 2004), pp. 122-128.

As early as the classical Confucian philosopher Xunzi some had understood Heaven to be simply the natural world (surely Xunzi was not the only person to do so). Although Zhu Xi likewise leaned toward the naturalistic side of the spectrum, he still retained an apparent suggestion of a moral will in his statements about Heaven, unlike Xunzi. His view of the appearance of sages like Fuxi and Zhou Dunyi is, I think it is fair to say, a Neo-Confucian analogue of *revelation*. Unlike Biblical revelation, it is not the deliberate action of a personal deity; hence terms like “the intention of Heaven” and “the mind of Heaven and Earth” are more metaphorical than literal. Yet the unfolding of “Heaven’s principle” (*tianli*, the natural order) does have *something like* purpose or intentionality. Again, it is teleonomic, not teleologic; it has direction but no director. This can be seen in Zhu Xi’s conception of *ming* 命, “mandate, decree, command,” to which we now turn.

IV. ZHU XI ON MING

There are two aspects to Zhu’s understanding of *ming*: the internal and the external.³⁴ The internal *ming* is the individual’s allotment of *qi*; more specifically, the quality of one’s *qi*, one’s “given” psychophysical constitution. Each person is born with a unique endowment of *qi*, which may be relatively clear and fine or relatively cloudy and impure. The relative clarity of one’s *qi* – and it is crucial to remember that the mind/heart (*xin* 心) is composed of *qi* – determines the degree of difficulty one will have in apprehending and understanding moral principle (*li*), both in the mind itself and in external things. Externally, *ming* refers to the circumstances in which one is born: whether one has a family and community with the means to physically, emotionally, and intellectually nourish one – variables that depend in part upon the state and its rulership. These factors were addressed by Mencius, who implied that those who fail to develop their moral natures do so because of the poor quality of these social environmental factors.³⁵ Taken together, these

³⁴ Michael Nylan suggests this schema in her article on “Ming” in the *Routledge Curzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, pp. 428-429.

³⁵ Mencius never says this explicitly, at least in the record we have of his teachings, but it is the clear implication of what he does say. In his only recorded explicit response to the nature/nurture question (which is also the problem of theodicy in this context), he merely says that those who fail to nourish their moral natures do so because they fail to think, or fail to recognize the importance of their moral natures (*Mencius* 6a:15). This,

internal and external dimensions of the given conditions of human life, over which we have no control (the realm of necessity), are the limiting factors in the process of self-transformation leading potentially to sagehood, and therefore also the limiting factors in the probability of sages appearing in any given era.

Zhu Xi focused primarily on the internal *ming*, i.e. the individual's endowment of *qi*, in his discussions of the individual process of self-transformation. But the rare appearance of sages who can continue the *daotong* is due to external *ming*, and it is the latter (external) that determines the former (internal). The external factors that determine one's configuration or allotment of *qi* at the time and place of one's birth even include the positions of the planets, as he mentions in his "Record of the reconstruction of Zhou Dunyi's library," and the weather:

If the sun and moon are clear and bright, and the climate temperate and reasonable, the man born at such a time and endowed with such *qi*, which is clear, bright, well-blended, and strong, should be a good man. But if the sun and moon are darkened and gloomy, and the temperature abnormal, all this is evidence of violent *qi*. There is no doubt that if a man is endowed with such *qi*, he will be a bad man.³⁶

Heaven is the source of these variables over which we have no control; they are what "Heaven decrees/gives" (*tianming*). But Heaven is also the source of the moral nature (*xing*), which is part of the natural order (*tianli*). *Tianming* is the impersonal "givenness" of necessity; *tianli* is the spontaneous, self-directing ordering process inherent in the natural world of *qi*. It is because *li* is the ordering process that *li* is inherently good: order *per se* is good in Confucian thought. This may be why Cheng Hao could make the seemingly unorthodox claim (for a Neo-Confucian) that even evil acts are *li*: they are *li* because they happen for reasons.³⁷

obviously, only pushes the question back a step: why do some fail to think? The answer is an insufficiently nurturing social environment.

³⁶ *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 (Zhu Xi's "Complete Works"), comp. Li Guangdi 李光地 (1714; rpt. Taipei: Guangxue, 1977, 2 vols) (hereafter *Zhuzi quanshu* 1714), 43:4b. This translation by Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 624-625, with "qi" substituted for "material force."

³⁷ See Wing-tsit Chan, comp., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 529. Chan's attempt to explain the apparent contradiction doesn't convince me. Furthermore, thinking of *li* as the "ordering process" rather than as static "pattern" makes sense of Zhu Xi's frequent references to *li* "flowing forth" (*liuxing* 流行); e.g. *Yulei* 9:308, 27:985, 28:1023, 31:1126, 36:1331, *Wenji* 36:1568, etc.

In the human being, the natural ordering process, the “flowing forth” (*liuxing* 流行) of *li*, is the proper development by which one’s moral potential is cultivated into full-fledged moral virtues, and is called the nature (*xing*).³⁸ But this proper development is not inevitable (obviously); it can be short-circuited by both internal and external factors. The internal self-limiting factors result from a less than fine endowment of *qi*; externally they include environmental factors, some of which can be avoided. Zhu Xi’s comments on two passages in the *Mencius* are particularly illuminating on this point. In the first of these Mencius introduces a distinction between “proper” (*zheng* 正) and “improper” (*feizheng* 非正) *ming*. According to *Mencius* 7A.2:³⁹

Mencius said: Though nothing happens that is not due to *ming* 命, one accepts willingly only what is proper (*zheng* 正).

Zhu Xi comments:

At people’s birth what is auspicious and inauspicious, unfortunate and fortunate, are both what is given (*ming*) by Heaven. But only that which is beyond one’s control is proper *ming*. So the superior person cultivates himself and waits for it. That is why he willing accepts it.

Here Zhu Xi underscores the idea that *ming* “proper” refers to what is beyond our control, like the time and place of one’s birth, or one’s parentage. Mencius continues:

Therefore one who understands *ming* does not stand under a crumbling wall.

Zhu Xi:

“*Ming*” here means proper *ming*. A crumbling wall is one that is about to fall. If one understands proper *ming* one doesn’t stand in a dangerous spot to accept the misfortune of annihilation.

³⁸ I am following A. C. Graham and Roger Ames in understanding the nature of a thing not as a fixed essence but as its natural course of development. For Graham see “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature” (1967; reprinted in Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986) and in Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002). For Ames see “The Mencian Conception of *Ren xing* (人性): Does it Mean ‘Human Nature?’” in Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham* (Chicago: Open Court, 1991), and “Mencius and a Process Notion of Human Nature,” in Alan K. L. Chan, ed., *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

³⁹ Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注 (Sibu beiyao ed.), *Mengzi* 7:1b.

That is, if one understands proper *ming* one knows that being killed by a falling wall does *not* fall into that category because it is not inevitable; one can choose to be careful and avoid it.

Mencius:

To die after fulfilling one's Way is proper *ming*.

Zhu Xi:

If one fulfills one's Way then what is of auspicious or inauspicious value is always beyond one's control.

To do one's best, to fulfill one's moral potential (*de* 德), is to act in accordance with what we can *metaphorically* call Heaven's "moral will" or "command" (*tianming*). That is all one can and should do. If despite having done this one suffers misfortune, that is beyond one's control. It too is due to Heaven because whatever causes the misfortune is not a random event; there is a principle (*li*) to it. But it is not the proper, natural result of one's moral behavior, and it is not the natural course of development of one's moral nature, so it is not one's proper *ming*.

Mencius continues:

To die in fetters is not a proper *ming* (*fei zheng ming*).

Zhu Xi comments:

"Fetters" are the punishment of a criminal, so this says that dying from a criminal offence and standing under a crumbling wall are both human choices; they are not done by Heaven.

Again, one can avoid dying in fetters by making proper choices, so this too is not one's proper *ming*.

The point of the distinction between proper and improper *ming* is that, of those things that happen *to* us, some are inevitable and necessary and others can be avoided by wise choices. Both of these categories are due to Heaven; or in Zhu Xi's terms, both are part of the natural order (*tianli*). But the avoidable misfortunes are not the natural course of development of one's Heaven-given nature. This natural course of development, I suggest, is the "real" mechanism (according to Zhu Xi) that is metaphorically called "obeying Heaven's will/command." I understand it as follows:

According to Mencius we are born with certain natural feelings or dispositions (*qing* 情), such as the "four beginnings" (*si duan* 四端), which, when cultivated, develop into full-fledged virtues (*de* 德).

The four beginnings are one's moral potential – “potential” not in the sense of mere possibility, but more like the concept of “potential energy” in physics. Potential energy, such as when I expend physiological energy by lifting an object, is something that actually exists: my physiological energy is converted into the potential energy now present in the object. When I let go of the object its potential energy is converted into kinetic energy as it falls, since energy is neither created nor destroyed. The moral potential of the four beginnings is also like a vector: it has both magnitude and direction. An acorn doesn't grow into a maple tree; it has a particular directionality; its normal course of development is to grow into an oak tree, and that is its *xing* (“nature”). For an old oak tree to die naturally and return to the earth would be its proper *ming*. Similarly, the natural, unimpeded development of our moral potential in its inherent directionality *tending towards virtue* is human nature, and “to die after fulfilling one's Way is proper *ming*.” Here the words “fate” or “destiny” can loosely, metaphorically be applied to *ming*, although I think they are misleading as translations. If there are external limiting factors, such as inadequate education or (in the case of Ox Mountain in *Mencius* 6A.8) cattle grazing on a green mountain and stripping it bare, that is not proper *ming*. So to act according to the innate moral tendencies “given” to us by Heaven (i.e. natural), and to overcome the psycho-physical and environmental limitations that are also “given” to us, is to realize one's “proper” *ming*. Since we have the choice whether and how thoroughly to overcome our limitations and realize our innate tendencies, Mencius prefers to regard their development as *xing*. In 7B.24 he says:⁴⁰

The mouth's relation to tastes, the eye's to colors, the ear's to sounds, the nose's to smells, and the four limbs' to ease are natural (*xing* 性). Yet *ming* is also there [i.e. they are given], so the *junzi* 君子 does not call them *xing*.

Zhu Xi's comment:

Master Cheng said: These five desires are natural, but they are allotted (*fen* 分) and cannot always be what we desire, so they are given (*ming*).

One's sensory functions are natural, innate, and part of what defines being human; to this extent they are part of our “nature.” But one who is devoted to pursuing the Confucian *dao* – i.e. a *junzi* – recognizes that one has no choice about them, and so applies the distinction described above to them, distinguishing between what we have choice about and

⁴⁰ *Sishu jizhu*, *Mengzi* 7:19b.

what we do not. By this definition our sensory functions are *ming*: they are both “given” and necessary. Mencius continues:

Humanity between father and son, rightness between master and servant, ritual propriety between guest and host, wisdom between worthies, and the sage in the Way of Heaven are given (*ming*). Yet *xing* is also there, so the *junzi* does not call them *ming*.

Zhu Xi comments:

Master Cheng said: Humanity, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom are the Way of Heaven. In humans they are bestowed in what is given (*ming*); they are the density and clarity of the [physical] endowment [or the “physical nature,” *qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性]. But they are also the goodness of human nature (*xing*), which can be learned and fulfilled. Therefore we do not call them *ming*.

Here Mencius and Zhu Xi implicitly apply Mencius’ claim that the goodness (actually the moral potential, as described above) of human nature is natural, which is to say that it is “given by Heaven.” As the first line of the *Zhongyong* clarifies, “What is given by Heaven (*tian ming*) is human nature (*xing*).” And as Confucius had said, “Heaven gave birth to the virtue (*de*) in me.”⁴¹ To say that human nature is given (by Heaven) is to say that *xing* is *ming*. But since we *do* have choices whether or how thoroughly to cultivate the moral potential of our nature, we should consider it *xing*, not *ming*.

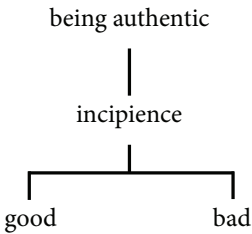
V. TIANMING AND DAOTONG

Since both the individual’s fulfillment of his/her moral nature and the appearance of sages who can propagate the Way are matters of *tianming*, we can apply this notion of proper *ming* to Zhu Xi’s understanding of the Confucian tradition (*daotong*). When he says that the “periods of clarity and periods of obscurity” in the propagation of the Way are “all the result of the Decree of Heaven (*tianming* 天命),” he is saying that the “proper *ming*” would be for the Way always to prevail. But “chance” events intervene, preventing the *dao* from prevailing. (Again, I am not using “chance” in the sense of randomness, but more like the chance coincidence of two independent lines of causation.) These chance events would be the inverse of the chance events that give rise to sages like

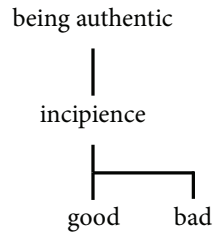
⁴¹ *Analects* 7:22.

Zhou Dunyi. That is, just as a unique configuration of *qi* in a certain time and place gave rise to the sage, in other times and places it did not. Therefore the world is like a person standing under a crumbling wall (to use Mencius' example), and it suffers the consequences: long periods without sages. These consequences are not random – i.e. they do have rational causes – but neither are they what is “meant” to happen, in the teleonomic (directional but not directed), not teleological, sense. That is, the interruptions in the transmission of the Way are *divergences* from the natural course of events, like disease in an organism, or a flourishing oak tree that is felled by a logger.

Zhu Xi's understanding of the natural course of development of a person's moral potential, which is metaphorically called Heaven's will or decree (*tianming*), is illustrated in a diagram drawn by a student of his in a letter to Zhu. The student was Zhao Zhidao 趙致道, who in the letter is contrasting Hu Hong's incorrect theory of evil with Zhou Dunyi's correct one:



This demonstrates Mr. Hu's error.



This clarifies Master Zhou's idea.

In the diagram on the right, the straight line from “authenticity” (*cheng* 誠) through “incipience” (*ji* 幾) to “good” (*shan* 善) is the natural course of development of the Heaven-given nature. The “bad” (*e* 惡) is like a “parasitic growth” on a tree or an illegitimate descent-line in a family, as Zhao Zhidao explains in the letter, and Zhu Xi emphatically agrees.⁴² Therefore good and evil do not have equal status, as Hu Hong's model implies. This is what I mean by “divergence” from the natural course of events. On the cultural level, the gaps in the transmission of the Confucian tradition are divergences from “Heaven's will” in the same sense.

⁴² *Wenji* 59:2863. For a complete translation of the letter see *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao*, pp. 234-236.

The rationalizing tendencies of Cheng-Zhu Confucianism have long been recognized. But their naturalistic, humanistic worldview was flexible enough to acknowledge the existence of gods, ghosts, and ancestors and to incorporate them into its natural philosophy. Likewise, it could accommodate a sense of transcendence, symbolized by Heaven, that was *not* supernatural. As Xunzi had suggested in the 3rd century BCE, both the literate elite and common people could use the “language” of ritual offerings to ancestors, but the former (in Xunzi’s view) understood it in psychological terms while the latter understood it as having to do with the literal existence of spirits. The Cheng-Zhu Confucians similarly used the language of a willfull Heaven but understood Heaven’s will as the natural, “proper” development of the nature of things. The breadth and non-dualism of this way of thinking enabled Chinese intellectuals to contemplate and affirm all aspects of human experience, including religious experience. There was no sharp distinction, for example, between rationality and intuition, or thinking and feeling, because both elements in these pairs were functions of the “mind/heart,” or *xin*. They constructed a worldview in which rationality does not preclude or conflict with a sense of awe and an appreciation of mystery. As Zhu Xi put it,

Yang ... is the beginning of things; *yin* ... is the end of things. If we are able to trace back to their beginnings and understand how they are generated, then we can turn to their ends and understand how they die. This is the ineffable mystery (*buyan zhi miao* 不言之妙) of the orderly process of creation, flowing from past to present throughout heaven and earth.⁴³

This way of thinking allows for “ineffable mystery,” but does not segregate it to a spiritual realm that is ontologically distinct from the mundane, physical realm. The ineffable mystery of creation is inherent in the world, not extrinsic to it. Christian process theologians, such as John Cobb and Gordon Kaufman, have said very much the same thing, based primarily on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Other modern

⁴³ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Taijitu shuo jie* 朱子太極圖說解 (Master Zhu’s commentary on the “Discussion of the Supreme Polarity Diagram”), in Zhang Boxing, comp., *Zhou Lianxi xiansheng quanji* 周濂溪先生全集 (Zhou Dunyi’s Collected Works) (1708; rpt. in *Zhengyi tang quanshu* 正義堂全書 [Baibu congshu jicheng ed.]), 1:31a. The paragraph above is adapted from my article, “The Heritage of Non-theistic Belief in China,” in J. Gordon Melton and Mark Vandebrake, eds, *Forging a Secular World: A History of Modern Unbelief* (forthcoming).

thinkers, such as Thomas Berry, have written in a similar vein about “the great cosmic liturgy of the natural world,” a liturgy fully based on scientific understandings of the physical world, life, and evolution.⁴⁴ Zhu Xi’s conceptions of Heaven and tradition are revealing windows into a premodern worldview of similar breadth and subtlety.

⁴⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), p. 19.