

KNOWLEDGE, ACTION, AND VIRTUE IN ZHU XI



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I

How are knowing and acting related? Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) addresses this question with a walking analogy: “Knowledge and action always need each other. It’s like how eyes cannot walk without feet, but feet cannot see without eyes. If we discuss them in terms of their sequence, knowledge comes first. But if we discuss them in terms of importance, action is what is important” (V/148:1).¹ In this analogy, a certain perceptual awareness is *causally prior* to walking. Such awareness is responsible for the walker’s proceeding without obstacle and walking successfully. But, in the analogy, walking is *normatively prior* to sight. That is, sight’s value is subordinated to that of walking: sight is valuable for the sake of walking, the action for which sight is beneficial. As Zhu Xi’s analogy suggests, what holds for sight and walking holds for knowing and acting generally. In all cases, knowledge and action are reciprocally related. But whereas knowledge is causally prior to action, action is normatively prior to knowledge. Knowledge, then, is valuable for its instrumental role in successful action.

With this walking analogy, Zhu Xi is making a point not just about the requirements of action in general, but about the requirements of *virtuous* action in particular. Consider an exchange between Zhu Xi and a disciple. The disciple recounts the teachings of a master from Hunan, who implores his students simply to act. Zhu Xi questions such a teaching: “If one is not enlightened about the Pattern of righteousness,” he asks, “how can one act?” (V/152:14). For one’s action fully to exemplify righteousness (*yi* 義), Zhu Xi thinks, one must first somehow *know* righteousness and its “pattern” or *li* 理. To explain, Zhu Xi reintroduces his walking analogy: “[I]f you cannot see, how can you walk?” (V/152:14). Again, action requires knowledge, and what holds for fully righteous action holds for all forms of virtuous action. Only when people have the right kind of knowledge—a complete apprehension of *li*—will they act fully virtuously. As Zhu Xi construes it, such knowledge consists in a certain enlightenment about *li* as an all-pervasive principle or coherent pattern that unifies the cosmos as a whole and that manifests itself as attached to different clarities of *qi* 氣 (vital energy).² Indeed—as a separate point and more optimistically—Zhu Xi thinks that when people have attained such enlightenment, “they will naturally always be filial in serving their

relatives, fraternal in serving their elder brothers, and faithful in interacting with friends" (V/152:14).

Zhu Xi, I take it, is a kind of virtue ethicist.³ Unlike some other virtue ethicists, however, he accepts a bold intellectualist view: acting virtuously requires knowing *li* as such. If one lacks this knowledge, one's agency will be less than fully virtuous, for one's virtue will fail to be "completely authentic" (*jie shi* 皆實).⁴ One's actions, that is, will fail fully to display one's true, ultimately virtuous, human nature. Instead, one's actions will always be less than perfect, tinged with the influence of bad desires, and one's human nature will remain, to that extent, obscured.

According to Zhu Xi's *investigation thesis*, then, a necessary condition (in ordinary cases) for one's acting fully virtuously is one's investigating the all-pervasive *li* in things (*gewu* 格物). True, the sage kings, such as King Wen, may well have been born naturally and effortlessly knowing *li* (132:12). But most of us are not natural-born sages. So, to cultivate ourselves fully, we must investigate *li* (152:14, 161:4). Investigating *li* in things, however, is a kind of philosophical investigation. For it aims to understand the broad structure (or "pattern") of reality, virtue, and the human good. Hence, the investigation thesis implies that fully developed or "completely authentic" virtue requires a certain philosophical understanding.

In accepting this investigation thesis, Zhu Xi invites comparison with Plato. At *Symposium* 210a–d, for instance, Diotima outlines for Socrates an ascending progression of studies of beauty throughout the cosmos that a philosopher must make in order to contemplate the Form of Beauty Itself (αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν). At *Symposium* 211e4–212a5, in turn, Diotima tells Socrates that only when one apprehends and contemplates Beauty Itself will one be able "to give birth not to images of virtue" (τίκτειν οὐκ εἰδῶλα ἀρετῆς), "but to true" virtue (ἀλλὰ ἀληθῆ). Here, Plato's Diotima suggests that a certain philosophical investigation—contemplating or studying Forms—is required for one's possessing and exercising true virtue, which manifests beauty (τὸ καλόν) in an exemplary way, and which is virtuous without qualification. To cultivate and exercise such unqualifiedly beautiful virtue (as opposed merely to some semblance of such virtue), the thought goes, one must grasp the nature of virtue, including the nature of beauty as one of virtue's constitutive features.⁵ To be sure, Zhu Xi's *li* differs in kind from a Platonic Form. Yet Zhu Xi and Plato uphold similar intellectualist views concerning authentic or true virtue's necessary knowledge conditions. Thus, it is unsurprising that some scholars (most notably Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭) have sensed relevant similarities between Zhu Xi and Plato on self-cultivation.⁶

If so, however, then Zhu Xi's investigation thesis faces worries that other philosophers have raised against broadly Platonic views. Rosalind Hursthouse, for instance, rejects what she labels "the Platonic fantasy." As she describes it, "This is the fantasy that it is only through the study of philosophy that one can become virtuous (or really virtuous), and, as soon as it is stated explicitly, it is

revealed to be a fantasy that must be most strenuously resisted.”⁷ Why should such a thesis amount to a “fantasy”? For Hursthouse, such a position assumes an excessively articulate—“over intellectual” and “far too *fancy*”—conception of virtue.⁸ To act fully virtuously, the view (mistakenly) holds, we must grasp, through philosophical investigation of virtue and the human good, some kind of (general) blueprint or pattern of virtue and the human good from which to deduce (particular) virtuous actions in specific circumstances. Yet according to non-intellectualists like Hursthouse, the fully virtuous person need not deduce any actions from any blueprints or patterns.⁹ “Of *course* people can be virtuous, really virtuous, without having spent clockable hours” investigating virtue and “working out an account of acting well.”¹⁰ It is simply false, Hursthouse claims, that a fully virtuous person must “have reflected long and hard” about the human good and have formulated “a picture of what is involved in acting well so comprehensive and substantial that it can be applied and its application justified in every suitable case.”¹¹ Perhaps one can be fully virtuous simply through sufficient habituation to fixed and stable virtuous dispositions. On such a non-intellectualist view, one chooses a virtuous action *qua* virtuous, and as an instance of doing well, just when one acts from a fixed and permanent state—namely the virtue(s) in question.¹²

For non-intellectualists, it is extravagant enough to insist that we must grasp, through philosophical investigation, some substantive pattern of virtue and the human good from which to deduce virtuous actions. But it would seem all the more extravagant to insist, as Zhu Xi does, that being fully virtuous requires us to grasp the *li* that pervades all things. Hence, Zhu Xi’s investigation thesis—the non-intellectualist might worry—stands to be a non-starter. First, the investigation thesis identifies substantive understanding of *li* as a necessary condition for attaining and exercising full virtue. The thesis thereby assumes that the fully virtuous agent deduces the fitting action to perform from his attained understanding of *li*. Thus, the investigation thesis commits one to an untenable, overly calculative conception of virtuous decision making. (Call this *the rationalism worry*.) Second, the investigation thesis simultaneously threatens to raise the requirements for being fully virtuous objectionably high. Becoming fully virtuous, for Zhu Xi, is a major cognitive achievement: it requires people to investigate *li* exhaustively and to understand *li* in all things (CCGL 5). Consequently, the worry goes, the investigation thesis promises to rule out as virtuous the vast majority of humanity, who are presumably incapable of meeting these standards. (Call this *the elitism worry*.)¹³

Related worries about the investigation thesis—and indeed any view according to which investigating the world (philosophically) is required for full virtue—find expression in Zhu Xi’s own historical context. For instance, as Wang Yangming 王陽明 recounts:

Day and night Qian went ahead trying to investigate to the utmost *li* in the bamboos. He exhausted his mind and thoughts and on the third day he was

tired out and took sick. At first I said that it was because his energy and strength were insufficient. Therefore I myself went to try to investigate to the utmost. From morning till night, I was unable to find *li* of the bamboos. On the seventh day I also became sick because I thought too hard. In consequence we sighed to each other and said that it was impossible to be a sage or a worthy, for we do not have the tremendous energy to investigate things that they have. (Trans. from T/V 2014, p. 239)

Wang concludes that this inference is wrong. One can become a sage. But investigating *li* in bamboo is the wrong way to do it.

Here, Wang suggests at least two linked worries about the investigation thesis. The first is an *explicit* worry: In insisting that we should investigate *li* throughout nature, Zhu Xi endorses an overly demanding requirement for virtuous agency. He requires us to engage in a great deal of esoteric investigative activity that overstrains human nature and constitutes sheer drudgery. (Call this *the demandingness worry*.) Wang also suggests a second, linked, and *implicit* worry: as an esoteric intellectual exercise, investigating *li* promises to be utterly beside the point. The sort of investigation that Zhu Xi endorses is neither necessary nor sufficient for virtuous action. We should not seek some external pattern or blueprint for guiding virtuous action by investigating *li* in bamboo, or in anything external to humanity as such. (Call this *the irrelevance worry*.)¹⁴

In what follows, then, I consider Zhu Xi's investigation thesis. Does Zhu Xi have good reason to think that fully virtuous action requires the synoptic investigation of things that he proposes? To what extent can Zhu Xi respond to the worries I have sketched? Ultimately, I contend, Zhu Xi articulates a defensible, though still controversial, account of virtuous agency's necessary conditions, one that can handle these challenges. Exploring how Zhu Xi can address these worries elucidates how related intellectualist views in other traditions might respond to such concerns as well.

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I begin by briefly spelling out Zhu Xi's core metaphysical and cosmological claims, which inform Zhu Xi's commitment to the investigation thesis. Zhu Xi's views are open to significant scholarly debate. Thus, I present one possible—yet still reasonable and textually supported—reading of his main views.¹⁵

First, Zhu Xi accounts for the cosmos in terms of *li* and *qi*. He makes two central claims: (1) that *li* is manifest throughout the universe, and (2) that this *li* is somehow inseparable from *qi*, even if *li*'s precise relation to *qi* is unclear (1:11, 2:5, 3:3, 3:8, 3:12, 4:1, 65:12).¹⁶ Hence, everything in the cosmos—from monkeys to palm trees, from paper scrolls to human beings—is an integrated unity of *li* and *qi*.

Li renders the cosmos a unified totality instead of a disorganized heap. For everything in the cosmos manifests *one and the same li* (58:14). Various

items differ, then, not on account of *li*, but on account of their *qi* (58:11). Things of different kinds possess differing clarities of *qi*, which in turn determine an ordered hierarchy of beings. Corresponding to some item's clarity of *qi* is that item's capacity to apprehend *li*. Given their especially clear *qi*, human beings have awareness and can grasp *li* (65:14). The human endowment of *qi* thus distinguishes human beings from other animals and plants, whose *qi* is relatively turbid (73:1) and cognitive powers are weaker. Further, among the set of human beings, those members with the clearest *qi* are the most sage-like (66:2; cf. 68:2, 69:4, 73:4).

Zhu Xi's remarks on *li* can be confusing. He insists that there is ultimately one *li*, the Great Ultimate (or "Supreme Polarity": *Taiji* 太極 [2:3]). Yet he writes as if we encounter multiple *li*: boats and carts, for instance, have their respective *li* (61:14). In Zhu Xi's considered view, there is indeed only one *li*, "but its manifestations are diverse" (V/102:8; cf. 2:7, 99:11, 102:6, 154:16). Various derivative "*li*" display themselves, yet these derivative "*li*" are but manifestations of (one) *li* in differing clarities of *qi* (58:11, 73:8).

But what precisely is *li*? Recall that, for Zhu Xi, *li* is most fully manifest in human beings. Indeed: "Human nature is just *li*" (V/68:2; cf. 69:4, 73:4, 83:1, 83:7, 88:12–14). Here, Zhu Xi is influenced by Mengzi, according to whom human nature consists, primarily, in the heart-mind's dispositions toward benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智) (*Mengzi* 2A6, 6A6, 7B16)—in short, toward Confucian virtue.¹⁷ For Zhu Xi, *li* 理 is somehow especially *identifiable with* Confucian virtue. Hence, Zhu Xi says, "*Qi* is metal, wood, water, and fire; *li* is benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom" (V/3:5; cf. 65:12). In Zhu Xi's view, all things, insofar as they manifest *li*, manifest Confucian virtue: "when humans and things are generated, they each receive an endowment of *li*, which constitutes the Five Virtues (of benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, propriety, and faithfulness)" (*CC Mean*, chap. 1 [TV 2014, p. 221]). Confucian virtue, in other words, orders the cosmos and gives it a coherent pattern—a pattern realized in *qi*.

Consider the realm of human affairs. For Zhu Xi, to be a human being is to possess predispositions for the Confucian virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (124.10; cf. *CC Mengzi* at 6A6). Confucian virtue unifies, and gives a coherent pattern to, human nature. One fully exemplifies one's humanity, in turn, insofar as one clarifies one's *qi* and brings these predispositions to their full manifestation. Yet such virtue is manifest within, and gives a coherent pattern to, the social world of human beings. By harmonizing people and their aims interpersonally, Confucian virtue transforms a disordered heap of competing, individual wills into a stable community.

Li qua Confucian virtue, however, manifests itself, if less perspicuously, throughout the non-human natural world as well.¹⁸ Confucian virtue, for instance, gives a coherent pattern to animal life: "[T]igers and wolves have fathers and sons, bees have rulers and ministers, jackals and otters [leave food behind to] give thanks, geese and swans mark social distinctions. This

is why we refer to them as ‘benevolent beasts’ or ‘righteous beasts’” (V/73:5; cf. 65:14). Non-human animals approximate human beings by approximating the Confucian virtue that human beings, when fully cultivated, display most clearly.

Even inanimate objects manifest *li qua* Confucian virtue, as if through a glass darkly. In one exchange, an understandably puzzled student questions Zhu Xi on this point. “Then how,” the student asks, “are benevolence and righteousness manifested in the writing brush?” Zhu Xi replies, “Subtly, in minute aspects, benevolence and righteousness are manifested” (V/61:12). To understand the writing brush’s derivative “*li*,” Zhu Xi suggests, the student should attend to the ways in which *li qua* Confucian virtue displays itself in the brush’s relatively turbid *qi*. In this spirit, Bryan W. Van Norden speculates that the writing brush as useful displays benevolence; as possessing integrity, it displays righteousness; as responsive to its environment, it displays wisdom; and as ornamental, it displays propriety.¹⁹ In what follows, I adopt this proposal.

For Zhu Xi, then, the whole cosmos fits together as a cosmos because the *li* most fully manifest in human nature—namely the complex of dispositions that I have called Confucian virtue—is evident throughout the cosmos, albeit more or less clearly across various kinds of things. Things exhibit *li* insofar as they possess Confucian virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, and the like, or insofar as they exhibit approximations to virtues, such as usefulness, integrity, and the like, that are determined by these things’ relative clarity of *qi*.

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Zhu Xi, then, presents a richly normative conception of the universe. Insofar as investigating things requires one to investigate Confucian virtue as it manifests itself in the universe, one can imagine, in some fairly general way, why investigating things might have *some* place in ethical education. But on what precise grounds should Zhu Xi think that the fully virtuous person must investigate things and their *li*?

Zhu Xi compares virtuous agency to archery: “If your will fixes on the bull’s-eye”—that is, on what one should do—“soon you will occasionally hit the target” (G/154:5). By contrast, if one’s will does not fix on the bull’s-eye, one will go astray. Assume, then, that one apprehends *li* as a complex of virtuous dispositions—benevolence, righteousness, and the like. Such understanding of *li* enables one to discern the end—benevolence, righteousness, and the like—that one aims to realize in acting virtuously. Such understanding, in turn, provides the clearest view of the target at which one’s practice aims. In short, Zhu Xi suggests, investigating things is necessary for *maximal discernment and reliability in practice*.²⁰

To clarify, consider Zhu Xi’s views on the proper stages of ethical education. He suggests that we grasp *that* certain kinds of deeds are to be

performed, and certain kinds of character traits are to be developed, through our initial, early education. Zhu Xi calls this basic education—which provides “the direct understanding of such and such an affair”—“lesser learning” (G/124:12). Through ritual, music, archery, calligraphy, mathematics, and basic character education (124:4), one initially secures decent motivations, including truthfulness and attentiveness. Such lesser learning initially cultivates our innate predispositions toward virtue (124:10, 126:5; *CCGL*, Preface [T/V 186]).²¹

But greater learning—investigating things and apprehending *li*—develops higher-order cognitive abilities. Such learning “is the investigation of such-and-such a *li*—the reason *why* an affair is as it is” (G/124:12, my italics; cf. 124:13, 125:1). Understanding why an affair is as it is, Zhu Xi can argue, is both salient and necessary for performing the deed as virtuously as possible. In understanding *why*, for instance, one should perform a certain benevolent deed, one is in a position to perform such a deed not for the wrong reasons, or for its incidental features, but for the right reasons, and for the deed’s relevant good-making features. Performing the deed from this perspective ensures that one does not perform what merely happens to be a virtuous deed; instead, it ensures that one performs a virtuous deed *as such*.²²

Clearly discerning and deeply understanding *li qua* Confucian virtue conduces to reliable virtuous agency in another way. Zhu Xi suggests that, insofar as one fails to understand *li* and to attend to that understanding, one is prone to akrasia or worse. Insofar as one lacks such rich understanding, and insofar as it fails to inform one’s choices, one lacks a chief countervailing factor to undermine akrasia. In akratic moments, selfish desires obstruct one’s grasp of what one should do (228:3). But insofar as one fully understands Confucian virtue, Zhu Xi suggests, one can forestall akrasia. Zhu Xi does not think that any old articulate understanding of *li* can play this role. Instead, he has in mind an intimate familiarity and a deep, internalized understanding (145:5, 162:10, 164:9, 165:5, 167:11, 168:11, 168:13, 169:14, 191:5). He has in mind, in other words, the sort of apprehension of *li* through which one possesses certainty about virtue (cf. 143:9). Such certainty, I take it, consists in a full, unimpeded grasp of virtue’s nature and goodness. For such certainty, in turn, silences the call of any opposing desires (224:4, 224:16). Thus, Zhu Xi contends, those who apprehend *li* clearly “cannot but be filial in serving their parents, fraternal in serving their brothers, faithful in intercourse with their friends” (G/152:14). Similarly, examining the akratic’s shortcomings, Zhu Xi says:

Take, for instance, the man who is determined to do good but upon spotting something bad seems capable of doing it as well; just as he’s about to do the good thing, he seems to have a mind to do the bad, a mind that comes from behind to lead him astray. This is just a matter of not knowing it so well. (G/154:8)

Unlike the akratic with a weak grasp of what is fitting, the fully virtuous person knows it, and knows it well. The virtuous person's understanding of "the reason why an affair is as it is" (G/124:12) differs, of course, from an utter lack of understanding. At the same time, it also differs from merely "shallow knowledge"—a basic, but less than fully intimate and articulate grasp of these matters (148:2). When one truly apprehends virtue and its goodness, one's understanding shapes one's character (140:4). Accordingly, inappropriate courses of action impress one with their sheer inappropriateness. Such sheer inappropriateness counteracts any remaining desires to perform them.

Zhu Xi, then, can offer in-principle reasons for why becoming fully cultivated ethically requires one to investigate *li*. The sage's dispositions, unlike the non-sage's, are both refined and thoroughly bolstered by a deep understanding of Confucian virtue. And such refinement and bolstering qualitatively distinguish the sage's dispositions from other people's. In particular, Zhu Xi can explain why we should investigate *li* as manifested in the human world, and why, especially, we have good reason to read the classics, which transmit an understanding of Confucian virtue in an especially perspicuous way (161:4, 162:8–9, 179:8).

IV

Recall that the non-intellectualist denies that philosophical understanding of virtue is required for fully virtuous agency. It suffices, the non-intellectualist claims, that the agent acts from a fixed and permanent virtuous character state—a state that need not be informed by any articulate understanding of virtue and the human good as such. Yet Zhu Xi, I contend, can offer credible general responses to non-intellectualists about the requirements for fully developed virtue.

First, Zhu Xi highlights the virtuous agent's need to perform virtuous deeds for the right reasons and for the deeds' relevant good-making features. Lest an agent perform virtuous actions merely coincidentally, then, it does not suffice that the agent act from a fixed and stable character state that *happens to* issue forth actions of the sort that the fully virtuous agent would perform. Instead, the fixed and stable character state from which the agent acts must be informed by an articulate understanding of virtue and the human good—an understanding of why certain deeds are to be performed, an understanding that the sage attains through investigating *li*.

Second, as his remarks on akrasia suggest, Zhu Xi can question the non-intellectualist's assumption that one actually *can* act from a fixed and stable character state without having undertaken the relevant philosophical investigation (including investigating *li*). Without a deep and intimate understanding of *li qua* Confucian virtue, which brings to light why certain deeds are such as to be performed, one will be susceptible to temptations

and selfish desires that impede one's virtuous deeds. In other words, to the extent that a deep and intimate understanding of Confucian virtue fails to inform the states from which one acts, one's motivational states will accordingly be unstable.

Zhu Xi, then, can offer a challenge: non-intellectualists must explain how virtuous people can choose and perform virtuous actions for the right reasons and for their good-making features without appealing to any role for philosophical understanding of virtue and the human good. They must also explain how virtuous people can act from fully fixed and stable characters when they lack an intimate understanding of virtue that would seem especially capable of silencing conflicting desires in tempting circumstances. How—or indeed, whether—non-intellectualists can do so lies outside the scope of this essay. Still, Zhu Xi has resources for defending his own intellectualist outlook. He also has resources for addressing the more specific worries outlined earlier.

I begin by reconsidering the rationalism worry. In the reading I articulated, Zhu Xi need not commit himself to a worrisome, overly intellectualist conception of practical reasoning. For in my reading, Zhu Xi thinks (only) that investigating things provides cognitive access to an intimate understanding of *li* by reference to which we judge best. He shows no signs, however, of holding the stronger view that an understanding of *li* is something from which the virtuous person deduces fitting action. Instead, as Zhu Xi's sight analogies (148:4 and 152:14) suggest, understanding *li* sharpens the sage's perception and discernment. The sage's intimate understanding of *li* infuses his practical perception of situations. Such understanding does not so much enable the sage to deduce or calculate anything as it facilitates a fully responsive pattern recognition.²³ The sage's understanding of *li*, Zhu Xi can say, typically remains in the background of the sage's activity, as a kind of tacit knowledge. Against this background, features of particular situations show up as salient to the sage. The sage's understanding, then, simply informs his way of seeing, and enables him to attend to relevant aspects of his situation.

Zhu Xi highlights the deep, almost embodied, level at which the sage's understanding of *li* infuses the sage's perspective and comportment. Quoting Cheng Yi 程頤, who in turn quotes *Mengzi* 4A27, Zhu Xi describes the kind of understanding of *li* that one should seek from the classics. When one grasps *li* in the right way, he says, "unconsciously, one's hands are moving to its rhythms, one's feet are dancing to its tunes" (CCA, Preface [T/V 2014, p. 195]). The sage, in this picture, need not "apply" his understanding to particular cases in any explicit way. Contrary to the rationalism worry, the investigation thesis need not commit one to a deductive model of sagely practical reasoning.

Moreover, to benefit from investigation, Zhu Xi thinks, one must first take other steps and fulfill other conditions. In particular, one must first

receive a good initial ethical education in one's lesser learning (cf. 236:10). Clearly apprehending *li* via greater learning is necessary for fully developed virtue; but such apprehension plays a limited, secondary role in ethical education. If one neglects one's lesser learning, Zhu Xi contends, one's greater learning will be fruitless. Without the adequate preparation provided by lesser learning, investigating things will injure one's heart-mind (125:7).

Hence, Zhu Xi can respond—incidentally—to the concern that if being truly virtuous required one's apprehending *li*, we should expect philosophical types (who would occupy the best position for apprehending *li* or its analogues) to be especially virtuous. But philosophical types—at least academic philosophers—do not seem to be much better as a group than most people.²⁴ Zhu Xi, however, can respond as follows. First, the investigation thesis is a claim about fully developed virtue's necessary conditions, not its sufficient conditions. Again, we require lesser learning and an adequate early ethical education to benefit from investigation. Hence, if some academic philosophers act less than virtuously despite engaging in something like investigation, inadequate early ethical education could well be responsible. Such figures, in Zhu Xi's view, would seem to commit the error of seeking lofty understanding before they were truly ready for it (130:13, 131:12). Second, Zhu Xi notes the temptations that scholars have to show off their cleverness (139:12, 139:15). Such temptations can impede these scholars from attaining a "personally meaningful" understanding of the work they study, one that integrates it into their lives (G/182:7).²⁵

Such considerations reveal Zhu Xi's resources for addressing the elitism worry, to which I now turn. True, the investigation thesis entails that those who fail to apprehend *li* are not in a position to develop virtue fully. Yet the thesis need not imply that the majority of humanity, who do not investigate *li*, are somehow bad people. For Zhu Xi accepts Mengzi's view that human nature is good, possessed of incipient tendencies toward virtue. By nature, we know what we should do (203:2, 205:9, 205:14). Therefore, we should not be surprised to find ordinary non-sages inclined to perform good deeds. Further, Zhu Xi can say, lesser learning suffices for one to become a basically good person who acts reliably well in ordinary circumstances. In this restricted sense of virtue, Zhu Xi can grant, the untutored can be virtuous, that is, good. But—Zhu Xi insists—that is not the end of the story. We must still cultivate ourselves, for our *qi* obscures our good human nature and prevents it from fully and consistently displaying itself (73:4). *Li* is in us from the start, but we still must investigate *li* in the classics and elsewhere if we are to clarify our *qi* and fully manifest our virtue (161:5, 161:8; cf. *Mengzi* 1A7 on King Xuan of Qi, and Zhu Xi's commentary in *CC Mengzi* [T/V 2014, p. 206]).

By accepting the investigation thesis, Zhu Xi proves more restrictive than some philosophers about who belongs to the ranks of the truly excellent. It is not clear, however, that Zhu Xi is wrong to be so restrictive (or that these

other philosophers are right to be so unrestrictive). A basically good person who does not deeply and intimately understand *li*, Zhu Xi can say, will not be reliably excellent in all kinds of cases, capable of choosing virtuous actions for their properly good-making qualities, and so on. Thus, the ordinary, basically good person will not possess the full excellence that he would possess if he pursued greater learning, investigated things, and acted in light of this understanding. As Zhu Xi indicates in his comments on *Analects* 2.4 (in which Confucius outlines his own educational progress), those who pursue greater learning and who quit before making progress in apprehending *li* will ultimately struggle in various ways to act well (*CCA* 2.4 [T/V 2014, pp. 196–197]). They will be subject to doubts, confusion, and a greater need to interrupt the smooth flow of their action with additional reflection.

Zhu Xi's view allows one to attribute an approximation of fully developed virtue to those whom we often call "virtuous" in a weak, non-technical sense. In this way, the investigation thesis coheres broadly with pre-philosophical assessments of people's characters—though it makes finer-grained distinctions than pre-philosophical views typically do. For the investigation thesis implies that we should be clearer than we usually are about what we require to possess full excellence—that is, truly to be sages. When we are clearer about these requirements, Zhu Xi can say, we will resist attributing *excellence—full* virtue—to those lacking understanding of *li*. Thus, Zhu Xi's view about who is virtuous is revisionary. Yet his view is not excessively so.²⁶

One might worry that this response will offer cold comfort to those who are less than full sages. Yet an analogy with grading makes the point more intuitive. While Zhu Xi does distinguish ordinary blokes from fully virtuous sages, he need not do so invidiously. The sage who attains virtue fully may warrant an A or A-, while the non-sage with a basically good character may warrant a B+ or a B. But both the excellent and the basically good are distinct from those who warrant a C or worse. Both the excellent and the basically good are in the admirable range, while those who warrant a C or worse are not. Thus, Zhu Xi does qualitatively distinguish the virtue of the sage who investigates *li* as part of greater learning from the "virtue" of the ordinary non-sage. But unless one thinks that all qualitative distinctions are objectionable—including the distinction between admirable people (on the one hand) and the less-than-admirable (on the other)—it is not clear what the problem is with Zhu Xi's distinguishing excellent states of character from very good or basically good states.

Or, to put these points yet another way: just as we may worry about grade inflation, that is, the tendency to give excellent marks to merely good work, so, too, we may worry about virtue inflation, that is, the tendency to identify merely admirable dispositions and behavior as truly excellent. But Zhu Xi can offer two reasons to make finer-grained distinctions. First, this policy coheres well with Confucius' admonition to rectify names (*Analects*

13.3). Second, making such distinctions can motivate us to attain the full excellence of which we are capable. Hence, Zhu Xi implores, we should not rest content with merely good dispositions and behavior. Instead, we should set out to “transcend the common and enter sagehood” (G/134:16).

A final point on the elitism worry: Zhu Xi, unlike the usual elitist, affirms that we typically all *do* have the capacity to attain full excellence.²⁷ The Confucian Way, at least, “is something that the masses are able to know and able to practice” (*CC Mean*, chap. 13 [T/V 2014, p. 223]). Success in investigating *li*, then, does not require some special allocation of natural intellectual gifts. Instead, such success “depends on firmly establishing the will” (G/134:5), as well as a certain energetic focus (138:6). We just need to focus ourselves on learning, exert effort on manageable studies, take our time, and not fixate on fears that we are too slow or are otherwise inadequate to the task (164:13, 165:14). Hence, Zhu Xi contends, dedicated students, “though they may be slow-witted, will be sure to get there in the end” (G/146:4). Successfully grasping *li* is largely a matter of dedication—an attitude that most of us can develop.

V

The investigation thesis is most plausible when Zhu Xi prescribes investigation of *li* in the human sphere. Reading and studying classic books promises to be useful, for these works preserve the intentions of sages and instruct us in virtue (162:8, 167:2, 179:8, 188:3).

But can Zhu Xi defend the requirement of investigating *li* throughout nature as well? In this context, the demandingness and irrelevance worries seem more troublesome. Suppose that human nature manifests *li* most clearly (given the *qi* that human beings possess). If so, then is investigating *li* throughout nature, for example in bamboo stalks, not beside the point? Why waste our time with overly demanding and seemingly irrelevant natural and metaphysical investigations?

Zhu Xi, however, can defend the relevance of investigating *li* throughout nature. For as argued above, *li*, no matter where it displays itself, manifests Confucian virtue. Zhu Xi’s conception of the cosmos—his *li/qi* metaphysics—implies that we should not expect *li* (and, hence, Confucian virtue) to display itself equally brightly in each item that we investigate. Hence, we should not expect *li* to display itself as clearly in chunks of granite or inkbrushes as in bamboo. Nor should we expect *li* to display itself as clearly in bamboo as in sentient life. *Li* is apt to be relatively obscure in bamboo. In cultivating a vast mind, Zhu Xi can say, it may well make good sense to prioritize investigating *li* as it manifests itself in the human domain. Hence, we have especially good reason to study the classics.

Yet investigating *li* outside the human sphere retains crucial relevance. Discerning *li* when *li* manifests itself in especially turbid kinds of *qi* may

well require us to work extra hard. But these labors, Zhu Xi can argue, constitute a salutary exercise. For investigating *li* wherever we find it, across kinds and in *qi* of varying degrees of clarity, Zhu Xi can say, is required for attaining a *fully generalized understanding* of *li* as a coherent pattern manifest not just in human affairs, but in all affairs. Such a grasp of *li* enables the investigator to grasp *universal aspects* of *li*, and to understand *li* as such. Such a maximally broad, universal grasp conduces, in turn, to a maximally deep understanding of *li* in the human domain.

Zhu Xi emphasizes one's need to grasp *li* synoptically. For instance, Zhu Xi says that when we examine human affairs as such we should attain multiple perspectives on the *li* manifest there and survey such *li* from every angle (cf. 130:8 and 157:6). Elsewhere, he insists that a comprehensive understanding of *li* (as a whole) enhances our understanding of *li*'s particular (or partial) manifestations: "When you've understood the big, you'll naturally thoroughly grasp the small within" (G/131:3; cf. 130:10). As a practical matter, to grasp "the big," we gradually have to work our way up from the small, that is, from an initial, if imperfect, grasp of *li*'s particular manifestations. When beginning the greater learning, "the learner must be made to encounter the things of the world, and never fail to follow the *li* that one already knows and further exhaust it, seeking to arrive at the farthest points" (CCGL, chap. 5 [T/V 2014, p. 191]). Once one does so, one attains a certain enlightenment: "When one has exerted effort for a long time, one day, like something suddenly cracking open, one will know in a manner that binds it all together" (CCGL, chap. 5 [T/V 2014, p. 191]). Such a comprehensive grasp—"the ultimate in knowledge"—emerges from one's increasingly expansive investigation of particular manifestations of *li*, even in comparatively turbid *qi*. Once attained, this comprehensive grasp has a powerful effect on the investigator. Investigators are in a position to review particular manifestations of *li*—and hence of Confucian virtue—with a new, transformed eye for what is evaluatively salient in them.²⁸ To be sure, Zhu Xi's investigation thesis presupposes the correctness of some controversial metaphysical views, including the thought that Confucian virtue is a pervasive pattern throughout the cosmos.²⁹ Yet if we grant these views, we can see how Zhu Xi can plausibly defend the investigation thesis.

I now consider the demandingness worry, which Zhu Xi's own remarks make pressing. Zhu Xi maintains, after all, that "students should forget about eating and sleeping and give it their all; in this way they'll make a successful start" (G/134:14). He calls attention to the hardship that students must endure for the sake of understanding (135:12). He urges students to "exert great effort" on learning (G/136:7). He insists that one make a strict schedule for investigation (136:11). He denies that one can succeed at grasping *li* in relaxed leisure (138:4). Instead, Zhu Xi compares learning to pulling a boat upstream: one "can't relax for even a moment" (G/137:11). We should endure "daily hardship" for the sake of learning (G/190:11). Investigating *li*, in short, sounds like nothing but drudgery and pain.

Zhu Xi's hortatory rhetoric invites the demandingness worry. But we can charitably read Zhu Xi's rhetoric as exaggerated for the sake of motivating his students. For Zhu Xi recognizes tendencies in human nature that oppose our learning. We tend to be lazy and are prone to procrastination (135:8); we desire unrealistically quick results (136:11); and, sometimes, we simply lack excitement about learning (135:4).³⁰ To counteract our tendencies simply to rest content with our current levels of understanding, then, we must compensate by exerting extra effort (136:2). Thus, when Zhu Xi highlights the need to labor at learning, he sounds more than a little like the coach who pushes his athletes hard and who portrays opposing competitors to be as fearsome as possible, all to guarantee that his athletes will work their hardest to succeed.

Zhu Xi recognizes that apprehending *li*, like other important tasks, takes effort and confronts us with certain difficulties (134:5). But apprehending *li* need not amount to sheer, overly demanding drudgery.

First, Zhu Xi denies that the effort and labor that investigation requires cut against the grain of human nature in any strong way. Understanding *li*, he says, "is no big thing. I don't know why people give it so little attention; it seems that they are content in their ignorance" (G/154:12). For apprehending *li* ultimately conforms with our natural predispositions. To be sure, Zhu Xi does not think that apprehending *li* is effortlessly simple, for our selfish desires and our particular allotment of *qi* may well impede us (cf. 205:5, 205:9, 224:4, 228:13). Yet he denies that investigating things must, in principle, be a weird or *recherché* enterprise. In grasping *li*, people succeed in "nothing other than knowing what their natures have inherently" (CCGL, Preface [TV 2014, p. 186]).³¹

Second, Zhu Xi is aware that investigating things is apt to seem overly demanding because we cannot apprehend *li* quickly. Zhu Xi suggests, however, that we should jettison any assumption that we ought to be able to apprehend *li* quickly. For those who start out investigating over-ambitiously are apt to falter (174:2). If we instead accept that apprehending *li* takes *slow and steady* progress, then we can see how investigating *li* need not impose excessive demands. For one can make this *gradual* progress without strain or impediment. Hence, Zhu Xi recommends that his students pare back on ambitious study plans (165:8). Instead of reading two hundred characters or one page, students should read one hundred characters or half a page (or even one paragraph) (165:14, 166:1, 166:12, 167:2). Zhu Xi compares textual study to farm work (174:2), which also has natural limits. One should water one crop at a time, not overwatering and rushing matters (167:11).³²

Zhu Xi, then, shows a realistic grasp of how human cognitive capacities function at their best. Although human beings are naturally disposed to apprehend *li*, they will succeed in this task only under certain conditions. Grasping *li*, Zhu Xi notes, requires mental energy (138:5) and a relaxed

mind (158:15, 164:12). Trying too hard to investigate *li*—forcing it—stands in the way of our actually being able to grasp it. Instead, we must rest and conserve our energies (178:11). To the extent that Wang Yangming overlooked these conditions when he sought to investigate bamboo, Zhu Xi can insist, we should not be surprised that Wang’s investigation failed. For it is not clear that trying for ten days straight to grasp *li* in bamboo is going to be particularly effective. Instead, one would do better to investigate little by little (159:9), slowly apprehending *li* in things and continuing until one fully cognizes *li* as it manifests itself throughout the cosmos.

To conclude: investigating things, Zhu Xi can say, is relevant for virtuous agency, just as it need not overstrain human nature. Zhu Xi recognizes that we can take the investigation of things too far, seeking to grasp *li* throughout the world without grasping our own limitations as investigators. Conversely, he recognizes that people can “earnestly turn to seek it within themselves” at the expense of investigating *li* elsewhere, on the false assumption that to investigate the world is to turn away from oneself (G/160:2). Hence, Zhu Xi recommends against both extremes, and identifies one-sidedness as a serious flaw in students (G/160:2). Within the good life, virtuous action is perhaps more significant than knowing *li*—including *li*’s various manifestations throughout the natural world. But—contrary to non-intellectualists—knowing these manifestations has its place in the good life, too.

Notes

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- 1 – References are to selections of Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*, as translated by Daniel K. Gardner (1990), which I cite as “G,” and Bryan W. Van Norden (2014a), which I cite as “V”; when referring to these two sources, pagination is from the Zhonghua Shuju edition (by page, then column number). For Zhu Xi’s *Collected Commentaries on the Great Learning (CCGL)*, *Collected Commentaries on the Analects (CCA)*, *Collected Commentaries on the Mengzi (CC Mengzi)*, and *Collected Commentaries on the Mean (CC Mean)*, I use Van Norden’s translations in Tiwald and Van Norden 2014, which I cite as “T/V.” For consistency, I emend “principle” (Gardner’s translation) and “Pattern” (Van Norden’s translation) as *li*.

- 2 – On the translation of *li* 理, see [Ziporyn \(2008\)](#) and [Angle \(2009, pp. 31–38\)](#), who favor “coherence,” and [Thompson \(2015b, pp. 150–151\)](#), who favors “pattern.”
- 3 – On Zhu Xi as virtue ethicist, see [Huang 2011; Marchal 2013, pp. 192–194](#); and [Angle 2015, pp. 255–259](#).
- 4 – *CC Mean*, chap. 20 (TV 2014, p. 227).
- 5 – See also Plato, *Laws* XII.967d–968a; *Phaedo* 82a–c; *Republic* VI.500b–d.
- 6 – [Fung \(1948, p. 244\)](#) labels Zhu Xi’s *lixue* 理學 “the School of Platonic ideas.”
- 7 – [Hursthouse 1999, p. 137](#).
- 8 – *Ibid.*
- 9 – Hursthouse’s remarks have two sources of inspiration. (1) [Hursthouse \(1999, pp. 136–139\)](#) accepts [Broadie’s objections \(1991, pp. 198–202\)](#) to the “Grand End” reading of Aristotle on the requirements for virtuous agency, according to which Aristotle’s virtuous agent must possess an articulated understanding of the human good. Hursthouse (p. 137) describes Broadie’s rejection of the “Grand End theory” as “obviously right.” (2) Hursthouse (p. 139) cites and follows [McDowell’s \(1997\)](#) rejection of the “deductivist model of practical reasoning” that he attributes to a “blueprint” conception of virtuous agency. For defenses of “Grand End” readings of Aristotle, however, see [Kraut \(1993\)](#) and [Ingليس \(2014\)](#).
- 10 – [Hursthouse 1999, p. 137](#).
- 11 – *Ibid.*
- 12 – *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 13 – In [Walker 2013a, pp. 781–783](#), I offer programmatic remarks in response to Hursthouse’s worry, and to the rationalism and elitism worries about the Aristotelian tradition. I briefly discuss some of Zhu Xi’s views on knowing and acting in [Walker 2016, pp. 207–208](#).
- 14 – Ultimately, Wang Yangming denies that the bamboo manifests *li* at all; only human beings do. In the quoted passage, however, Wang grants that the bamboo manifests *li*. He simply denies that ordinary (non-sage) human investigators can apprehend it. Thus, he thinks, Zhu Xi’s educational program is worrisome.
- 15 – On *li* and *qi* in Zhu Xi, see [Ivanhoe 2000, chap. 4](#); [Van Norden 2004](#); [Angle 2009, pp. 38–50](#); [Sim 2010](#); [Shun 2010, pp. 177–178](#); the supplementary notes in [Van Norden 2014a](#); [Thompson 2015a](#); and [Baba 2015](#).
- 16 – On *li*’s ontological status (and relation to *qi*), see, e.g., [Blakeley 2004](#); [Angle 2009, pp. 39–41](#); and [Baba 2015](#).

- 17 – On Mengzi’s conception of human nature, see [Walker 2013b](#).
- 18 – On the continuity of life forms in Zhu Xi, see [Thompson 2015a](#), p. 13. On how animal “natural virtues” approximate human ethical virtues, cf. Aristotle, *History of Animals* VIII.1. [Chang \(1957\)](#), p. 262) compares Zhu Xi and Aristotle on these points.
- 19 – [Van Norden 2004](#), p. 118 n. 27.
- 20 – Cf. Aristotle’s archery analogy in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2, 1094a22–24, on which see [Nussbaum 1994](#), pp. 60–61.
- 21 – On Zhu Xi’s lesser learning in relation to Aristotle on early ethical education, see [Angle 2009](#), pp. 136–140.
- 22 – In relation to Aristotle, cf. [Walker 2013a](#), pp. 772–777. I take Plato to accept a similar view. See [Irwin 1995](#), pp. 194–195, 231–236.
- 23 – See [Thompson 2015b](#), pp. 151–152, on grasping *li* as a kind of pattern recognition.
- 24 – Consider, for instance, the experimental findings of [Schwitzgebel and Rust \(2009\)](#) that the behavior of ethics professors is largely indistinguishable from that of other professors. [Van Norden \(2014b\)](#), §6) compares the worries of Wang Yangming (on the one hand) and Schwitzgebel and Rust (on the other).
- 25 – Zhu Xi’s broadly intellectualist approach to ethical development encourages students to focus on textual and other studies. In doing so, the thought goes, Zhu Xi’s teaching is open to abuse by those who wish to pursue personal profit. See Wang Yangming, “Pulling Up the Root and Stopping Up the Source,” in [Chan 1963](#), pp. 122–123. Zhu Xi, who is also concerned that students will investigate for the wrong reasons, addresses such matters at, e.g., 246:5, 246:12, 247:7.
- 26 – [Jordan \(2007\)](#), pp. 23, 29, 31) also argues that Hursthouse has an overly inclusive notion of the virtuous agent.
- 27 – Zhu Xi holds that some people with unusually turbid *qi* cannot learn (168:15), but such people are presumably exceptions.
- 28 – A further benefit: simply by virtue of elucidating that each aspect of the cosmos—including oneself as a knower—is part of a larger whole, such understanding counteracts a one-sided, egotistical outlook that mistakenly takes oneself to be cut off from any larger context, including ties to other people. See, e.g., 131:5 and [Shun 2010](#), pp. 185–187, as well as *CCA* 6.30 (T/V 2014, p. 201). For different responses to Wang’s worry, see [Thompson 2015a](#), p. 13 (citing Qian Mu) and [Allen 2015](#), pp. 178–180.

- 29 – Van Norden (2004, pp. 107–109) defends the internal coherence of Zhu Xi’s metaphysics, and argues that any final assessment of his metaphysics requires us to examine it in relation to other systematic metaphysical views.
- 30 – See also *CC Mean*, chap. 20 (T/V 2014, p. 226).
- 31 – Wang Yangming himself accepts that self-cultivation requires real effort (T/V 2014, pp. 280–281). Yet he holds that learning is comparatively easy “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” (trans. Chan 1963, p. 121).
- 32 – Cf. *Mengzi* 2A2 on the farmer of Song.

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