

**On the Origin of the Way**  
**Han Yu**  
**(translation by B.W. Van Norden; January 13, 2006)**

To love broadly is what is meant by "benevolence." To act appropriately is what is meant by "righteousness." To follow this and move toward it is what is meant by the "Way." To be sufficient in oneself without relying on the external is what is meant by "Virtue." "Benevolence" and "righteousness" are fixed terms. The "Way" and "Virtue" are empty roles. Hence, there is the Way of the gentleman and of the petty person, and there is the Virtue that is unfortunate and that which is auspicious.

When Laozi treated benevolence and righteousness as petty, it was not that he was slandering them. It was that his perspective was petty. If someone sitting in a well and observing the Heavens says, "Heaven is small," it is not that Heaven is small. Laozi regarded small kindness as benevolence, and petty carefulness as righteousness. It is appropriate that he would treat them as petty. What he meant by the Way, and what he treated as the Way, is not what I mean by the Way. What he meant by Virtue, and what he treated as Virtue, is not what I mean by Virtue. In general, what I mean by the Way and Virtue is what is harmonious with benevolence and righteousness. This is the communal doctrine of the world. What Laozi meant by the Way and Virtue abandoned benevolence and righteousness. This is the private doctrine of a single person.

The Way of the Zhou Dynasty declined. Kongzi passed away. There was the Qin Dynasty burning of books.<sup>i</sup> There was the Huang-Lao Daoism of the Han Dynasty. There was Buddhism during the Jin, Wei, Liang and Sui dynasties. When doctrines regarding the Way, Virtue, benevolence and righteousness did not tend toward Yangism, then they tended toward Mohism;<sup>ii</sup> if they did not tend toward Daoism, then they tended toward Buddhism. If they entered into the one, they would always come out into the other. Entering, they were dominated by it; leaving they were angry at it. Entering, they assisted it; leaving, the slandered it. Alas! If later people desired to hear an explanation of benevolence,

righteousness, the Way and Virtue, whom could they follow to listen to? The Daoists say, "Kongzi was actually a disciple of our teacher." The Buddhists say, "Kongzi was actually a disciple of our teacher."<sup>iiii</sup> Those who favored Confucianism, when they heard their theories, delighted in their novelty and regarded themselves as petty. Then they too said, "Our teacher actually did once treat them as his teachers." They not only expressed this with their mouths but wrote this in their books. Alas! If later people desired to hear an explanation of benevolence, righteousness, the Way and Virtue, whom could they follow and seek for it? Extreme indeed is people's fondness for the unusual! They do not seek out the sprouts or follow them to the tips, but only wish to hear of what is unusual.

In ancient times, the people were composed of four groups: scholars, farmers, craftsmen and merchants. Nowadays, the people are composed of six groups: scholars, farmers, craftsmen, merchants, Taoist priests and Buddhist monks. So in ancient times, those who taught occupied one of the groups; nowadays, those who teach occupy three of the groups. For one farming household there are six households that eat its grain; for one craftsman household there are six households that use its implements; for one merchant household there are six households that get goods from it. How could the people not be impoverished and resort to stealing?

In ancient times, people were harmed in many ways. Only when there were sages in place were people taught the Way of nurturing one another. The sages made rulers for the people, made teachers for them, drove off vermin, snakes and wild animals, and made them dwellings in caves. They were cold, and so the sages made clothing for them. They were hungry, and so the sages made food for them. When they had dwelled in trees they fell, and when they dwelled in caves they became ill, so the sages made houses for them. They instituted craftsmen to supply tools for the people's use. The sages instituted merchants, in order for the people to exchange what some had and others lacked. The sages instituted doctors and medicines, in order to save the people from

misfortune and death. The sages instituted funerals and rituals in order to expand the people's love and kindness. The sages instituted rituals in order to put in sequence first and last. The sages instituted music, in order to express the people's pent up feelings. The sages instituted government, in order to curb the people's laziness. The sages instituted punishments, in order to weed out the brutal. When the people cheated one another, the sages instituted tallies, official measures, and scales, in order for people to have faith. When the people stole from one another, the sages instituted city walls, armor and swords, in order to protect them. When harms came, the sages instituted preparations against them. When problems developed, the sages instituted defenses against them. Yet nowadays there is the (Daoist) doctrine, "If sages do not die, great thievery will not stop; cut up the official measure and break the scales and the people will cease to fight." Alas! They have simply not thought about this. If there had been no sages in ancient times, humans would long ago have perished. Why? We have no feathers or fur, scales or shells in order to live comfortably; we have no claws or fangs in order to compete for food (with other animals).

For this reason, those who are rulers are the ones who issue orders. Those who are ministers put into effect the orders of the rulers and transmit them to the people. The people produce grain, hemp and silk, make tools and vessels and exchange goods in order to serve those who are above them. If rulers do not issue orders, they lose that by which they are rulers. If ministers do not put into effect the orders of the rulers and transmit them to the people, and if the people do not produce grain, hemp and silk, make tools and vessels and exchange goods in order to serve those above, then they will end up being punished (because they will have to resort to stealing to live). Yet nowadays there is the Buddhist teaching that says, "One must cast aside ruler and minister, do away with father and son, forbid the Way of mutual nurturing," in order to seek their so-called "purity" and "extinguishing (of desires)." Alas! On the one hand, they are fortunate that they came *during* the Three Dynasties, so that they were not eliminated by Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, the Duke of Zhou and Kongzi; on the other

hand, they are unfortunate that they did not come *before* the Three Dynasties, so that they were not corrected by Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, the Duke of Zhou and Kongzi. An emperor and a king differ in their names, but that by which they are sages is one. In the summer one wears light clothes, in the winter one wears heavy clothes; when thirsty one drinks and when hungry one eats. The activities differ, but that by which they are wise is one. Yet nowadays there is the (Daoist) saying, "Why not practice the lack of action of high antiquity?" This is like challenging those who wear heavy clothes in winter, saying, "Why not employ the ease of light clothes?" Or like challenging those who are hungry and eat, saying, "Why not engage in the ease of drinking?"

The *Greater Learning* says, "The ancients who desired to enlighten the enlightened Virtue of the world would first rule their states. Those who desired to rule their states would first put their clans in order. Those who desired to put their clans in order would first cultivate their selves. Those who desired to cultivate their selves would first correct their hearts. Those who desired to correct their hearts would first make their thoughts Genuine." Thus, what the ancients meant by correcting their hearts and making their thoughts Genuine resulted in action. Nowadays, they desire to correct their hearts but treat as external the world and the state, extinguishing Heaven-given universals. Someone is a son, but he does not treat his father as a father; someone is a minister, but he does not treat his ruler as a ruler; the people do not treat their duties as duties.

When Kongzi composed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, if the assorted lords used barbarian rituals, he treated them as barbarians, while those who adopted Chinese (culture) he treated as Chinese. The *Analects* says, "Barbarians with rulers are not as good as Chinese without them." The *Odes* says, "The Rong and Di barbarians, these he chastised; the Jing and the Shu barbarians, these he punished." Nowadays, they take up the Buddhist teachings of the barbarians and put it on above the teachings of the Former Kings. How have they not completely become barbarians?!

Now, what is meant by the "teachings of the Former Kings"? Loving broadly is what they meant by "benevolence." To act in an appropriate way is what they meant by "righteousness." To follow this and go toward it is what they meant by the "Way." To sufficiently have it in oneself that one need not rely upon anything external is what they meant by "Virtue." Their literature was the *Odes*, *Documents*, *Changes* and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Their methods were ritual, music, punishments and government. Their peoples were the scholars, farmers, craftsmen and merchants (and not monks and priests). Their roles were ruler and minister, father and son, teacher and friend, guest and host, elder and younger brother, and husband and wife. Their clothes were of hemp or silk. Their dwellings were homes and palaces (not Daoist temples and Buddhist monasteries). Their foods were grains and rice, fruits and vegetables, fish and meat (so they were not vegetarians like the Buddhists). The Way they made was easy to understand and the teachings they made were easy to practice. For this reason, if one shapes oneself in accordance with them, one will be agreeable and fortunate. If one shapes others in accordance with them, they will be loving and public-spirited. If one shapes one's heart in accordance with them, it will be harmonious and peaceful. If one shapes the world and the state with them, there will be no place that is not fitting. For this reason, the living satisfy their passions; for the dead, they exhaust their rituals. When the shrine sacrifices are performed, the spirits of Heaven alight; when the temple sacrifices are performed, the ghosts of humans enjoy them.

Someone may ask: "This Way: what Way is it?"

I reply: "This Way of which I speak is not what the Daoists and Buddhists refer to as the Way. Instead, this Way was transmitted by Yao to Shun; it was transmitted by Shun to Yu; it was transmitted by Yu to Tang; it was transmitted by Tang to Wen, Wu and the Duke of Zhou. Wen, Wu and the Duke of Zhou transmitted it to Kongzi. It was transmitted by Kongzi to Mengzi. When Mengzi died, it did not succeed in being transmitted. Xunzi and Yang Xiong grasped parts of it but not its essence; they spoke of it but not in detail.<sup>iv</sup> Prior to the Duke

of Zhou, (these sages) were rulers. Hence, their actions were put into effect. After the Duke of Zhou, they were ministers. Hence, their theories have been long-lived.

This being the case, how should things be dealt with? I say, "If *they* are not blocked, the Way will not flow. If *they* are not stopped, the Way will not be practiced. Treat their people as people (rather than as monks and priests). Burn their books. Convert their temples into houses. Illuminate the Way of the Former Kings in order to guide them. Let widows, widowers, orphans, the bereft, the abandoned and the sick be nurtured. Would this not be acceptable?"

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> The Emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221-202 BCE) was influenced by the Legalist philosophical movement. He attempted to destroy all books of rival philosophical schools, including those of the Confucians.

<sup>ii</sup> The Mohists advocated "universal love" (i.e., impartial love for everyone), which Confucians saw as opposed to filial piety (since it treated parents the same as others). The Yangists supposedly advocated a kind of "egoism," in which one was only concerned about oneself. In "On Reading Mozi," Han Yu says that the teachings of Mozi are consistent with those of Kongzi, but criticizes later followers of Mozi and Kongzi for insisting that their teachings were different. Here in "On the Origin of the Way," he is criticizing the Mohists, not Mozi himself.

<sup>iii</sup> It was an often-heard myth that Kongzi was originally a disciple of either Laozi or the Buddha. (There is no historical basis for either claim.)

<sup>iv</sup> Yang Xiong was a Han Dynasty Confucian philosopher. For selections from his writings, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, ed., *Readings in Han Chinese Thought* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, forthcoming).