Questions on the Great Learning

Introduction by Qian Dehong

Whenever my teacher accepted a new student, he would always rely upon the first chapters of the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean to show them the complete task of sagely learning and acquaint them with its proper path. I received and recorded the Questions on the Great Learning the night before the master set off to suppress a rebellion in Sitian.

Questions on the Great Learning

[Question]: A former scholar considered the Great Learning to be “the learning appropriate for a [morally] great person.” May I ask, how is it that the learning of such a great person lies in “making bright [one’s] bright virtue?”

Master Yangming replied: Great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures as their own bodies. They look upon the world as one family and China as one person within it. Those who, because of the space between their own bodies and other physical forms, regard themselves as separate from [Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] are petty persons. The ability great people have to form one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures is not something they intentionally strive to do; the benevolence of their minds is originally like this. How could it be that only the minds of great people are one with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures? Even the minds of petty people are like this. It is only the way in which such people look at things that makes them petty. This is why, when they see a child [about to] fall into a well, they cannot avoid having a sense of alarm and concern for the child. This is because their benevolence forms one body with the child. Someone might object that this response is because the child belongs to the same species. But when they hear the anguished cries or see the frightened appearance of birds or beasts, they cannot avoid a sense of being unable to bear it. This is because their benevolence forms one body with birds and beasts. Someone might object that this response is because birds and beasts are sentient creatures. But when they see grass or

---

1 The disciple Qian Dehong recorded this work in 1527, one year before Wang’s death. As Qian’s introduction suggests, it explores the meaning of the opening chapter of the Great Learning. The six questions follow the text of the opening chapter almost line by line, covering most of the original text. Compare James Legge tr., Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Chinese Classics, Volume 1, Reprint (Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong Press, 1970): 356-9.
2 A province in Southern China.
3 The reference is to Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200). See his comments on the first line of the text, Daxue zhangju 大學章句, in Sishujizhu 四書集註 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan 藝文印書館, 1975), 1a.
5 Paraphrasing the example of the child and well from Mengzi 2A6.
6 Mengzi 1A7 offers the example of King Xuan being “unable to bear” the anguished cries and frightened appearance of an ox being led to slaughter. Mengzi goes on to infer a general aversion to seeing any animal suffer.
trees uprooted and torn apart, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of sympathy and distress. This is because their benevolence forms one body with grass and trees. Someone might object that this response is because grass and trees have life and vitality. But when they see tiles and stones broken and destroyed, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of concern and regret. This is because their benevolence forms one body with tiles and stones.

This shows that the benevolence that forms one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] is something that even the minds of petty people possess. Such a mind is rooted in the nature endowed by Heaven and is naturally luminous, shining, and not beclouded. This is why it is called “bright virtue.” The minds of petty people have become cut-off and constricted, and yet the benevolence that forms one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] is able to be as unbeclouded as what Heaven originally endowed. This occurs in those times when they have not yet been moved by desires or obscured by selfishness. Once they have been moved by desires or obscured by selfishness, beset by thoughts of benefit and harm and stirred by feelings of indignation and anger, they will then attack other creatures, injure their own kind, and stop at nothing. At the extreme, they even will murder their own kin and wholly lose the benevolence that forms one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures]. And so, if only they are without the obscuration of selfish desires, even the minds of petty people will have the same benevolence that forms one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] that great people possess. As soon as there is obscuration by selfish desires, then even the minds of great people will become cut off and constricted, just like those of petty people. This is why the learning of the great person indeed lies only in getting rid of the obscuration of selfish desires, thereby making bright one’s bright virtue and restoring the original condition of forming one body [with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures]. It is not that anything can be added to this original state.

Question: In that case, why [does the learning of the great person] lie in loving the people?

[Master Yangming] replied: Making bright [one’s] bright virtue is the state of (lit: is the ti "body of") forming one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad things. Loving the people universally extends the operation (lit: is the yong "use" or “function”) of forming one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad things. And so, making bright [one’s] bright virtue must find expression in loving the people, and loving the people just is the way one makes bright one’s bright virtue. This is why it is only when I love my father, the fathers of other people, and the fathers of everyone in the world that my benevolence truly forms one body with my father, the fathers of other people, and the fathers of other people, and the

---

7 The terms ti and yong are used to make a variety of distinctions in traditional Chinese philosophy. Here the point is that making bright one’s bright virtue is the goal of moral cultivation itself—it’s body or substance—while loving the people is the natural operation or function of such a virtuous state. For a more thorough and detailed discussion of the use of these terms in Chinese philosophy, see the entry for ti and yong in Edward Craig, ed., Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Volume 9 (Routledge Press, 1998): 400.

8 Here Wang is relying upon other senses of the terms ti and yong. First is the idea that the ti and yong of a given thing are only conceptually but never actually distinct from one another. Second is the idea that each thing (ti) has a natural function (yong). An excellent example of both these senses is found in the Platform Sutra, which tells us that a lighted lamp (ti) is never found apart from lamplight (yong). See the entry on ti and yong noted above.
fathers of everyone in the world. It is only when I truly form one body with them that the bright virtue of filial piety begins to be made bright. It is only when I love my elder brother, the elder brothers of other people, and the elder brothers of everyone in the world that my benevolence truly forms one body with my elder brother, the elder brothers of other people, and the elder brothers of everyone in the world. It is only when I truly form one body with them that the bright virtue of brotherly love begins to be made bright. It is the same in regard to rulers and ministers, husbands and wives, and friends; it is the same in regard to mountains and rivers, ghosts and spirits, birds and beasts, and grass and trees. It is only when I truly love them all and universally extend my benevolence that forms one body with them that my bright virtue will be made bright in every respect, and I can really form one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad things. This is what it means to, “make bright one’s bright virtue throughout the world.” This is what it means to, “regulate the family, order the state, and bring peace to the world.” This is what it means to, “fulfill one’s nature.”

Question: In that case, why [does the learning of the great person] lie in according with the highest good?

[Master Yangming] replied: The highest good is the ultimate standard for making bright one’s bright virtue and loving the people. The nature endowed by Heaven is the highest good in its purest state. To be luminous, shining, and not beclouded are manifestations of the highest good. This is the original state of bright virtue or what is called pure knowing. When the highest good is manifested, whatever is good will appear as good and whatever is bad will appear as bad. We will respond to the weighty or the light, the substantial or the insubstantial as these affect us. Our changing postures and various actions will stick to no fixed principle, and yet none will fail to attain its Heavenly mean. This is ultimate of what is “admirable for human beings and proper for things.” It admits neither the slightest deliberation or doubt nor the most miniscule addition or subtraction. If there is even the slightest deliberation or doubt or the most minuscule addition or subtraction, then this constitutes the petty cunning of selfish thought and is no longer the highest good. But of course, if one has not mastered being “watchful over oneself when alone” and is not “wholly refined and wholly focused” then how could one have attained to such a state?

It is only because the people of later ages don’t understand that the highest good is within their own minds and instead use their selfish cunning to grope and search for it outside their own minds that they mistakenly believe that each affair and every thing has its own fixed principle. In this way, the proper standard for right and wrong becomes obscured; they [become preoccupied with] disconnected fragments and isolated shards.

---

9 All three of three of these quotes are from the first chapter of the Great Learning. Cf. Legge, p. 357.
10 Paraphrasing the Shijing “Book of Poetry,” Mao #260, which in turn is quoted in Mengzi, 6A6.
13 Wang is here criticizing an encyclopedic, scholastic form of scholarship that many Neo-Confucians recognized as not adequate for moral knowledge. For a discussion, see my Ethics in the Confucian
human desires run amok, and Heavenly principle is lost. As a consequence, the learning of making bright one’s bright virtue and loving the people is thrown into confusion and turmoil throughout the world. Now, in the past, there certainly were those who wanted to make bright their bright virtue throughout the world. Nevertheless, simply because they did not understand what it is to accord with the highest good and instead exerted their selfish minds toward the achievement of excessively lofty goals, they were lost in vagaries, illusions, emptiness, and stillness and had nothing to do with the family, state, or world. The followers of the Buddha and Laozi are like this. Now, in the past, there certainly were those who wanted to love the people. Nevertheless, simply because they did not understand what it is to accord with the highest good and instead dissipated their selfish minds in what is base and trifling, they were lost in calculation, scheming, cleverness, and techniques and had nothing to do with the sincere expression of benevolence or compassion. The followers of the Five Despots and those who pursue worldly success are like this. All of these mistakes arise from failing to understand what it is to accord with the highest good. And so, according with the highest good is related to making bright one’s bright virtue and loving the people as the compass and square are related to what is round and square, as ruler and tape are related to long and short, and scale and balance are related to light and heavy. And so, if what is round or square does not accord with the compass and square it will deviate from its standard. If what is long or short does not accord with the ruler and tape, it will miss its measure. If what is light or heavy does not accord with the scale and balance, it will lose its balance. Those who [attempt to] make bright their bright virtue or love their people without according with the highest good will lose the root. And so, according with the highest good in order to make bright one’s bright virtue and love the people—this is called the learning of the great person.

Question: “When knowledge accords with [the highest good], there is stability. When there is stability there is calm. When there is calm there is peace. When there is peace there is deliberation. When there is deliberation there is attainment.”

[Master Yangming] replied: It is only because people don’t understand that the highest good is within their own minds that they search for it on the outside. They mistakenly believe that each affair and every thing has its own fixed principle, and so they search for the highest good within each affair and every thing. This is why they [become preoccupied with] disconnected fragments and isolated shards; confused and disheveled, they have no stable orientation. Now once one understands that the highest good lies within their own minds that they search for it on the outside.
within one’s own mind and does not depend upon anything outside, then one’s intentions will have a stable orientation and one no longer will suffer the misfortunes of being [preoccupied with] disconnected fragments and isolated shards and being confused and disheveled. Once one no longer suffers the misfortunes of being [preoccupied with] disconnected fragments and isolated shards and is no longer confused and disheveled, then one’s mind will not engage in wanton activity and one is able to be calm. Once one’s mind no longer engages in wanton activity and one is able to be calm, then one’s mind will be relaxed and leisurely in its daily operation, and one will be able to at peace. Once one is able to be at peace, then whenever a thought arises or an affair affects one, one’s pure knowing will spontaneously inquire and explore as to whether or not this is the highest good, and so, one will be able to deliberate. If one is able to deliberate, then all one’s decisions will be precise, all one’s responses will be appropriate, and the highest good will thereby be attained.

Question: “Things have their roots and branches.”17 A former scholar took “making bright one’s bright virtue” as the “root” and “renovating the people” as the “branch”—seeing these as two separate things opposing one other as inner and outer. “Affairs have their conclusions and the their beginnings.” The same former scholar took “knowing to accord with [the highest good]” as the “beginning” and “attaining [the highest good]” as the “conclusion”—seeing these as a single affair connected like head and tail. If we follow your explanation [of the text] and read “renovating the people” as “loving the people,” then isn’t there a problem with this explanation of roots and branches?

[Master Yangming] replied: This explanation of roots and branches in general is correct. If we read “renovating the people” as “loving the people” and say that “making bright one’s bright virtue” is the “root” and “loving the people” is the “branch,” this explanation cannot be considered wrong. But we simply must not separate branch and root and regard them as two separate things. Now the trunk of a tree can be said to be its “root” while the tips of the limbs can be said to be its “branches.” [But] it is only because the tree is a single thing that these can be called its “roots” and “branches.” If you say that the trunk and the tips of the limbs are separate things altogether, then how can you talk about these purportedly separate things as [related] “roots” and “branches?”

The meaning of the phrase “renovating the people” is different from the meaning of “loving the people,” and so the work of making bright one’s bright virtue naturally is seen as something distinct from “renovating the people.” [But] if one understands that making bright one’s bright virtue is loving the people and that loving the people is how one makes bright one’s bright virtue, then how could one separate making bright one’s

17 Continuing with the next lines in the first chapter of the Great Learning. “Roots and branches” refers to what is primary and what is secondary, respectively. Wang’s view insists on the fundamental, organic unity between “root” and “branch.”
18 Here again the “former scholar” is Zhu Xi. See his commentary to this section of the Great Learning in Daxue zhangju, 1b. Zhu Xi modified the original text of the Great Learning and here read qin min 親民 “loving the people” as xin min 新民 “renovating the people.” Wang insisted on following the original text.
bright virtue and loving the people and regard them as two separate things? The real problem with this former scholar’s explanation is that he did not understand that making bright one’s bright virtue and loving the people are at root a single affair, and so he came to regard them as two separate affairs. This is why, even though he understood that roots and branches should be seen as one thing, he could not avoid separating them into two things.

Question: I see how the section of text that begins with, “The ancients who wished to make bright their bright virtue throughout the world…” and that runs through, “first…cultivated themselves” can be understood on your explanation of making bright one’s bright virtue and loving the people. But may I ask about the sequence of spiritual training and manner in which one should put forth effort that is described in the section beginning with, “Those who wished to cultivate themselves” and that runs through, “the extension of knowledge lies in rectifying one’s thoughts [about things]?"

[Master Yangming] replied: This section of the text offers a complete and detailed description of the effort needed to make bright one’s bright virtue, love the people, and accord with the highest good. Now, we can say that “self,” “mind,” “thoughts,” “knowledge,” and “things” describe the sequence of spiritual training. While each has its own place, in reality they are but a single thing. We can say that “rectifying,” “extending,” “making sincere,” “correcting,” and “cultivating,” describe the spiritual training used in the course of this sequence. While each has its own name, in reality they are but a single affair. What do we mean by “person?” It is the way we refer to the physical operation of the mind. What do we mean by “mind?” It is the way we refer to the luminous and intelligent master of the person. What do we mean by “cultivating the self?” It the way we refer to doing what is good and getting rid of what is bad. Is the physical self, on its own, able to do what is good and get rid of what is bad, or must the luminous and intelligent master of the person first want to do so and only then will one physically start to do what is good and get rid of what is bad? And so, those who want to cultivate themselves must first correct their minds.

Now the mind in its original state is the nature. Since the nature is only good, the mind in its original state is wholly correct. Why then must one make an effort to correct it? Since, as noted above, the original state of the mind is wholly correct; it is only when thoughts and ideas begin to stir that there is that which is not correct. And so, those who wish to correct their minds must correct their thoughts and ideas. Whenever they have a good thought, they must really love it in the same way that they love a beautiful color. Whenever they have a bad thought, they must really hate it in the same way that they hate a foul odor. Then all of their thoughts will be sincere and their minds can be rectified.

However, one’s thoughts give rise to what is bad as well as to what is good. If one does not have a way to make clear the difference between these two, the true and the

---

19 This question probes Wang’s understanding of the next sections of the Great Learning. The term gewu 格物 translated here as “rectifying one’s thoughts [about things]” represents a distinctive feature of Wang’s interpretation of this text and of self-cultivation more generally. The orthodox view, represented by Zhu Xi, understands this term as the “investigation of things.” For a discussion of these different readings, see Ivanhoe, Ethics in the Confucian Tradition, pp. 97-9, etc.

20 These memorable examples appear in chapter six of the Great Learning.
deviant will become confused with one another and mixed together. Then, even those who wish to make their thoughts sincere will be unable to do so. And so, those who wish to make their thoughts sincere must fully extend their knowledge. Zhi 致 “to fully extend” means  zhi 至 “to reach to the full extent,” as in the line, “Mourning zhi 致 reaches to the zhi 至 full extent of grief.”

The Book of Changes says, “Zhi 致 reach to zhi 至 the full extent of what one knows.” [In the latter passage], “the full extent of what one knows” is a matter of knowledge. “Reaching to the full extent” is fully extending. To fully extend one’s knowledge is not like the so-called filling out and broadening of what one knows that later scholars talk about. It is simply to extend fully the liangzhi 良知 “pure knowing” of my own mind. Pure knowing is what Mengzi was talking about when he said, “All human beings possess the mind that knows right and wrong.” The mind that knows right and wrong knows without deliberation and is able to act without learning. This is why it is called pure knowing. This is the nature with which Heaven has endowed me, my mind in its original state, which spontaneously is clear, luminous, bright, and aware.

Whenever a thought or idea arises, on its own, my pure knowing knows. Is it good? Only my pure knowing knows. Is it not good? Only my pure knowing knows. It never has a need to rely on other people’s opinions. This is why even those petty people who have done bad things and would stop at nothing, still, whenever they see a gentleman, will dislike these [aspects of themselves] and try to conceal their wickedness and display their good points. This shows the degree to which their pure knowing will not allow them to hide from themselves. Those who want to distinguish the good from the bad in order to make their thoughts sincere can only do so by extending fully the knowledge of pure knowing. Why is this? If, as a thought or idea arises, my pure knowing knows it is good, but I am not able to sincerely love it and later turn my back upon it and cast it aside, then I take what is good as bad and obscure my own pure knowing, which knows the good. If, as a thought or idea arises, my pure knowing knows it is not good, but I am not able to sincerely hate it and later follow and act upon it, then I take what is bad as good and obscure my own pure knowing, which knows what is bad. In such cases, though one says one knows, one still does not know. [Under such circumstances] can one’s thoughts be made sincere? Now, if one sincerely loves and hates what pure knowing [knows to be] good or bad, then one will not be deceiving one’s own pure knowing, and one’s thoughts can be made sincere.

Now does the desire to extend one’s pure knowing refer to something shadowy and vague; does it imply remaining suspended in what is empty and incorporeal? [No!] It

---

22 Quoting the commentary on the first hexagram of the Yijing. Here and with the prior quote Wang attempts to bolster his interpretation by supplying glosses on key terms supported by passages from the classics. The two terms involved are homophones and cognates.
23 Criticizing Zhu Xi and his followers, who argued that one must augment and enlarge one’s moral knowledge.
24 For Wang’s appropriation of this term from Mengzi, see Ethics in the Confucian Tradition, pp. 48-50.
25 For these qualities of pure knowing, see Mengzi 7A15.
26 Paraphrasing chapter six of the Great Learning.
requires one to always be working at some concrete 事 “task” or “affair.” And so, extending one’s knowledge must lie in 事事 “rectifying one’s thoughts [about things].” A 物 “thing” or “object” is a 事 “task” or “affair.” A thought always arises in regard to some affair or other. The affair that is the object of a thought is called a thing. To 事 “rectify” is “to correct.” It refers to correcting whatever is not correct and returning to what is correct. Correcting whatever is not correct means to get rid of what is bad. Returning to what is correct means to do what is good. This is what it means to “rectify.” The Book of History says, “[The good qualities of Emperor Yao] 事 ‘reached’ [Heaven] above and [earth] below,”28 “[Emperor Shun 事 ‘reached’ the temple of the illustrious ancestors,”29 and “[The king’s ministers] 事 ‘rectify’ his errant mind.”30 The word 事 in the expression 事事 combines these two meanings (i.e. “to reach [some thing]” and “to rectify [the mind]”).31

Even though one sincerely wishes to love the good known by pure knowing, if one doesn’t actually do the good in regard to the thing about which one is thinking, then some aspect of this thing has not yet been rectified, and the thought of loving it is not yet sincere. Even though one sincerely wishes to hate the bad known by pure knowing, if one doesn’t actually get rid of the bad in regard to the thing about which one is thinking, then some aspect of this thing has not yet been rectified; the thought of hating it is not yet sincere. Now, concerning the good that is known by one’s pure knowing, if one actually does the good in regard to the thing about which one is thinking to the very utmost of one’s ability and, concerning the bad that is known by one’s pure knowing, if one actually gets rid of the bad in regard to the thing about which one is thinking to the very utmost of one’s ability, then things will be completely rectified, and what is known by one’s pure knowing will not be diminished or obstructed in any way. [This knowledge] then can reach its ultimate extension. As a result, one’s mind will be pleased with itself, happy and without any lingering regrets; the thoughts that arise in one’s mind at last will be without a trace of self-deception and can be called sincere. This is why it is said that, “When thoughts [of things] have been rectified, knowledge is fully extended. When knowledge is fully extended, thoughts are sincere. When thoughts are sincere, the mind is correct. When the mind is correct, the self is cultivated.”33

While one can say that there is an ordering of first and last in this sequence of spiritual training, the training itself is a unified whole that cannot be divided into any ordering of first and last. While this sequence of spiritual training cannot be divided into any ordering of first and last, only when every aspect of its practice is highly refined can one be sure that it will not be deficient in the slightest degree. This explanation of

27 Wang here alludes to a teaching first seen in Mengzi 2A2 but which Wang interprets in his own distinctive way. For a discussion of this issue, see Ethics in the Confucian Tradition, pp. 92-4, 100-1, 107-8.
31 Wang wants to combine these two meanings in order to make clear that the thoughts of the mind that are to be rectified have objects outside the mind; the process is not just inward-looking but directed out to events and affairs in the world.
rectifying, extending, making sincere, and correcting helps us to understand the
zhengchuan 正傳 “orthodox tradition” of [the sage emperors] Yao and Shun and is
the xinyin 心印 “seal” of Kongzi’s approval.”

The language of this last line invokes terms and ideas of the Chan school, as seen in texts like the
Platform Sutra. The zhengchuan “orthodox tradition” of the Chan school was a mind-to-mind transmission,
“that does not lie in writing or words.” It was affirmed through receipt of a xinyin “mind seal” between
patriarchs, which in essence was the mind of the Buddha. Wang is saying that the true Confucian tradition
is likewise a transmission of the mind.

---

34 The language of this last line invokes terms and ideas of the Chan school, as seen in texts like the
Platform Sutra. The zhengchuan “orthodox tradition” of the Chan school was a mind-to-mind transmission,
“that does not lie in writing or words.” It was affirmed through receipt of a xinyin “mind seal” between
patriarchs, which in essence was the mind of the Buddha. Wang is saying that the true Confucian tradition
is likewise a transmission of the mind.