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Da Xue 大學: “Expansive Learning”

INTRODUCTION

The *Da Xue* is included in the Warring States text, the *Li Ji* (*The Book of Rites*). Though traditionally attributed to Confucius and his student Zeng Zi, its true authorship is disputed. The Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhu Xi (1130–1200), extracted the *Da Xue* from the *Li Ji*, along with the *Zhong Yong*, and grouped them with the *Analects* of Confucius and the *Meng Zi* (*Mencius*), to form “The Four Books.” He maintained that the study of Confucianism ought to begin with the *Da Xue*. We agree that it does indeed provide an excellent introduction for the novice to Confucian philosophy.

The core of the text contains a ‘Canon,’ which succinctly articulates the central Confucian notion that self-cultivation, training oneself to realize one’s full human potential, is key to transforming society. The underlying idea is that self-cultivation leads to the development of an influential virtuous character (*de* 德) that resonates with others in such a way as to inspire in them the desire to act appropriately and develop their own character. Confucians believe that this process is critical to achieving a harmonious social order.

The title of this work, *Da Xue* 大學, has been famously translated “Great Learning.” But its contents may be most succinctly summarized: *learning to be great*, as Wing-tsit Chan has translated the phrase (W.-T. Chan 1963, 86). The word “*xue* 學” means “learning” in a broad sense that includes cultivating personal excellence of character. The idea is this: Concentrating on the root—one’s own inner character—is the most

important (“great”) learning, for this is the means of attaining personal excellence. And, further, great achievements in the world are rooted in the achievement of excellence in personal character.

While the word *da* 大 does mean “great,” it also has the sense of expanding out and reaching everywhere. Indeed, the *Da Xue* is about precisely this: virtue at the individual level expands outwardly to influence increasingly larger circles until the whole world is ordered. For this reason, we render “*da xue*” as “expansive learning.”

Now, to cultivate one’s character, one must consider the actual circumstances of the world itself—both through introspection and empirical observation—with calm, rigorous honesty. In other words, one begins the process of expansive learning, and in turn the process of ordering the world, by engaging in philosophical inquiry.

THE CANONIC CORE OF THE *DA XUE*

Note: Bracketed numbers here serve as reference markers corresponding to some of the elucidations provided in the commentarial portion of the *Da Xue*, which follows the Canonical Core.

The *dao* of expansive learning (*da xue* 大學) resides in illuminating (*ming* 明) illustrious potency of character (*ming de* 明德) [1], treating the common people as close relatives (*qin* 親),^a and stopping only when one has achieved the utmost excellence (*shan* 善). When one understands that this is the stopping point, one may be resolved. Being resolved, one can achieve tranquility. Being tranquil, one can achieve peace of mind. With peace of mind, one is able to be reflective. Being reflective, one is able to obtain [excellence]. All phenomena have roots (*ben* 本) and extremities (*mo* 末, “branches”); affairs have ends and beginnings. If one understands what comes first and what comes later, then one is approaching the *dao* [of expansive learning].

Comment: The metaphor of root and branches, “*ben mo*,” can be found in other Ruist texts, as well as Mohist, Legalist, and Daoist texts. The concern is what we should tend to the root in order to achieve success in affairs (the branches). The text here seems to suggest that there is a hierarchy between what comes before and what comes after, and to Western-trained ears this in turn suggests a strict foundationalism. But the relation between root and branches is a thoroughly organic one, and so the reader would be wise to investigate the fuller argument to see if the metaphor might not better be interpreted more holistically.

In antiquity, those who wanted their distinct influential virtue (*de*) to shine forth in the world first put their states in order. Wishing to put their states in order, they first proceeded to regulate their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first proceeded to cultivate their personal character (*shen* 身). Wishing to cultivate their personal character, they first proceeded to properly align (*zheng* 正) their feelings (*xin* 心). Wishing to properly align their feelings, they first proceeded to make their thoughts and intentions (*yi* 意) authentic (*cheng* 誠) [6].

Comment: *Cheng* 誠 is often translated “sincerity.” But the commentary suggests that here the passage means, “One ought not deceive oneself.” (See §6 of the Commentary, below, p. 63.) The word “*xin*” 心 means “heart,” and was associated with thinking as well as feeling. Sometimes context suggests that one element is being emphasized more than the other. That the “feeling” element is dominant here is suggested by the examples in §7 of the Commentary (p. 63).

Wishing to make their thoughts and intentions authentic, they first proceeded to extend their understanding. Extending understanding resides in examining things and phenomena (*gewu* 格物).

Comment: A controversy developed in later Confucianism. While it would be to some degree anachronistic to insert Neo-Confucian concepts into the discussion here, it is worth considering, in general terms, whether the “examining of things and phenomena” refers to an examination of the external world, or an examination and cultivation of one’s mind.

Only when one has examined things and phenomena is one’s understanding adequate. And only when one’s understanding is adequate can one’s thoughts and intentions be authentic (*cheng* 誠). Only after one’s thoughts and intentions are authentic can one properly align one’s feelings. Only after one has properly aligned one’s feelings can one cultivate one’s personal character [7]. Only after one cultivates one’s personal character can one regulate one’s family [8]. Only after one regulates one’s family can one put the state in order [9]. And only after one has put the state in order can there be peace in the world [10].

What all people have in common, from the emperor down to the common people, is that they consider self-cultivation to be the root (*ben* 本). For the fundamental to be in a shambles and yet the details dependent upon it to be well ordered is unheard of. There has never been a case in which the profoundly important and the insignificant

were interchangeable. This is called “understanding the root” and “the fulfillment of understanding.”

SELECTIONS FROM THE COMMENTARY
ON THE *DA XUE*

1 The Proclamation of Kang says, “Their self-mastery exhibits an illustrious (*ming* 明) potency of character (*de* 德).” The *Tai Jia* says, “He attended to and examined his illustrious command (*ming* 命) [to rule] provided by *tian* 天.” The Emperor’s Canon says, “His self-mastery exhibits an illustrious and lofty *de*.” These are all [examples of] making oneself illustrious.

Comment: The character *ming* 明, which is composed of the radicals for the Sun and the Moon, means bright and clear, and also can mean “to make clear.” The phrase “illustrious potency of character” (*ming de* 明德) is meant to suggest a compelling character that shines bright and clear, and in doing so, manifests outwardly a clear and compelling example, illustrative of consummate conduct.

3 [...] As a ruler of others, one rests in *ren* 仁 (humanity). As a minister, one rests in respectfulness. As a child, one rests in filiality. As a father, one rests in loving kindness. And, fellow countrymen in their relations rest in trustworthiness (*xin* 信).

The *Odes* say, “[...] The refined person: like cutting and filing, like carving and polishing” [...] “Like cutting and filing” means learning the way. “Like carving and polishing” means self-cultivation. [...]

Junzi 君子 (exemplary persons) value their own worth (賢其賢), and they treat those to whom they are close dearly (親其親). Petty persons enjoy their own amusement (樂其樂), and benefit from profit taking (利其利). [...]

4 The Master [Confucius] said, “In presiding over public disputes, I am like any other. What is necessary is to ensure that no such disputes occur” (*Analects* 12.13, see p. 94).^b

Comment: One prevents disputes from occurring by using norms of ritual propriety to help people develop their character. Cultivated persons find ways of resolving disagreements before they become disputes needing to be formally arbitrated. As is suggested in *Analects* 2.3 (p. 94), people led by ritual propriety will develop a sense of shame and reform themselves.

Those who are unfeeling are not to make exhaustive accusations. Holding the aspirations of the common people in great awe is called “understanding the root.”

6 The phrase “make their thoughts and intentions (*yi* 意) authentic (*cheng* 誠)” means not deceiving themselves, just as when one detests foul odors, and is fond of lovely colors. This is being comfortable with oneself. Thus, *junzi* are sure to be cautious in their solitude. Idle petty persons, being degenerate (*bu shan* 不善), have nothing they will not do. It is only after seeing the example of a *junzi* that they begin to cover up their degeneracy with disgust, and make appearances of excellence (*shan* 善). When others observe them, it is as though they see through to their very lungs and liver. So what use is [pretending]? This is why it is said “authenticity (*cheng* 誠) from within takes shape on the outside.” Thus, *junzi* are sure to be cautious in their solitude.

Comment: What one does in private, and even what one merely thinks about, affects one’s character. And one’s character shows through when one acts publicly. Thus, one’s character cannot be hidden, it “takes shape on the outside.” (Cf. *Analects* 2.10, p. 92.) And thus, one must be “cautious in one’s solitude” because private thoughts and actions have real effects in the world, mediated through the character that they reinforce.

Zeng Zi said, “What all see and condemn is grave indeed.” Wealth enriches the home, virtue (*de* 德) enriches the person, and expansive feelings (*xin* 心) make the body content. Thus, *junzi* are sure to be authentic in their thoughts and intentions (*yi* 意).

7 “Cultivating personal character” resides in the proper alignment of one’s feelings (*xin* 心). If one has anger and resentment as part of one’s character, one will not be able to achieve this alignment. If one is fearful, one will not be able to achieve it. If one’s feelings are not in alignment, then although one looks, one will not see; although one listens, one will not hear; although one eats, one will not know the flavor. This is why it is said that self-cultivation resides in the proper alignment of one’s feelings.

8 [...] To say that regulating one’s family resides in cultivating one’s person means: people are partial regarding those they are close to and love, regarding those they disdain and despise, regarding those they are in awe of and respect, regarding those who are modest and engender pity, and regarding lazy pleasure-seekers. Thus, there are few people in the

world who, though fond of something, apprehend its flaws, and though repulsed by something, appreciate its merits. Thus, as the saying goes: “No one knows one’s own child’s defects. No one knows a seedling’s great [potential].” Because of this, if one does not cultivate one’s person, one will not be able to regulate one’s family.

9 To say that ordering the state surely involves first unifying one’s family means that there are no people who, though unable to instruct their own families, are capable of instructing others. *Junzi* do not abandon their families to become instructors of the state. Being filial is how one serves one’s lord. Brotherly respect is how one serves elders. Loving kindness is how one serves the masses. [...]

Comment: Confucians posit an analogy between the political and the familial: a ruler should be as a good parent, a loyal minister as a good son. And, as they see it, it is in the context of a family that the virtues necessary for proper governance, such as caring for others and loyalty, naturally arise and are cultivated.

The *Odes* say: “Befitting an elder brother, befitting a younger brother.” After one has been a true elder brother and a true younger brother, only then is one able thereby to educate the people of the state. [...]

10 To say that pacifying the world resides in ordering one’s state means: When those above are like good parents, the people will gladly be filial. And when those above behave with brotherly guidance (like an elder brother should) the people will gladly respond with brotherly respect (as a younger brother would). For when those above ensure that orphans are provided for, the people will not forsake [those in need]. It is on this basis that *junzi* have a way (*dao* 道) of assessing and of setting standards (*xie ju* 繫矩).

Comment: The reference to elder and younger brothers is clearly a male-oriented way of making the point. Today we would make it with reference to older and younger “siblings.” Such male orientation is not uncommon in the Confucian classics; for example, *Xun Zi* 14.7 refers to fathers as being “the most exalted in the family” (see comment to *Xun Zi* 21.1, p. 201). Historically, this is undeniable. However, although the idea of different roles for different people, and the value of harmony over sameness, are central to Confucianism, for contemporary *philosophical* purposes we can interpret more inclusively without causing much distortion in the system as a whole.

What those above detest, do not impose on those below. With what those below detest, do not serve to those above. What is detested in the past, do not repeat over and over. What will be detested in the future, refrain from doing from the beginning. What is detested on the right, do not give to the left. What is detested on the left, do not give to the right. This is what is meant by the *dao* of assessing and of setting standards (*xie ju* 絜矩). [...]

Comment: The expression 絜矩 (*xie ju*) means: to assess (something) and then set appropriate standards. What the text is conveying is that the way this assessment is done, and the basis for the standards set, is something very much like empathetic consideration (*shu* 恕). See *Analects* 6.30 and 15.24, both on p. 83.

The Proclamation of Kang says: “A mandate (*ming* 命) [to rule] is not necessarily long enduring (*chang* 常).” With the *dao* of excellence (*shan* 善), one will gain it. If one is not excellent, one will lose it.

The book of Chu says: “In the state of Chu, nothing except excellence was regarded as precious.” [...]

ENDNOTES

^a This line may involve a corruption of the text. Cheng Yi emended the text by changing *qin* 親 (parents, relatives; to be emotionally close to) to *xin* 新 (new; renew). The meaning of the phrase then becomes, “renewing the common people.” This is plausible. On the other hand, the idea of “treating the common people as close relatives” is expressed in Commentary §§9 and 10, and is consistent with the Confucian analogy between the country as a whole and a family. However, *Meng Zi* 1A7 (p. 140) may seem to suggest the opposite.

^b This statement also constitutes the entirety of *Analects* 12.13.