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ANOTHER LOOK AT LI 理

Willard Peterson
Princeton University

In a recent number of this journal, Allen Wittenborn offered a discussion of the concept of li as a "perplexing idea" in what he called the Chu Hsi school.* He introduced six "problem areas" he found in the concept of li. He asked a series of questions about the concept and was in general negatively critical of the answers he was able to derive from Chu Hsi's teachings. Without pretending to the "complete comprehension of Neo-Confucian thought" which Wittenborn hopes can be achieved, I would like to sketch my understanding of li in the teachings of Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi and then address the difficulties which Wittenborn, and perhaps others, find in reading Chu Hsi.

The Neo-Confucian (Tao-hsüeh) use of the word li has been translated into English by a variety of words.¹ "Reason" has sometimes been chosen, at least in part because it is the most potent term in the later European philosophical tradition to which li can be matched,² but such a translation introduces into Sung thought unwarranted implications of a "consciousness" on the part of what is doing, or has done, the reasoning.³ "Law" and "laws of Nature" have also been used, but Needham has persuasively argued that such translations inject unwarranted implications of a "law giver" or "legislator," again euphemisms for a supreme deity.⁴ Needham expressed a preference for not

*See BSYS 17, pp. 32-48.

1. See the itemization provided by W. T. Chan in his translation, Reflections on Things at Hand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 367. Also see the discussion in Joseph Needham, Science and Civilisation in China, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 472-473 for examples. T'ang Chün-i distinguished six meanings of li which were associated with particular historical developments and stressed that li in Sung and Ming Neo-Confucianism was an "ethical" li. "Lun Chung-kuo che-hsüeh ssu-hsiang shih chung-li chih liu-i," Hsin-ya hsüeh-pao 1.1 (1955), esp. 82-86.
2. See, for a recent example, the usage in Thome H. Fang (Fang Tung-mei), Chinese Philosophy: Its Spirit and Development (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co., 1981), 413-417. Aristotle's "form" has also been used for li. See Needham, vol. 2, 475.
3. See W. T. Chan, trans., Reflections on Things at Hand, 367.
4. See Needham, Science and Civilisation, vol. 2, 475 and 557-558, and W. T. Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 519.

translating Chu Hsi's li, but allowed that "organization" or "principle of organization" are approximations of the meaning,⁵ even though "organization" implies an organizer as much as law implies a law maker.

Discussing the word li in a broader context, but still with reference to Chu Hsi, Needham also wrote that "Li, then, is rather the order and pattern in Nature, not formulated law . . .; it is dynamic pattern. . . Such dynamic pattern can only be expressed by the term 'organism'. . ."⁶ With its strongly biological connotations, "organism" reflects Needham's preoccupation with li in the realm of heaven-and-earth and his relative indifference to li in the realm of human affairs and human thought; it could not be sustained as an actual translation of Chu Hsi's use of the word li. If we leave aside Chu Hsi for a moment and go back to pre-Han and Han uses of li, then li is used in contexts for which "pattern" and "order" seem appropriate renderings, whether li is understood in its narrowest sense as dressing jade, the lines in jade, or divisions marking cultivated fields,⁷ for it often enough has the extended meaning of ordering and arranging, order and arrangement. These renderings become more problematic by the time of Wang Pi and the Buddhist authors--whose use of the word I leave aside here--and objectionable for Ch'eng Yi's and Chu Hsi's usage (as I shall show later).

"Principle," which is currently the conventional translation for Chu Hsi's li, was used by Derk Bodde, who acknowledged Needham's earlier argument against "law."⁸ Although "principle" is well established, objections can be raised against some of its implications. I shall indicate these in the course of my discussion of li in the teachings of Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi. Instead of "principle," I use the word "coherence." I intend "coherence" to be taken in the straightforward sense of "the quality or characteristic of sticking together," with the connotations varying according to context. My expectation is that translating, and understanding li in this manner will better fit the Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi usage and preclude certain unwarranted preferences.

5. Needham, vol. 2, 475.

6. Ibid., 558.

7. See A. C. Graham, Two Chinese Philosophers (London: Lund Humphries, 1958), 21, and W. T. Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept Li as Principle," Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies, n.s. 4.2 (February 1964), 123-129. Also see A. C. Graham, Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), 191-192.

8. See his translation of Fung Yu-lan, History of Chinese Philosophy, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 444. Also see A. C. Graham, Two Chinese Philosophers, 12.

The meanings of li for Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi can be summarized in the following set of propositions (P). (N.B. The propositions are proposed by me and imputed to them.) Although, as Graham observes, "The Ch'eng brothers never find it necessary to define it [li] . . .,"⁹ and li may not even have been taken by them as the central term which it later became, Ch'eng Yi used it to explain other terms, and thus the concept came to have great weight. Later Chu Hsi was repeatedly pressed with questions about what was meant by li, which indicates the term had also already become problematic. I present a few examples which illustrate these propositions, and there are other examples scattered throughout their writings and conversations. In one form or another, these propositions are also to be found in the major secondary literature. I have not attempted to provide systematic reference to it.

P.I. There is coherence (li) for each and every thing, whether that thing is taken as heaven-and-earth as a whole, or a thing smaller than a cricket, an ant, or a blade of grass.

Ch'eng Yi said that "For each unitary thing there is a unitary coherence. . ."¹⁰ A "thing" (wu) thus is a portion of ch'i which has coherence, and conversely, coherence is manifest in differentiated things (wu). Me, my shoelace, my dog, and my refrigerator, each constituted of ch'i, are units of coherence. So are a pebble, a flame of a candle, and a cloud. If there is no coherence for a "thing," that "thing" cannot be said to exist. "Someone asked, 'In tales it is said that in the distant past there were humans with ox heads and snake bodies, but there wasn't any coherence for this, was there?' [Ch'eng Yi] replied, 'You are certainly right. When we call it a human, how could there be these other aspects? But there are human shapes which resemble a bird's beak or an ox's head. It is mentioned in the Hsun-tzu.' . . . Some one asked, 'At the time when humans first came into being, were there still transformations of ch'i or not?' [A "transformation" (hua) involves a change in kind.] [Ch'eng Yi] replied, 'This must shed light on coherence; we ought to discuss it carefully. Now if a sand island suddenly appeared in the ocean, it would then have plants and trees come into being when there is earth. When there are plants and trees, birds and beasts will come into being on it of themselves.' Someone asked, 'In your Recorded Sayings you say, "How do we know that on some island there are not humans

9. Graham, Two Chinese Philosophers, 8.

10. Ch'eng Yi, "Ho-nan Ch'eng shih yi-shu," Erh-Ch'eng chi (Peking: Chung-hua, 1981), 18. 188. (Hereafter abbreviated ECC.) Cf. Graham, 76. The Chinese texts of key translated passages are provided at the end, numbered according to the notes.

[generated by] the transformation of ch'i?" What about that?' [Ch'eng Yi] replied, 'That is right. Human habitats nearby certainly do not have [instances of humans generated by the transformation of ch'i], but it cannot be known if they occur in extremely distant places.' It was asked, 'In the world today there are no humans without parents. In ancient times there were transformations of ch'i and now there are not. Why?' [Ch'eng Yi] replied, 'There are two types [of transformations of ch'i]. In the first type, the whole of the ch'i [of a thing] is transformed and [a new thing] comes into being. An example of this is rotting vegetation becoming fire-flies.¹¹ When this ch'i is transformed, it has reached the suitable moment for transforming and transforms itself. In the other type, after [a new thing] has come into being by a transformation of ch'i, it then is reproduced by seed. If a human puts on new garments and after a few days there are lice in them, this is a transformation of ch'i. After the ch'i is transformed, it is not subsequently transformed, and [lice] come into being by seeds [eggs]. The coherence of this is obvious.'¹²

The claim of coherence on this level, P.I, was an integral part of Ch'eng Yi's response to the problem of being committed to "this world" in the face of Buddhist arguments about the provisional or illusory quality of the perceived world. Chu Hsi was addressing this issue when he said, "When Sakyamuni was still a prince, he went out and saw the pain of birth, aging, sickness and death. Repulsed at them, he retired to the snowy mountain to prepare to become a Buddha. With this one thought, he emptied himself of all perceptions and only feared he had not severely extirpated them and completely rid himself of them. We ju are not so. We perceive there is not a single thing which does not concretize its particular coherence, and there is not a single instance of coherence which can be removed from its thing. Buddhists say that the coherence of the ten thousand [things] is all empty. We ju say that the coherence of the ten thousand [things] is all real. . . . Those who study Buddhism today say they know their hearts and recognize their natures, [but if there is no coherence] I do not understand what 'heart' they know or what 'nature' they recognize."¹³ If someone were to continue to insist that things, including one's "self" are illusory, or that they "exist" only in some consciousness rather than "out there," or that things are merely

11. This example comes from the "Yüeh ling" chapter of the Li-chi.

12. Ch'eng Yi, ECC, 18.198-199.

13. Chu Hsi, Chu-tzu yü-lei (reprint: Taipei: Cheng-chung, 1962), 17.9a. (Hereafter abbreviated CTYL.)

some whirling particles without coherence, then that person could not continue a discussion with Ch'eng Yi or Chu Hsi.

P.II. Coherence (li) is unitary.

The notion of coherence does more than affirm for us the existence of any particular thing (wu). Chu Hsi mentioned a kernel of grain sprouting, flowering, heading, and producing a hundred more kernels like itself all as an instance of unitary coherence.¹⁴ Thus we can move from the coherence of any particular, single, even unique phenomenon to larger and larger sets of phenomena, even to all the ten thousand things in the realm of heaven-and-earth, and still maintain the notion of coherence. "Someone asked about [the relation of] coherence and ch'i. [Chu Hsi] replied, 'Yi-ch'uan [i.e., Ch'eng Yi] said it well when he said that each instance of coherence is separate, but when we speak of the thousand things in heaven-and-earth together, there is a single coherence; yet when we come to [the coherence] in humans, each also has his own single coherence.'¹⁵ Collectively, the particular instances of coherence, including the coherence of heaven-and-earth, have another name. "The coherence of all the ten thousand things in heaven-and-earth, taken together, is the Great Ultimate. The Great Ultimate originally did not have this name; it is just an appellation."¹⁶ Appearing first in the "Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations" of the Book of Change, the name T'ai-chi, literally the Great Ridgepole, was put into currency in Sung by Chou Tun-yi (1017-1073) as the "source" out of which all things are generated and was identified with the unitary integrative coherence only after the death of Ch'eng Yi.¹⁷ Chu Hsi may have been alluding to this shift when he used the word "originally." Coherence which is integrative and comprehensive as well as unitary was also termed Heaven's Coherence (t'ien-li) and even simply as the Way (tao).¹⁸

14. Ibid., 94.8 a-b.

15. Chu Hsi, Chu-tzu ch'üan-shu (Taipei: Kuang-hsueh, 1977 reprint), 49.1 b. (Hereafter abbreviated CTCS.) Also translated in W. T. Chan, Source Book, 635.

16. Chu Hsi, CTY, 94.9b. Also translated in Chan, Source Book, 641, and Fung/Bodde, vol. 2, 537.

17. A. C. Graham, Two Chinese Philosophers, xviii-xix, 108, and 160-164.

18. Ch'eng Yi, ECC, 2A.30. For other examples, see Fung/Bodde, 502-504 and 538, and Graham, 12-13.

One of the difficulties, as Graham pointed out,¹⁹ in translating li into English as "principle" is that we are continually forced to decide whether unitary "Principle," "a principle" of a single thing, or "principles" is meant. Graham suggested li was to be conceived as a "network of veins" (p. 13) and as a "network of roads" (p. 58). Presumably one could understand the Great Ultimate as a network of networks, but there would still be a "one and many" problem. An advantage of understanding as well as translating li as "coherence" is that we can speak of the coherence of my puppy, the coherence of all dogs, the coherence of all living things, and so on, without involving ourselves in a verbal dilemma over the relationship between the "different" levels or envelopes of coherence. Coherence is coherence, whether we are referring to a member of a set, all of the members of a set, or the set as a whole. Coherence refers to both the parts and the whole and should not be understood as additive.

P.III. Coherence (li) of objects or phenomena is not locatable independently of ch'i.

Chu Hsi wrote, "In the realm of all-under-heaven, there is no ch'i which has no coherence, and also there is no coherence which has no ch'i."²⁰ There was the following exchange. "Someone asked about the place where coherence is manifested in ch'i. [Chu Hsi] replied, 'Yin and Yang and the Five Phases not losing their inter-connectedness amidst their complications is just "coherence." If there were a time when ch'i did not coalesce [as things (wu) but was undifferentiated, not fen], then coherence for its part would not have that in which to inhere."²¹ Coherence is significantly manifested to us in the regularity, order, or pattern of the interaction of Yin and Yang and of the Five Phases which are involved in all the movement and flux that we perceive in all the things (wu), including affairs (shih), constituted by ch'i. The flux of phenomena, including those in human society, may seem to be occasional and transitory, but their being patterned (as by Yin and Yang and the Five Phases) as they change is their coherence. In another response Chu Hsi said, "After there is this particular coherence, then there is this particular [configuration of] ch'i. When there is this particular [configuration of a quotient of] ch'i, only then does this particular coherence have the appropriate place. Whether as large as heaven-and-earth or as tiny as a

19. Graham, 12, 57-58.

20. Chu Hsi, CTCS, 49.1a. Also translated in W. T. Chan, Source Book, 635.

21. Chu Hsi, CTCS, 49. 2b. Also translated in Fung/Bodde, 543, and Chan, Source Book, 635.

cricket or ant, the coming into being [of these things] are all like this. Why think that when heaven-and-earth came into being, there was not that which was the recipient [of the coherence of heaven-and-earth]? As for this one word 'coherence' [not in conjunction with ch'i,] we cannot discuss it with the terms 'existing' or 'not existing.' At the time when there was not a heaven-and-earth, [its coherence] already was as it is."²² Although it is inappropriate to speak of coherence as existing (yu) or not existing (wu) independently of ch'i, there is coherence, as exemplified by many sentences such as "Each unitary thing must have (yu) a unitary coherence."²³ Coherence does not stand autonomously.

P.IV. Coherence (li) is categorically distinct from the ch'i of which things are constituted.

"Someone asked, 'What about [the statement that] there must be this particular coherence and only then is there this particular ch'i [constituting a particular thing]?' [Chu Hsi] replied, 'On a basic level they cannot be spoken of as first and later. Nevertheless, if one insists on drawing an inference about whence they have come, then he must say that first there is this particular coherence. Nevertheless, coherence for its part is not separated as a single thing, but is existing in this particular ch'i [for which it is the coherence]. If there were not this ch'i, then this coherence would not have a place to be suspended."²⁴ Chu Hsi also said,

What are called 'li' and 'ch'i' absolutely are two 'things' (wu) [Chu Hsi's vocabulary may have failed him here], but if viewed from the perspective of [phenomenal] things, then the two [categorical] 'things' are a mingled whole and cannot be separated out with each in its own place. This being so, we do not harm the separateness of the two [categorical] 'things' in taking them as a single [phenomenal] thing. If viewed from the perspective of coherence, then although there is not a [particular phenomenal] thing, there is the coherence of that thing. This being so, there is also only this [particular] coherence without there actually being this [particular] thing.²⁵

Here Chu Hsi would seem to be going against his admonition not to think of coherence as existing or not existing independently of ch'i.

Maintaining both P.III and P.IV, Chu Hsi repeatedly was asked to clarify the relation between coherence and ch'i in things (wu). If the

22. Chu Hsi, CTCS, 49. 6a. Also translated in Fung/Bodde, 539, and Chan, Source Book, 637.

23. Ch'eng Yi, ECC, 193.

24. Chu Hsi, CTYL, 1.2b, and CTCS, 49.1b. Also translated in Chan, 634.

25. Chu Hsi, CTCS, 49.5b-6a. Also translated in Chan, 637.

coherence of any particular thing is not dependent on or derived from or a function of the thing itself as constituted of ch'i, then where is the coherence, for example, when its allied thing does not exist? The question was put to Chu Hsi as where was a person's coherence before he was conceived? "Someone asked, '[You say that] there is a particular coherence [for any particular thing] and only then is there this particular ch'i [constituting that thing, for example a particular human being]. When there is not that person, where is his particular coherence?' [Chu Hsi] said, 'It is just right here. Think of an ocean of water. Whether one takes a dipperful, a jarful, or a bowlful, they all are this [same] ocean water. [Applying this analogy to human beings,] it is just that he might be the host and I the guest, or he might be comparatively long lived and I might not live so long.'"²⁶ Some of us have a dipperful of life, and others a bowlful, but the coherence of our particular lives is "right here" and does not "exist" in some "other" realm such as fate or Heaven or whatever. The coherence of each yet to be born baby is "right here." Chu Hsi seems to have been saying that the particular coherence of each human being is drawn from a "reservoir" of coherence, just as the ch'i which constitutes that human being is drawn from a "reservoir" of undifferentiated ch'i. Before any particular thing comes into existence, there is coherence to be associated with it, and that coherence persists after the given phenomenon ceases to exist. All things (wu) constituted of ch'i in the realm of heaven-and-earth are involved in flux and movement and are responsive to the changes of Yin and Yang and the Five Phases. Coherence is not a (phenomenal) thing and is not in flux even though it is associated with things and things are in flux.

P.V. Coherence (li) is transcendent as well as immanent.

Chu Hsi engaged in many discussions over whether coherence is within a phenomenon, or phenomena, or outside of it, or them. The issue was discussed in terms of whether (a) coherence is "below" or within that which has material presence or form (hsing erh hsia), or (b) coherence somehow is beyond or "above" all that which has form (hsing erh shang). His formulations vary, but overall Chu Hsi's position is that the coherence of particular phenomena is immanent in them and also that coherence is transcendent, not only because it "is," independently of particular things, but especially when we refer to the comprehensive coherence of the Great Ultimate and the Way, which cannot adequately be correlated with any particular "thing." Chu Hsi and Ch'eng

26. Chu Hsi, CTYL, 1.2a, and CTCS, 49.2a-b.

Yi seem to be clear that coherence in its transcendent aspect must be described as "above" that which has form. For example, Ch'eng said that, "Ch'i is within form and the Way is above form."²⁷ Looking at it from the other direction, Chu Hsi said that whatever can be called "above form" is coherence.²⁸ In some instances Chu Hsi stressed the transcendent aspect of coherence. "In the realm of heaven-and-earth, there is coherence and there is ch'i. That which is coherence is the Way of what is above forms (hsing erh shang) and is the basis of things which have come into being. That which is ch'i is the particular physical object (ch'i_物) of what is within form (hsing erh hsia) and is the instrumentality of anything which has come into being. Coming into being as a human, one necessarily is endowed with this coherence [of being a human] and only then has the nature [hsing of a human]. One is necessarily endowed with this ch'i [in the configuration of a human] and only then has the form [of a human]."²⁹ Chu Hsi's teaching would be crippled if coherence is taken exclusively to be either immanent or transcendent. Perhaps more out of hope than conviction, Needham wrote that "The work of Chu Hsi, therefore, was to remove li from its Buddhist contexts, and to restore its ancient naturalist significance, immanent rather than transcendent. The precise degree to which he was able to do this remains a matter for minute future research; certainly his critics of later centuries often believed that he did not entirely succeed in divesting the concept of its religious-metaphysical undertones."³⁰ In an early review, W. T. Chan pointed out that Needham overemphasized the interpretation of li as immanent, to the neglect of its transcendent aspects.³¹ Coherence is the basis (pen) of the coming into being of things, including humans, but we need not infer that the pre-existing coherence of a particular thing causes that thing to be as it is.

P.VI. Coherence (li) is that by which a thing is as it is.

Ch'eng Yi was reported to have said: "To exhaust the coherence of things is to exhaust [i.e., to comprehend] that by which they are so. Heaven's being high, earth's being thick, ghosts and divinities' being invisible or

27. Ch'eng Yi, ECC, 6.83. A. C. Graham, 34.

28. Chu Hsi, CTYL, 95.6a. Also translated in Fung/Bodde, 534.

29. Chu Hsi, CTCS, 49.5b.

30. Needham, Science and Civilisation, vol. 2, 478.

31. W. T. Chan, "Neo-Confucianism and Chinese Scientific Thought," Philosophy East and West, 6.4 (January 1957), 321.

visible, these must have that by which they are so. If one says that heaven just is high, earth just is thick, ghosts and divinities just are invisible or visible, then they are merely words and what would there be!"³² Clearly the coherence of a thing (including a ghost or divinity) is not an attribute (like color or invisibility) of that thing, but is that by which it is so (so yi jan). Coherence may be understood in a broad, and loose, sense as "cause." However, when we recall (from P.III) that the coherence of a thing is not locatable independently of the ch'i of that thing and for which it is the coherence, then we are driven back to the notion that "it" (whether the thing or the-thing-and-its-coherence) is so-of-itself (tzu-jan),³³ which would appear to be self-contradictory if coherence is taken in any strict sense of "cause" which made it discrete from "that which is caused." In this regard, "principle" also is misleading as a rendering of li to the extent that "principle" can be understood only as that which comes first (in the senses of principle as source, origin, fundamental) and as separate from that for which it is the li. Chu Hsi was asked about the Way of Heaven. "He said, 'The Way [in the sense of the course traced by ongoing processes of the alternation] of Yin and Yang is coherence; Yin and Yang [themselves] are ch'i.' 'But for what cause would one consider Yin and Yang to be the course of ongoing processes?' [Quoting from the 'Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations'] he said, 'What is above form is called the course of ongoing process and what is within form is called a particular physical object. . . . This being so, particular physical objects nevertheless are also of the course of ongoing processes, and the course of ongoing processes nevertheless is also of particular physical objects. The course of ongoing processes is never separate from particular physical objects; it is also just the coherence of these particular physical objects. For example, this armchair is a particular physical object. That it can be sat in is the coherence of an armchair. [In the other words, the ch'i of Chu Hsi's armchair 'sticking together' as it does involves its possessing, as it were, a distinct seating capacity.] A human body is a particular physical object. That it speaks words and does actions is the coherence of a human.'"³⁴ It is not surprising that the li of a thing has been partially understood as its cause, principle, function, definition, form or

32. ECC, 1272; also see 157. Partly translated in Graham, 8.

33. See Graham, 13.

34. Chu Hsi, CTYL, 77.5a. Partly translated in Graham, 17.

description, but none of these is sufficient. We must remember that in a world in flux, where all things are transitory and thus unreliable, we can have the start of certainty when we accept that each thing has coherence and its coherence is that by which it is as it is, but is not separable from that which it is. When we say that summer follows spring, we are referring to the coherence of the passage of the seasons, but spring does not "cause" summer.

P.VII. Each phenomenon has its associated ultimate or "perfect coherence" (chih li), which may or may not be attained.

Someone suggested to Chu Hsi that "'The Great Ultimate is just the perfect coherence in men's hearts.' [Chu Hsi] said, 'Events and things all having an ultimate is the ultimate attainment of the Way's coherence [and not a product of men's hearts or minds]. . . . [It was asked,] 'The benevolence of the ruler and the reverence of the minister are then ultimates?' [Chu Hsi] replied, 'These are the ultimates of a single event or a single thing.'"³⁵ To refute those who wondered if dried and withered plants had not lost their coherence, Chu Hsi referred several times to rhubarb and wolfsbane, which as dried medicinal plants maintain their distinctive coherence as purging and warming ingredients even if they are not ingested.³⁶ Thus envelopes of coherence occur over time and include potentialities as well as actualities. It was precisely with this aspect of their conception of coherence that Ch'eng Yi, and following him Chu Hsi, were able to introduce morality. The logic is simple. There is the coherence of all that is. There is the coherence of what will be or ought to be, usually expressed as the perfect coherence. As an aspect of that which we now are, we have the coherence of what we ought to be and the allied capacity to attain that ultimate, the full realization (ch'eng) of our potential. The puppy becomes a dog, what it ought to be, if it acts in a manner congruent with fulfilling that potential coherence within it (e.g., if it does not run under the wheels of a truck) and is not otherwise interfered with. The individual human exerting the appropriate effort in the appropriate environment becomes a morally perfect man.

35. Chu Hsi, CTYL, 94.9b. Also translated in Fung/Bodde, 537, and Chan, 641.

36. Chu Hsi, CTYL, 4.5a, cited in Fung/Bodde, 551-552. CTCS, 42.32a, cited in Needham, vol. 2, 569.

P.VIII. Coherence (li) is intelligible on all levels of integration, a blade of grass, a school of fish, the experience of a lifetime, heaven-and-earth, the Great Ultimate.

Coherence is accessible to our minds, which have coherence. It was probably Ch'eng Yi who said, "In the realm of heaven-and-earth, what is simply is. For example, after decades have passed, one day a man fully recalls in his breast knowledge and experiences [from his past]. Where was this particular coherence located [in the intervening years]?"³⁷ While in the twentieth century we might say that a "coherent memory" is a product of certain mental functions, for Ch'eng Yi it "just is." Graham cited an extremely telling comment, again probably by Ch'eng Yi. "What the heart 'comprehends when stimulated'³⁸ simply is coherence. In [the heart's] knowing, the affairs in the realm of all-under-heaven either are or are not, irrespective of past and present or before and after. [That is, the remembered events of the past are in our hearts simultaneously and now; unremembered events are not there.] A further example is our dreams; there are no forms [in the technical sense of 'that which is constituted of ch'i'] in them, but there simply is this coherence. One might say that when [a dream] involves such categories as 'forms' and 'voices' [i.e., we "see" forms and "hear" voices in dreams], then these are ch'i [in the dream]. When a particular thing comes into being the ch'i for it is coalesced, and when it ceases to be, its ch'i completely reverts [to the state of undifferentiated ch'i]. If there is a voice, there must be the mouth which made it, and if there is a touch, there must be a body which did it. When the matter [of a particular thing, say the Duke of Chou,] has dispersed, how could there be these [voices and touches of the Duke of Chou, which have been experienced in dreams]? It follows that if [the heart's] knowing did not have this coherence [which pertains to the dead person, whose ch'i is dispersed], then [the dream] could not be believed."³⁹ A dream, like a memory, can be believed when it has coherence. It is easy enough to extrapolate from these to realize the importance of coherence in the classics, in histories, in ceremonies, and so on. Ch'eng Yi said, "In general, each thing having a unitary coherence, one must exhaustively go after its coherence. There are many ways to start exhausting

37. Ch'eng Yi (?), ECC, 2A.31. Also translated in Graham, 15.

38. The allusion is to the "Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations," A10.16: "When stimulated, [the Change] comprehends all causes in the realm of all-under-heaven."

39. Ch'eng Yi (?), ECC, 2B.56. Also translated in Graham, 15.

coherence: reading books and clarifying their moral coherence; discussing your past and present men and distinguishing right and wrong [in their conduct]; being involved in affairs and dealing with them properly--all these are [means of] exhausting coherence."⁴⁰

Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi taught that by investigating things (ko wu 格物) we exhaust coherence (ch'iuung li 窮理), that is, we attain or apprehend (te) "perfect coherence." This then is the aim of learning (hsüeh) and is pivotal in the moral improvement of oneself and in bringing peace to the world.⁴¹ Chu Hsi said, "One who is exhausting coherence just wants to know that by which events and things are as they are (so yi jan) and that which they ought to be (so tang jan). As a result of knowing that by which they are as they are, one's purpose is not in doubt. As a result of knowing that which they ought to be, one's conduct is not in error. This is not to say one takes the coherence of 'that' and attributes it to 'this.'"⁴² Right aims and right conduct are congruent with the actual coherence in affairs and things. For Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi, the ascription of coherence to the realm of heaven-and-earth provides the basis for finding it in human experience and realizing order in the realm of all-under-heaven.

I believe that understanding li in terms of these eight propositions, rather than any single sentence of definition, helps to resolve questions raised by Wittenborn in his six "problem areas."

1) "How do we, or how can we, know li?" Under this heading, Wittenborn finds a dilemma in li being "imperceptible and inexperiential" (p. 34); as li can be known only through its manifestation in ch'i. He raises the example of a cart floating on water and functioning as a boat; if the cart has the li of a cart and then functions as a boat, he supposes that "Since the li of a thing is assuredly not open to change, then we can only conclude that we were mistaken in the first place [about the cart having the coherence of a cart]" (p. 34). Both of these interpretations seem to stem from taking li as a Platonic universal (e.g., cart-ness, boat-ness). The coherence of a cart is right there in the cart itself (P.I) even though the coherence can be understood as somehow beyond the cart itself (P.V). The coherence of a particular configuration of ch'i entails that thing being used as, perceived as, and called a "cart," but that coherence does not

40. Ch'eng Yi, ECC, 2B.56. Also translated in Graham, 76, and Chan, Source Book, 561.

41. E.g., Ch'eng Yi, ECC, 18.188. This passage is widely cited.

42. Chu Hsi, CYCS, 3.34a. Also translated in Chan, 611.

preclude that thing from serving as a boat-with-wheels, or firewood, or whatever it has been, is, or will be. Its coherence does not change. A creature with an ox-head does not have the coherence of a human; a newly laid egg has the coherence of a chicken even if it ends up as an omelette ingredient. A kitten has the coherence of a cat but not the coherence of a dog.

Wittenborn also finds that our capacity to be in error about the li of a thing "leads us inevitably into the quagmire of Cartesian doubt." Descartes sought to recover "certainty" in reason,⁴³ and Wittenborn notices that Chu Hsi did not formulate a Cartesian "epistemological edifice," but "bluntly presupposed the concept of principle to be self-evident" (p. 35). Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi did "presuppose" coherence, and not just the "concept of principle." The ingredients of a man's breakfast, the act of eating that breakfast and the memory of eating that breakfast all have coherence; if someone were to tell me that on philosophical grounds he did not "really" know if he had breakfast this morning, I could not begin to describe Chu Hsi's teachings to him. But if the person forgot, or was demented, or otherwise mistaken about his breakfast, the coherence of the things which constituted his most recent meal is not thereby dissolved. Wittenborn reveals he is misled when he substitutes "ideas" for "principles" (p. 35) in his discussion. Coherence is "out there" in association with things; that coherence is intelligible to us through the coherence in our minds, and we are able to fathom it." But that coherence "out there" is not dependent on our minds and is not affected by our being mistaken about it. A new-born baby may be said not to know or comprehend the coherence of its mother's care, but the coherence of that care is not thereby affected. Humans (including Chu Hsi) have had a variety of accounts of the coherence of what we call stars, but all of the accounts so far being in some respects inadequate or mistaken does not affect the coherence of the stars being what they are (if we grant that stars exist). Chu Hsi pointed out that a Buddhist implies he has a heart when he claims to know it. Descartes had to start with the coherence of his thinking. On one level Wittenborn is correct when he comments, "We are asked [by Chu Hsi] to accept as axiomatic something that simply is not." I would answer on Chu Hsi's behalf that the coherence of Wittenborn's sentence, not only in the sense of its conforming to certain conventions of the English language but also in its implicit intentions of conveying a meaning to his readers, already implicitly accepts

43. Cf. Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), for a discussion of some consequences of the "solution."

that there is coherence. His sentence, however, is not congruent with the coherence of Chu Hsi's teachings; Wittenborn has not "fathomed coherence."

2) "Is li prior to ch'i and, if so, what does this mean?"

The discussion of P.III, P.IV and P.V bear on this question, and it caused some of Chu Hsi's own students some difficulty. Wittenborn's problem seems to involve understanding a "thing" as existing statically (or timelessly) rather than as enduring over a period of time, and its coherence only as "transcendently prior" rather than in time.⁴⁴ Wittenborn also suggests that li has "the capability of causing something else to achieve being," and that "Li is the potential organizing pattern of all there is" (p. 36), with the emphasis on "potential" rather than realized. If we reread the previous sentence and substitute "coherence" for "li," it is clear that the phrase "capability of causing" is less suitable than "potential organizing pattern," which is less suitable than simply "potential pattern." The coherence of the cat is in the kitten, in the embryo developing in the kitten's mother, and in the "reservoir" of coherence prior to that kitten's conception.

3) "Is li subjective or objective?"

This question dissolves when we understand li as coherence. As Wittenborn recognizes, coherence is "accountable as both physical phenomena and as psychological concepts." But then he adds, "In Western modes of thinking, at least, this cannot be possible" (p. 38). I would say that we must extend our sympathies to anyone still so caught up in Cartesian dichotomies.

4) "Is li a form of what things are or a standard of what they should be?"

I have tried to indicate under P.I and P.VII that coherence is "of" the thing for which it is now "that by which that thing is so" (so-yi jan che) and also is the coherence of "that which the thing ought to be." Chu Hsi was not blurring a distinction between "is" and "ought"; he recognized it and spoke of it. He was urging us to understand as a coherent whole both what a man is now and what he might be in the future.⁴⁵

5) "What accounts for the differentiation of things?"

Here Wittenborn raises the "one and many" or "universal-particulars" problem inherited from Greek philosophy, and suggests (but does not intend) a solution. "The problem, then, is whether li is a unity, or a multiplicity. It

44. Cf. Fung/Bodde, 535.

45. See A. C. Graham, "Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of 'Is' and 'Ought,'" in Victor H. Mair, Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 3-23.

cannot be both. If it were then our entire way of thinking . . . would have to be seriously reconsidered, and probably discarded" (p. 42). I urge that he discard it if it so interferes when he is trying to understand Chu Hsi. Wittenborn's problem seems to come from not recognizing li as a mass noun. We might remember that "reason" has been an attractive interpretation and translation of li perhaps in part because most readers would not stumble when they came to an assertion that "Reason is reason" or "Logic is logic." Reason can be understood to be apportioned among many individuals, past and present, and as that which somehow "accounts for" the way things are. The crucial difference between "reason" and li, it seems to me, is that the latter was not intended by Ch'eng Yi or Chu Hsi as locatable independently of the "things" which are constituted of ch'i. Things are differentiated. That is acknowledged by Wittenborn's question 5). One answer which may satisfy his question is, "Each particular thing has its own particular coherence, and so they are different" (P.I). But if Wittenborn's question is asking, "What causes things to be differentiated?," then the answer would seem to be, "They are so of themselves." This answer may not seem wholly satisfying, but it is close to what cosmologists today say when they speculate about the first few nano-seconds after the Big Bang.

6) "What is the scope of li?"

Here Wittenborn is concerned about coherence in our minds. He asks, "if there are li of purely mental concepts, then on what do they 'hang,' to what do they inhere?" (p. 43). Dreams and memories, as discussed under P.VIII, are examples of coherence of "things the ch'i of which is dispersed" inhering in the ch'i of our minds. Wittenborn asks about the coherence of numbers, beliefs, actions and emptiness. I briefly examine each. If we understand "emptiness" as the relative absence of ch'i (e.g., the emptiness of a cup which contains "nothing," the emptiness of the space between the ch'i which constitutes the Earth's atmosphere and the ch'i which constitutes our moon), then there is coherence in what is "empty." What Chu Hsi sought to deny was an absolute "emptiness" which included among its characteristics an absence of coherence.⁴⁶

Given that both Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi emphasized the gloss of "things" (wu) as "affairs" (shih), there should be no problem in seeing that actions, human actions, have coherence. When the student bows to the master, there is coherence in the relation between their two bodies at that moment, and

46. Cf. Fung/Bodde, 567-568.

that coherence is part of their relationship before the act of bowing as well as after the bow.

The coherence of a particular belief can be associated with a particular set of electrical charges in a particular part of our brain. Whether I have a belief that a dragon dwells at the bottom of my pond or any other belief or idea, I have been instructed by Ch'eng Yi and Chu Hsi to fathom the coherence of that belief (in my mind) by investigating things such as the color and motion of the water in my pond for their coherence to ascertain if the dragon is down there.

By raising "numbers" in this context, Wittenborn indicates he regards them as "purely mental" and questions what relation they would have to ch'i. This is a good example of what happens when one expects Chu Hsi to think with twentieth century assumptions. Asked about coherence and numbers (shu), Chu Hsi said, "Ch'i is just number. There being this particular coherence, there is just this particular ch'i [constituting this particular thing]. There being this particular ch'i, there is just this particular number [associated with this thing]. Each and every thing is so, such as six, the number of Water, in [the six points of] a snow flake."⁴⁷ In the section on "numbers" (shu) in his Classified Conversations (ch. 65), Chu Hsi was at pains to subordinate the notion of "number" advocated by Shao Yung and others in a tradition stemming from the Book of Change. He did not want to have "number" understood as being essentially the same as "coherence."

Finally, Wittenborn explains that he understands the relationship between li and ch'i as two members of two pairs: transcendental and immanent, and potential and realizable or actualizable. (I suspect he means "realized or actualized.") I have tried to show that Ch'eng Yi's and Chu Hsi's li must be understood as standing on both sides of the pairs.

I am certain my discussion of li will not be satisfactory to all readers. I can only hope, as Wittenborn did, that my comments will elicit further discussion. We need not complain that a concept which occupies such an important place in Ch'eng Yi's and Chu Hsi's teaching is complicated rather than simple.

47. Chu Hsi, CTYL, 65.6b.

所謂理氣決是一物但在物上看則一物渾渾不
可分開各在一處然不書二物之各為一物也若
在理上看則雖未有物而已有物之理然亦但有
其理而已未嘗實有是物也

25 又何在曰也只在這裏如一海水或取得一杓或取得一擔或
取得一棹都是這海水但是他為王我為客他較長我
得之不久耳理氣同義

26 又問有是理而後有是氣未有人時此理
天地之間，有者只是有。譬之人之知識聞見，經歷數十年，一日念之，了然胸中，這一箇道理在那裏放著來。

27 天地之間，有者只是有。譬之人之知識聞見，經歷數十年，一日念之，了然胸中，這一箇道理在那裏放著來。

28 天地之間有是理也者形而上之道也生物之
本也氣也者形而下之器也生物之具也是以人
物之生必稟此理然後有性必稟此氣然後有形
也

29 心所感通者，只是理也。知天下事有即有，無即無，無古今前後。至如夢寐皆無形，只是有此理。若言涉於形聲之類，則是氣也。物生則氣聚，死則散而歸盡。有聲則須是口，既觸則須是身。其質既壞，又安得有此？乃知無此理，便不

30 子曰：窮物理者，窮其所以然也。天之高，地之厚，鬼神之神，必有所以然者。苟曰天惟高耳，地惟厚耳，鬼神惟幽顯耳，是則辭而已，尚何有哉？

31 窮理者欲知事物之所以然與其所當然者而已知其所以然故志不惑其所當然故行不謬非謂取彼之理而歸諸此也

32 凡一物上有一理，須是窮致其理。窮理亦多端，或讀書，講明義理，或論古今人物，別其是非，或處接事物而處其當，皆窮理也。

33 或曰：傳記有言，太古之時，人有牛首蛇身者，莫無此理否？曰：固是。既謂之人，安有此等事？但有人形似鳥喙，或牛首者耳。荀子中自說：「問：太古之時，人還與物同生否？」曰：「同。」莫是純氣為人，繁氣為鳥否？曰：「然。人乃五行之秀氣，此是天地清明純粹氣所生也。或曰：「人初生時，還以氣化否？」曰：「此必燭理，當徐論之。且如海上忽露出一沙島，便有草木生。有土而生草木，不足怪。既有草木，自然禽獸生焉。」或曰：「先生語錄中云：『焉知海島上無氣化之人？』如何？」曰：「是。近人處固無，須是極遠處有，亦不可知。曰：「今天下未有無父母之人。古有氣化，今無氣化，何也？」曰：「有兩般。有全是氣化而生者，若腐草為螢是也。既是氣化，到合化時自化。有氣化生之後而種生者。凡如人身上著新衣服，過幾日，便有蠅蟲生其間，此氣化也。氣既化後，更不化，便以種生去。此理甚明。」

34 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

10, 40 窮理者欲知事物之所以然與其所當然者而已知其所以然故志不惑其所當然故行不謬非謂取彼之理而歸諸此也

11 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

12 窮理者欲知事物之所以然與其所當然者而已知其所以然故志不惑其所當然故行不謬非謂取彼之理而歸諸此也

13 老病死苦感感之入雪山修行從上一念便一切作空者惟恐刻著之不狂屏除之不盡吾儒却不然蓋見得無一物不具此理無一理可違於物佛說萬理俱空吾儒說萬理俱實其一是方有公私義利之不同今學佛者至誠心見性不知其識何心是見何性哉

14 一粒粟生為苗苗便生花花便結實又成粟連復本形一總有百粒每粒箇箇完全又將這百粒去種又各成百粒生只曾不已初間只是這一粒分去物物各有理總只是一箇理

15 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

16 總天地萬物之理便是大極太極本無此名只是箇表德

17 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

18 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

19 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

20 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

21 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

22 有此理後方有此氣既有此氣然後此理有安頓處大而天地細而蟻蟻其生皆是如此又何慮天地之生無所付受和要之理之一字不可以有無論未有天地之時便已如此也

23 天下物皆可以理照，有物必有則，一物須有一理。

24 或問必有是理然後有是氣如何曰此本無先後之可言然必欲推其所從來則須說先有是理然理又非別為一物即存乎是氣之中無是氣則是理亦無掛搭處

25 問理與氣其本也只是一曰氣便是數有是理便有是氣有是氣便是數物皆然如水數六雪片也

26 又問有是理而後有是氣未有人時此理

27 天地之間，有者只是有。譬之人之知識聞見，經歷數十年，一日念之，了然胸中，這一箇道理在那裏放著來。

28 天地之間有是理也者形而上之道也生物之本也氣也者形而下之器也生物之具也是以人物之生必稟此理然後有性必稟此氣然後有形也

29 心所感通者，只是理也。知天下事有即有，無即無，無古今前後。至如夢寐皆無形，只是有此理。若言涉於形聲之類，則是氣也。物生則氣聚，死則散而歸盡。有聲則須是口，既觸則須是身。其質既壞，又安得有此？乃知無此理，便不

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31 窮理者欲知事物之所以然與其所當然者而已知其所以然故志不惑其所當然故行不謬非謂取彼之理而歸諸此也

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33 或曰：傳記有言，太古之時，人有牛首蛇身者，莫無此理否？曰：固是。既謂之人，安有此等事？但有人形似鳥喙，或牛首者耳。荀子中自說：「問：太古之時，人還與物同生否？」曰：「同。」莫是純氣為人，繁氣為鳥否？曰：「然。人乃五行之秀氣，此是天地清明純粹氣所生也。或曰：「人初生時，還以氣化否？」曰：「此必燭理，當徐論之。且如海上忽露出一沙島，便有草木生。有土而生草木，不足怪。既有草木，自然禽獸生焉。」或曰：「先生語錄中云：『焉知海島上無氣化之人？』如何？」曰：「是。近人處固無，須是極遠處有，亦不可知。曰：「今天下未有無父母之人。古有氣化，今無氣化，何也？」曰：「有兩般。有全是氣化而生者，若腐草為螢是也。既是氣化，到合化時自化。有氣化生之後而種生者。凡如人身上著新衣服，過幾日，便有蠅蟲生其間，此氣化也。氣既化後，更不化，便以種生去。此理甚明。」

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35 老病死苦感感之入雪山修行從上一念便一切作空者惟恐刻著之不狂屏除之不盡吾儒却不然蓋見得無一物不具此理無一理可違於物佛說萬理俱空吾儒說萬理俱實其一是方有公私義利之不同今學佛者至誠心見性不知其識何心是見何性哉