

Form, Principle, Pattern, or Coherence? Li 理 in Chinese Philosophy

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1. Classical Ambiguities of the Term

The term *Li* 理 is the focus of several explicit controversies in the history of Chinese philosophy. These are well-known. According to the standard doxa, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians¹ understand Li as the “principle” of all things. This Principle is *manifested* more or less clearly and completely in particular things, owing to the character of that thing’s constituent *qi* (material force), but is nonetheless *present in its entirety* in each thing, serving as that thing’s true nature. It is this Principle that is the intrinsically good Nature also of human beings, which is revealed as an aspect or condition of their minds, but is not their minds as such. On this view, each thing has its own Li, or principle, but all of these principles are really one Principle,

¹ A very general term retrospectively applied to what became the normative school of Neo-Confucianism, used as the basis for the civil service examinations from the Yuan dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty, named after Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the latter being its definitive systemizer.

the Principle of all things or the “Great Ultimate” (*taiji*), which is thus both one and many—a point which has raised many difficulties for Western interpreters of this doctrine, as we shall see.

These Confucians critique Buddhists for understanding Li as nothing but Emptiness (*kong*, *sunyata*), and thereby overlooking the specific Li of each thing. On the other hand, they critique Lu-Wang Confucians² for understanding Li directly as mind, for in the Lu-Wang understanding things have no “fixed Li” of their own, but rather are given their principles by the human mind, which is itself the only Li. Finally, Qing Confucians such as Dai Zhen (1724-1777) and Duan Yucai (1735-1815) critique both the Cheng-Zhu and the Lu-Wang Neo-Confucians for understand Li as an omnipresent universal principle of all things (whether Mind or the one Principle), whereas its real, original meaning, they claimed, on the basis of classical etymological studies, was of the differentiated, particular forms of individual things, the “cuts” between them, not the bridges over these gaps. Li for these Confucians refers only to the multiplicity, not the unity, of individual principles. It is less known that a controversy about the unity and multiplicity of Li also emerges within Tiantai Buddhism, with Siming Zhili (960-1028) asserting that *both* Li and its opposite member, events (事 *shi*), to which it is normally opposed,

² A general retrospective term for an opposing trend Neo-Confucian, named after Lu Xiangshan (1139-1192) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529).

entail both multiplicity and unity. *Li* are both one and many, but *shi* are also both one and many. His opponents, known as the Shanwai, take *Li* to mean precisely the unification and interfusion of all determinations, while *shi* refers only to differentiation. The Shanwai position has its roots in Huayan thought, and also tends toward the Huayan/Chan idea of *Li* as a pure indeterminate undifferentiated unity identified with the intrinsic enlightened mind of all sentient beings. It is Zhili's understanding that became orthodox within Tiantai.

The term *Li* clearly has not only exceptional importance, but also exceptional ambiguity. The word is an odd one, with an odd history. It came into prominence as the central metaphysical category rather gradually, seemingly through the intervention of Buddhist usages, taking its decisive role only in Cheng Yi's thought, and further developed by Zhu Xi, who then reads it back into the pre-Buddhist tradition although its actual appearance in the early texts is sparse and problematic. It is one of the handful of terms—along with *Dao* 道, *De* 德, *Ming* 命, *Tian* 天, *Qi* 氣, *Xing* 性 and so forth—which must unquestionably be dealt with in some detail in any attempt to write a history of Chinese thought, and it is usually the one that presents the most problems.

2. Modern Ambiguities of the Term: Comparative Issues

The term Li has also been of special interest for comparative studies, because in some of its Neo-Confucian usages it seems to be the one place where something like a transcendent realm of determinate forms or eternal normative principles appears in the Chinese tradition, which otherwise appears to be devoid of any such two-tiered metaphysics of the Platonic and post-Platonic types. This two-tiered metaphysics of rules and their instantiations, of an intelligible and a phenomenal realm, are almost inescapable in Western thought, even in scientific conceptions of "natural law," which tends to be conceived as an immutable realm of real determinants creating effects within observed reality. The lack of any such notion in China has been the cause of considerable bewilderment: how then did the traditional Chinese thinkers conceive of regularities in nature and of the binding normativity of behavioral patterns without reference to an immaterial and immutable realm? Li, especially in its Neo-Confucian usages,

seemed a likely candidate for some equivalent. Indeed, Fung Yulan (1895-1990) famously and rather rashly declared that the the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian notion of “Li” was the traditional Chinese equivalent of the Platonic forms, based on their putative transcendence to their instantiations, and their role in defining the essences of these instances.³ This suggestion quickly aroused refutations, as the many points of disharmony between the two doctrines became apparent. The most obvious of these lie in the unity/multiplicity relation in Li,⁴ the normative/descriptive fusion in Li,⁵ and the relation between Li and *qi* as opposed to that between form and matter.⁶

³ Fung Yulan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), vol. 2, p. 537.

⁴ While the Platonic forms are many, although perhaps somehow grounded in a greater unity, the Neo-Confucian Li seem to be simultaneously both one and many. Zhu Xi, for example, states at times both that there is only one Li, and that each thing has its own specific defining Li, and that somehow all these particularized Li are one and the same Li. The entire supreme Li is contained in each differentiated entity, Zhu Xi tells us in other contexts, as the reflection of the moon is reflected completely in a multitude of bodies of water. If these statements are taken as assertions of definitive doctrine, we have an obvious mismatch with the concept of Platonic ideas.

⁵ The Platonic forms may or may not have an evaluative force to them. They do when they define, for example, a virtue, but a universal quality such as “redness” seems to be purely descriptive. There is, of course, a derivative though perhaps pervasive axiological sense in that a putative instantiation of a given form will be judged to be deficient if it fails to meet the definition embodied by the form; a chair is not a good chair, which is to say, a real chair, unless it accords with the Form of the chair. This axiological dimension is perhaps reflected in the role given to the Form of the Good, and the implied equation between Being and Goodness that is easily derived from the Platonic position. Still, the axiological dimension of the Neo-Confucian Li is clearly front and center, to such an extent that they have been cited as

For these and other reasons, it has been notoriously difficult for Western interpreters to find a fitting interpretation for Li, and, correlatively, to account for the lack of concern with the problem of universals, together with its attendant epistemological problems, its transcendentalism, and its absolutist moral implications. Several attempted translations of Li into English have been attempted. The main candidates have been “principle,” “order,” “reason,” “Logos,” “pattern” and “coherence.” But each of these has presented problems of its own; there seems to be no ready-made fit for this concept in the existing philosophical lexicon.

Under these conditions, several hypotheses have been put forth to grasp the multiple dimensions of meaning encoded in this, simultaneously explaining the relative unimportance of the problem of universals in early Chinese philosophy, and the unusual way the problem is treated when it does appear. Tang Junyi (1909-1978) presented one of the earliest and still one of the most useful modern analyses of the term in his seminal essay “Yuan Li” (Tracing the

a classic example of the traditional Chinese “fusion of fact and value.” The Li of a thing is both “what makes it so” and also “how it should be,” and ethics are derived directly from this fusion of “is” and “ought.”

⁶ Matter, in Greek thought, is formless and passive. Qi, which is the opposite member to Li in much Neo-Confucianism, is spontaneously active and can even be interpreted as having determinations of its own. Zhu Xi explicitly says in certain contexts that after it is produced from Li, qi cannot be totally controlled by Li. Moreover, Zhu Xi sometimes states that, in some sense that is rather difficult to discern, Li produces Qi, which is not true of the relation between form and matter.

origin of Li), originally published in 1955 but later used as the opening chapter of the first volume of Tang's massive history of Chinese Philosophy.⁷ In this work Tang attempts a comprehensive overview of the usages of Li throughout the history of classical Chinese philosophy, separating out six distinct meanings of the term while also tracing its etymological bases. Tang's six senses of the term are: *wenli* (Li in the context of cultural activities), *mingli* (Li in logical reasoning about abstract philosophical attributes, considered by Tang to be synonymous in its usage with *xuanli*, abstruse or metaphysical Li), *kongli* (Li as Emptiness), *xingli* (Li as Human Nature), *shili* (Li pertaining to events or affairs) and *wuli* (pertaining to concrete empirical things). Tang begins his discussion by stressing the role of human activity in the earliest definition of Li even in its apparently most concrete and objective usages. This distinction between "pattern" as a simple fact found in an object and Li as a kind of interface between human subjectivity and the structure of the surrounding world will be crucial to our discussion below, and will also help us get a handle on problem of multiplicity and unity implied by the term. Tang's discussion directs our attention to the earliest uses of the term Li. In the Book of Songs, 210, the term is used as a verb, not a noun. It is parallel with the term *jiang*

⁷ Tang Junyi, Zhongguo zhexue yuanlun: Daolunpian (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1986), pp. 21-89.

疆, used as a verb to mean “to divide or make a border.” Li here seems to be a verb meaning “to separate into groups, to divide into sections,” but with an implication of doing so for a particular purpose: in this case, the division of a field in order to cultivate crops, and the creation of pathways of access to these fields. The earliest Chinese dictionary, the Shuowenjiezi, defines the term simply as “to treat jade” (治玉也). The implication is that Li here means “to cut and divide in a way which is consistent with a particular human value.” One cuts away pieces from a raw piece of jade in order to make it serve as a ritual implement or to attract a human buyer. Thus the raw jade material must be reorganized to form a whole that also necessarily coheres with some human desires or purposes. Tang thus stresses that in its earliest uses, the subjective and active/temporal sense of Li as primary, with its objective and static/spatial aspects as derivative: Li as a verb rather than as a noun. He also notes, importantly, the role of human will, a human project, in all these early usages of Li; that is, the essential connection with value and valuation. Tang sees Li in its earliest meaning above all as the purposive, humanly motivated act of cutting, tailoring, which connects its various aspects and phases as means toward this end. It is primarily a human activity, and only derivatively the patterns that emerge

from this activity, or the pre-existing patterns that guide it.⁸ For if the primary sense of Li in pre-Qin texts is what Tang calls 文理 *wenli*, taken to mean initially the action of making cultural patterns, as expressed especially in social interactions but also in pragmatic skill-activities such as field-division and jade-treating, then we have in hand a powerful model for understanding the intertwining of unity and differentiation in this concept, as Tang notes in his critique of the Dai Zhen/Duan Yucai “division-only” position. The unification here refers to the end, the goal of the activity, as present in each differentiated and even contrasting particular operation in the procedure. The diversity refers to the various individual means used to achieve this end. Tang stresses, importantly, that the unity here is temporal, not the joining of an array of differentiations but the unity of a single orienting intention governing a complex process. So in treating jade I may sometimes cut and sometimes polish, sometimes sharpen a corner and sometimes dull an edge. “Sharpening” and “dulling” are diverse opposite operations, but they are unified, not as objects in space as in an enveloping container, or instantiations of a universal to which they bear some morphological mimetic similarity, but as immediate phases of the total process of shaping the jade. The presence of the unifying “universal” orientation, the willed,

⁸ Tang Junyi, *op. Cit.*, p. 31.

value-informed human activity of creating a coherent pattern, is wholly present in each of these aspects of the process, not partially present, but it is not for that reason replicated as distinct instances of this orientation. Li implies both unity and differentiation in this distinct sense: it is temporal, purposive human activity on a found object, redividing and regrouping its parts, orienting the means of this activity around a definite intended end. This convergence of division, cohesion and value in the usage of this term provide a helpful foundation for understanding both why someone might confuse Li with a Platonic form—in that it does some of the same work—and also why it is nothing like a Platonic form.

Western Sinologists have struggled in their own ways to make sense of this peculiar mismatch of conceptual schemes. Let us review a few of them.

1. Needham and Organic Pattern

As noted, Fung Yulan had suggested that Li be translated as “Platonic Form,” and Form in the Aristotelian sense has also been proposed as a translation, along with Reason, and Law of Nature. Joseph Needham, in his classic work Science and Civilization in China, rejects these suggestions, again with mainly the Neo-Confucian usage in mind, in developing his own overall

account of the distinctive nature of traditional Chinese thinking. For Needham, all of these terms are misleading in that they suggest an external source of order, either form as imposed upon passive matter, or natural law as enforced by God as legislator, in both cases implying a transcendent source of order standing outside the things which are ordered, bearing a different ontological status. He suggested instead the terms “organization” or better, “organism,” as modeled on the interrelation of parts in an animal organism, viewed as spontaneously interacting and organizing themselves around each other. In the West, Needham said, even an organism always had to have an extrinsic “guiding principle,” due to the basic belief in a personal god or gods who directed things. In the Chinese context, Needham thought, “cooperation of the component parts was spontaneous, even involuntary, and this alone was sufficient.”⁹ As Hall and Ames point out, this is a rather unusual understanding of the English word “organism.” In Western thought, even in Whiteheadian thought which informs Needham’s understanding, organic order is understood as profoundly teleological: “this term is most generally associated with living things conceived as complex arrangements of parts functioning

⁹ Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China (Taipei: Caves Books, 1985), Vol. 2, p. 302.

with respect to some end or aim.”¹⁰ This characterization leads, they note, to “a classification of ends or aims which would then undergird a [single, unambiguous, synordinate] taxonomic organization of ‘natural kinds.’”¹¹—precisely what is lacking in the Chinese case. To be sure, the teleological dimension is crucial to Tang’s analysis of the early uses of the term; the unity of Li lies in the final product, in the *telos* of the process. But importantly, this telos is not the jade’s or the field’s; it belongs to the human being working on the jade or field. There is as yet no implication, as in Needham’s sense of the term, that there is a teleology built into the organic pattern of nature itself. I would argue, with Hall and Ames, that even in the most fully-flung applications of the term to nature in Neo-Confucianism, we still don’t see an autonomous natural teleology of this kind. Still, Needham’s intention is clear; he wants to understand Li as spontaneous pattern brought to bear not by extrinsic coercion, even by a “guiding principle,” but by the spontaneous, involuntary cooperation and reciprocal adjustment of the members in any group. The anti-transcendentalist perspective is stressed here. It is not clear, however, that this model can do all the work Needham wants it to do. In particular, the normativity,

¹⁰ David Hall and Roger Ames, Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 269.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

definiteness, simultaneous oneness and manyness of Li, and its application to human ethics, remain for the most part mysterious on this reading.

2. Graham and the Correlative Pattern:

A.C. Graham translates Li as “pattern,” meaning the “recurring” patterns in which things are organized, the sorting out of which is the thinking which belongs to the realm of man. He describes Li in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism as “the universal pattern branching by division from the Supreme Ultimate (T’ai-chi), setting the lines along which things move,” which is opposed to qi as the “universal fluid out of which things condense and into which they dissolve, freely moving when fine or inert when coarse, active as the Yang or passive as the Yin.”¹² Li in this system are “the patterns which regularize things and events.”¹³

¹² A.C. Graham, “The Ch’eng-Chu Theory of Human Nature,” in Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature. (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), p. 421.

Graham provides a distinctive solution to the descriptive/normative problem. In general, he asserts, Chinese thought assumes that we are already spontaneously moved in various directions before any prescriptive moral discourse comes to us. But these spontaneous promptings are alterable; they change when we are aware of more or other things. The point of ethical culture in China then was to expand awareness of all relevant implications, so that we would be spontaneously moved in a different way. The ultimate standard was the way the wisest and most fully aware persons, the sages, were spontaneously moved. In terms of *Li* in Neo-Confucianism, this helps Graham explain why struggle is needed to attain the sage's lucid spontaneity, and why *Li* can be spoken of both as "what makes things what they are"—a matter of simple fact—and "how things should be"—a prescriptive norm. Graham says, "To the extent that I remain ignorant, the dense *ch'i* [qi] of my organism runs blindly in the broad channels of the *li* where it happens to be; but by moral training I refine my substance to greater transparency and penetrate into the finer veins of the universal pattern, so that my spontaneous reactions change as the rarified *ch'i* out of which the denser goes on being generated adjusts to newly perceived *li*. The assumption is that if I still fail to respond in the full light of my

¹³ Ibid., p. 422.

knowledge, it is because a *li* has permeated just far enough to awaken a spontaneous inclination along its path, but not yet to articulate the motions of the organism as a whole.”¹⁴

One is always proceeding according to some portion of the overall *Li* however one is moved and whatever one is doing; moral value attaches only to how much or little of the *Li* one has penetrated. Right and wrong is a matter of greater and lesser penetration of *Li*. If one continues only in the “coarser veins” of *Li* where one “happens to be,” one has failed to live up to the *Li* of being a human being, which is exemplified by the sages, who have shown that man’s mind is able to penetrate the entirety of *Li*. When one fails to do so, one is a “not really a human being”—not fully realizing the *Li* of being a human, but only the less comprehensive *Li* of being an animal, for example. We will be returning to, and partially adopting, this interpretation of *Li*’s ethical implications in the pages to follow.

Graham describes Zhu Xi’s *Li* as:

...a vast three-dimensional structure which looks different from different angles. In laying down the lines along which everything moves, it appears as the Way (*Tao*); in that the lines are independent of my personal desires, it

¹⁴ Graham, *Ibid.*, pp. 423-424.

imposes itself on me as Heaven (*T'ien*); as a pattern which from my own viewpoint spreads out from the sub-pattern of my own profoundest reaction, it appears as my own basic Nature (*hsing*). Looking down from the Supreme Ultimate, at the apex of which its branches join, it first divides as the Way of the first two diagrams of the *Changes*, Ch'ien and K'un, patterning the *ch'i* in its Yang and Yin phases; but from my own viewpoint, the major lines which connect me with the whole are the principles of conduct, Benevolence, Duty, Manners, Wisdom. Each person, peering into the vast web from his own little corner of it, may, if his *ch'i* is perfectly transparent, see all the way to the Supreme Ultimate at its farthest limits."¹⁵

Of crucial importance in this interpretation, which makes sense of the "one-many" question, is Graham's claim that the "subjectivising, Chinese" assumption that "the knowing of a *li* [is] inseparable from the reactions it patterns."¹⁶ The organic pattern is not merely an objective network to be observed and studied from without; our own reactions are also parts of this

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 426-7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 431.

network of connections. Once again, the mind is not set aside as a separate ontological category, but is part of the whole. This insight will serve us well in the considerations below.

Graham also develops a notion of Chinese thinking, particularly from the Han on, as marked by “correlative” or analogic, rather than “analytic” or “causal” pattern formation. We will return to this suggestion in the discussion of the treatment of these problems by Hall and Ames below.

3. Peterson and Coherence.

In his 1986 article, “Another Look at Li,” Willard Peterson made a breakthrough suggestion on how to translate, and understand, the term Li in Neo-Confucianism. The translation he suggests is the English word “Coherence.” By coherence, Peterson means “the quality or characteristic of sticking together,’ with the connotations of varying according to context.”¹⁷

The contextualizing implication is perhaps not analytically derivable from the notion of “coherence” as such, but it is a qualification that fits well with the points we have considered above, and indeed the two parts of this definition bring into sharp relief the crux of the problem.

¹⁷ Willard Peterson, “Another Look at Li,” Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies, Number 18, 1986, p. 14.

For indeed, coherence does suggest contextualization, if “sticking together” is meant to apply not only to the parts of the entity in question, but to the way the entity as a whole “sticks together” with what surrounds it. Coherence, then, means both the coherence of the parts of any whole with each other and the coherence of this whole with all other things which are related to it, which contextualize it. Peterson notes that this interpretation allows many of the mysteries surrounding the Cheng-Zhu use of Li to disappear. He makes the following points about the Cheng-Zhu use of coherence:

1. “There is coherence 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.”¹⁸ Each thing, to be the thing it is, must have its own coherence, and this applies both to any whole as a whole and to each part as a part.
2. “Coherence is unitary.” This solves the one-many problem: “...we can speak of the coherence of my puppy, the coherence of all dogs, the coherence of all living

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

things, and so on, without involving ourselves in a verbal dilemma over the

relationship between the 'different' levels or envelopes of coherence."¹⁹

3. "Coherence of object or phenomena is not locatable independently of ch'i."²⁰

4. "Coherence is categorically distinct from the ch'i of which things are

constituted."²¹

5. "Coherence is transcendent as well as immanent."²² This is a restatement of

the previous two points.

6. "Coherence is that by which a thing is as it is."²³ It is descriptive, and also

explanatory, in the sense of being "that by virtue of which a thing is what it is,

rather than any other thing."

7. "Each phenomenon has its associated ultimate or 'perfect coherence' (*chih li*

[*zhi Li*]), which may or may not be attained."²⁴ This is meant to solve the

problem of the simultaneous descriptive and normative use of "coherence."

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 17-8.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

²¹ Ibid., p. 19.

²² Ibid., p. 20.

²³ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

Peterson explains his understanding of this connection as follows: "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 wheel of a truck) and is not otherwise interfered with."²⁵

Peterson's brilliant exposition of Li as coherence goes a long way toward providing a paradigm by which to understand its peculiar combination of unity, differentiation, and value, and how this might cover much of the territory of metaphysical universals or forms without requiring a supersensual realm. "Coherence" provides us with a wholly immanent way to understand Li as both normative and descriptive. But Peterson's final point is perhaps more problematic. The imputation of a distinction between "potential" and "actual" coherence invoked here implies an abstract transcendentalism which undermines the power of the coherence

²⁵ Ibid.

model. Peterson's tries to circumvent this implication by suggesting that the former is an "aspect" of the former, and indeed, both can be subsumed under the concept of "coherence."

As Peterson puts it, Zhu Xi is "urging us to understand as a coherent whole both what a man is now and what he might be in the future."²⁶ This restatement continues to rely on the distinction of "is" and "might," but the point is surely that coherence reaches across these putatively separate categories of potentiality and actuality.²⁷ Indeed, Peterson makes the point that Li

²⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁷ These points allow Peterson to provide solutions to the six "problem areas" concerning Neo-Confucian Li raised by Wittenborn (Allen Wittenborn, "Li Revisited and Other Explorations," *The Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies*, #17, 1981, pp. 32-48).

1. "How do we, or can we know li?" The problem here is that there is no independent standard of what a thing's li is outside of its actual behavior; so if I think the li of this cart is "to travel on land," and this is disconfirmed by the fact that it later does something not specified by this characterization, such as be used as a boat to float on water, how can I ever know if I have correctly ascertained any thing's li? Peterson answers that both the floating and land-travel are part of a single coherence, which includes, again, both a thing's actual and potential connections, without thereby fading immediately into all possible connections and thus meaninglessness.

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

3. Is li subjective or objective?"

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

5. "What accounts for the differentiation of things?" Peterson grants that li gives no answer to the question of what causes things to be differentiated; they are so of themselves, if this question is meant to be answered in terms of efficient causality.

6. "What is the scope of li?" This question is concerned with the li of purely mental concepts, such as dreams, memories, numbers, beliefs, actions and emptiness. Peterson answers that coherence applies to the "sticking together" also of particular sets of electrical characters in a particular part of our brain and events in the world.

must be understood as standing on both sides of the pair “potential” and “realized or actualized.”²⁸

4. Hall and Ames and the Focus/Field

David Hall and Roger Ames raise some objections to the putative “transcendentalism” of Peterson’s notion of coherence, which was of course intended only as an explication of the term’s use in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, not to the entire tradition of Chinese thought, early and late. Hall and Ames state that they wish to adopt this interpretation for pre-Qin thought, but leaving out the transcendentalism, which they take to be applicable only to post-Buddhist, Neo-Confucian uses of the term.²⁹ Hall and Ames’ discussion of Li comes in the context of their overall interpretation of the dominant modes of “Han thinking” as a whole, which they characterize as privileging what Graham had identified as the “correlative, analogical,

²⁸ Ibid. p. 29.

²⁹ Hall and Ames, p. 303, note 65.

metaphorical” mode of classification over the “analytic, causal, metonymic” mode. Correlative groupings are loose, metaphorical and ad-hoc in character, producing concepts that are “image clusters in which complex semantic associations are allowed to reflect into one another in such a way as to provide rich, indefinitely ‘vague’ meanings. Univocity is, therefore, impossible.

Aesthetic associations dominate.”³⁰ It is, they further stipulate, the language of process, “the only language that gets us close to the immediate sense that ‘all things flow’....The language of correlativity is the result, the sign, and the reward of feeling the flux of passing circumstance.”³¹

The correlations made in this mode are “non-foundational since they are only a matter of empirical experience and conventional interpretation.”³² They are nominalist, pragmatic, historicist, thus always necessarily ambiguous and negotiable. Hall and Ames see one of the most important examples of this in the “seemingly ubiquitous distinction between yin and yang,” which is “no more than a convenient way of organizing ‘thises’ and ‘thats.’ This is clearly a consequence of the nominalistic character of Chinese intellectual culture.”³³

³⁰ Ibid., p. 136.

³¹ Ibid., p. 138.

³² Ibid., pp. 140-1.

³³ Ibid., p. 140.

In contrast to this is the causal, analytic mode of making connections, which may perhaps be linked to the metonymic rather than metaphorical function of language (although Hall and Ames are quick to stress that this distinction itself is better understood on an aesthetic, “metaphorical” interpretation). This is, the authors suggest, possibly relatable to the distinction between classification and abstract definition in early Greek thought, as noted by Paul Feyerabend. The Platonic tradition sought the definitions of things, “measuring rather than classifying,” as Whitehead put it, the quest for definitions arising again in association with the concern with mathematical exactitude and universally applicable truth. (Indeed, Whitehead sees this tendency to count and measure rather than merely categorize, as even Aristotle tends toward, as the basis for the development of all precise knowledge of the world.) This can be seen as again promoting the positing of a supermundane realm where these non-transient, non-empirical, non-historical truths resided, whereas correlative thinking is primarily horizontal in the sense that it involves the association of concrete experienceable items of immediate feeling, perception and imagination related in aesthetic or mythopoetic terms, usually without recourse to any supramundane realm.³⁴ Correlative thinking allows a free-form association of items

³⁴ Ibid., p. 124.

which might “cohere” with a given class, again very much including the subjective or cultural axiological reactions to things experienced together with them.

It is in this context Hall and Ames adopt and modify Peterson’s notion of Li as coherence.

Li, they say, is “the inherent formal and structural patterns in things and events, and their intelligibility. In expressing this notion of coherence and intelligibility, no severe distinction is made between ‘natural’ coherence (*tianli* or *daoli*) and ‘cultural’ coherence (*wenli* or *daoli*)...each is integral to *li*....[It is] the fabric of order and regularity immanent in the dynamic process of experience...*li* in defining order confounds the familiar distinction between rational faculty and the underlying principles it searches out. Li has neither an exclusively subjective nor objective reference.”³⁵ Moreover, “Li establish the ethos of a given community. As such *li* may never be considered as independent of context. There are no transcendent *li*....In the absence of teleological guidance, there is only an ongoing process of correlation and negotiation....Things are continuous with one another, and thus are interdependent conditions for each other. In a tradition which begins from the assumption that existence is a dynamic process, the causes of things are resident in themselves as their conditions, and the project of

³⁵ Ibid., p. 213.

giving reasons for things or events requires a tracing or mapping out of the conditions that sponsor them....Li constitutes an aesthetic coherence in the sense that it begins from the uniqueness of any particular as a condition of individuation, and is at the same time a basis for continuity through various forms of collaboration between the given particular and other particulars with which, by virtue of similarity or productivity or contiguity, it can be correlated.”³⁶

This anti-transcendental emphasis on process, and on reciprocal action gives a different implication to the notion of “coherence”: “Process entails uniqueness, and makes any notion of strict identity problematic. As such, coherent unities are characterized in terms of a relative continuity among unique particulars. And such continuity is open-ended rather than systematic; it is contingent rather than necessary; it is correlative rather than causal. This is can include aspects which, if entertained simultaneously, would seem inconsistent or even contradictory, yet when entertained in process, are well within the boundaries of continuity.”³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., p. 214-15.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 215.

Summary Report on Conclusions Drawn Elsewhere

The insights of all these interpreters provide a good basis for returning to the original sources in search of the way Li actually functions in early Chinese texts. This requires a careful and painstaking analysis, which I have attempted in a longer work, tentatively entitled Perforation and Pendulum: Li in Preneoconfucian Chinese Thought. But I can sum up here what I adopt and what reject from the giants on whose shoulders I stand, and what I think needs to be added.

From Needham I accept that Li is somehow autonomous rather than heteronomous, not a principle imposed from without. But I reject the idea of organism and the idea of “pattern”; organism implies a fixed ends-means teleology of organs, while pattern implies strict repeatability, neither of which can be found in Li.

From Graham I would pick up and amplify the notion of inclusion of human inclinations within the scope of the given, and the clue this provides to solving the descriptive/normative problem for Li. But I would amend his notion of “pattern,” “regularizing” and “reiterability,” as well as the depiction of Li as a sort of passive channel in which qi may

flow. My emendation comes from placing a greater emphasis on Graham's own adaptation of Chad Hansen's "Mass Noun Hypothesis," which holds that the traditional ontology is evident in its use of nouns that function more like "mass nouns" than like "count nouns," suggesting an amorphous stuff that can be divided into particular measured and shaped units, rather than an assemblage of individuals additively combining to form an aggregate or class. Chinese thought typically divides down from the whole, rather than building up from the part. Graham adds to this idea that these stuffs come with built-in instructions on how they are to be divided, sometimes many alternate sets of possible divisions. Combining this idea of what might be called "perforated" stuffs of reality with Graham's reflections on Li as pattern, we may move toward the view that Li are these perforations, and the flowing of *qi* is also Li's rearrangement. Li must include also the notion of dividing and unifying, not just as a network branches apart but also interconnects, but rather as material is rearranged, divided into groups, so as to cohere, stick together, in a certain way. When the material is rearranged, its perforations are also rearranged. The next division to be made will *harmonize* (cohere) with the previous divisions, but will not *repeat* them. Early Chinese thought makes a strict division between "harmony" (

和^{he}) and “sameness” (同^{tong}).³⁸ Li does not “repeat the same” as a pattern does, but rather “harmonizes with the given” like the treatment of a given piece of jade, which brings into coherence the pre-existing raw material and the demands of the market, without replicating either. With each harmonization, the given with which the next harmony must harmonize changes. The “flow” of qi must be understood as the way Li rearranges it, in the process developing modifications in the “channels” themselves.

From Peterson I adopt the crucial idea of Li as coherence, meaning both the sticking together of the component parts of a thing and its way of sticking together with its environment. The multiple forms of nesting this conception allows will be crucial to developing Graham’s “perforation” idea, as well as the unity/multiplicity and immanent/transcendent dilemmas concerning Li. The use of this paradigm to solve the third crucial dilemma—the descriptive/normative—is, I feel, not yet accomplished in Peterson, and it is this angle I would attempt to augment.

From Hall and Ames, I adopt the addition of the sense of coherence as “intelligibility” to Peterson’s model, the inclusion of human and natural within its scope (continuing Graham’s

³⁸ See especially *Analects* 13:23, *Guoyu*, “Zhengyu,” (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), pp. 515-6, and *Zuozhuan* 420: Shao 20.

point), and the greater emphasis on the ad hoc nature of these coherences, their shifting and always negotiable character. I also would build on their focus/field model, and the *ars contextualis* that goes with it. However, I make bold to add several things to this model, while substantially agreeing with its overall intent. First, to the senses already implicit in the notion of “coherence,” a fourth must be further stressed: value. Coherence, in Li, must cover at least these four senses: sticking together of parts, sticking together with the environment, intelligibility and value. In emphasizing this point, we find that the assertion that Li is purely ad hoc and nominalist is somewhat misleading. For value is built into the notion of Li, rather than imposed upon, albeit in an unusual way which does not amount to a realism either, and does indeed invite the kind of shifting focal contextualization that Hall and Ames concentrate on. Hall and Ames note that Li are neither exclusively objective nor exclusively subjective. We should add, as a corollary to this, that Li is strictly speaking neither nominalist nor realist in character. Li are really there, and really transcendent, in a way that a purely nominalist description tends to obscure, although they are never devoid of reference to some human inclination or other, to some value. For there can be many patterns in the world and many intelligible togethernesses which are not Li: those that a human being cannot harmonize with in such a way that will lead to

a coherence with the world that satisfies some set of his specifically human desires. That is, unless cohering with it allows you to cohere with the world more coherently, it is not a Li. This is perhaps the crucial emendation: the meaning of Li is beholden to a reference to a second-order coherence. That is, it is only those coherences that cohere in a certain way with certain other coherences (i.e., human beings, who are also “coherences”) that qualify as Li. This is to some extent already implicit in Peterson’s use of the term. But it is still far too easy to imagine Li simply as some sort of pattern to be apprehended, without considering the subjective position of the apprehender. Li is not just any togetherness: it is a valued togetherness. Value, however, is here also a type of togetherness: it is a relation between a desire and its object. The valuer is already implied in this notion of value. The intelligibly coherent thing must cohere with certain human inclinations, which must themselves cohere with other inclinations in a valued way—i.e., “harmoniously.”

Lastly, I would like to augment the Hall and Ames field/focus model with a reference to a certain bipolar structure evident in almost all deployments of the idea in classical thought. That is, there is a dyadic character to the set of elements to be harmonized, a certain circular form or rotating motion, which must be further stressed. “Fields” are conceived mainly as

dyads, with two extremes ranged around a center. I adopt Qian Mu's paradigm of the pendulum: something that is constantly in motion, swinging from one extreme to another (life and death, health and sickness, spring and autumn, hot and cold, assertive and yielding, manifest and hidden, present and absent, etc.), passing over a centerpoint at which it never stops, but which, as a center of gravity, remains still and constant, and serves as the defining orienting locus for all the motion of the pendulum. This center is the Li. What strays too far from the center, so that it cannot swing back to the opposite extreme, maintaining the balance of the swinging motion, loses both its value and its being, precisely because it deviates from Li. Li is in this sense the source of both value and being, while being neither a creator nor a transcendent ruler belong to another realm of being beyond the phenomenal.³⁹ Hall and Ames perhaps allude to this in their discussion of Yin and Yang as a "this/that" pair, but it seems insufficiently integrated into their field/focus model, and their description of Li, still, as a kind of "pattern." To stress the dyadic character of the field and the "centrality" of the focus, as well as some sense of a pull of force, a center of gravity, in the organizing process, I will suggest instead a model of vertex and vortex. Taking a further step, we stress that these vertices are

³⁹ Qian Mu, Hushang xiansi lu (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1988), pp. 42-44.

lines of perforation inviting human action, the action of making a division, hence making something intelligible and articulate, organizing the material at hand in a particular way, grouping it. By dividing along the perforation, the Li, we join the totality into a certain harmonious whole—harmonious in the sense that it harmonizes with our sense desires and inclinations, and further creates harmonies *among* our sense desires and inclinations. Here the further model of the acupuncture meridian must be used to supplement the still too objectivist picture of vertex and vortex.

We can note in the above reflections an implicit tension in the idea of coherence, which will serve as an engine of many further developments. For what after all is the criterion for coherence? It is not just any set of items that stick together. In early Chinese thinking, it must always be a set of things that form a togetherness also with some human desire. This is clear from the persistent use of culinary and aesthetic paradigms, analogies of flavors and tones which are pleasing to the palate as a primary exemplar of “harmony,” and will be relentlessly present in the early philosophers from Mencius to Xunzi to Laozi and Zhuangzi. This gives us two criteria for coherence:

- 1) A togetherness counts as a coherence when it creates pleasure, like the

harmonious enjoyment of a flavor or a musical harmony. This pleasure may be described as a further coherence, a meta-coherence, i.e., the cohering of this togetherness with some human desire. Usually it is associated also with a) stability, balance or equilibrium (a joining with what destabilizing the health and stability of the organism would be experienced as displeasure), generally conceived as a balance of two opposite qualities in a roughly quantitative but not strictly quantified sense, and b) progeny, growth, continuance. Indeed, this sense of coherence as implying life, continuation and growth runs through the Mencian reflections on *xing* or Human Nature, on the one hand, into the Neo-Confucian glosses of Li as ceaseless production and reproduction (生生不息 *sheng sheng bu xi*), as derived from the “Great Commentary” to the Book of Changes.

2. But there is another criterion for what kind of togethernesses count as true coherences. It is, as it were, the flip side of the notion of continuance and ceaseless progression—seeing it rather as infinite regress. For when a readable characteristic becomes fully intelligible, one passes smoothly over it, it is no longer noticed; when a desire is consummated, it dies. As is noted in the Zhuangzi, “To forget the feet indicates the fitness (or comfort, 適 *shi*) of the shoes; to forget the waist indicates the fitness of the belt; when

consciousness forgets right and wrong it indicates the fitness of the mind...He who begins in fitness/comfort and is never unfit/uncomfortable has the comfort of forgetting even comfort.”

Once all the parts cohere into a single something, readable as a one, this means that it has been absorbed as a single unit into something else; it has found just the context it needed, and become readable as an aspect of that something else. Once it is coherent, it becomes intelligible as a single homogenous piece of a larger whole. The search for ever more coherence is, in other words, inherent, and thus ceaseless. Each coherence cries out for further context. The parts can only cohere if the whole coheres with a greater context, and then this context including the previous whole becomes a new internally consistent coherence in search of a yet larger context. We judge something to be coherent only when it coheres with an outside--but this proposition alone ensures an infinite regress, for once the new coherence is found it becomes the inside seeking a new outside. There is just no limit to how far down or how far up coherence goes; we can keep dividing and keep assembling indefinitely.

From the above considerations, I offer a definition of Li, which I claim is applicable in almost every usage of the term in the early Chinese tradition:

Li is a harmony which, when harmonized with by a human being, leads to further harmonies. These further harmonies may involve the original harmony, the human being, or both. I can restate the definition by replacing the word “harmony” with “coherence” in each instance, emphasizing thus that one of the ways in which a harmony can harmonize with a human being is for the human being to know it, for the harmony to be intelligible to him. Both terms imply a togetherness of diverse terms. Harmony emphasizes the experience of pleasure, and the quality of balance of dyadically opposed extremes that is implied in this togetherness. Coherence implies the intelligibility in this togetherness. So more completely, but less elegantly, we may say: Li is a harmonious coherence, which, when a human being becomes harmoniously coherent with it, leads to further harmonious coherence.

Note that three distinct levels of harmonious coherence are thus necessary for any item, X, to qualify as Li. I will now spell these out a little more completely:

1. The harmonious coherence (togetherness) of
 - a. the parts of X with one another, and
 - b. X as a whole with its environment.

2. The harmonious coherence between X and a desiring human perceiver:
 - a. The given desires of the human being must harmoniously cohere with X; that is, X must satisfy some human desire.
 - b. Human awareness harmoniously coheres with X; that is, X is *intelligible* to human awareness.
3. The harmonious coherences that result when “1” above harmoniously coheres with “2” above. These can be of any number of types:
 - a. Marketability or social utility of X (X adheres with economic demand and market desires or ritual requirements: the treated jade).
 - b. Harvest of crops (nutrition available to humans, which harmonious cohere with their needs: the plowed field).
 - c. Continuation of the species (harmonious coherence of past and present).
 - d. Grouping together of the species (harmonious coherence of its members).

e. Skill in human relations, or practical prowess or skill of any kind

(coherence of ends and means).

f. Liberation from suffering (Nirvana), and enlightenment into further

intelligible coherences (“wisdom”).

Li is any harmonious coherence of the type described in 1 that can harmoniously cohere with human beings in the sense of 2, leading to further harmonious coherences of the type described in 3.

In its earliest uses, Li is a verb meaning to cut something away from a background of raw material, and to shape it into a coherent object that further coheres with some human values. It can usually be translated as “ordered” or “to put in order,” with the qualification a particular notion of order is implicit in the term: the arrangement of the parts of a thing, separating them into groupings, so that it becomes a coherent whole, meaning a whole that more effectively interfaces—coheres—with human needs and human awareness. It means to put something into a humanly palatable form. In its earliest nominal usages, Li seems to be translatable roughly as “a valued way of cohering,” or “value-laden coherence.” This

can mean the lines along which the cutting, articulation and divisions must be done in order for the thing to be “ordered” in the above sense, its implicit perforations, or by a further extension, the resulting network of articulations. In this case, we can speak of “following” (循 *xun*) or “tracing” (緣 *yuan*) along the Li, which in this context translates easily as “pattern,” if we again recall that this implies a humanly valuable pattern, not necessarily any configuration that happens to repeat at regular intervals. This pattern of articulations is valuable or healthy for humans; it is also intelligible to humans, and healthy for humans to pay attention to. A further item that fits into the same set of articulations in an equally healthy way may be said to be part of the same Li, and to recognize this interconnection or harmony between these two items, or events, is to recognize the “same Li,” but this does not entail any strict repetition of the same “pattern.” We could also in this sense speak of “the Li of X,” which would denote the way of viewing X so that its organizing articulations are evident, the ways in which it is optimally divided and grouped. To see the Li of X would be to see it subdivided in that optimal way, rather than in some alternate way. In this sense, the term “principle” can be a tempting translation. Indeed, we could almost translate Li simply as “useful information,” as long as we gloss this by saying that “useful” presupposes

a given set of human goals and desires, the coherence with which makes something useful, and that “information” means an intelligible fitting between a symbol, a cognitive apparatus, a background set of linguistic or symbolic usages, and a context, in such a way as to be transferable between contexts. With this translation, “useful information” becomes equivalent to our previous definition of Li, i.e., a harmonious coherence that, if cohered with, leads to further such coherences.

On the basis of this fundamental semantic range of the term, we can further discern two distinct applications in the subsequent history of Chinese thought:

1. The “Non-ironic” Usage of Li as Coherence, and the related terms 性 *xing* and 類 *lei*, as found in The Analects, the Mencius, the early proto-Taoist texts of the Guanzi, and, with some modifications, the Xunzi. This will involve the coherence of items into intelligible groupings, but also coherence in the sense of intelligibility (visibility and readability) and as value. This coherence has a premise and a consequence, each of which are further instances of “coherence.” The premise is that these particular coherent groupings “cohere” with human desire and cognitive faculties. In other

words, human responses to the world are included among the items that must cohere intelligibly, involving pleasure and continuity, as premised on balance and proportion.

The consequence is that, once these coherences are attained, they lead to the formation of an actual group or species, a coherent collective related through what comes to be called “feeling and response” (感應 *ganying*). A coherence coheres with human experience and thereby causes further coherence, either of the human personality, the human group, or both.

2. The “Ironic” Usage of Li as Coherence, as found in the Laozi, with the Hanfeizi Commentary thereto, and the Zhuangzi , Inner Chapters. The use of the term Li as coherence is here considered “ironic” in the specific sense that it retains a sense of “togetherness,” and indeed extends it, but also sees that true togetherness of all things further entails an effacement of coherence in the sense of “intelligibility.” Therefore, the true coherence (togetherness) is incoherent (unintelligible, indiscernible). This is an upshot of the “infinite regress” implicit in the notion of coherence, as noted above.

3. Attempts to combine the ironic and the non-ironic usages, which come in two opposite types. The first consists of the “ironic” incorporations of the “non-ironic” usage, such as we find in several passage from the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters of the Zhuangzi. The second is the “non-ironic” incorporations of the “ironic” sense of coherence, such as in the Yin-Yang concept of The Book of Changes (Yijing) and its Appended Commentaries, along with two further elaborations thereof: The Taixuan jing of Yang Xiong, and the Wang Bi/Han Kangbo commentaries on the Changes, as another unification of these two lines of thought.
- In this category we put Guo Xiang’s commentary on the Zhuangzi, where Li becomes a very central term. Guo uses the term Li to signify *ziran* (lit. “self-so,” meaning the intrinsic value of each entity due to the fact that it comes into being without purpose, free of anyone’s deliberate activity or the cognition of goals), which applies to all entities without exception, and what is truly valuable in every apparent principle. But Guo’s Li is not a principle, rather it is the opposite of all principles: it is the rejection of any possibility of explicability or meaningful cognitive linkage between any two entities. The *ziran* of any entity is actually just that entity itself, not the principle that

explains or makes intelligible the existence of that entity. Here we have a stress on both absolute individuality and separation, and at the same time on the most universal possible Li. Guo's usage can very profitably be read as an actual "singularity" between the ironic and non-ironic senses of the term, where they fully converge into a paradoxical synonymy. Precisely coherence is precisely incoherence.

4. Very briefly, the use of Li in Chinese Buddhist thought, which is all too often left entirely out of discussions of this kind, can be summarily indicated. The term Li is chosen by Buddhist thinkers to represent Emptiness (*sunyata*). Emptiness refers to a rejection of all cognitive views with respect to the self-nature of putative entities, and it applies in all cases without exception. Guo Xiang had used the term Li to signify *ziran*, and reduced all possible principles to this single principle of no-principle, which also applied to all entities without exception. The Buddhists continue this line of thought, and their use of Li to signify universal Emptiness, intrinsically free of all specific characteristics, would appear to be where Li finally makes the jump from a word meaning specificity and diversity to one signifying unity and universality. But in fact, as in the case of Guo

Xiang, universality is actually a *side-effect* of this new application of the term. The word Li is used for Emptiness not because Emptiness is universal, but rather it is the recognition of it is the source of *value*. As Jiexiang Jizang (549–623) of the Three Treatise School states explicitly, “existence” (*you*) (i.e., provisional appearance is some particular form) and “Emptiness” are *both* applicable to all things without exception, both are universal. But we do not call “existence” Li for that reason. Rather, “Li” always means what one must see in order to attain a presupposed value. In Buddhism, the ultimate value is liberation, and since Emptiness is what liberates, Emptiness is Li.

This comes to have varying implications within the different schools of Buddhist thought. In Huayan Buddhism, we have what looks like an expanded sense of one side of Guo Xiang’s Daoism. The one real principle is Emptiness, which is Li in all the senses delineated above: it is all-inclusive and indivisible (cohering, harmonizing), it is universally applicable, it is what needs to be paid attention to in order to attain maximum value for human beings (second-order harmony, harmony with human needs). As in Guo, this involves a turnaround and negation of Li, a turning back to events, to individual instances outside the top-down control of any higher-order

principles. But as in Guo also, this amounts to the ceaseless repetition of one and the same Li, i.e., the principle of “no-principle.” That remains in force even, and especially, in the Huayan doctrine of interpenetration of events (事事無礙 *shi shi wu ai*), which seems to pass beyond any reference to Li (理事無礙 *li shi wu ai*). Since Huayan retains a traditional Two Truths epistemology, this interpenetration of events is presented as a truth to be recognized, against which alternate perceptions can only be counted as errors. This ultimately means that the Li to be recognized—i.e., that coherence attention to which is liberating—in each and every event is one and the same: this Li is the interpenetration of events. To experience an event as “interpenetrating and interidentical with whatever other events actually exist” is to experience it liberatingly.

Tiantai Buddhist thought, on the other hand, develops the other aspect of Guo’s work: the singularity between coherence and incoherence. According to the Tiantai theory of the Three Truths, all putative entities are both (locally) coherent and (globally) incoherent, and these are two alternate statements of the same fact. Such an assertion alters the epistemological stance decisively: there are no errors, only local

coherences of varying ranges of applicability: all experiences and assertions of any kind are conventional truths, and all conventional truths may lead beyond themselves to reveal themselves to also be ultimate truth and the intersubsumption of the two types of truth, and, further, of all local coherences. We can put this point the other way round: instead of saying there are no errors, we can say there are *nothing but errors*. Even enlightenment can never be separated from cognitive error, for in Tiantai enlightenment is always and only enlightenment *about delusion*. Truth is a deeper knowledge *about errors*. There is simply nothing else for there to be truth about, there is nothing else to know about, for all coherences, anything thinkable or experiencable, are present only as the result of a bias in perspective. To know about anything is to know about biases. And this knowledge about errors is not an elimination or refutation of them only; it is rather a *letting them be*, allowing them to exist *more clearly and fully as what they are*. The Three Truths asserts that for any error to be fully realized means for it to show itself to be a particular local coherence, the global incoherence of this local coherence, and the fact that these are merely alternate ways of saying the same thing. So in allowing it to be more manifest, the error (local coherence) is both more fully established and

completely undermined, and these are seen to be identical. Hence what needs to be seen in order to achieve liberation is not just “interpenetration” as such (“*whatever actually exists* is present here as this event”), but the complete inherent entailment of the “3000 quiddities” as each moment of experience, such that no specific determination, including every determination attributed to anything by the idiosyncratic error of any sentient being, is ever excludable from any experience. To experience any event as “inherently including each and every one of the specific characteristics of hellishness, hungry-ghostishness, and so on, up to Bodhisattvahood and Buddhahood, as viewed in every possible way” is to experience it liberatingly. Awareness of the presence of each possible specific determination is necessary for liberation to occur, for liberation is here conceived of not as passing beyond conventional truths, but the full mastery of all conventional truths in the insight that they are identical to ultimate truth. Hence conventional truth is what is made manifest in the realization of Li, not what is left behind as an illusion when Li, conceived as some true principle, is realized. This means that every conventional truth is itself Li, i.e., a coherence that must be attended to, cohered with, in order to attain ultimate value, or liberation. In Tiantai the notion of Li

is diversified: it is not just that there is one principle-of-no-principle, which then empties out into the interpenetration of events. Rather, there are infinite principles, infinite Lis, which interpenetrate infinite events. Every experience is a Li in just this sense. These Lis are neither simply given as facts in the objective world (Platonic realism) nor merely projected onto a blank canvas by subjective whim or convention (nominalism). Rather, they are “inherently entailed” in the sense delineated by the Three Truths: always identifiable, but always ambiguous, and thus readable into all locations and times, but equally readable out of the initial instance, the apparently “given” occurrence of this quiddity. Here we have the full development of the neither-nominalist-nor-realist middle way that can be traced throughout the tradition. Hence Siming Zhili’s dictum that “even when ignorance is eliminated, there are still distinctions.” In other words, the Three Thousand determinations are still present in reality: they are not a merely subjective error. But the mind functions as a focal apparatus that screens *down* some of these distinctions, letting only a few of them come through at any given time. Whatever delusion sees is really there; delusion does not add something to reality that is not there, but rather sees only part of what is real. Every content is also a category

that subsumes all other contents; every category is also a content subsumed by every other category. It is in this sense that Li are valued coherent harmonies to be harmonized with: each thing is a Li in that all things “cohere” in each thing, it is “readable” (intelligible, coherent) in each other thing and each other thing is readable in it. This reading of all coherences in each coherence is a harmonizing that itself constitutes liberation from the existential condition of suffering. For suffering is a result of conceiving the self (and correlatively, all entities) as simply located in one time or place rather than any other, hence impermanent, sundered from one another, and for that reason constitutively saturated with suffering. Whatever is conditional is impermanent, and whatever is impermanent is suffering. Liberation is to see each entity as absolute, unconditional, permanent. To see any entity, even “suffering,” as all-pervasive, ineradicable, unexcludable in every other apparent entity, is to see “suffering” as such, this specific suffering, as the Li of all things, to experience “suffering” liberatingly.

There is no space in this short article, of course, to demonstrate the legitimacy and

usefulness of these claims, as rooted in the close analysis of specific texts. Readers interested in a fuller explanation are invited to consult the longer work from which these conclusions are abstracted.