

THE SEQUENTIAL PROBLEM OF THE EIGHT HUMAN AIMS IN THE GREAT LEARNING



Chenyang Li

Nanyang Technological University
cyli@ntu.edu.sg

In this essay, I examine the relations among the eight aims in the Confucian classic *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) and problematize various interpretations by its commentators and translators. I call the problem a “sequential problem” because it is about the issue of a sequence among these aims, or lack thereof, and the nature of the sequence. After examining different interpretations, I propose a solution that the sequence of these Confucian human aims is *developmentally temporal yet not stage-exclusive* and that illustrates such an account by drawing on the model of Erik Erikson’s developmental theory. Accordingly, while there is a temporal progression in achieving these aims, they nevertheless should be pursued concurrently throughout most of a person’s life.

I. The Three Ideals and Eight Aims

The *Great Learning* is a chapter of a larger Confucian classic, the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of rites), one of the collected texts commonly referred to as the “Thirteen Classics” (*Shisan jing* 十三經) in Confucianism. The chapter did not receive special attention until the Tang dynasty, when prominent writers Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and Li Ao 李翱 (774–836), respectively, quoted it in their influential treatises. Later, the prominent Song Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) selected it to be one of the Confucian *Four Books*, along with Confucius’ *Analects*, the *Book of Mencius*, and the *Zhongyong*, which is another chapter of the *Liji*. In under two thousand characters, the *Great Learning* consists of a short main classic text, the *jing* 經, and its Commentary, the *zhuan* 傳. By Zhu Xi’s account, the *jing* was Confucius’ words, recorded by Confucius’ disciple Zengzi 曾子; the Commentary was written by Zengzi’s students. Of the *Four Books*, Zhu Xi recommended that the *Great Learning* should be studied first before progressing to the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, and then to the *Zhongyong*.¹ Being one of the important *Four Books* and the fact that it is short and relatively easy to read have made the *Great Learning* one of the most studied texts in the Confucian tradition.

At the outset of the *Great Learning*, the author lays out three ideals for the mission of the Great Learning, or “learning to be great” (Chan 1963, p. 86). They are: manifesting the luminous virtue (*ming mingde* 明明德),

renewing the people (*xinmin* 新民²), and achieving the highest good (*zhiyu zhishan* 止于至善). These three ideals are illustrated in eight aims toward which people should strive in life. Interpretations and translations of the eight aims vary.³ For the sake of convenience in discussion, I provisionally translate the eight aims as follows:

1. To investigate things (*gewu* 格物)
2. To extend knowledge (*zhizhi* 致知)
3. To clarify one's will (*chengyi* 誠意)
4. To set one's heart right (*zhengxin* 正心)
5. To cultivate one's person (*xiushen* 修身)
6. To harmonize one's family (*qijia* 齊家)
7. To manage the state (*zhiguo* 治國)
8. To achieve world peace (*ping tianxia* 平天下)

It is not the purpose of this essay to justify these Confucian aims as the most important in the good life on a culturally neutral ground, nor to prove the order of these aims to be valid, nor to adjudicate specific interpretations or translations of these aims. The purpose of this essay is to interpret the linkages between these aims as presented in the text, in ways that make sense to contemporary readers, Chinese or otherwise. It will be useful, however, to say a few words to contextualize the aims before we investigate their relations. Confucian philosophy takes humanity as a moral concept rather than a merely biological one. In this Confucian account, people are not born human but have inborn potentials to develop and achieve humanity and do so by learning and developing virtues. This is the Confucian philosophy of “learning to be human” (*xue yi chengren* 學以成人). The order of the eight aims demonstrates the Confucian grand ideal of “inner sageliness and outer kingliness” (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王). That is, one engages in self-cultivation to become a virtuous person in order to serve society toward the ultimate goal of world harmony. Starting when one is still a child, a person begins exploring various things and thereby extends knowledge about the world. A certain amount of knowledge serves as the basis for a person to establish a clear will and to set the heart/mind on the goal toward becoming a good person.

Xiushen has usually been translated as “self-cultivation” or “personal cultivation.” *Shen* refers to one's own person. *Xiu* means to train, to mend, and to mould into something more refined. Therefore, we can understand *xiushen* as the making of a good person, or simply “person-making.” Family life occupies a central place in the Confucian conception of the good life in part because person-making usually begins and takes shape in the family.

The word *qi* 齊 in *qijia* literally means to equalize. This literal meaning does not work well in interpreting *qijia* because the Confucian view of the relationships in the family, between parents and children, and between elder

and younger siblings, are unequal. *Qi* also stands for *ji* 劑, which literally means mixing herbs in making Chinese medicine. The Confucian classic *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rituals of the Zhou) describes cooking a dish by mingling eight ingredient delicacies together in terms of *qi*.⁴ This use of the word is similar to that in the classic analogy with soup-making for the prototypal definition of harmony (*he* 和) in the classic text *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo commentary).⁵ In such an account, *qi* means “to harmonize”; *qijia* should be read as “to harmonize the family.” In ancient times, *qijia* is usually attributed to the role of the father, even though the discussion of filial care (*xiao* 孝) and brotherly love (*di* 悌) in the *Great Learning* suggests that it is meant also for members of various roles in the family.

The expression *zhiguo*, directly translatable to “managing the state” (“placing the state in good order”), strongly suggests a goal for the ruler; however, the *Great Learning* states explicitly that these aims are for all people including commoners as well as rulers. Therefore, if we render *zhiguo* as “managing the state,” it implies broad participation by people in various social stations.⁶ In today’s common expressions, we probably can call it “managing social affairs” or, even more broadly, “serving the country/society.”

Finally, achieving world peace is not one person’s effort or even a one-dimensional task. The full expression of this aim is to “manifest the luminous virtue throughout the world.” Today, such an aim should include such efforts as saving the world by fighting climate change and eliminating world hunger. A common reading traceable to Zhu Xi takes the first five aims as realizing the first ideal of manifesting the luminous virtue and the next three as fulfilling the ideal of renewing the people. Combined together, one achieves the highest good (*zhishan* 至善) in life.

II. Interpretations of the Relations among the Eight Aims

Now I turn to various interpretations of the relations among the eight aims and their problems. The original Chinese text in Section 2 of the *jing* of the *Great Learning* reads as follows:

Part A

古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國；欲治其國者，先齊其家；欲齊其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先誠其意；欲誠其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。

Part B:

物格而後知至，知至而後意誠，意誠而後心正，心正而後身修，身修而後家齊，家齊而後國治，國治而後天下平。

This key passage articulates the relations among the eight aims. Part A begins with achieving a virtuous world, traces back through other terms, and

finally reaches “investigating things” as the starting point. Part B goes in the reverse order. The sequence can be outlined loosely as follows:

Part A:

For the ancients, in order to achieve a virtuous world, one began by managing the state;

In order to manage the state, one began by harmonizing the family;

In order to harmonize the family, one began by cultivating the person;

In order to cultivate the person, one began by setting the heart right;

In order to set the heart right, one began by clarifying one’s will;

In order to clarify the will, one began by extending knowledge;

In order to extend knowledge, one began by investigating things.

Part B:

Investigate things, then extend knowledge;

Extend knowledge, then clarify one’s will;

Clarify one’s will, then set one’s heart right;

Set one’s heart right, then cultivate one’s person;

Cultivate one’s person, then harmonize one’s family;

Harmonize one’s family, then manage the state;

Manage the state, then achieve world peace.

Each occurrence of “then” in Part B stands for the term “*er hou*” 而後, which means “thereafter”. By using this term for each pairing, Part B articulates a progressive sequence in achieving these aims, beginning with investigating things step by step all the way to achieving world peace. Hence, temporally, fulfilling the former aim in each pairing comes before the latter.

How should we understand the nature of such a sequence? Is achieving the former aim in each pairing a necessary condition for achieving the latter? If necessary, is it also a sufficient condition to embark on the latter? What satisfies the condition of the former one in order to fulfill the latter? These questions have theoretical as well as practical implications. The original language is compressed in expression and vague in specifics. Not surprisingly, different interpretations have been made. Elaborating on one segment of this sequence, the author of the Commentary section of the *Great Learning* states:

The statement that those who wish to manage the state must first harmonize the family means this: There are none who cannot instruct their households but can instruct others. Hence the *junzi* perfects the teaching in his state without leaving his household. Filiality is what it takes to serve the ruler. The deferential attitude of the younger brother is what it takes to serve elders. Kindness is what it takes to preside over the masses. The Announcement of Kang says, “Be it like tending a newborn babe.” If one genuinely seeks the way to do so in one’s own heart, though one may miss the mark, one will not be far off.⁷ (Eno 2016)

The commentator here sees harmonizing the family as a necessary condition for managing the state. In such a view, in learning to harmonize one's family, one refines oneself for becoming virtuous, and being virtuous prepares one for managing social affairs and for contributing to society. Affirming the former aim in each pairing as a necessary condition for the latter aim without specifying requirements seems problematic, however, because it does not tell us how adequately the former aim needs to be fulfilled before one can undertake the latter. Without specification, the text is left open for a requirement that can be either too inadequate or too demanding. Fulfilling the former inadequately leaves a person unprepared for undertaking the latter; a too demanding requirement makes it impossible for a person to progress to the latter.

Li Ao gave a flexible interpretation in his reading of Part B, on which he elaborated:

Wu refers to the myriad things. *Ge* means coming, reaching. When things reach (us), the heart-mind is kept clear in discerning them without becoming dependent on them. This is to gain knowledge, the arrival of knowledge. The arrival of knowledge (*gu*) leads to the clarification of the will. The clarification of the will (*gu*) leads to setting the heart right. Setting the heart right (*gu*) leads to the cultivation of the person. Cultivate the person and (then) harmonize the family. Harmonize the family and (then) manage the state. Manage the state and (then) bring peace in the world. This is how humanity can form a triad with Heaven and Earth.⁸ (Li Ao, *Fu xing shu* 复性书 [A treatise on restoring human nature]; my translation)

Here *gu* 故 can be read as “consequently” or “as a consequence,” suggesting the reason for doing something or the cause for something to happen. The word itself is not used in the *Great Learning* passage in question. In the Commentary, *gu* is used as an adverb in the sense of “therefore.” For instance, in *gu zhiguo zai qi qijia* 故治國在齊其家, *gu* introduces a conclusion from a preceding reason (“no one can enlighten others if he does not conduct himself well”). It means, roughly, that managing social affairs is grounded on harmonizing the family. Li uses *gu* to connect between “the arrival of knowledge” and “the clarification of the will,” between “the clarification of the will” and “setting the heart right,” and between “setting the heart right” and “the cultivation of the person.” It would be farfetched to interpret *gu* in Li's statement as saying that “the arrival of knowledge” logically entails “the clarification of the will.” I here render it as “leads to.” Li uses *er* 而 in place of *er hou* 而後 in the original text. Whereas *er hou* explicitly means “thereafter,” the meaning of *er* alone is less than explicit. *Er* can mean progression, as “A *er* B” can mean progressing from A to B, or it can also mean simply “and” as in “A and B.” Li's use of *er* in place of the original *er hou* weakens the temporal sequence of the statements and leaves ambiguities as to whether the former aims are

necessary or sufficient conditions for latter aims. One may surmise that Li dropped the explicit expression of *er hou* out of his uneasiness or reservation with the sense of a strong temporal sequence among the eight aims that the original passage apparently expresses, an uneasiness shared by Zhu Xi as I will show shortly.

Anglophone interpretations of the *Great Learning* vary on the strength of the sequential order among the aims. One of the earliest translators is James Legge (1815–1897). Legge rendered the passage as follows:

Part A:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.

Part B:

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy. (Legge [1893] 1971, pp. 357–359)

(*gewu*—investigation of things; *zhizhi*—extended to the utmost their knowledge; *chengyi*—be sincere in their thoughts; *zhengxin*—rectify their hearts; *xiushen*—cultivated their persons; *qijia*—regulated their families; *zhiguo*—ordered well their own States; *tianxia ping*—the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.)

The original passage in Chinese does not indicate whether the present or past tense is used. Legge used the past tense throughout the entire passage and hence made the whole passage as being about the “ancients.” The “ancients” presumably refers to the ancient sage-kings, who are supposed to be perfectly moral persons. On Legge’s reading, the entire passage is a description of the ancient sage-kings. His translation has an interpretative advantage. As no one really knows for sure whether ancient sage-kings actually acquired complete knowledge before their hearts became sincere, and so forth, we can suppose they achieved each aim perfectly before entering the next one. One would wonder, however, whether such a model of perfection is applicable to the average person. The *Great Learning* is explicit that the lesson is meant for commoners as well as the son of Heaven. It is probably for this reason that more recent translators have used

the present tense in translating Part B, making it a general prescriptive statement.

Wing-tsit Chan, author and compiler of the influential work *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, translated the key passage in question as follows:

Part A:

The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge.

Part B:

The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended. When knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere. When the will is sincere, the mind is rectified. When the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated. When the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated. When the family is regulated, the state will be in order. When the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world. (Chan 1963, pp. 86–87)

(*gewu*—investigate things; *zhizhi*—extend knowledge; *chengyi*—make wills sincere; *zhengxin*—rectify minds; *xiushen*—cultivate personal lives; *qijia*—regulate families; *zhiguo*—bring order to the states; *tianxia ping*—peace throughout the world.)

According to Chan's translation, Part A of the passage is about how "the ancients" conducted themselves; namely, when "the ancients wished" to accomplish certain things, they "would" first do related things respectively. Part B is put in the present tense, making it a general prescriptive statement of the eight aims. His translation, in the form of "when *x*, then *y*," is subject to interpretations. A weak interpretation does not imply a logical or causal connection between the two terms, with *x* and *y* merely occurring in temporal sequence, as in "Mary left when Jeff started his presentation." A strong interpretation, however, suggests a corollary relation between the former and latter terms of each pairing. For instance, "a contestant is disqualified when he breaks the rules." Such a relation makes *x* a *sufficient* condition for *y* and entails that whenever *x* obtains, *y* necessarily takes place, such that when the will is sincere, the mind will become rectified. Such an interpretation could even suggest an automatic connection between *x* and *y*, that *x* entails *y*.

In the context of the *Great Learning*, such a strong interpretation would mean that once one has investigated things; all other aims are accomplished on a pre-set sequence of domino effects and so instantly. The author(s) of

the *Great Learning* could not have meant that the sequential results of the aims are in any sense automatic. So, a strong interpretation fails. Conversely, a weak interpretation is too weak as it suggests the connection between *x* and *y* to be purely coincidental. In the spirit of the principle of charity, we should read Chan's translation as implying that *x* is a necessary condition for *y*. Presumably, when the will is clarified, it provides an indispensable condition for the mind to become rectified, and when the mind is rectified, one's person may become refined. Whatever the subsequent *y* is, additional learning and efforts may still be needed. However, as I will show in section 3, such a reading of the passage also invites challenges as it implies a stage-exclusive development in a person's life.

Another esteemed scholar of Chinese philosophy, Robert Eno, translated the same passage as follows:

Part A:

In ancient times, those who wished to make bright virtue brilliant in the world first ordered their states; those who wished to order their states first aligned their households; those who wished to align their households first refined their persons; those who wished to refine their persons first balanced their minds; those who wished to balance their minds first perfected the genuineness of their intentions; those who wished to perfect the genuineness of their intentions first extended their understanding; extending one's understanding lies in aligning affairs.

Part B:

Only after affairs have been aligned may one's understanding be fully extended. Only after one's understanding is fully extended may one's intentions be perfectly genuine. Only after one's intentions are perfectly genuine may one's mind be balanced. Only after one's mind is balanced may one's person be refined. Only after one's person is refined may one's household be aligned. Only after one's household is aligned may one's state be ordered. Only after one's state is ordered may the world be set at peace. (Eno 2016, p. 12)

(*gewu*—align affairs; *zhizhi*—extend understanding; *chengyi*—intentions be perfectly genuine; *zhengxin*—one's mind be balanced; *xiushen*—one's person be refined; *qijia*—the household be aligned; *zhiguo*—the state is ordered; *tianxia ping*—the world be set at peace.)

Eno's translation of Part B presents a strong reading that one must achieve the former aim fully or completely before taking on the next one in each pairing. According to his translation, there is a strong, one-way relation between any two adjacent aims. In the form of "only after *x* has been fully/perfectly achieved may one proceed to *y*," Eno's translation implies that *fully* achieving the former aim in each pairing is a necessary condition for the latter one. This is an extremely demanding requirement.

The demanding spirit of Eno's translation addresses a potential concern with the sequential requirement of the aims that I have brought up previously, namely inadequacies in fulfilling a former aim before taking on the next aim. For instance, if a person tried but hardly accomplished much on a former aim, how well is he prepared for undertaking the next one? Eno's rendering of full or perfect fulfillment of a former aim may find support in Zhu Xi's *Annotations of the Great Learning* (Zhu, *Daxue zhangju* 大學章句 n.d.).⁹ Zhu said:

To go things means to reach everywhere that the pattern of things exists. That knowledge reaches (me) means my heart-mind leaves no knowledge unexhausted. Once knowledge has been exhausted, then the will can be grounded on a solid foundation. Once the will has been grounded on a solid foundation, then the heart can be set right.¹⁰ (Zhu, *Daxue zhangju*; my translation)

Translated as "then" here, "ze" 則 indicates a sequential connection. The strong expression of exhausting knowledge suggests the perfect acquisition of all knowledge. Therefore, of the pairing of acquiring knowledge and clarifying the will, Zhu Xi's interpretation above is that one needs to have fulfilled the former completely before turning to latter, at least in accordance with his words quoted here.

Eno's translation, however, also makes the statements in Part B vacuously true, because presumably no one in the current world can *fully* achieve a former aim. Seen this way, Eno's rendering undercuts the significance of the teaching in the passage. In comparison, the translation of this passage by another learned scholar, Daniel Gardner, avoids such a problem. Gardner renders the passage as follows:

Part A:

Those of antiquity who wished that all people throughout the empire would let their inborn luminous virtue shine forth put governing their state well first; wishing to govern their states well, they first established harmony in their households; wishing to establish harmony in their households, they first cultivated themselves; wishing to cultivate themselves, they first set their minds in the right; wishing to set their minds in the right, they first made their intentions true; wishing to make their intentions true, they first extended knowledge to the utmost; the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things.

Part B:

Only after things are investigated does knowledge become complete; knowledge being complete, intentions become true; intentions being true, the mind becomes set in the right; the mind being so set, the person becomes cultivated; the person being cultivated, harmony is established in the household; household harmony established, the state becomes well governed; the state being well governed, the empire becomes tranquil. (Gardner 2007, pp. 4–5)

(*gewu*—investigate things; *zhizhi*—complete knowledge; *chengyi*—intentions become true; *zhengxin*—the mind be set in the right; *xiushen*—cultivate the person; *qijia*—harmonize the household; *zhiguo*—the state becomes well governed; *tianxia ping*—the empire becomes tranquil.)

Like Chan and Eno, Gardner renders Part B of the passage in the present tense, making it a general prescriptive statement rather than a description of the accomplishment of the ancients as in Legge's translation. The qualifier "only after" is an indirect rendering of *er hou* 而後. Even though *er hou* 而後 appears in each pairing of Part B, Gardner uses it only once at the beginning of Part B; in doing so, he softens the strong sequential sense in the original passage, a move similar to that of Li Ao that we examined earlier. Without using such adverbs as "fully" and "perfectly," "knowledge being complete" can be understood as "knowledge being reached/attained" rather than being completed perfectly. In doing so, Gardner avoids Eno's problem of vacuous truth or making the conditional too demanding for the average person. However, Gardner's interpretation of Part B leaves one important question unanswered. Namely, if one does not need to fully or perfectly fulfill a former aim before taking on the next one, what happens to a former aim after a person has undertaken a latter one? This is the core issue of the sequential problem of the eight aims in the *Great Learning*.

III. The Sequential Problem and Its Solution

The problems with these interpretations have to do with understanding the nature of the sequence in pursuing the eight aims. Neither a strong nor a weak reading of Chan's translation yields a satisfactory interpretation. It is also problematic to take fulfilling each precedent aim *fully* to be a necessary condition for the subsequent aim, as Eno's interpretation indicates. Does one progress to extending knowledge only when things are fully investigated? Does one set the heart in the right only after the intentions have become perfectly genuine? If the answers to these questions are negative for the average person, it leads us to questions that Gardner's translation has left unanswered: To what extent does one have to achieve a former aim before tackling the latter in each pairing? What happens to a former aim after a person has proceeded to a latter one?

Zhu Xi evidently realized the difficulty with a strong sequential order of achieving these aims and struggled in his repeated attempts to explain it away. However, he seemed to have been bewildered, unable to reconcile the explicitly stated sequential order of the eight aims in the text and his own view of a need not to be restricted by such a sequence in practice. On the one hand, Zhu said that we should consider them in a sequential way and act on them accordingly.¹¹ On the other hand, Zhu also attempted to soften the sequential order altogether. He insisted that the passage does not mean that one cannot serve the state before one has harmonized the family,

or that one cannot harmonize the family before becoming cultivated first.¹² Zhu explained:

Under careful examination, the Classic text just makes a general statement in inferring further actions. It does not mean these are merely actual ladder steps after investigating things.¹³ (*Collected Works of Zhu Xi*; my translation)

Zhu advised his followers,

When reading the *Great Learning*, one should grasp its main spirit closely, follow its general idea, but come to start with solid things to work on with real effort. One should not merely follow the procedural sequence and take that as the only way to proceed.¹⁴ (*Collected Works of Zhu Xi*; my translation)

On the whole, Zhu Xi seemed to hold that even though the text appears to say that one should follow the stated sequence, it is not practical in real life. In practice, one needs to act in accordance with the actual circumstances and act on these aims simultaneously.¹⁵ Zhu took learning and acquiring knowledge to be a lifelong endeavor. Then, how can one ever surpass *gewu-zhizhi* (investigating things—extending knowledge) and move on to the later aims? Zhu was unable to come up with a coherent account that does not contradict the literal meaning of the *Great Learning* passage, which he held to be the “word of the sage” (*shengren zhiyan* 聖人之言).

At one point, Zhu Xi separated the first four aims from the rest and treated them differently. He said,

In the sequence of the *Great Learning*, from “investigating things and extending knowledge” to “clarifying the will and setting the heart right,” these are not two separate things. Nevertheless, there is progress from the internal to the external and from the shallow to the deep.¹⁶ (*Collected Works of Zhu Xi*; my translation)

Here Zhu Xi proposed that, for the first four, progressing from former aims to latter ones is a matter of expanding the scope and deepening the extent of the former. He also said that, after clarifying the will, every other aim falls into the sequence toward achieving the highest good.¹⁷ In other words, from the fourth aim onward, all other aims are still to be achieved sequentially. Such a compromised interpretation is problematic, however, because the wording of Part B does not differentiate between the first few aims and the rest.

Zhu Xi’s bewilderment reveals a serious problem with interpreting the text. On the one hand, the passage evidently states that there is a sequence, as indicated by the repeated use of the expression *er hou* 而後. On the other hand, following the sequence seems impractical and problematic, as some of these aims are either unfulfillable perfectly or do not have to be fulfilled perfectly before embarking on the next. In the end, Zhu Xi’s solution was not to take the passage word-for-word and instead to extrapolate and follow

its “main spirit,” even though the “main spirit” appears to contradict the actual wording of the original passage.

This difficulty also puzzles contemporary thinkers. Some thinkers have proposed as a solution to take the sequence as merely “a logical sequence” rather than “a temporal sequence.”¹⁸ Namely, even though logically each former aim is necessary for subsequent ones, such a sequence does not have to take place in time. Accordingly, the term *er hou* 而後 in Part B is a logical “thereafter,” not temporal. Here, I submit, “logical” is not to be taken strictly in the Hegelian sense; it does not have to mean the unfolding of a pre-set order toward a pre-determined destiny. Rather it is “logical” in that it makes the best sense for living the good Confucian life. The sequence merely presents a theoretical order for understanding. Such a move seems promising at first glance, but it runs into problems quickly. For it entails that a person achieving the eight aims does not have to begin temporally with the former aims on the sequential list; one could begin with any other aim on the list at any time. Such an account appears implausible according to the view of the *Great Learning*, however. It seems *prime facie* unreasonable to exclude any bearing of such a sequence on the temporal dimension. It would be farfetched to say, for instance, that in achieving the eight aims one could first begin with managing the state. Hence, even if there is a logical order, we still need to know how such a logical order has to be manifested in a temporal sequence. I believe there is good reason to hold that the logical order should coincide with a temporal sequence of the realization of the eight aims.

What, then, should a reasonable account accomplish? First of all, Part B of the original text clearly states that there is a sequence among the eight aims. A reasonable account faithful to the text should accommodate such a sequence temporally. Furthermore, one important stance to take note of is that a person cannot expect to achieve one aim completely before taking on the next one; it is more plausible for each aim to be fulfilled gradually over time, along with the fulfillment of some other aims, even though presumably there can be a focus on an aim in a particular time period. As Zhu Xi suggested, harmonizing the family is an ongoing lifelong process rather than something to be achieved completely before one moves on to serve the state. It is also the case with other aims. For instance, neither investigating things nor extending one’s knowledge can be achieved in a snapshot. Both are lifelong endeavors. One can clarify (or establish) one’s will at any time, but keeping it that way in everyday life requires long-term effort and continuous reinforcement. The same can be said of setting one’s heart right. It can also be argued that one cannot fulfill former ones adequately without engaging in latter ones. For instance, one furthers self-cultivation in the process of harmonizing the family; becoming a good family member also belongs to the process of being a good person (self-cultivation). The Commentary section of the *Great Learning* emphasizes the need to keep

people “renewed day by day” (*ririxin* 日日新). “Day by day” should apply to clarifying one’s will and setting one’s heart right as well as to other aims. Understood this way, all eight aims are to be pursued throughout a lifetime after a certain initial point. Therefore, we will need to think of their relations in a different light than thus far proposed.

I propose that we read the sequence in the passage as *developmentally temporal but not stage-exclusive*. The process for a person to begin her pursuit of the eight aims is developmentally temporal, in accordance with the sequence as laid out in the text, but she continues to make progress improving what she has achieved at earlier aims even after she has embarked on a journey at later ones. Such a reading describes a temporal sequence of a person’s developmental progression. On such an interpretation of the Confucian view in the *Great Learning*, a person’s growth begins with learning about things in life. After learning about things, she has acquired information and knowledge to reflect on and to establish a will on the right path. As she continues to grow, she acquires further knowledge and skills for personal cultivation, while she continues to pursue a healthy family life, to contribute to society and to the world. In such a process, she continues to improve what she has accomplished earlier in life and makes holistic efforts on all these fronts through positive mutual enforcement in the pursuit of all eight aims. Such progression is at once logical, temporal, and developmental.

I would like to think that such a proposal is not difficult to accept for most readers. But how does my account accommodate the idea of *er hou* 而後 as explicitly stated in the text, which various thinkers have been struggling with? I suggest that we should differentiate two types of *er hou* 而後 (“thereafter”). The first type is in the form of “one-act completion.” For example, in some countries a person has to get married before becoming eligible for government-subsidized housing. Once a person has gone through the legal process of getting married, he can apply for such housing benefits. Getting married is completed in one act. The other type is in the form of “attainment without terminus.” For instance, a person has to learn a programming language before she can do computer programming. Even after she has learned the language and begun programming, she can continue to learn more of the language and to improve further with mastering the language. These two types of *er hou* are similar in that they both require a temporal sequence. They are also different in an important way; that is, with the second type the former aim does not drop out of the picture after the latter comes on the scene. In my interpretation, the sequence of achieving the eight aims is of the second type.

At this point, it may be helpful to take a look at different models constructed by contemporary thinkers on people’s cognitive and moral development. A developmental and temporal sequence can be exclusively transitional from one stage to another in linear progression. Lawrence

Kohlberg's six-stage theory of moral development is such a case. Kohlberg's stages from lower to higher include: (1) Obedience and punishment orientation; (2) Self-interest orientation; (3) Interpersonal accord and conformity; (4) Authority and social-order-maintaining orientation; (5) Social contract orientation; and (6) Universal ethical principles. In Kohlberg's theory, when a person develops through an earlier stage, he goes beyond and progresses into a higher stage without having to return to the earlier stage for further improvement. In Kohlberg's model, a person's development at any particular stage any time excludes simultaneous development at another stage; it is "stage-exclusive."¹⁹ A developmental and temporal sequence, however, does not have to be so; it does not have to imply that one must completely fulfill one stage before progressing on to the next stage or leave a previous stage forever. In this regard, Erik Erikson has provided an alternative developmental theory. Erikson divides human psychosocial development into eight stages, in terms of Infancy, Toddlerhood, Preschool, Preadolescence, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Middle Adulthood, and Old Age. In each stage, the subject deals with a predominant theme of a person's psychological life and develops a basic virtue, as follows:

Stage, Theme → Virtue

1. Trust vs. Mistrust → Hope
2. Autonomy vs. Shame → Will
3. Initiative vs. Guilt → Purpose
4. Industry vs. Inferiority → Competency
5. Identity vs. Role Confusion → Fidelity
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation → Love
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation → Care
8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair → Wisdom

For Erikson, there is a progressive sequence of development in a person's life, yet, in each stage, development is not stage-exclusive. While there is a predominant theme in each of these stages, the predominant issue of a particular stage does not cease after progressing into the next stage. Challenges in an early stage may resurface and be tackled continually later on. (Erikson's developmental model is illustrated in figure 1.) Thus, complete mastery of an early stage is not required for advancement to the next stage, even though inadequate development in earlier stages has a negative impact on one's growth in later stages. In Erikson's theory, personal development, though temporally staged, continues throughout life. For instance, the theme of "trust vs. mistrust" begins at infancy, but it accompanies a person throughout life and has to be tackled continually (Erikson 1972, p. 395). The same can be said for many other issues in each stage of Erik Erikson's scale. In this regard, Erikson has provided an alternative model for understanding human development.

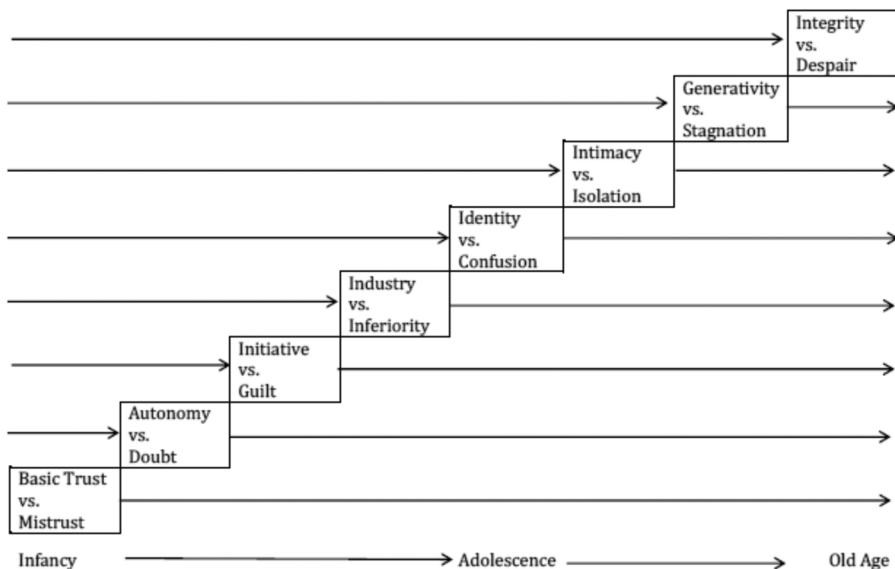


Fig. 1. (from Syed and McLean 2018)

It is neither my intention nor necessary for the purpose of this essay to defend Erikson's theory in technical terms. Erikson's theory of psychological development does not parallel the eight stages in the *Great Learning*. It could even be argued that whereas Erikson's sequential order is a natural order in that it is rooted in human physio-psychology, the Confucian sequence is—at least partially—integrated with philosophical construction on the best approach to living the good life. Erikson's theory is relevant to our discussion in an important way, though, not because it proves a type of sequence in the *Great Learning*, but because his conception of temporal development provides a model for us to think clearly about temporally staged progression without mutual exclusion across stages. Erikson's theory provides us with a ready example of a developmental sequence that is temporal without being stage-exclusive. Understanding a person's developmental sequence this way helps us to work on a solution to the sequential difficulty encountered in interpreting the *Great Learning*.

According to Zhu Xi, a person makes the transition from *xiao xue* 小學 ("elementary learning") to "great learning" at the age of fifteen.²⁰ So the period of Confucian "great learning" does not go in parallel with that of Erikson's theory. We can nevertheless understand the developmental sequence construed in the *Great Learning* in a similar light. Although normal personal development usually progresses from investigating things onward toward world peace, none of these aims has to cease completely. Underdevelopment in one stage does not prevent one from progressing into the next stage, even though some degree of development in an earlier stage is necessary. My account does not provide an answer as to what extent one

must fulfill an earlier aim before progressing onto the next. But it renders the question less pressing by making explicit that continued efforts on earlier aims are still needed even when one has progressed onto later aims. Accordingly, growing into later phases of life, a person would continue to investigate things, to extend knowledge, to clarify the will, to set the heart in the right, to cultivate the person, to harmonize the family, to participate in social affairs, to contribute to world flourishing. Even if such a progression is developmentally temporal, the pursuit of each aim nevertheless also co-progresses with others that have been embarked upon.

In my account, the eight aims in the *Great Learning* follow a temporal sequence, yet they are also progressing concurrently throughout a lifetime after a certain point in life. While the idea of temporal sequence is explicit in the text, the understanding of concurrent progression is an interpretative add-on to make the text cohere with our understanding of human development without contradicting the text. Accordingly, within each pairing of the aims, a certain degree of accomplishment of the former aim is required as a necessary condition before embarking on the latter one, even though one does not have to become perfect at any stage before moving forward. On the whole, the *Great Learning* teaches that the eight Confucian aims are to be achieved in coordination by harmonizing various efforts throughout a lifetime.

Notes

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- 1 – Zhu Xi, *Annotations of the Great Learning* (Zhu, *Daxue zhangju* 大學章句 n.d.).
- 2 – The original text has *qinmin* 親民, loving the people. Following Master Cheng 程子, Zhu Xi adjusted the word *qin* 親 to *xin* 新, on the basis of

the Commentary, which elaborates on how to keep the people and culture “refreshed” rather than on “loving the people.”

- 3 – In his *Annotations*, Zhu Xi called these eight aims “eight articles” (八条目). They have been called the eight “steps” in English scholarship (e.g., [Chan 1963](#), p. 84). “Steps” seems to imply a strong sense of linear sequential relation among them. I use the more neutral term “aims” to avoid possible prejudice in my discussion.
- 4 – *Bazhen zhi qi* 八珍之齊, in the “Tianguan-Shiyi” 天官·食醫 chapter of the *Zhou li* 周禮 (Rituals of the Zhou) (*Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Thirteen Classics with Commentaries 1985], p. 667).
- 5 – *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Thirteen Classics with Commentaries 1985), p. 2093.
- 6 – In *Analects* 2:21, Confucius says that being filial to parents and loving to siblings are also a form of governance (*weizheng* 為政).
- 7 – 所謂治國必先齊其家者，其家不可教而能教人者，無之。故君子不出家而成教於國：孝者，所以事君也；弟者，所以事長也；慈者，所以使眾也。康誥曰「如保赤子，」心誠求之，雖不中不遠矣。 Eno translates *chengjiao* 成教 as “to perfect.” It should be understood as “to improve toward perfection” rather than being *in* the state of perfection.
- 8 – 物者萬物也，格者來也，至也。物至之時，其心昭昭然明辨焉，而不應於物者，是致知也，是知之至也。知至故意誠，意誠故心正，心正故身修，身修而家齊，家齊而國理，國理而天下平。此所以能參天地者也。(Li Ao, *Fu xing shu* 復性書 [A treatise on restoring human nature]).
- 9 – Zhu Xi’s book title *Daxue zhangju* 大學章句 (hereafter *Annotations*) literally means “Annotating the *Great Learning* Chapter by Chapter and Sentence by Sentence.”
- 10 – 物格者，物理之極處無不到也。知至者，吾心之所知無不盡也。知既盡，則意可得而實矣，意既實，則心可得而正矣。(Zhu, *Annotations*).
- 11 – 但細推其次序，須著如此做。(Zhu, *Annotations*).
- 12 – 有國家者，不成說家未齊，未能治國，且待我去齊得家了，卻來治國；家未齊者，不成說身未修，且待我修身了，卻來齊家！無此理。(Zhu, *Annotations*).
- 13 – 子細看來，經文只是就大體規模上推說將來耳，非謂實徑此漸次等級，然後及於格物也。(Zhuxi wenji 朱熹文集; hereafter *Collected works of Zhu Xi*).
- 14 – 大抵看《大學》，須先緊著精神領略，取大體規模，卻便同來尋簡實下手處，著緊用功，不可只守著此固行程節次，便認作到頭處也。(Collected works of Zhu Xi).
- 15 – 若隨其所遇，合當做處，則一齊做始得。(Zhu, *Annotations*).

- 16 – 《大學》之序，自格物致知，以至於誠意正心，不是兩事，但其內外淺深自有次第耳。(*Collected works of Zhu Xi*).
- 17 – 意誠以下，則皆得所止之序也。(Zhu, *Annotations*).
- 18 – 「八条目列出的顺序不是工夫过程实际的顺序，而是大体上的顺序，不是时间上的先后，而是逻辑次序上的先后」。(Zhang 2008).
- 19 – For Kohlberg's discussion of the "inversion" phenomena, see Kohlberg 1976. For an empirical study in defense of Kohlberg's "invariant sequence" of stage development and its "irreversibly progressive" model, see Walker 1982.
- 20 – 人生八岁 . . . , 皆入小学;及其十有五年 . . . , 皆入大学。(Zhu, *Annotations*).

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