

# Moral norms and physical necessity: Zhu Xi on the concept of *Li*

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**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to analyze one of the key concepts in Zhu Xi's thought, *Li* 理, from the perspective of Confucian ethics and to stress its importance in the strategic synthesis of Confucian thought realized by Zhu Xi in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Focusing on the fundamental concepts of Neo-Confucian thought—*Li* (principle), *Qi* 氣 (vital force), *Dao* 道 (the way/nature), *Ren* 仁 (humanity) and *Xin* 心 (mind-heart)—the paper turns its attention to the inseparability of metaphysical and ontological perspectives on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the ethical perspective in the new Confucian paradigm. Taking into consideration the various definitions given to the concept *Li*, this paper attempts an interpretation of the concept based on the ineluctability of the Confucian moral norms stated by Zhu Xi, according to which in the order of the world everything happens under the unavoidable sign of the necessity of its issuance. These findings suggest that *Li* is a concept composed of a sum of various aspects (*li*) resulting from the different instances of its issuance in the world with which the mind-heart governed by it is confronted, therefore proving that *Li* is the sum of moral norms that encompass humanity, righteousness, rites and wisdom, the pillars of the Confucian moral order.

## Zhu Xi and his strategic synthesis of Neo-Confucian concepts

Zhu Xi, the Chinese philosopher whose prestige earned him a place among the sacred classic thinkers Confucius, Mencius, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, gave new meaning to Confucian thought. The system that he proposed has dominated for centuries not only Chinese thought, but also Korean and Japanese philosophies, and has served as the basis of the Confucian paradigm throughout Asia. Zhu Xi's contribution was not limited to the spheres of thinking, ethics or governing, but it had preponderant influence in these fields. Zhu Xi adopted the concept of humanity (*ren* 仁) from Confucius, the doctrine of virtue and humanity from Mencius, the idea of authenticity (*cheng* 誠) from the *Zhong yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*),<sup>1</sup> and the methods of reaching the correct way described in the *Da xue*<sup>2</sup> (*The Great Learning*), which he

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<sup>1</sup> *Zhong Yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*), initially a chapter of the classical book *Li ji* (*The Book of Rites*), was included by Zhu Xi in the collection of the *Four Books* (*Si shu*), the new Confucian canon from the Song.

<sup>2</sup> 大学 *Da xue* (*The Great Learning*) was, similarly to *Zhong yong*, initially a chapter of the classic *Li ji*, later to be included by Zhu Xi in the Confucian canon of the *Four Books*.