Hello. Today we're going to talk about Chu Hsi, a very important Neo-Confucian philosopher.

In fact, Chu Hsi was the most important Chinese philosopher since Mencius, definitely the most important Chinese philosopher of the last, say, thousand years, just extremely, extremely influential. We definitely want to know something about his thought. His main contribution was in synthesizing work of some of the previous Neo-Confucian philosophers, especially the Cheng brothers, who we did last time and in particular Cheng Yi. He was himself a follower of Cheng Yi, and really followed his thought in most respects. His great influence was due in part that he had the good fortune of his particular interpretations of the classics were chosen as the official ones for the Chinese civil service exams. That meant from the, say, 14th or late 13th century up until the early 20th century, anyone who wanted a government job basically had to memorize Chu Hsi. Everybody studied him, everybody knew him real well, and he was just hugely important,
not only in China but also in Korea.
His interpretations were the official ones there as well, and in Japan he was also very, very significant.
A very important philosopher.
Now, we're going to start with his idea of human nature.
Of course, this is a key idea in Confucian philosophy as we already know and Chu has his own edition to the theory which we want to take a look at.
One important characteristic of Neo-Confucianism, I touched on last time, but we didn't really get into it in detail, is that Neo-Confucians see a moral order in the whole universe.
The universe is not an impersonal or indifferent place for them. They think that it all fits together and it fits together in a particular way, and there's a reason behind that. Not that there's a divine plan or anything like that, they don't think there's a supernatural God who's designed it as such, it's just the way the world is.
It's just the way that it fits together. If we understand our place in that world, we see why our morality is so important. It's part of what the world should be,
and it's part of the way the world is.

One way we see that in Chu Hsi is how he connects the virtues in human beings to virtues in heaven and earth. He's got the same four virtues as Mencius. Mencius, like I said, one, Mencius became the basis of all Neo-Confucian philosophy. Chu Hsi talks about the same four virtues, humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Though again, Cheng very often leaves humanity untranslated as written.

But whereas in Mencius, these are just characteristics of human beings. In fact, these are what make human beings different from animals, the fact that we have these four virtues. Neo-Confucian see these virtues everywhere. Not to the same extent as in human beings necessarily, but something like them. Neo-Confucian, for example, talk about how other animals care for their young. One example is tigers, how mother tigers will fiercely defend their young in case of a threat. That shows that tigers have the same concern for their children like people do. Of course, people have a greater capacity
for that compassion.

Tigers don't much care about

the prey that they eat, for example,

but human beings can have a greater concern,

but it's not different in kind.

It's broader, it's more expansive,

but it all flows from the same idea, the same process.

Chu Hsi sees the same moral order in heaven and earth.

Heaven and earth provide

for the things that we need to live.

That's not a coincidence,

that's part of this moral order.

That heaven's benevolent when

it gives us the four seasons.

So we can grow crops,

we can have water,

we can get what we need to survive.

That's how we see we're connected

to all of heaven and all of earth,

we're part of this whole very comprehensive order.

The mind of humanity,

he says, is the mind of heaven and earth.

That's one way we know we we're originally good.

As heaven and earth are good,

they provide for our needs and

the needs of all of the various creatures,

we have that same mind.
We're not, again it's totally separate.
We're all part of the same world and so we have these shared characteristics.
He gives a different reasoning for why human nature's good.
Again, it's not just random, it's not an accident of evolution, as contemporary scientists might say that our morality is, but it's part of this deep connection that we have to the whole world.
That's something very, very important for Chu Hsi, which I'll come back to later, this idea of connection.
We saw indications of it last time in the Cheng brothers as well.
Where Chu took a step beyond the Cheng brothers is connecting human nature even more closely to some of these other ideas, particularly principle. He identifies human nature, the way in principle. Principle is the foundational idea, and human nature in the way are particular manifestations of principle.
In Chu's view, when we're talking about other things, animals, plants, non-living things,
their principle's referred to as the way.
Again, the way like we
talked about in the first section of the class,
the way things are,
the way everything is.
In people specifically, principle is human nature.
Again, that's another way we know human
nature's good because principle's good.
Principle is what makes things what they are.
When a human follows human nature,
he or she is being what he should be.
He's being human being rather than like an animal.
Again, if we reflect back on Mencius,
we see this idea,
but Chu takes it in a more metaphysical
direction than Mencius did.
We're connected to heaven,
we're connected to the whole world,
and we all share the same principle,
but with specific manifestations.
Then again, we come to this question of, well,
if human nature is good,
why do people suck?
Where does evil come from?
Chu Hsi gives the same answer as the Cheng brothers,
the basic problem is selfishness.
Selfishness means we feel cut off from other things,
we don't grasp the connection that we have.
He also used this distinction of
original nature and physical nature.
This originally came from his teacher Cheng Yi.
Original nature is again nature
abstracted from any particular manifestation.
If we were talking about what are
the key human characteristics that we
originally have before we even
have bodies if that was even possible.
That would be original nature.
Then physical nature is
the combination of li and
xi of principle in material force.
When we're endowed with material force in a body,
at that point we have physical nature.
That's where the problems come in,
because our material force,
if it's not clear,
that causes us to have desires and we have
this feelings of selfishness and we cut
ourselves off from the rest of the world.
Human nature can be good or bad,
or it can be clear,
can be more turbid,
is the way that Neo-Confucians tend to talk about it.
Again, they don't really explain why that is,
or why some people have
better material force than others,
it just seems like the way things are,
like some people are born more intelligent,
better looking, taller, and it's maybe just accidents.
But when we have this material force and we have bodies,
with bodies come along selfish desires.
These selfish desires interfere with
the original nature and that's what makes people suck.
Right now, the implication of
this and Zhu Xi is very clear about this,
is that means by nature we have no selfish desires.
This is a really radically different way of
thinking from certain other parts
of the Chinese tradition,
notably Zhu Xi who thought
our nature pretty much was selfish desires.
But also this common
way of thinking that a lot of people have now sort
of influenced by evolution and the idea of
survival of the fittest and natural selection,
that we're just interested in our own survival,
passing on our own genes.
That's not what Zhu Xi thinks at all.
When we have selfish desires,
that's not natural, that's not the way we normally are,
and that's not the way we should be.
By nature we have no selfish desires at all.
What does he mean by that?
Because if he's really saying we
don't have the desire to eat or drink,
this just sounds pretty
implausible and I don't think that's what he means.
Because he's going to distinguish
natural desires from selfish desires.
We still have certain needs just to survive;
we need food, we need water, we need air.
Those are not what he would categorize as
selfish desires as long as they're not excessive.
A desire for food,
that's natural, that's not a problem for Zhu Xi.
A desire for caviar and truffles and foie gras,
that might be a selfish desire,
especially if it leads to you
accumulating lots of wealth in
order to be able to purchase
these luxury goods that we don't actually need.
A certain amount of desire is not a problem for him,
he doesn't even generally refer to those as desires.
We might categorize those as needs.
But its desires that can lead
to harm to oneself or harm to others,
those are what he would categorize as selfish desires.
In our society, desire for a certain amount of
wealth would probably not be a problem, it's just necessary.
Unless you're going to go out and live by yourself in the woods, you need some money to survive.
But somebody who accumulates billions of dollars, that's a case where his selfish desires have gotten out of control and that is a sign of poor material force.
But despite these people who have poor material force, people like Donald Trump, or I know Tiger Woods might be another example of someone with excessive desires who just came to mind, improvement is always possible. Because again, like Chung Hao and Cheng Yi, Zhu thinks you can't get rid of human nature. It's without non-existing anymore, it is just built into us and it's always there, and it's always possible to get to it. You can never get rid of original nature in this context. No matter how bad someone is, improvements are always possible. That principle, that is human nature cannot be lost.
Now, how do we get back to that? This is again where the controversy enters in the Neo-Confucianism.
Neo-Confucians all agree nature is perfectly good, they all diagnosed the problem of selfish desires. Where they begin to disagree is in how to eliminate selfish desires and return to original nature. Zhu Xi builds on Cheng Yi's solution, and that's his particular interpretation of investigating things. Now this idea of investigating things again, is shared by everybody. This comes from this text, The Great Learning. It's a key concept for everybody but they interpret it differently and that's where the disagreements start to happen. So Zhu Xi's understanding of investigating things means to investigate principle to the utmost and he means the individual principals in each thing. Again, this comes right from Cheng Yi. When he says investigate principle to the utmost, he really means it, it's investigate every single thing you can. There's principle in everything. There's principle in this pen, investigate it. There's principle in my cup, investigate it. All these things have their principle and they're all worth investigating. Now that said, some are more important than others.
Zhu Xi did some of his own investigations of what we might call quasi-scientific kind like investigating the natural world, but that really wasn't his focus. He said the best place to find principles, especially when you start out is the works of the sages. The principle there is clearest, it's easiest to understand. That's what he recommended starting with. Particularly the works of Confucius, the works of Mencius, the Great Learning this text where the term investigating things comes from, and another one known as the Doctrine of the Mean. So that that's where you should start. As you progress in your course of study, you study principle in other areas. But it's a never-ending process. There's basically an infinite number of things in the world at least for our practical purposes, and Zhu recommends investigating as many of them as you can. This is a course of study that never stops, that should go on forever essentially. When you're doing this,
his understanding of what
happens is a little bit different from Cheng Yi.
When he says we have the same principle as the universe,
and he really means the same principle.
We have in ourselves the principle of everything.
We don't recognize it,
that's not always in
a way that we can see it and understand it.
What we're doing when we're investigating things,
he actually uses a term which means the principals meet.
When I investigate something like this pen,
there's a principle in it and
the principle in my mind and we meet.
That's what happens when I understand what a pen is,
that's a meeting of the principle.
The principle in my mind and the principle in
this thing join and that's when I say, "Oh, okay.
That's a pen, it's used for writing."
That's what we should do with every single thing,
you investigate it until you understand.
He talks about understanding
the way it is and the way it should be.
He's going to distinguish the way things are in
just a descriptive sense and the way
things should be in a normative sense,
and these can be different.
Because when I investigate,
let's say a person, let's say Donald Trump.
I'm picking on him today, apparently.
I investigate him and I understand how he is;
he's a guy who's qi is pretty cloudy.
He's got excessive selfish desires and he really needs
to investigate principle to become less selfish.
That's the way he is.
But it's not the way he should be.
The way he should be is unselfish,
is seeking harmony with other things.
Particularly his family first of all,
but other people, other animals,
and ultimately the rest of the world.
When we see something broken,
say I take my iPad,
throw it on the floor, it's smashed.
The way it is, is broken,
doesn't work, that's not the way it should be.
The way it should be is functioning properly,
doing what it's supposed to do.
We're talking about an idea of
the ideal function of something,
that's the way it should be.
When we understand both of those, first of all,
we realize the principle in our own mind,
and then we also know what to do.
We want to make things the way they should be,
that's our job in the world,
is to help things become what they should be.
That's what moral action is all about.
But to do that, you have to
first understand what that is,
you have to know the way
things should be before you can act on that.
Throughout this you have to have an attitude of
seriousness and this is another key term for Zhu.
In a sense it takes the place of
ritual and earlier Confucianism.
Whereas especially with somebody like Zhu Xi,
ritual is very much an external thing.
It comes from the sages of
the past and you have to study it and master it
and the ideal case you eventually internalize it.
But initially you don't understand why you're doing it,
you just have to learn it.
Neo-Confucians turn things inside more,
it has to come from you more
because you have this principle already inside you.
You have to approach your investigation principle
with seriousness,
that means a strong commitment to it.
It's not always pleasant,
it's not always easy.
But you have to be disciplined,
you have to keep at it,
you have to keep studying.
This attitude of seriousness is crucial to your success,
if you don't have it, it's not going to work.
Now, this relationship between knowledge and action,
another crucial question in
Neo-Confucian philosophy and one of the big disagreements
between Zhu Xi and and
a later philosopher Wang Yangming
that we'll look at after the break.
Zhu is a big proponent of knowledge,
and you can see from his understanding of
principal and the investigation of things,
knowledge is really important for him.
For him knowledge has to come before action.
If you don't know the way things should be,
and you don't know their principal,
you're not going to know what to do.
It's like someone, perhaps when you're a kid,
you enjoyed taking things apart to see how they worked.
That wasn't a big fan of that myself,
but I know some people who were.
Then, if you don't know how it fits together,
you can't put it back, it won't work.
If you're trying to fix
things without knowing the principle,
you're going to be unsuccessful,
and for Zhu this carries over to all action.

Suppose rather than the trial
falling into well that example,
let us take a case of
another manifestation of humanity and compassion.
You see someone who's sick,
you want to help that person.
But if you don't know
the causes of their illness and how to treat it,
you might do more harm than good,
and that's why we tend to rely on doctors.
Zhu thinks in order to
act properly and in a constructive fashion,
first you have to know what you're doing.
You got to know before you can act.
That means knowing the principal,
knowing how things are,
knowing how they should be.
But you don't want to stop with just this understanding,
because what it's all about is leading up to action.
If you know what's good and never do it,
that's not helping anything.
That's not really making the world a better place.
In terms of priority,
actions are more important.
In terms of sequence,
knowledge comes before action.
Know first, then act.
The problem comes in and this is where Wang Yangming criticized Zhu Xi, if you have to investigate principle and everything, when do you have time to act?
There's always more principal to learn, so it looks like we just put off action more and more and that was Wang's problem with this idea.
Because Zhu does say you should investigate principle everywhere, every principle is worth investigating no matter how minor it might seem.
We might raise the question, when does the action come in? Where is the time for that?
How can you be sure you know enough to act?
That seems to be a difficulty for Zhu's position.
Although in his defense we might say, "Well, yeah, you don't want people who don't understand things, and trying to act in ways that might have harmful consequences."
If I'm having appendicitis and somebody wants to help me, I'd rather they just call an ambulance to get me to the hospital, don't start doing surgery if they don't know how to do it.
It seems like there's
a difficult balancing act on the one hand, yes.
It makes sense to say you should
know what you're doing before you act.
On the other hand, you don't
want it to become an excuse to say,
"Well, I have to know more.
I'm not ready to act." Then never act.
I want to come back to a point that,
and we touched on last time with the Cheng brothers.
Then a real contrast with
Neo-Confucian ways of thinking and to an extent Chinese,
East Asian ways of thinking in general.
If you look at this conflict
between reason and desire, reason and inclination,
there's various ways of describing this,
and this is such an important part of
so many different Western philosophies.
Plato has got something
like it though he adds in the third part,
it's a big thing and can't.
Even in psychology represented in someone like Freud,
the conflict between the Id and the superego.
That in Western psychology tends to portray
this inner struggle between what
we want to do and what we think we should do,
between desire and reason.
One implication of Neo-Confucian views
is that there should be no such conflict.

There certainly is in some people,
but that's only because they haven't eliminated selfish desires.

For someone who has, there's no inner conflict.

It's never a struggle to be moral.

It should feel natural, should feel easy.

That's I think a really interesting difference in the idea of how moral struggle, moral decisions are made.

As for Zhu, human nature is only good.

There is no bad in human nature.

There are no selfish desires in human nature, and for people who have selfish desires, they can be eliminated. That's actually possible.

Now again we're talking about not desire for food, not desire for water which you're actually needs for survival,

but really what we might call more selfish desires to have more than other people in various aspects.

That stuff is not natural for him.

We want to get to a point and do thinks that is possible, where being good is effortless.

You just know and you don't have to force yourself to do it.
There's no well, I guess I should do this,
I don't really feel like it.
It'll be as natural
as taking a drink when you're thirsty.

[NOISE] Now again,
it doesn't mean that it's easy to get to that point.
It's not always clear from them
how many people they think actually have done this.
Certainly some Confucius, Mencius,
the Sages have done it.
They're not always clear about whether they
expect this to be a realistic goal for most people,
but they're quite convinced it
can be done and has been done.
They have ultracious a particular take
on what the source of bad action is.
For him the main moral problem is a sense of isolation,
not being aware of the connections
that we have to other people,
animals for the rest of the world.
When we don't see that connection,
that's when selfish desires can become active.
Where we feel ourselves
separate from the rest of the world.
It's not our concern and we don't have to worry about it.
His solution to that problem is learn to care,
and a way of talking about that is
enlarging the circle of moral consideration.

What I mean by moral consideration is just the idea that things have value, that they matter, because value we have to recognize, that we have to consider, that other people have value, animals have value, plants have value, pens have value, that we should recognize.

Now again, like we talked about last time this doesn't mean treating everything the same. For Zhu, yes, you should eat animals and plants not people. Well, he doesn't actually say that as far as I know but I'm quite certain he would agree with that. When he says to recognize its value, it doesn't mean we can't use other things. We have to survive. We need to eat. We need to use resources to build houses, to have clothes. That's not a problem for him, but appreciate the value it has even as you use it, and he thinks the problem is people circle of moral consideration is too narrow. They value themselves, most people do anyway. They value certain other people in their lives, their family, their friends. Maybe they value other people,
but they don't value enough.
Their circle of moral consideration is too small.
When we go through this process that Zhu talks about,
where we should end up is seeing the connections,
seeing the principle and
everything and how it's reflected in us.
Then, when we see the connections,
we see the value that everything has.
Again, that doesn't mean treating everything the same,
but giving it some consideration, realizing its value.
This means we'll recognize the moral status of others.
When we think about the things that
we tend to call bad, morally problematic.
I think you can see Zhu's point
that a lot of them have to do
with not seeing our connection to others.
Something like racism.
If we consider other people is not equal,
different from us and less valuable.
That's a problem, and Zhu would agree that's a problem.
We have to recognize the moral status of others.
The destruction of the environment,
where we just treat things as resources
for us to use as we see fit and don't value them.
That's a problem, and
Zhu solution is to see the connections.
Moderate our usage.
We can't give up using resources altogether, but we don't have to do it the way we do now. His views where we want to get to this ideal of harmony. Seeing and properly appreciating everything. Seeing the value it has, seeing what it should be and helping it be what it should be. When we do that, we become better people, we act correctly, we cause less harm, and we value things in the way that we should. We'll stop here and I'll see you after spring break.