

To Benjamin Bowen Wiley

December 12, 1856

Concord Dec 12 '56

Dear Sir,

I but recently returned from New Jersey after an absence of a little over a month, and found your letter awaiting me. I am glad to hear that you have walked with Newcomb, though I fear that you will not have many more opportunities to do so. I have no doubt that in his company you would ere long find yourself, if not on those White Mountains you speak of, yet on some equally high, though not laid down in the geographies.

It is refreshing to hear of your earnest purposes with respect to your culture, & I can send you no better wish, than that they may not be thwarted by the cares and temptations of life. Depend on it, *now* is the accepted time,¹ & probably you will never find yourself better disposed or freer to attend to your culture than at this moment. When *They*^a who inspire us with the idea are ready, shall not we be ready also?

I do not now remember anything which Confucius has said directly respecting man's "origin, purpose, and destiny". He was more practical than that. He is full of wisdom applied to human relations—to the Private Life^a—the Family^a—Government &c. It is remarkable that according to his own account the sum & substance of his teaching is, as you know, to Do as you would be done by.

He also said—(I translate from the French) Conduct yourself suitably toward the persons of your family, then you will be able to instruct and to direct a nation of men."²

“—To nourish ones self with a little rice, to drink water, to have only his bended arm to support his head, is a state which has also its satisfaction. To be rich and honored by iniquitous means, is for me as the floating cloud which passes.”³

“As soon as a child is born we must respect its faculties;

the knowledge which will come to it by & by does not resemble at all its present state. If it arrives at the age of 40 or 50 years, without having learned any thing, it is no more worthy of any respect."⁴

This last, I think, will speak to your condition.

But at this rate I might fill many letters.

Our acquaintance with the ancient Hindoos is not at all personal. The few names that can be relied on are very shadowy. It is however tangible works that we know. The best I think of are the Bhagvat-Geeta (an episode in an ancient heroic poem called the Mahabarata)-the Vedas-The Vishnu Purana-The Institutes of Menu-&c

I cannot say that Swedenborg has been directly & practically valuable to me, for I have not been a reader of him, except to a slight extent:-^ebut I have the highest regard for him and trust that I shall read all^a his works in some world or other- He had a wonderful knowledge of our interior & spiritual life-though his illuminations are occasionally blurred by trivialities. He comes nearer to answering, or attempting to answer, literally, your questions concerning man's origin purpose & destiny, than any of the worthies I have referred to. But I think that this is not *altogether* a recommendation; since such an answer to these questions cannot be discovered, any more than perpetual motion, for which no reward is now offered.⁵ The noblest man it is, methinks, that knows, & by his life suggests, the most about these things. Crack away at these nuts however as long as you can-the very exercise will ennoble you-& you may get something better than the answer you expect-

Yrrs Henry D. Thoreau

Correspondent: See p. 464.

¹ "For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

² T found the lines in *Confucius et Mencius*, p. 23, and translated

them into English in a commonplace book now in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.

³ T's translation of *Confucius et Mencius*, p. 108, appears in his commonplace book in the Berg Collection. When he used this passage in his compilation of "Ethnical Scriptures" titled "Sayings of Confucius" in the *Dial* (April 1843, p. 493), T drew on Joshua Marshman's translation, *The Works of Confucius*. See *Early Essays* 1975, p. 140.

⁴ T's translation of *Confucius et Mencius*, p. 121, appears in his commonplace book in the Berg Collection.

⁵ *Scientific American* had recently noted: "We have frequent inquiries respecting a prize said to be offered by the British Government to the person who first discovers perpetual motion. No such reward has been offered—and if it were offered it never could be obtained for such a discovery will never be made" ("New Inventions," *Scientific American*, October 18, 1856, 44).

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Editor's Notes

This letter is addressed "B. B. Wiley Esq / Care of / Strong & Wiley / Chicago / Ill.," postmarked "C{illegible}d Mass. {illegible}"; and endorsed "Dec 12, 1856 H D Thoreau".

extent:–] PE; dash under colon in MS

Author's Alterations

They] they

Life] life

Family] family

all] inserted

From Thomas Cholmondeley

December 16, 1856

Rome, December 16, 1856.

My Dear Thoreau,–

I wish that I was an accomplished young American lady, for then I could write the most elegant and "recherche"¹ letters without any trouble or thought. But now,