

THE QUEST FOR ETHICAL TRUTH: WANG YANGMING ON THE UNITY OF KNOWING AND ACTING

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ABSTRACT: *Drawing an analogy between Wang Yangming's endeavor to know ethical truth and Descartes' quest for epistemic certainty, this paper proposes a reading of Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting to the effect that the doctrine does not express an ethical teaching about how the knowledge that is already acquired is to be related to acting, but an epistemological claim as to how we know ethical truths. A detailed analysis of Wang's relevant texts is offered to support the claim.*

Keywords: *unity of knowing and acting, Wang Yangming*

Wang Yangming (王陽明) came to the insight that the heart is itself principle—*xi-ji-li* (心即理)—on a night in 1508 as if someone told it to him while he was half-asleep (Wang, 2006: vol. 33, 1228).¹ It was Wang Yangming's doubt concerning Zhu Xi's (朱熹) doctrine that one should investigate the nature of things to acquire ethical knowledge—the doctrine of *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* (格物致知)—that eventually led him to propose this doctrine of his own. As a teenager, he once sat in front of a bunch of bamboos to think about them, intending to practice Zhu's doctrine of acquiring ethical knowledge through the investigation of things.² He fell sick after seven days and the investigation failed. He later on told to his followers that, while scarcely anyone ever practiced Zhu's doctrine, he had put the doctrine to the test by practicing it and disproved it with his own experience (Chan 1963, 249, no.319).³ Some

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¹ The event is named in the Chinese tradition as the Enlightenment at Longchang (*Longchang wudao*).

² It is usually maintained that Wang Yangming's investigation of bamboos took place at Beijing in 1492 when he was 21. However, according to Chen Lai, since the event occurred at Beijing, it cannot be in 1492, but must be much earlier than that. For Wang was not at Beijing in 1492 (Chen 1991, 339-40).

³ For references to Wang's *Chuan-Xi-Lu*, both page number and passage number will be given according to Chan's translation (Chan 1963).

scholars think that the way in which Wang practiced Zhu's doctrine in his youth is questionable and that no other scholars had ever understood the doctrine in Wang's way (Chen 1991, 132). Yet that is actually what is at issue in Wang's experiment. With the doctrine of acquiring ethical knowledge through investigating things, Zhu offers no account as to how to investigate things. Scholars following Zhu acquire ethical knowledge not really through the investigation of things, but mainly through the study of Confucian classics, from which they are supposed to acquire ethical knowledge.⁴ Therefore Wang said that scarcely anyone ever practiced Zhu's doctrine. His experiment consists in facing things directly to investigate them. The moral of the experience is, according to him, that ethical knowledge is not to be acquired through investigating things in the external world, but merely through the investigation of one's own heart.

Developed in such an existential context, the doctrine that the heart is principle has its root in Wang's zealous endeavor to know ethical truths—that is, to know what one should do in a given situation—to become a sage. The doctrine therefore does not concern ethical principles' normative contents so much as the way in which ethical truths are to be known. Wang's contention is that ethical truths are not to be known through turning outwardly to investigate things, but through turning inwardly to one's own heart. It is the quest for a certain way to know ethical truths that ultimately underlies his doctrine that the heart is principle.

However, the instruction of turning inwardly to one's own heart remains empty so far as one does not know what exactly in one's own heart is to be followed in order to know ethical truths. The doctrine that the heart is itself principle must be further concretized if it is to serve Wang Yangming's project of acquiring certain ethical knowledge.

My aim in this paper is to expound Wang's doctrine of the unity of (ethical) knowing and acting—*zhi-xing-he-yi* (知行合一),⁵ which he proposed in 1509, along this line as the necessary concretization of his doctrine that the heart is itself principle. The thesis that is to be defended here is that the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is meant to tell us how to acquire knowledge about what one should do since, according to the doctrine, ethical truths are revealed in the spontaneous acts that respond to given situations. To know ethical truths, then, is to turn inward to one's heart to pay heed to what one's heart drives one to do. Furthermore, acting spontaneously is itself already knowing since it reveals one's innate ability to react to a given situation in the morally right way. It is knowing in

⁴ Zhu Xi famously claims that the key to the search for knowledge is studying books. See Zhu Xi, *Zhu-Wen-Gong-Wen-Ji (Si-Bu-Cong-Kan)*, vol.14, 204. Studying books is the most substantial content of his idea of the investigation of things (*ge-wu*) (Yu 2008, 85).

⁵ Warren G. Frisina maintains that the applicability of the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is not restricted to practical knowledge (Frisina 2002, 74). I am of the opposite view and will come back to the issue at the end of the present paper.

the sense of knowing-how that underlies Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting.⁶

In Section 1, I will discuss the traditional and wide-spread interpretation that views the doctrine as expressing an ethical ideal. In Section 2, I will analyze Wang's analogies to support the interpretation that is to be presented in Section 3, according to which the doctrine is rooted in Wang's idea of *liang-zhi* (良知), the innate knowing, which is the innate ability of human beings to act in a given situation in the morally right way while the act is engendered by their emotional reaction to the situation. In contrast to Philip J. Ivanhoe, who maintains that the innate knowing is "a faculty of moral sapience" and therefore a faculty of propositional knowledge (Ivanhoe 2011, 282), I stress that Wang's view is that such emotional reactions are natural in the sense that no thought involving ethical concepts is needed to specify them. The sheer operation of the emotional faculty is sufficient for moral agents to do the right thing without their having any idea about morality. The doctrine, then, serves as an epistemological claim about how to know ethical truths. In the last section, some critical observations about Wang's doctrine will be offered.

1. THE UNITY OF KNOWING AND ACTING AS AN ETHICAL IDEAL

Wang proposes the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting to object to the doctrine that knowing is prior to acting. The latter doctrine is represented by Zhu Xi. With the doctrine that knowing is prior to acting, Zhu means that the former is logically prior to the latter, for he thinks that one can act only if one knows what to do. At the same time, since the knowing at issue is about what to do and aims at acting from the beginning, Zhu maintains that acting is more important than knowing.⁷

The logical priority of knowing to acting is consistent with the possibility that one knows what to do, yet fails to act accordingly. In contrast, Wang maintains that the original state of knowing and acting—"zhi-xing-zhi-ben-ti" (知行之本體)—excludes such a separation, which happens only through the intervention of selfish desires between knowing and acting. Consequently, he denies that there is any real knowing (*zhen-zhi*; 真知) that is separated from acting. Wang maintains that the teaching of

⁶ Huang Yong maintains that the knowing in Wang's idea of the innate knowing is not knowing-how since a person that knows how to do something is not therefore disposed to do that thing while a person that knows something in Wang's sense is indeed disposed to do it (Huang 2012, 108-9). I was inclined to agree with Huang and thus had been quite reluctant to characterize knowing in Wang's sense as knowing-how. However, now I think that the distinction pointed out by Huang is not as absolute as he claims. There seems to be forms of knowing-how that will prompt the knower to activate his ability whenever the knowing-how is applicable. Having learned to speak German, one understands German whenever one hears it spoken. Having learned falling techniques thoroughly—for example by practicing judo, one implements the technique whenever one falls. Such examples blur the distinction made by Huang. Since it makes sense to characterize knowing in Wang's sense as abilities, I think that it can be classified as a form of knowing-how.

⁷ Zhu Xi, "Reply to Cheng Zhengsi," (Zhu 1965, vol.6).

the Confucian saints aims to restore the original state of knowing and acting (Chan 1963, 10, no. 5).

Moreover, Wang maintains that Zhu's doctrine that knowing is prior to acting is consequent on his view according to which the heart is to be distinguished from principle such that one has to go outside the heart to search for principles. In contrast, searching for principles in one's heart is thought by Wang to be equal to the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting: "Knowledge and action have been separated because people seek principle outside the heart" (Chan 1963, 95, no. 133).⁸

What does this doctrine mean? Chen Lai maintains that Wang actually has real knowing instead of ordinary knowing in mind in the context in which he speaks of the unity of knowing and acting. Since real knowing necessarily results in acting, knowing in this sense is one with acting (Chen 1991, 95). The unity that is maintained by Wang as the original state of knowing and acting, therefore, is an ethical ideal that should be strived for. The unity exists merely for those virtuous persons whose ethical knowledge smoothly passes over into action without being interrupted by selfish desires. For ordinary people, the unity is yet to be realized.

Chen's interpretation belongs to a long tradition. A Ming scholar and Wang's admirer, Shi Bangyao (施邦曜), already said that the gist of Wang's doctrine was to urge people to put ethical knowledge into practice (Chan 1983, 166). Among contemporary scholars, Julia Ching (1976, 66, 68) and Lao Sze-Kwang (1980, vol.3, 468) maintain that the doctrine expresses an ethical ideal embodied by sages. Antonio S. Cua likewise maintains that Wang's doctrine is primarily an ideal (Cua 1982, 70). He sees the unity as achieved through the process starting from prospective knowledge, which is the acknowledgment of the guiding force of an ethical principle, through the action guided by the principle and finally culminating in retrospective knowledge, which is a personal experience of the actual practice of the ethical principle.

However, such an interpretation entails that Wang's view is not very different from the view of Zhu, who, though advocating the priority of knowing to acting, also maintains that knowing should not be separated from acting (Chen 1991, 101). According to Chen, the differences between both thinkers are, instead of being theoretical, rather due to Wang's intention to stress the practical nature of ethical knowledge—that ethical principles demand to be conformed to. The stress would be one-sided if one had to study to know ethical principles. However, Wang's doctrine that the heart is principle saves one the labor of studying the nature of things to get ethical knowledge. The heart's innate knowing immediately furnishes itself with ethical knowledge. Because ethical knowledge is immediately present, Chen maintains, there is no need for Wang to stress knowing since he is concerned merely with motivating ethical practice (Chen 1991, 99-100).

⁸ Basically, I follow Chan when quoting his translation but will modify his translation in some cases. The modification will be notified. Chan translates 'xin' (心) as mind whereas I prefer to render it as heart to underline the emotional aspect of *xin*. I do not use the translation "heart-mind" because it is too artificial for me.

However, interpreting Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting as expressing an ethical ideal stands in conflict with Wang's own statement that he does not propose the doctrine "carelessly to effect a temporary remedy," but to present the original state of knowing and acting (Chan 1963, 94, no. 133). The interpretation makes it barely understandable why Wang vehemently objects to Zhu's view that knowing is prior to acting. It is tendentious and far-fetched for Chen to maintain that Wang distances himself from Zhu's view because, believing that the heart is principle, there is no need for Wang to mention knowing in order to emphasize that ethical knowledge be put into practice. Moreover, Wang leaves no doubt that he thinks that Zhu's doctrine that ethical knowledge is to be acquired through the investigation of things, according to which one has to seek principles outside the heart, is the ground for the separation of knowing from acting. Different from Chen's explanation, Wang thinks that there is an important theoretical ground for him to object to the doctrine of the priority of knowing to acting.

If the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting expresses an ethical ideal, it can be thought that the doctrine is meant to motivate people to put their ethical knowledge into practice.⁹ Thus Chen thinks that Wang aims to strengthen the motivating power of ethical knowledge by maintaining that only those complying with ethical principles are knowledgeable about them in the real sense. The distinction between ordinary knowing and real knowing had been common since Song scholars. Wang identified knowing with real knowing so that those who failed to comply with ethical principles were disqualified as knowing those principles at all. According to Chen, "such an attitude entails a more rigorous demand on morality" (1991, 96).

This seems to mean that Wang's doctrine is nothing but a persuasive definition of knowing, through which the original meaning of knowing as ordinary knowing is replaced by a new one, according to which knowing is not separated from acting. The point to introduce a persuasive definition is to redirect people's interests by giving a new meaning to a term without "substantially changing its emotive meaning" (Stevenson 1938, 331). A persuasive definition, then, exploits a term's emotive meaning. It preserves a term's emotive meaning and associates a new conceptual meaning with the term. In Wang's persuasive definition, knowing is the term whose emotive meaning is exploited. In the case that Wang's persuasive definition as a motivating tactic works, this means that people put their knowledge of ethical principles into practice because they want to be knowledgeable about them.

That is, even if the pedagogic tactic that Chen ascribes to Wang works, neither is the motivating power of an ethical principle strengthened nor is one really motivated to act through an ethical principle. Given Wang's repudiation of people whose acts

⁹ Ching remarks about Wang's doctrine that "this is the language of a prophet, seeking to arouse the moral conscience of his fellow countrymen to the recognition of certain ethical ideals" (Ching 1976, 68). A reviewer suggests that Wang by means of the doctrine might uphold the ideal that we acquire the mental state in which knowing and being motivated to act take place simultaneously. Yet such an ideal itself aims to encourage people to act.

seem to be virtuous but in fact act from unvirtuous motives,¹⁰ Wang would not adopt that tactic even as a pedagogic means.

Moreover, I seriously doubt the effect of the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting as a pedagogic device. Telling people that to know an ethical principle is to act in conformity to it is scarcely different from telling them the principle. For that is what it means for a principle to be an ethical principle. As soon as one knows a principle as an ethical principle, one knows that one should act in conformity to it. If somebody knows an ethical principle but fails to act in conformity to it, reminding him that an ethical principle ought to be complied to merely repeats what he already knows, which does not seem to be an effective strategy to motivate him to act.

If the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is taken to express an ethical ideal, the unity pertains merely to real knowing. Real knowing is different from ordinary knowing in that it is not separated from acting. It is thereby presupposed that real knowing and ordinary knowing are both cognitive states whose contents are ethical principles. Read in this way, the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is not an epistemological claim about how to know ethical truths, but a claim about how the knowledge that is already acquired is to be related to acting. In the following section, I will argue rather that the doctrine is epistemological.

2. WANG'S OBJECTIONSS AGAINST THE PRIORITY OF KNOWING TO ACTING

Obviously, Zhu Xi had in mind propositional knowledge about what one should do as he maintained that knowing is prior to acting. And scholars that take Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting to express an ethical ideal seem to share the same idea of knowledge. Yet I think that Wang Yangming does not have propositional knowledge in mind. Rather, he is referring to *liang-zhi*, which is a kind of innate knowing-how instead of knowing-that. This is to be seen from Wang's metaphors.

Answering Xu Ai's (徐愛) objection to the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting, Wang says:

Therefore the Great Learning points to true knowledge and action for people to see, saying, they are "like loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors." Seeing beautiful colors appertains to knowledge, while loving beautiful colors appertains to action. However, as soon as one sees that beautiful color, he has already loved it. It is not that he sees it first and then makes up his mind to love it. Smelling a bad odor appertains to

¹⁰ Wang says: "For instance, the five powerful despots drove out the barbarians and honored the House of Chou all because of their selfishness, and therefore they are not in accord with principle. Some people say that acted in accord with principle, but their heart did not become completely identified with the Principle of Nature. These people always admire the deeds of the powerful despots. They just want their deeds look good on the outside and completely ignore the relationship to the heart. They divide the heart and principle into two and drift into the insincerity which is characteristic of the ways of despots. Therefore I talk about the identification of the heart and principle so people will know that heart and principle are one and devotes their effort to the heart instead of accumulating individual acts of righteousness externally" (Chan 1963, 251-2, no.322).

knowledge, while hating a bad odor appertains to action. However, as soon as one smells a bad odor, he has already hated it. It is not that he smells it first and then makes up his mind to hate it (Chan 1963, 10, no. 5).

Wang makes the point that loving beautiful colors is not separated from seeing them in that no consideration intervenes between seeing beautiful colors and loving them. One does not have to make up one's mind to love a beautiful color. Moreover, smelling a bad odor is not separated from hating it in that one already hates the bad odor as soon as he smells it. In Wang's view, smelling a bad odor is an event in which hating the odor is imbedded as an essential dimension. That is because one does not perceive an odor as a bad odor if he does not hate the odor upon smelling it. Likewise, seeing a color as beautiful is loving the color. No consideration intervenes between seeing and loving because loving the color is itself a dimension of the event of seeing the color as beautiful. Seeing beautiful colors and smelling bad odors are for Wang knowing, while he identifies loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors as acting. As a consequence, acting itself is for him an essential dimension of knowing. By loving a color, one discerns a color as beautiful—that is, knowing it as beautiful. By hating an odor, one discerns an odor as bad—that is, knowing it as bad. What is at issue here is knowing as the ability to discern beautiful from ugly through loving and bad from good through hating. According to this sense of knowing, one knows beautiful colors or bad odors if and only if one acts—or reacts—in certain ways. However, through loving a color and thus knowing it as beautiful in the sense of being able to discern the beautiful color, one can reflectively get the propositional knowledge about what beauty is.

Wang's analogy with seeing beautiful colors and smelling bad odors cannot be taken to mean that loving beautiful colors and smelling bad odors are the only ways for one to get the propositional knowledge that a certain color is beautiful or a certain odor is bad. One can know that an odor is bad, for example, through being informed by others. However, the origin of the propositional knowledge that some odor is bad is dependent upon someone's smelling it and hating it.

The interpretation of Wang's analogy of seeing and smelling suggested here is to be contrasted with Cua's reading. Cua maintains that seeing beautiful colors in general involves a conative attitude. Yet according to him, it is the aspect-seeing that grasps a color as beautiful which then triggers the conative attitude of loving it. Similarly, when I recognize or acknowledge a person as my father, I respond to him filially (Cua 1982, 11). The present interpretation, in contrast, claims that the conative attitude of loving the color is constitutive of the aspect-seeing that grasps a color as beautiful. It is through loving a color that one sees it as beautiful.¹¹ To put it in another way: Being loved is part of the color's being beautiful.¹²

¹¹ I do not thus ascribe to Wang the view that it is because one acts toward a person filially that the person is acknowledged as one's father. Wang's analogy aims to illuminate the unity of knowing and acting in which knowing's object is principles but not persons. In the case of the father-son relation, Wang's view is that a certain act or a drive to act in a certain way toward one's father makes that act ethically good, but not that a certain act or a drive to act in a certain way toward a person makes him

Questioning the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting, Wang's disciple, Gu Dongqiao (顧東橋) writes to Wang:

One knows the food before he eats it, knows the soup before he drinks it, knows the clothes before he wears them, and knows the road before he travels on it. It is not true that one first performs an act without knowing the thing to be acted on (Chan 1963: 92, no. 132).

Clearly, it is the logical priority of knowing to acting that is expressed in Gu's statement. According to Gu, acting must be guided by certain knowledge that is acquired before one acts. That is: One must have the propositional knowledge that something is food before one eats it. To this Wang replies:

A man must have the desire for food before he knows the food. This desire to eat is the will; it is already the beginning of action. Whether the taste of the food is good or bad cannot be known until the food enters the mouth (Chan 1963, 92-3, no.132).

While Gu focuses on the requirement that acting be directed to an object that is known—the food, the soup, the clothes or the road, Wang is concerned about the question of how to know properties of the object in the first place. In the case of food, the edible properties of the thing as food are not known until one actually eats it.

If this was taken to mean that a person has to eat a thing to know how it tastes, Wang's view would be quite untenable. For we all have the experience that we go into a grocery store and know the tastes of many foods from our past experience, or if we have not yet tasted the foods, at least roughly through others' descriptions. Propositional knowledge about how a certain food tastes can be acquired without that one desires to eat and really eats.

Yet this is not how Wang should be understood. Rather, he has in mind the epistemological question about the origin of the propositional knowledge about food.¹³ A certain food's taste is not known to anyone until someone tastes it. Wang certainly would agree that, once it is tasted, the food's taste becomes a piece of information that can be shared by others so that one can know the taste without eating or having eaten it. Yet he makes the point that the information is acquired originally only through eating the food. That is: As to the origin, the idea of a certain food's

one's father. Knowing what to do toward a person, but not knowing the person, is the knowing that Wang maintains is one with acting. I therefore doubt whether Stanley Cavell's notion of acknowledgement appropriately clarifies Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting as is maintained by William Day (2012), though many aspects of Day's view are sympathetic to me.

¹² The interpretation suggested here is rather similar to David S. Nivison's. Nivison says: "One doesn't just perceive what is there and then back off and 'decide' what to make of it. The 'what to make of it,' the *shi-fei* 是非 (approval/ disapproval), is part of the 'what,' and is taken in simultaneously in a total perception which is both sensitive and evaluative. This is one way Wang has of putting his *zhi-xing-he-yi* 知行合一 ('the unity of knowledge and action')" (Nivison 1996, 227).

¹³ Chen notices that Wang's discourses are rather about the origin of ethical knowledge (Chen 1991, 98).

taste emerges through the act of eating. The act of eating is necessary for knowing edible properties.

Wang's analogy with food is slightly different from his analogy with beautiful colors and bad odors in so far as, unlike loving and hating, the act of eating does not itself correspond to a certain taste of food. It is nevertheless true that the propositional knowledge about a certain food's taste presupposes human beings' ability to discern the taste while eating the food. Without activating the ability, that is, without acting in a certain way, the taste will not be experienced at all.

Turning back now to the analogy with seeing beautiful colors and smelling bad odors, two aspects of the analogy deserve considering. Both aspects have to do with loving and hating, which firstly are regarded as acts and secondly as spontaneous acts.

It is crucial for Wang to justify the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting through the analogy of seeing and smelling that he takes loving and hating to be acts. Loving and hating are indeed conative states, which might eventually lead to acts. Loving a beautiful color, one is keen to dwell in its neighborhood to enjoy it longer. Hating a bad odor, one intends to turn away to avoid it. Though loving and hating are not themselves strictly acts, as conative states, they are the beginnings of action.

It is not accidental that Wang in his analogies equates conative states with acts. Wang says:

In their learning people of today separate knowledge and action into two different things. Therefore when a thought is aroused, although it is evil, they do not stop it because it has not been translated into action. I advocate the unity of knowledge and action precisely because I want people to understand that when a thought is aroused it is already action. If there is anything evil when the thought is aroused, one must overcome the evil thought (Chan 1963, 201, no.226).

An evil thought that has not yet been translated into action is still evil. Sometimes it happens that an evil thought leads to deeds that might be judged to be good and admired as such. Wang nevertheless rejects such deeds as inconsistencies (Chan 1963, 251-2, no.322). It is thus, in Wang's view, intentions that determine the ethical values of acts. Since what will be done from the ethical point of view is already inherent in the intention to act, Wang describes it as "the beginning of action" (Chan 1963, 92, no.132).

Even more importantly, Wang takes intentions to be knowledge as well: "When a thought is aroused, it is knowledge and at the same time action" (Wang 2006, vol. 32, 1172). Rightly understood, both the analogy of knowing food and that of seeing beautiful colors and smelling bad odors make the same point. Something is known about food only if there is the desire to eat. A color is known to be beautiful only if it is loved. An odor is known to be bad only if it is hated. Analogically, some conduct is known to be an act of filial piety only if one in the first place intends to behave toward one's parents in that way. Just like one discerns a color to be beautiful through loving it, one's intention to serve his parents makes him aware that certain deeds are

acts of filial piety. Once these deeds are known to be acts of filial piety in that original way, the knowledge can be shared—in the form of proposition—without the need for those who share in the knowledge to feel like wanting to serve one’s parents. Ethical knowledge of filial piety in this sense is supposed to tell people that they should be filially pious. As a consequence, propositional knowing is supposed to be prior to acting and therefore separated from it.

From Wang’s point of view, propositional knowledge is *derivative*. It derives from *the original state* of knowing in which knowing is not separated from acting since it is a kind of knowing-how, which expresses itself in one’s ability to act in or to react to a given situation in a certain way.

Contrary to Chen’s interpretation, the reading proposed here maintains that Wang objects to the doctrine of the priority of knowing over acting not because of pedagogic considerations. While Chen, following Zhu Xi, has propositional knowing in mind,¹⁴ Wang maintains the unity of knowing and acting because he is committed to the existence of an innate faculty, *liang-zhi*, which makes one react to a given situation in the morally right way while not being guided by prior ethical knowledge about what one should do in the situation. Knowing what to do in a given situation is thus identical to spontaneously acting in the situation in accordance with *liang-zhi*.¹⁵ It is now Wang’s idea of *liang-zhi* that is to be examined.

3. THE INNATE KNOWING AS A FORM OF KNOWING-HOW

Wang characterizes *liang-zhi*, the innate knowing, in the following way:

The heart is naturally able to know. When it perceives the parents, it naturally knows to be filial [*zhi-xiao*]. When it perceives the elder brother, it naturally knows to be respectful [*zhi-ti*]. And when it perceives a child fall into a well, it naturally knows to be commiserative [*zhi-ce-yin*]. This is innate knowledge of good (*liang-zhi*) and need not be sought outside. If what emanates from innate knowledge is not obstructed by selfish ideas, the result will be like the saying “If a man gives full development to his feeling of commiseration, his humanity will be more than he can ever put into practice” (Chan 1963, 15, no. 8).¹⁶

Translating “*zhi*” in phrases “*zhi-xiao*,” “*zhi-ti*” and “*zhi-ce-yin*” as “know” seems natural and unavoidable. Yet the translation is somehow misleading as well. The proposition “when it perceives a child fall into a well, it naturally knows to be commiserative” does not mean that one knows that one should be compassionate

¹⁴ Indeed, Chen Lai notices that there are some similarities between Wang’s idea of knowing and the idea of knowing-how, though he nevertheless denies that Wang understands knowing as knowing-how (Chen 1991, 114-7).

¹⁵ That Wang’s doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting must be understood in connection with the doctrine of *liang-zhi* has been taken notice by some scholars (for example, Lee 1994, 416).

¹⁶ I have modified the translation of the phrases “*zhi-xiao*,” “*zhi-ti*” and “*zhi-ce-yin*.”

while seeing a child about to fall into a well.¹⁷ Rather, the proposition obviously paraphrases Mencius' example of the same situation, with which Mencius intends to demonstrate the existence of four sprouts of heart (*Mencius* 2A/ 6). In Mencius' story, one immediately feels compassionate as soon as he sees a child about to fall into a well. His feeling of compassion is neither preceded nor accompanied by any cognitive state in which he is aware of his duty to feel compassion for the child or to rescue the child. Rather, he spontaneously feels compassion for the child and is driven to rescue him. Feeling compassion for the child, he simply is keen to rescue the child. Since Wang refers to Mencius' story, "it naturally knows to be commiserative" has the same meaning as "it feels compassion." Similarly, "it naturally knows to be filial" means "it is filial" and "it naturally knows to be respectful" means "it is respectful." The verb phrase "knowing to be" in the propositions signifies that one behaves in a certain way, that is, filially, respectively or compassionately.¹⁸

According to the usage of the Chinese verb "know" observed above, knowing in the descriptions "knowing to be filial," "knowing to be respectful" and "knowing to be commiserative" is rather knowing-how instead of knowing-that since the term "knowing" signifies the dispositions inherent in human beings to act filially, respectfully or to feel compassion in a given situation. Such dispositions are nothing else than human beings' ability to react to a given situation in the morally right way. Suppose it is, as Wang believes, the case that compassion always makes one do the right thing—helping people in need, it seems proper to say that one immediately knows the right thing to do through the feeling of compassion.

Accordingly, *liang-zhi*, or innate knowing, can be characterized as the faculty of moral drive that is the immediate and spontaneous response to a given situation and enables one to act in the morally right way in the situation. Toward one's father, one's innate knowing drives him to act filially. Toward one's brothers, the innate knowing prompts one to act respectfully. In the presence of a child about to fall into a well, the innate knowing makes one feel compassion and drives him to rescue the child. In each situation, one displays the ability to do the right thing through doing the

¹⁷ It would have this meaning according to Chan's translation. Chan's translation reads: "When it perceives the parents, it naturally knows that it should be filial. When it perceives the elder brother, it naturally knows that it should be respectful. And when it perceives a child fall into a well, it naturally knows that it should be commiserative."

¹⁸ It might be of interest to indicate that the usage of the verb "zhi" in the phrases "zhi-xiao," "zhi-ti" and "zhi-ce-yin" is not specific to Wang Yangming. Jiang Lihong shows many instances in writings from Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties in which zhi functions as an expletive having no meaning according to him (Jiang 1997, 527-35). In many instances given by Jiang, zhi appears in the structure "zhi + verb," which has the same meaning as the verb. For example: "Song zhi jun-chen bi zhi kong wei" (Song's ruler and ministers must know to be afraid), which means that Song's ruler and ministers must be afraid (Jiang 1997, 534). This usage can be found in modern Chinese too. The question "do you know to be afraid now?" (*ni xian-zai zhi-dao pa le?*) means "are you afraid now?" (*ni xian-zai pa le?*). If one says that somebody merely knows (*zhi*) to complain, it is meant that he always complains. It has been suggested to me that this usage happens only in a negative context. This is not right since one can also say that somebody merely knows to study while one means admiringly that he is always studying.

right thing or at least through having the inclination to do the right thing. Yet all the responding drives do not presuppose any conceptual representation of ethical principles as to how one should act in given situations. It is not the case that one feels compassion for a suffering person because one knows that it is one's duty to be compassionate for a suffering person. Rather, one feels compassion spontaneously without having to learn anything about morality at all.

Such a drive as an intention to act is an intentionless intention (*wu-yi-zhi-yi*)—to use a term of Wang Longxi (王龍溪), a disciple of Wang Yangming—in that it does not emerge through applying a principle to the given situation. The intention to act filially toward parents is the sufficient and necessary condition for one to know the principle of filial piety in the first place. Therefore Wang says: “As there is the feeling (*xin*) of being filial pious toward parents, there is the principle of filial piety. If there is no feeling of being filial pious, there will be no principle of filial piety” (Chan 1963, 94, no.133).¹⁹ Likewise, commenting upon Cheng Yi's claim that “what is inherent in a thing is principle,” he says:

The word “heart” should be added to the saying to mean that when the heart is engaged in a thing, there is principle. For example, when the heart is engaged in serving one's father, there is the principle of filial piety, and when the heart is engaged in serving the ruler, there is the principle of loyalty, and so forth (Chan 1963, 251, no. 322).

Accordingly, the operation of the heart is sufficient for one to do the right thing. It is only afterwards that one gets the propositional knowledge that the thing is what one should do.

This view bears some similarities to epistemological externalism, which denies that it is necessary for knowing that the knower has access to what justifies the knower's belief. Accordingly, so long as one's belief is true and has certain objective properties that ensure that the belief's truth is not merely accidental, one can be said to know what one believes. In order to have knowledge, one does not need to have evidence or reasons for one's true beliefs. Rather, those objective properties bestow “positive epistemic status” on one's true beliefs and qualify them as knowledge.²⁰

There are various forms of epistemological externalism. One version, proper functionalism, maintains that an objective property that makes a true belief knowledge is, among others, that the belief is the product of epistemic faculties that function properly (Plantinga 1993, 46).²¹ Wang Yangming's doctrine of the innate knowing is similar in so far as, for Wang, the operation of the faculty of the innate

¹⁹ I revise Chan's translation for “*xiao-qin-zhi-xin*.” Chan's translation reads: “As there is the mind of filial piety toward parents, there is the principle of filial piety. If there is no mind of filial piety, there will be no principle of filial piety.” Chan fails to convey the point that, with “*xiao-qin-zhi-xin*,” Wang means the actual feeling to be filial pious toward parents.

²⁰ “Positive epistemic status” is a term coined by Alvin Plantinga.

²¹ I am thankful to the referee that urges me to take Plantinga's view into closer consideration.

knowing necessarily prompts one to do the right thing in a given situation.²² One does not need to be aware of the reason why the act that one does is right—that is, the ethical principle on grounds of which the act is right.

When one sees people suffering, one feels compassion and is driven to help them. The similarities of Wang's doctrine with epistemological externalism do not imply that the one ethically justifies the drive to help with one's felt compassion.²³ One is aware of the compassion that one feels, but not as evidence for one's drive to help. For one to appeal to the felt compassion to justify one's drive to help, one has to think that it is ethically right or obligatory to help those that one feels compassion for. Yet for Wang, such a thought is absent when the innate knowing prompts one to help the suffering people. One is driven to help without thinking that it is ethically right to help. Rather, it is the causal link between people's suffering, the felt compassion and the drive to help that qualifies the drive as ethical instead of being accidentally a drive to do the right thing. The causal link, which is guaranteed by the faculty of the innate knowing, confers "positive ethical status" on one's drive to help and qualifies it as ethical knowing.

The status of *liang-zhi*, the innate knowing, as a faculty that is perfect and fully formed is stressed by Ivanhoe too (Ivanhoe 2002, 50; 2011, 281, Note 13, 282), who maintains that the innate knowing reveals "true knowledge," which is "an understanding that embraces, in addition to a cognitive awareness of a situation, a corresponding and an appropriate emotional and motivational response" (Ivanhoe, 2002, 79).

Ivanhoe characterizes *liang-zhi* as "a faculty of moral sapience" (2011, 282) and "moral vision" (2011, 283). The terms suggest that Ivanhoe conceives the innate knowing to be a faculty that produces propositional understanding of the ethically relevant traits of a given situation. Therefore he says that "true perception involves an understanding not only of what is being perceived but how it relates to the greater context of the Way." What is understood is the normative dimension of a situation. Ivanhoe's view is that such an understanding "entails" the appropriate emotional response to the situation, which then provides the motivation to act (2002, 99).

Ivanhoe illustrates the entailment relation with the example of seeing the green light:

²² This does not mean that Wang thinks that one will necessarily do the right thing. The innate knowing does not unfold infallibly into action. One might be driven to be filial but nevertheless fails to act so because of the presence of desires that prevent one from following the drive, or because one's will is too weak to do what one is driven to do, or simply because of the lack of means, ability, or factual knowledge to perform acts of filial piety. As has been mentioned, Wang considers merely the first possibility and regards the intervention of selfish desires as the sole factor that sunders the original unity of knowing and acting. In such cases, the unity should be restored, which is the aim of moral cultivation.

²³ This seems to be suggested by a referee: "It might be the case that Wang is a sort of internalist externalist: internalist in the sense that warrant is internally accessible, but externalist in the sense that what is accessible isn't necessarily access to propositional content that wholly justifies the belief." According to the referee, "there is something internal to the agent that gives warrant according to Wang (e.g., desire and compassion, to which a mature agent has internal access)."

People who see green have few doubts about what they are seeing. If green means go, they will tend to go when they see green. As Wang Yangming argued, there will be a unity of knowing and acting (Ivanhoe 2011: 287).

It seems that the cognition “green means go” is part of one’s understanding of the situation. Without having in advance the proposition knowledge that green means go, one would not tend to go when one sees green. The meaning of the green light as the permission to go is the normative dimension of the situation the understanding of which motivates one to go.

The reading of Wang’s doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting suggested here differs from Ivanhoe’s in that, identifying knowing in Wang’s sense as a form of knowing-how, it excludes any normative understanding from knowing. Knowing in Wang’s sense, as understood here, is the innate ability for one to react to a given situation in the morally right way. As the innate ability, such knowing does not presuppose any conceptual understanding about what one should do in a given situation.

Thus in Wang’s analogy of seeing beautiful colors and smelling bad odors, one loves a color without having to conceptually grasp the color as beautiful. Interpreting Wang’s analogy, some scholars claim that one will not like a flower if and only if one does not believe that the flower is beautiful (Huang 2012, 113). An obvious counterexample to the claim is babies and small children that show their preference for a certain flower. They like it while, due to their lack of the ability of conceptual thinking, it is not proper to attribute to them a mental state the content of which involves the proposition that the flower is beautiful. The example shows that the affection of liking something is independent from any conceptual grasp of it.

Likewise, in Mencius’s all-important example of a child about to fall into a well, it is said that the person feels compassion for the child and rescues it. Mencius’—and Wang’s—claim is not that the person spontaneously knows that he ought to have compassion for the child and then has compassion, but that he spontaneously has compassion for the child.²⁴ For, as in the above example, it is possible that the person feels compassion for the child without any conceptual understanding neither about compassion nor even morality. One does not need to possess the concept of compassion or morality to feel compassion for a child about to fall into a well.

This is yet another similarity between Wang’s idea of knowing and epistemological externalism. According to the latter, one can know something without that he knows that he knows it. The status of one’s true justified belief as knowledge is due to certain objective properties of the belief that one needs not be

²⁴ A referee reminds that the analogies with liking beautiful colors, hating bad odors and eating food concern subjective mental states while Wang Yangming is obviously not committed to a subjectivist view of ethical knowledge. This is true. However, Wang thinks that there are moral feelings universally shared by human beings. He can therefore appeal to the relation between knowing and acting in the case of the subjective liking and hating to expound the unity of knowing and acting in morality.

aware of. Likewise, according to Wang, one can react to a given situation in the morally right way without having to know that one is thereby acting morally.

Hume distinguishes natural and artificial virtues. Natural virtues are practiced from natural motives, that is, motives that do not involve thoughts that are to be identified in terms of moral concepts (Korsgaard 2009, 9, 11). While describing a natural motive, no moral concept like duty, moral rightness or justice is needed. In his well-known claim that a philanthropist inclined to help people on the ground of his nature acts in conformity of duty but not from duty, Kant attributes to the philanthropist a natural motive—that is, the motive of helping people—and thus denies that his act has any moral value (Kant 1900, 398). The philanthropist helps people in need not because he believes that it is his duty to do so. He helps rather because he wants to. No moral consideration plays any role in his decision to help. Wang's idea of the innate knowing implies that human beings are endowed with natural motives that drive them to do moral acts while no intervention of any thought involving ethical concepts is needed.

Such natural motives result from moral feelings that, according to Wang, are inherent in human beings universally, for example, the feelings of compassion, filial piety and deference. Ivanhoe also maintains that the true knowledge revealed by the innate knowing involves an appropriate emotional response to a situation: “The person who ‘knows’ that parents should be served with filial piety but does not proceed to serve them in this manner simply does not possess ‘true knowledge’”(Ivanhoe 2002, 79). However, even if the propositional knowledge that one should serve one's parents with filial piety engenders a moral feeling, the feeling is what Kant names respect for moral laws but cannot be the feeling of filial piety. The latter has as its object one's parents while the former's object is the moral law. Knowing the universal proposition that one should serve one's person with filial piety will not engender in a person the feeling of filial piety towards his own parents. Moreover, since feelings generally are not to be commanded, it seems to me improbable that the conceptual knowledge that one should serve one's parents with filial piety implies the demand that one have the feeling of filial piety towards one's parents. Indeed, the idea of the feeling of filial piety is not even part of the content of the proposition. Likewise, one will not necessarily feel compassion for people in need even if one accepts as one's duty to help them. The proper emotional response to a situation, which is indeed an essential moment of Wang's idea of knowing, therefore, is not consequent upon the propositional knowledge about the normative dimension of the given situation. Rather, it is consequent upon the natural motive that drives one to act in the morally right way in a given situation.

The doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is grounded in Wang's theory of innate knowing, which is not a cognitive, but rather a conative faculty of the heart directing one to act to respond to a given situation. The innate knowing is the innate ability of human beings to act in the morally right way in a situation and therefore a form of knowing-how, while the knowing reveals itself in the moral feelings universally inherent in human beings, which drive human beings to act without the intervention of ethical thoughts.

By maintaining the unity of knowing and acting, Wang asks us to follow the guidance of the innate knowing to do the right thing. The doctrine is epistemological since it concretizes the doctrine that the heart is principle in that it gives a hint as to how to find ethical truths in the heart. The doctrine implies that it is through the drive to behave filially toward one's father that one reflectively knows the proposition that one should be filial. Likewise, it is through the drive to help people in need that one reflectively knows the proposition that one should help people in need. Such propositional knowledge of ethical principles is grasped reflectively and has a derivative status. Without being concretized in this way, the doctrine that the heart is principle would be as impracticable as Zhu's doctrine of acquiring knowledge through the investigation of things because one then would not know what in the heart are ethical truths.

Yet the doctrine also has obvious practical and pedagogic implications. It teaches that, following the feeling originated from the heart, one is certain to do the right thing since the feeling will motivate one to do the thing that is right to do. Admittedly, the ethical truth about what one should do in a situation can be known derivatively in propositional form after such spontaneous and immediate drives have been taken notice of. If one, following Zhu and other scholars, maintains that ethical principles are to be discovered outside the heart, then ethical knowledge is knowledge of ethical propositions, which demand to be applied and put into action. Yet ethical action in the original sense does not result from applying knowledge of ethical propositions whose guiding force is already recognized, but is the unfolding of the innate drive of the heart.

4. SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting implies a non-representational view of ethical knowledge which is grounded in his theory of innate knowing. It is a non-representational view of ethical knowledge because the doctrine maintains that it is by the moral feeling originated from the heart that one is driven to act morally in the first place. No conceptual representation of the normative dimension of a given situation is needed. So far as innate knowing is supposed to make one respond to a given situation immediately and spontaneously in the morally right way, the theory is itself metaphysical. For to recognize the existence of innate knowing is to admit that a certain situation will engender a certain response in human beings' heart while there is a law-like connection between the objective situation and the subjective response. Human beings' moral acts immediately engendered by their innate knowing are thus a part of the all-prevailing cosmic order, which Wang names the Principle of nature (*tian-li*). For Wang, "the highest good is none other than the heart which has completely identified with the Principle of Nature in its fullest extent" (Chan 1963, 9, no.4). The theory of innate knowing is a part of the metaphysics of the Principle of nature in which there is no unbridgeable gap between the objective and the subjective.

Frisina is right in that he maintains that the background of Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is a metaphysics that rejects the subject-object

dichotomy. Yet Frisina seems to think that the unity of knowing and acting follows immediately therefrom such that he says: “The ontology Wang affirms is dynamic, lacking any tendency to dichotomize mental and physical substances and therefore unable to dichotomize knowledge and action” (Frisina 2002, 89). Consequently, Frisina argues that the unity of knowing and acting is a prevailing characteristic of the cosmos as Wang sees it and not restricted to ethical knowledge.

The doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting, however, says more than that the world is not dualistic. For knowledge is a normative term such that not every acting qualifies as knowing. Wang is concerned with the normative dimension of knowing. When Wang speaks of acting that is one with knowing, he therefore does not mean simply any acting, but the acting that reveals ethical truth—that is, the act driven by innate knowing. Even if it really follows from a non-dualistic metaphysics that each knowing is acting, it still does not follow that, for each type of knowing, there exists a type of acting that one can rely upon to secure the knowledge. Frisina’s attempt to extend the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting beyond the scope of practical knowledge, though attractive in itself, misses the normative dimension of the doctrine.

Wang’s theory is that there is a full-fledged faculty of innate knowing by which one spontaneously responds to any situation and knows thereby what ought to be done ethically in the situation. In my view, the theory is a part of what Ivanhoe calls “the heroic metaphysical aspects of Wang’s view” (2011, 281). The theory might have a certain degree of plausibility in a time in which social life is relatively simple and the patterns of ethical situations that one expects to encounter are fixed and limited. In such a time, people might be seldom involved in situations in which ethical decisions demand extended and complicated reflection. Rather, to make decisions, they could just follow the conventional principles that they have learned such that they might believe that the principles are rooted in their heart. The modern society with its ever-changing life deprives this blissful innocence of its psychological basis.

Nevertheless, I think that a deflationary and less heroic version of the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting might be defensible. According to the deflationary version, the unity of knowing and acting does not apply to all ethical principles but merely to some principles that are fundamental to ethics. These principles are the very origin of our ethical thinking in that, without us spontaneously acting in some ways—for example, helping others in need—we might not have ethical acts at all. If this is true, we are moral agents not as rational beings as Kant thinks, but as human beings; that is, beings with a determinate nature in which the tendency to act in certain ways is inherent.²⁵

Whether this deflationary version of Wang’s doctrine is tenable certainly cannot be answered in this paper. Nevertheless, I think that it is not a little feat for Wang’s doctrine to have pointed out the conative nature of ethical knowing.

²⁵ This certainly means neither that human beings are not rational nor that being human is incompatible with being rational. It is about whence human beings’ moral status comes.

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