



Undergraduate assignment feedback form
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Different interpretations of *gewu* 格物 and *zhizhi* 致知

by Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming

Gewu and *zhizhi* are two key concepts in *The Great Learning*. Over time, they've been interpreted in quite different ways. This presentation will explore two interpretations from Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, the two most influential philosophical figures in east Asia over the last thousand years.

The Great Learning says: 'The ancients, in wishing to manifest luminous virtue in the world, first brought good order to their states. In wishing to bring good order to their states, they first regulated their households. In wishing to regulate their households, they first cultivated themselves. In wishing to cultivate themselves, they first rectified their minds. In wishing to rectify their minds, they first made their intentions sincere. In wishing to make their intentions sincere, they first extended their knowledge to the limit (*zhizhi*). Extending knowledge to the limit (*zhizhi*) lies in investigating things (*gewu*). Investigate things (*gewu*) and then knowledge is perfected (*zhizhi*). When knowledge is perfected, then intentions become sincere. When intentions are sincere, then the mind is rectified. Rectify the mind and the self is cultivated. Cultivate the self and the household is regulated. Only after the household is regulated is the state well ordered. Only after the state is well ordered is the world at peace.' (Trans. Ian Johnston and Wang Ping with modifications)

We can see that *gewu* and *zhizhi* are prerequisites of self-cultivation and governance. The most widespread interpretation is by Zhu Xi.

Zhu Xi's interpretation of *gewu zhizhi*

Zhu Xi's definition was given in the *Collected Commentaries of the Four Books*:

Ge 格 means to reach or extend. *Wu* 物 (things) is like matters or affairs. To investigate thoroughly the principle of matters and things is to wish to reach the ultimate point.

Zhi 致 means extend to the limit or ultimate. *Zhi* 知 is like to know. Extending our knowing to the limit is to wish our knowledge to be exhaustive and without limit. (Trans. Ian Johnston and Wang Ping with modifications)

In Zhu's view, everything has its own principle, and investigating things means carefully and thoroughly uncovering that principle.

How to investigate? We should start with one thing and investigate them one by one. When

reading classics, every sentence and word conveys principles, and if we don't pay close attention and think deeply about them, we are unlikely to gain the true wisdom of the sages. The same spirit applies when dealing with matters in life. In every matter there lies a principle, and we should strive to understand it, rather than simply getting the task done. In the case of human relationships, we all know that one should be filial and respectful to one's parents, be loyal to one's country and supervisors and loving towards one's siblings. But why should we do this and what is the real filial piety, loyalty or love. To understand these is the investigation of things. It is not just general knowledge.

According to Zhu Xi, we start from what is close to us, and one by one, extend it to every aspect of our lives, and reach the extent of knowing everything. This is the extension of knowledge (*zhizhi*). Zhu Xi believed that the principle of things is originally known by our innate nature, and what we should do is to recover it. As he quoted from Chengzi, 'the initial teaching of the Great Learning insists that the learner, as he comes upon the things of this world, must proceed from principles already known and further fathom them until he reaches the limit. After exerting himself for a long time, he will one day experience a breakthrough to integral comprehension. Then the qualities of all things, whether internal or external, refined or coarse, will all be apprehended and the mind, in its whole substance and great functioning, will all be clearly manifested.' (Trans. Wm. Theodore de Bary)

In sum, *gewu* is to investigate every single thing and fathom its principle, and *zhizhi* is to extend this process to everything and achieve integral comprehension. *Gewu* is reaching the limit of depth, while *zhizhi* is reaching the limit of scope. This is what Zhu Xi understood them.

Wang Yangming's interpretation of *gewu zhizhi*

About 300 years after Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming lived during the Ming dynasty, when Zhu Xi's teaching was the official textbook. However, the spirit of seeking truth from the classics was almost lost, and learners tended to pursue the textual writing mainly to pass exams and gain prestige. Against this background, Wang corrected some of Zhu's explanations and offered his interpretation.

Instead of enriching and widening knowledge, he interpreted *zhizhi* (the extension of knowledge) as 'simply extending one's innate knowledge of the good to the utmost.' He explained the second character *zhi* 知 as the innate knowledge of the good, which is what Mencius meant by 'the sense of right and wrong' inherent in every human being. In his *Inquiry on the Great Learning*, he asserted, 'The sense of right and wrong requires no deliberation to

know, nor does it depend on learning to function. This is why it is called innate knowledge. It is my nature endowed by Heaven, the original substance of my mind, naturally intelligent, shining, clear, and understanding.’ (Trans. Wing-tsit Chen)

As this innate knowledge is inherent in everyone, when a thought or will arises, your innate knowledge already gives a judgement of right and wrong, even when you were doing an evil deed, you would know it’s wrong. Therefore, follow your innate knowledge, do what is right and get rid of the wrongdoings, so that your goodness will increase and wrongdoing will lessen.

As for *gewu*, he said, ‘A thing (*wu*) is an event. For every emanation of the will there must be an event corresponding to it. The event to which the will is directed is a thing (the *wu*). *Ge* 格 is to rectify. It is to rectify that which is incorrect so it can return to its original correctness. To rectify that which is not correct is to get rid of evil, and to return to correctness is to do good.’ (Trans. Wing-tsit Chen with modification)

From Wang Yangming’s perspective, rectifying things (*gewu*) and extending innate knowledge (*zhizhi*), as well as making intentions sincere, rectifying our minds and cultivating ourselves are essentially one thing. He said, ‘The master of the body is the mind. What emanates from the mind is the will. The original substance of the will is knowledge, and wherever the will is directed is a thing.’ Therefore, rectifying knowledge and extending innate knowledge are just different aspects of making intention sincere.

Applying our innate knowledge to everything and enabling all the things and matters to attain their principle, this is what *gewu* and *zhizhi* mean according to Wang Yangming.

Comparison of the two interpretations

There is a distinct difference between Zhu Xi’s and Wang Yangming’s interpretation.

1. Zhu focused more on the external world, saying that one can attain the principle through the investigation of the things. He said that there is only one principle. The principle of things is just the principle of heaven, which is within our innate nature. However, Wang Yangming emphasized inner practice. He said there is no principle outside the mind, and the mind itself is the principle, so one should look inward to restore the innate knowledge.
2. Zhu regarded them as being in a strict order. One should only extend knowledge after the investigation of things has been carried out, at least to a certain degree. Wang, however, saw them as one and the same, just different aspects and objects.

Conclusion

Both interpretations have had a huge influence on later scholars and have shaped Chinese philosophy. For us, who are learning to put these teachings into practice, I think it's better to combine the two approaches rather than neglect either. Clearly, we can't cultivate ourselves without our mind, but we also should not detach from learning from the world we live in.