

王陽明

5. Wang Yangming

It is, of course, impossible to give an adequate picture of *any* person's life and thought in the span of a single chapter. In the case of Wang Yangming (1472-1529 C.E.),¹ one feels this difficulty even more acutely, for he seems to have lived not just one but several lives. He was a scholar, a poet, a renowned calligrapher, a successful provincial governor, a triumphant general, and the most influential and charismatic moral teacher of his day.² I will concentrate on this last aspect of his life, and, in keeping with the theme of the present study, will focus my attention primarily upon his method of self cultivation.

Like Zhu Xi, Wang saw himself as the inheritor and defender—against enemies both within and without—of Confucianism. In particular, he saw himself as the true disciple and defender of Mengzi, the fourth-century B.C.E. Confucian whose thought we explored in chapter two. I have argued that Mengzi taught a *development model* of moral self cultivation in which people, through practice and reflection upon their innate and fragile moral sense, could develop and extend these “moral sprouts,” until they became strong and vital moral dispositions.

In the previous chapter, I also argued that profound changes had occurred in the Confucian intellectual paradigm in the course of the nearly fifteen hundred years separating thinkers like Zhu Xi from Mengzi, and I sought to explain briefly some of those changes that most affected the issues surrounding moral self cultivation. By Wang's time this major shift in Confucian moral thinking had been in place for several hundred years. As noted earlier, the sources of this shift can be traced to the rise and reign of Daoist and Buddhist thought that began around the first century C.E. and only began to subside around the ninth century.³ Though the tide of Daoist and Buddhist thought began to ebb, its influence remained, and the course of Chinese philosophy had changed dramatically under this influence.

One result of the broad and complex interaction of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism was a profound shift away from Mengzi's *development model* of moral self cultivation, which was grounded in his distinctive theory of human nature, to theories that were based on comprehensive metaphysical theories about the world. We saw a clear manifestation of this shift in Zhu Xi's thought and it is a distinctive feature of every Neo-Confucian thinker. Mengzi's ethical theory was grounded in assumptions about moral psychology and a philosophical anthropology, i.e., theories about what kinds of creatures human beings are and how they act as social creatures. By Zhu's and Wang's time, ethical theories were grounded in views about universal moral principles, lying unnoticed or obscured beneath the hustle and bustle of day-to-day

activities. These theories now provided the warrants for how one should organize and live one's life. Mengzi's theory that we all possess moral sprouts, a young and fragile moral sense that requires concerted and prolonged effort to nurture to maturity and refinement, had become a belief in an innate and fully formed *moral mind*: a complete and perfect moral guide that was buried beneath our selfish desires.

One can see this philosophical difference manifested in a dramatic shift in metaphors. Wang did not talk about "sprouts" or employ Mengzi's panoply of agricultural images. [He spoke of the moral mind as *the sun shining behind clouds* and *a clear, bright mirror hidden beneath dust*.] Our moral sensibilities were fully formed and quite formidable *faculties* that were obscured by the "clouds" and "dust" of selfish desires.⁴ These are images Mengzi never used and this is not only because they are borrowed from Buddhist texts which he had not seen, they reflect a set of assumptions about the nature of human beings and the universe which he did not share or ever entertain.

This had profound effects on both the possibilities for and conceptions of the process of moral self cultivation. It led to what I refer to as *recovery* or *discovery models* of moral self cultivation.⁵ These new models of self cultivation opened up exciting and attractive new possibilities. For example, Wang and other later Confucians could and did talk about the experience of dramatic and complete moral *enlightenment*.⁶ Given their views, it became possible to awaken to complete and perfect moral knowledge; one could *discover* and bring fully into play one's innate moral mind. Some believed this goal could be reached with a single moment of sincere effort; indeed Wang believed such an effort constituted proper practice. These kinds of ideas are completely foreign to Mengzi; it simply is impossible to *develop* like this. While Zhu Xi holds his own unique version of these views, in Wang they assume a distinct and dramatic form.

While Mengzi advocated the persistent and careful cultivation of one's moral sprouts and Xunzi urged us to acquire a second, moral nature through persistent study and practice, later Confucians increasingly concentrated, sometimes exclusively, on the elimination of one's *selfish desires*. These later Confucians exhibit a passionate and at times frenetic preoccupation with the goal of moral enlightenment and with the challenge of maintaining unceasing, internal vigilance over their each and every thought. Their aim is to develop and sustain a state of mind in which they constantly monitor themselves for the slightest trace of selfishness. For them, moral self cultivation comes to resemble the tasks of relieving oneself of and guarding against self-deception. Since one already possesses a complete and perfect moral mind, the challenge is to identify it, engage it, and preserve it from obscurity. The source of

obscurantism also lies within the self—misguided applications of the mind that generate selfish desires. Wang's teachings purport to offer a unique form of *moral therapy*, designed to address this pernicious form of self-deception.

I will explore three distinctive aspects of Wang's general theory of moral self cultivation. The first of these, *the unity of knowledge and action*, is Wang's most well known teaching and was mentioned briefly in my discussion of Zhu Xi's method of self cultivation above.⁷ The question of the relationship between moral knowledge and action is an idea with a very old pedigree in China (and elsewhere as well). Wang's particular version of it has had a profound influence on later East Asian thought and culture.⁸ It still exerts great influence and retains strong appeal. For example, in one of Yukio Mishima's great novels, *Runaway Horses*, Wang's teaching is ardently embraced by the central figure, Isao.⁹ It culminates in his assassination of a powerful member of a *zaibatsu* ("corporate conglomerate") which Isao and others believe is undermining their society. Isao's *knowledge* of the malignant nature of the *zaibatsu* precipitated his *action*. As Wang argued, such knowledge is the beginning of action and such action the completion of knowledge.¹⁰

While the nature of the relationship between moral knowledge and action involves familiar problems about issues like the reason-giving force of moral propositions, claims about a *unity* of knowledge and action might strike one as a bit strange at first, for it seems that we often *know* we should (or should not) act in a certain way and yet we fail to act accordingly. Wang would simply deny this, but we have to understand much more about how he saw things in order to appreciate *why* he would hold such a view and what such a denial entails.

The problem of the relationship between moral knowledge and action is not unique to China, nor is China the only place where we find disagreement over how to address this issue. At first glance, Socrates seems to say something very similar to Wang; he believed that we could never act against knowledge. If we *knew* the good we would *do* the good, and if someone did not do the right thing, it must be the case that this person simply lacked complete knowledge of the good.¹¹ However, as we shall see, Socrates' view ends up being significantly different from Wang's. Socrates had an intellectualist view of moral action; he didn't fully appreciate how appetites, passions, and desires often interfere with our rational knowledge of what is right and prevent us from acting appropriately. In his own unique fashion, Wang was very concerned with just these aspects of human behavior and much of his philosophy concerns how to manage these various aspects of the self. In addition, Wang believed that moral knowledge brought forth new and needed

desires and affections; whereas, on the Socratic model, knowledge could at best redirect our inherent desires, appetites, and passions.

Given his understanding of things, Socrates did not have an adequate way to account for or accommodate problems like *weakness of will*. Later thinkers in the early Greek and western tradition developed more elaborate pictures of moral psychology in which different parts of the self could be in conflict with one another.¹¹ They also developed views of the self in which our different parts could influence and shape one another.¹² In time, the idea of a distinct mental power, the *will*, was introduced, as a way of bridging the gap that one often finds looming between the course of action we know we should take and what we actually do.¹³ Of course, the notion of will, while answering certain vexing questions concerning the phenomenon of moral failure, generates special difficulties of its own. In particular, as a moral teacher, it leaves one in a difficult bind. For, when someone claims she *knows* what is right to do yet finds that she cannot act in accordance with her knowledge, if you are convinced that she does in fact know, all that seems to be left to do is to insist that she *just do it!* But what is a teacher to do if, as is often the case, the student insists, "I'm trying as hard as I can but find that I still can't do it!"?

This admittedly brief and selective survey of issues prepares the ground for our discussion of Wang's view of *the unity of knowledge and action*. Wang did not approach the problem of moral failure—cases where one knows one should act in a certain way but fails to so act—in terms of a Socratic lack of knowledge or Augustinian weakness of will. He had a different set of philosophical tools with which to work; prominent among them was a distinction between *zhenzhi* 真知 "real knowledge" and *changzhi* 常知 "ordinary knowledge."¹⁴ Later Confucians believed that there was a significant difference between *knowledge about* something and *knowledge of* something. The former kind of knowledge is "ordinary" in the sense that it is commonplace, most everyone has it. The latter kind of knowledge is "real" in that it arises out of personal experience and brings together both cognitive and affective types of knowing. This distinction is not universally applicable. For example, it doesn't apply to imaginary objects, like unicorns, which no one has *knowledge of*. But it may remain meaningful even in cases of highly abstract knowledge, such as mathematical knowledge; there is a significant difference between knowing about a given geometric proof and grasping its significance in the way a great mathematician does.¹⁵ But Wang and his fellow Confucians were not much interested in these kinds of cases; they were primarily interested in moral knowledge and in this regard the distinction between "real" and "ordinary" knowledge does some major work.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand and appreciate the distinction between *real* and *ordinary* knowledge is to follow the Confucian practice

of explaining things by means of parable. Cheng Yi¹⁶ captured the distinction between these two types of knowledge in a memorable way and used it to describe the relationship between moral knowledge and action. He said:

Real knowledge is different from *ordinary knowledge*. I was once with a farmer who had been mauled by a tiger, when someone happened to mention that a tiger was mauling people in the area. [Naturally], everyone was alarmed. But this one farmer had on his face an expression that differed from the rest. Everyone, even a child, knows tigers maul people, but they do not possess *real knowledge*. It is only *real knowledge* if it is like that of the farmer. When people continue to do what they know they should not do, this is because they do not *really know* it is wrong. If they *really knew*, they would not do it.¹⁷

Real knowledge embraces both proper cognitive and affective aspects. In cases requiring moral action, one not only knows what to do but finds oneself properly motivated to do so. In genuine cases of *real knowledge*, an agent simply spontaneously moves toward the proper end. Those who possess such knowledge cannot but act in accordance with it; this is what separates them from most of us, who possess only ordinary knowledge. *Real knowledge* is self-activating in the same way that genuine virtues are; when faced with situations of a certain kind, a person with *real knowledge* will simply respond in an appropriate manner. There is no need to perceive, select, judge, and will; this is to have three acts too many. The perfected person responds like a mirror, accurately and immediately “reflecting” the situation at hand.¹⁸

On one occasion, Wang sets forth his views on this issue while answering one of his disciples. The disciple said:

“Now there are people who, despite knowing they should be filial to their parents and respectful to their elder brother, cannot be filial or respectful. From this it is clear that knowledge and action are two separate things.”

[Wang replied, “In this case, knowledge and action] have already been separated by selfish desires; this is not the original state of knowledge and action. There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who know but do not act, simply do not yet know. . . . Thus the *Daxue* (“Great Learning”) gives us examples of *real knowledge and action*, saying it is ‘like loving a beautiful color or hating a bad odor.’”¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, Wang believed we all possess an innate, perfect, and fully formed moral mind which, in some deep sense, always knows

what we ought to do. But selfish desires interfere with the operation of this innate moral mind, our ever-present moral conscience, obscuring its effectiveness and bringing about the “separation” of knowledge and action. As Wang goes on to explain in the same passage,

It is like a person with a stuffed-up nose. Even if he sees a malodorous object before him, he does not smell it, and so he does not hate it. This is simply not to know the odor. This is just like the case of saying someone [who does not act appropriately] knows filial piety or brotherly respect. That person must have already acted with filial piety or brotherly respect before he can be said to know them. One cannot say he knows filial piety or brotherly respect, simply because he knows how to say something filial or brotherly.

From his theoretical claim about the unity of knowledge and action, Wang draws the practical conclusion that one cannot possess *real knowledge* until one has actually acted in the appropriate way. For Wang, you cannot know what courage is until you have acted courageously and you cannot really understand what compassion is until you have acted compassionately. Someone who really “knows” courage or compassion will spontaneously act in a courageous or compassionate manner, whenever these are called for.

It should seem a bit odd that Wang considers the cases of hating a bad odor and loving a beautiful color as *actions*. We tend to regard these as *affections*—not *actions*.²⁰ However, Wang would insist that they are part of a continuum of *knowing, feeling, intending, and acting*. He expresses this organic unity of knowing and acting with the formula “Knowledge is the beginning of action and action the completion of knowledge.”²¹ Wang sees the problem of moral failure and the solution to the problem very differently from either Socrates or Augustine. For Socrates, the person who fails to act morally simply needs to know more. For Augustine, she needs to engage in an act of will. But for Wang, such a person needs to *become sincere*, i.e., be true to her innate moral mind. One accomplishes this by eliminating the obscuring influences of one’s selfish thoughts.²²

One often gets the impression that Wang saw himself as a spiritual *therapist* rather than a philosophical *theorist*. His primary concern was getting people moving in the right direction. A number of aspects of his philosophical position appear at best problematic and others are left rather vague. But in teaching individual students he is always clear, direct, and to the point. Often one can feel the power of his personality and the energy of his exchanges with students. It is clear that a great deal was at stake in these meetings and conversations. However, it is equally clear that much of what Wang accomplished was more the result of his

inspiring presence and dramatic delivery than it was a consequence of the cogency of his arguments.²³

Let us now turn to another aspect of Wang's theory of moral self cultivation and discuss what he thought we needed to do in order to become sincere. According to Wang, people deluded themselves and, in the process, lost sight of their innate moral mind. He believed the causes of this unfortunate phenomenon were numerous, but we shall restrict our attention to one cause which he seemed to find particularly bothersome, perhaps because it concerned a mistake in how to pursue self cultivation itself. This problem can best be described as the overintellectualization of the task of self cultivation.

Wang believed that in order for self cultivation to work, it had to directly concern the actual activities of one's own life. For example, one of Wang's disciples, who was an official, complained that he had inadequate time for self cultivation because he was so busy listening to litigation.²⁴ Wang jumped on this opportunity to make two related points to this disciple. First, he told him that he had ample opportunity to engage in self cultivation, for whenever he was listening to legal cases he could examine himself to see whether he was being perfectly sincere. During these times, he should guard against the intrusion of even the slightest selfish thought which would interfere with his performance as a fair and good judge. Second, this kind of opportunity is his only *real* opportunity for moral improvement. What he took to be moral self cultivation—studying some classic or engaging in meditation—isn't the best kind of self cultivation at all. At best, such pursuits might help him to avoid going further astray, but they will never help him advance. More likely, they will interfere with his moral growth, for he will come to regard them as ends unto themselves. This not only distracts attention from the true work of self cultivation—which must take place in the arena of one's own life—but over time, it will lead him to begin competing with others over who knows more about the classics, or he will mistake meditative calm as the goal and drift into quietism.

Wang described this aspect of his teachings in terms of a passage from the *Mengzi*, in which Mengzi talked about the need to continually work on the task of self cultivation. Wang understood a line from this passage in his own particular way. Mengzi had said, *biyou shiyan* 必有事焉 "always work at self cultivation."²⁵ Wang took this to mean, "[in self cultivation] always work on *your own personal problems*." That is to say, if you don't have your own problem to work on, self cultivation simply won't work. In fact, such effort often has extremely negative results. It can lead one away from genuine moral engagement and result in a profound alienation from morality and an obsession with selfish

pursuits. Trying to improve oneself morally, in the absence of some actual, personal moral problem was, according to Wang:

just like cooking rice by heating a pot. If one does not put in water and rice, and only concentrates on adding fuel and starting the fire, I don't know what kind of thing you will cook up. I am afraid the pot will crack before the fire can be properly adjusted.²⁶

Wang's point here can be understood in terms of the earlier discussion between ordinary and real knowledge. One will never attain real knowledge of morality unless one works on real problems. And the only real problems—those that engage one's heart and challenge one to become aware of and work to eliminate the selfishness that stands in the way of moral improvement—are those that one confronts (or avoids) every day, in one's own life.

If I were to apply Wang's teaching to my own life, which of course he would insist I do if my goal is real knowledge, I would see many reasons for concern and only some for hope. This in itself might be seen as progress, since it generates some sense of my need for and the demanding nature of moral improvement. Since I am interested in ethics, Wang would want me to be careful not to confuse *knowing about* ethical philosophy with *being* a better person. While few philosophers would confuse these two (and none should), we do tend to believe—perhaps wrongly or at least too strongly—that a *theoretical* understanding of ethical issues plays a central role in becoming a better person. Instead, Wang emphasized the need to cultivate certain affective states and saw these as playing a critical *cognitive role* in moral understanding.²⁷ Wang would also warn me not to become obsessed with my interest in ethical philosophy or even my desire to become moral, for these too can become impediments to moral well-being. Either of these might lead me to ignore or even trample over family, friends, students, and colleagues in order, on one hand, to win professional success and recognition, or, on the other, to pursue a grim and lonely conception of moral improvement.

On the positive side, if I take up and follow Wang's advice, I will see that I have ample—practically speaking, unlimited—opportunities for moral self cultivation. For the proper objects of my moral attention are the actual affairs of my everyday life. I don't need to wait for dramatic opportunities that require moral courage, compassion, and wisdom of heroic proportions. Quite the contrary, I should concentrate on more modest moral challenges. I should work on monitoring and correcting my behavior as a son, husband, teacher, colleague, friend, etc. These areas of life present me with *real* moral problems, real in the sense that working through them will have efficacious results on my own moral

progress. Here again we clearly see the therapeutic orientation of Wang's thought.

I have described Wang's ideal method of self cultivation as, in at least one respect, more "modest." But it is important to realize that, taken as a whole, it is rather demanding; he insisted on uninterrupted self-scrutiny. He wanted us to maintain constant inner scrutiny of every thought and be ever-vigilant against the intrusion of selfishness. If we could sustain this state of uninterrupted inner vigilance, our innate moral minds would recognize each and every selfish thought as it arose. Such awareness in itself had the power to eliminate the selfishness, provided of course that our self-knowledge was sincere.²⁸ Wang describes this state in a dramatic and most memorable passage:

This effort must be carried out continuously. Like eradicating robbers and thieves, one must resolve to wipe them out completely. In idle moments one must search out and discover each and every selfish thought for sex, wealth, fame and the rest. One must resolve to pluck out and cast away the root of the sickness, so that it can never arise again. Only then may one begin to feel at ease. One must, at all times, be like a cat catching mice—with eyes intently watching and ears intently listening. As soon as a single [selfish] thought begins to stir, one must conquer it and cast it out. Act as if you were cutting a nail in two or slicing through iron. Do not indulge or accommodate it in any way. Do not harbor it, and do not allow it to escape.²⁹

I would like to explore one final aspect of Wang's views on self cultivation, which I will call the *existential flavor* of his teachings. Wang's beliefs about an innate moral mind and the need to pursue self cultivation in the affairs of one's own life led him to see moral choice as extremely context-sensitive, and the moral life as an intensely personal and rather isolated affair. We can understand these aspects of his thinking as results of his desire to reorient people to the critical importance of personal commitment in pursuit of the moral life, but it led Wang to be an extremely iconoclastic Confucian and gave his teachings what I am calling a kind of *existential flavor*.³⁰

For example, one of Wang's earliest disciples, his brother-in-law Xu Ai, in a preface to the work now known as the 傳習錄 *Chuanxilu*, tells us that one day Wang noticed a student recording his instructions.³¹ Wang admonished this disciple saying that he taught in the same way a doctor prescribes medicine, he diagnoses the problem with each student on a case-by-case basis, supplies and adjusts the dosage of the appropriate medicine, and in this way *cures* each student's spiritual malady. If someone writes down these prescriptions and starts passing them out to

people on the street, he will not only not help them, he will probably cause them great harm!

Of course, the student, and all his fellow students as well, immediately stopped writing down Wang's teachings. However, a short time later, the student who had been admonished by Wang discovered Xu Ai making a record of what the master had said. He immediately upbraided Xu Ai by repeating the words of the master. Xu calmly responded that he remembered the master's words well enough, and that unfortunately it seemed as if only *he* had truly understood them. For, as Xu Ai went on to explain, Wang's warning to not record his teachings was itself a prescription for a given ailment, a teaching tailored to a specific occasion and individual; it did not apply *now*, to Xu Ai.

This example illustrates the highly context-sensitive nature of moral judgment and the intensely personal character of moral decision in Wang's school. In Wang and his disciples we see a true religious faith in the power of the innate moral mind; they regarded it as a faculty, akin to seeing or hearing, that allowed them to realize what is right in each and every situation they encountered. If one could keep selfish thoughts from clouding the moral mirror of one's innate mind, it would spontaneously and accurately "reflect" the true dimensions and precise features of every situation that came before it. Borrowing a term from the *Mengzi*, Wang referred to this innate moral faculty as *liangzhi* 良知 "pure knowing."³² One of his poems well represents his faith in the power of this inner light.

The thousand sages are all passing shadows;
liangzhi alone is my teacher.³³

For Wang, one should always steer by one's own inner light; first, because each moral choice is original and unique, and, second, because only such choices provide one with genuine opportunities for moral self cultivation. Such views led him, among other things, to a less reverential attitude toward the Confucian tradition. He once said:

In learning, the important thing is to get it with the mind. Even words from the mouth of Kongzi, if one seeks in one's mind and finds them to be wrong, dare not be accepted as true. . . . Even words from the mouth of an ordinary person, if one seeks in one's mind and finds them to be correct, dare not be regarded as false.³⁴

Wang went so far as to imply that we would be better off without the Confucian classics themselves, since at best these are records of past examples of the moral mind at work. At one point, he even condones the infamous "burning of the books" by the notorious first emperor of the

Qin dynasty.³⁵ According to Wang, we cannot improve ourselves by mimicking the classics, for *our* task is here, at hand, in our own lives. The classics and the sages themselves had no clear role to play in Wang's conception of the Confucian tradition. They cannot offer one *real knowledge* and pose potential threats to genuine practice.

The individuality of moral self cultivation led Wang to present the moral life as one which often led to a kind of righteous isolation.³⁶ Wang's followers had an awesome moral duty that compelled them to act in ways that most people simply could not understand. He once described this situation:

There have been times when a man sees his father, son or brother falling into a deep ravine and drowning. He cries out and goes crawling, half-dressed and barefoot, stumbling and falling [in a mad dash] to save them. He dangles from dangerous cliffs and precipices in order to reach them. Looking on are some "proper gentlemen," who chattering and laughing amongst themselves and ceremoniously bowing to one another, consider the man to be insane, for so discarding proper etiquette—stripping off his clothes, crying out, stumbling and falling like this. . . . But [this man] pays no mind even to the danger of drowning, much less is he concerned about being ridiculed as insane! There is nothing wrong with people saying that I am insane. The minds of all people throughout the world are the same as my mind. While there still are people who are insane—how can I not be so? While there still are people who have lost their minds—how can I not lose mine.³⁷

In Wang, we see a radical version of Mengzi's moral intuitionism and a unique expression of the Confucian vision. Though iconoclastic in many ways, Wang himself was a consummate Confucian gentleman, a dedicated official, and a tireless moral teacher. His commitment to the moral life and his belief that this life consists of the cultivation of the self and the improvement of society, with the ultimate goal being the perfection of both, reveals him to be an original and worthy member of Kongzi's lineage.

Notes

1. Tu Wei-ming has written an interesting work on Wang's early life, a Neo-Confucian version of Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*. See his *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming's Youth (1472-1509)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976). Julia Ching's study of Wang's spiritual quest is also most valuable. See *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

Wing-tsit Chan has produced the most important translation of Wang's teachings. See his *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963). Julia Ching's translation of Wang's philosophical letters is also an important source. See *The Philosophical Letters of Wang Yang-ming* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1973). My *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition* compares aspects of Wang's ethical philosophy to aspects in Mengzi's thought and argues that Wang represents a distinct and quite radical form of the Mengzian vision.

2. Chang Yü-ch'üan wrote a most helpful series of articles on Wang's political and military accomplishments. See his "Wang Shou-jen as a Statesman," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, 23: 30-99, 155-7, 319-75, 473-517. A reprint of these articles is now available: (Arlington, VA: University Publications of America, 1975).

3. This is not to say that Daoism and Buddhism did not continue to be influential or develop after this point in Chinese history. However, Confucianism regained considerable strength and influence beginning around this time and there was a true renaissance of Confucian thinking.

4. For Wang's use of the sun and clouds imagery, see Chan, *Instructions*, sections 21, 62, 76, 167, and 171. For the mirror and dust imagery, see sections 207, 237, 255, 289, and 290. This of course only gives us examples from one record of Wang's teachings; these are not the only examples nor the only metaphors he uses to convey his view of things.

5. I use the former to refer to Zhu Xi's view and the latter to Wang Yangming's. While these two models share many similar assumptions, they tend to diverge over the issues of how accessible moral knowledge is and what is the necessary or best way to engage this knowledge and get it to inform one's perceptions, judgments, and actions.

6. Wang uses the character *wu* 悟 "enlightenment" (familiar to many in the west by its Japanese pronunciation, "satori") some thirty times in the course of the major collection of his teachings, the *Chuanxilu*. This character and this general way of talking about moral development are not found anywhere in the *Mengzi*. The idea that some people are able to attain an immediate understanding of the true nature of the mind and that this itself is true practice can be seen most clearly in the famous "Teaching in Four Axioms" (Chan, section 315). This conversation, between Wang and his two most advanced students, finds a clear parallel in chapter 16 of the *Platform Sutra*.

7. See p. 51.

8. Perhaps the earliest explicit reference to this problem is found in the *History*, where a minister named Fu Yue declares to his king that, "It is not knowing that is difficult but acting." See James Legge, tr., *The Chinese Classics, Vol. 3, The Shoo King*, reprint (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970): 258. For a study of the history of this idea from

Wang Yangming to Mao Zedong, see David S. Nivison, "The Problem of 'Knowledge' and 'Action' in Chinese Thought Since Wang Yang-ming," in Arthur F. Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953): 112-45.

9 See Michael Gallagher, tr., *Runaway Horses* (New York: Pocket Books, 1975): 353-4.

10. Socrates purportedly put forth this view in the *Protagoras* (349e-361c). See W. K. C. Guthrie, tr. (London: Penguin Books, 1979)

11. For example, in Book IV of the *Republic* (412b-427c), Plato introduces a tripartite picture of the soul in which the passionate and appetitive parts vie with our desire for the good, which is associated with the rational part of the soul. See the *Republic*, G. M. A. Grube, tr., C. D. C. Reeve, rev. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992).

12. Aristotle presents his view of the intellect's ability to shape the passions and appetites through habituation to the good in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1103a15-1103b25 and 1144b1-1145a5). See Terence Irwin, tr., (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985). For an extremely helpful study of Aristotle's view of moral learning, see M. F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980): 69-92. For an essay that focuses on the executive role that the intellect plays in this process, see Richard Sorabji, "Aristotle on the Role of the Intellect in Virtue," in the same volume, pp. 201-19

13. In *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, Albrecht Dihle argues that Augustine is the first to articulate a distinct mental power, *voluntas* ("will"), which directs and orders human desires and that this discovery arose out of his personal struggle as described in the *Confessions*

14. For a discussion of the early development of this distinction, see my *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming*, pp. 66-7

15. Wang's distinction in some ways resembles Gilbert Ryle's distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how." People can know that dribbling a basketball entails handling it in a certain specific way and yet may be wholly incapable of so handling it. They know what dribbling is but lack the know-how to do it. See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949): 25-61.

16. See p. 43.

17. *Henan Chengshu yishu*, 2A.2b-3a (SBBY)

18. This is Wang's way of talking, and it conveys his view of things very well. However, the mirror metaphor breaks down at a certain point: for mirrors do not *act*, whereas the sage surely does. Cf. pp. 45-6.

19. Adapted from Chan, *Instructions*, section 5.

20. This point was first made by David S. Nivison. See his "Review of *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* by Wing-tsit Chan and *Instructions for Practical Life* by Goodrich Henke," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 84.4 (1964): 437.

21. See Chan, *Instructions*, section 5. Wang also uses the formula, "Knowledge and action advance together." See sections 133, 136.

22. I follow the standard practice of translating the Chinese character *cheng* 誠 as "sincere" with the qualification that this means "true to one's innate moral mind." A. C. Graham sought to bring out this sense of the word by translating it as "integrity." See his *Two Chinese Philosophers*. The idea is that a thing is *cheng* when it is as it ought to be, i.e., when it follows its *li*. And so being sincere for Wang means realizing or bringing into being the true state of one's nature. This is appropriately thought of as "integrity."

23. In some respects, Wang was a kind of spiritual coach, but he was also a kind of *guru* figure to his disciples. For an interesting study that explores the various facets of Wang as a religious teacher by applying insights borrowed from Kierkegaard, see Lee H. Yearley, "Teachers and Saviors," *The Journal of Religion*, 65.2 (April, 1985): 225-43.

24. For this passage, see Chan, *Instructions*, section 218. Cf. 137 and 294. In the latter passage, we find Wang himself listening to and resolving a difficult legal case in a most ingenious manner.

25. For a more complete discussion of this aspect of Wang's teaching, see my *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming*, pp. 83-4, 89-90.

26. See my *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming*, p. 84. Cf. Chan, *Instructions*, section 186.

27. One's affective state can play a critical role in how one perceives a given situation. For example, when a totally heartless person, walking home on a winter's night, comes upon a shivering homeless person blocking his path, all he might see is an obstacle to his progress. Such a deficiency proved tragic for King Lear. "[He] that will not see, because he does not feel" (*King Lear*, 4.1, 70-1). See Kenneth Muir, ed. (London: Methuen and Company Ltd. 1952): 151. I owe the reference to Bryan W. Van Norden.

28. See Chan, *Instructions*, sections 241, 290.

29. See my *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming*, p. 85. Cf. Chan, *Instructions*, section 39.

30. Okada Takehiko sees Wang's thought as strongly existential. See his "Wang Chi and the Rise of Existentialism," in Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970): 121-44. David S. Nivison offers some important qualifications to such a view. See his "Moral Decision in Wang Yang-ming: The Problem of

Chinese 'existentialism'," *Philosophy East and West*, 23.1-2 (1973) 121-38. I have explored this issue in more depth in an article discussing these two early treatments. See "Existentialism in the School of Wang Yangming" in Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed., *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture*, (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Press, 1996): 250-64. See also Nivison's response on pp. 336-41 of the same volume.

31. The *Chuanxilu* is the work translated by Chan and Henke. A translation of the preface can be found in Appendix I of my *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming*, pp. 115-16.

32. The term occurs only once, in 7A15, and there lacks the special sense it has in Wang's use. Roughly speaking, for Mengzi it described a nascent capacity while for Wang it described an innate faculty.

33. *Wang Wenchenggong quanshu*, 20.632b (SBCK).

34. Chan, *Instructions*, section 173.

35. For this reference and a general discussion of Wang's attitude toward the classics, see my *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming*, pp. 102-112. For an account of the burning of the books by the Qin, see Derk Bodde, *China's First Unifier: A Study of the Ch'in Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Ssu* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1938): 22-4, 162-6.

36. Wang's own moral enlightenment occurred during a time of deep isolation, when he unjustly was banished to Guizhou. So, in his own case, the moral conviction arose *out of* isolation. I owe this observation to Betsy Lancefield.

37. Cf. Chan, *Instructions*, section 181.