

# The Philosophy of Wang Yangming<sup>1</sup>

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## 14.1 Preface

Certain things about Wáng Yángmíng 王陽明 I am not going to dwell on this evening. I am not going to talk about his life, except to note that he was born in 1472 and died in 1529; was an official and eventually a general, commanding several important campaigns against rebels in central and south China; and had, by 1520, become famous as a moral teacher. I'm not going to talk about his political philosophy, except to note that he was, like many late Confucians, a utopian who idealized a remote and imaginary past, when he thought human society was bound together in a unity of feeling and purpose like the parts of a single living body (142–43); and that he had a kind of Daoist anti-intellectual persuasion that civilization has come to place too high a value on knowledge (in the sense of mere information) and on literary art and writing, and that a truly good society would preserve just enough of both to meet what need there might be for it in educating people to be virtuous and unselfish, and would do away with the rest (11).

I will add that these elements of his thought disturb me, because I can feel very well the appeal of his utopia—which he describes with some passion—and (at the same time) know it to be essentially totalitarian; and being a twentieth-century American who is older than the generation now in college I know that beautiful ideas like this can become the basis of something quite horrible. His anti-intellectualism is saddening, if understandable. But it too is disturbing, because I can see in both this and the utopianism a connection with parts of his thinking that both attract and fascinate me, even if they do not always persuade, and it is possible that this connection is a necessary one. If it is, there is a conflict within myself that I would rather not have to deal with.

## 14.2 *Xin xue*

The Chinese have had their names for keeping things tidy, and the name they have used for Wang Yangming's kind of Confucian moral philosophy is *Xin xue* (心學), which it is tempting to render “literally” as “philosophy of mind.”

But that expression, of course, is one of *our* names for keeping things tidy, so caution is at once in order.

There are pages in Wang, sometimes, that could almost make acceptable brief notes in a contemporary philosophy journal like *Analysis*; but it would be misleading and unfair to him to focus on these and let the rest go. Wang, in writing and talking philosophy, is also practicing and teaching a *religion* at the same time, and only by remembering this can one see what is going on. As a philosopher he is concerned with many “standard problems”—the relation of mind to body, the mind’s place in nature, the way the mind works, the relation between mental and overt acts, between thinking, perceiving, and valuing, and between perception and reality. (There is not, I think, any treatment in him of a true free will-determinism problem, and the reason for this, as we shall see below, is interesting.) He is intensely interested in what it means to know what is good or bad, and he is constantly engaging in a sort of inner phenomenological scrutiny of moral experience.

But he is not interested in these subjects as theoretical objects of investigation. He is always a moralist, interested in straightening out people and society, teaching people how to make themselves better persons. And this moral-committed philosophy is at the same time a religion, in several senses.

- (i) We find in Wang a striking and total seriousness. He has a sense of mission that is almost messianic. He has come to see (he says “Heaven,” *tiān* 天, has taught him this) through his own trying experiences how the worms in a person’s heart can be got rid of, so that one is at peace with oneself and is confident and free of anxiety in all one’s actions, and he just *sees* that if all people could be so redirected, their lives in society, which are now miserable and ugly, would be beautiful and happy. Seeing this he *must* (he almost cries out to himself) “save people from their distress and difficulty,” even if this makes ordinary “gentlemen” laugh at him (181). But this drive to give himself totally to a life of “saving” he himself recognizes to be an expression of his own being, the component in his nature that he, with Mencius, sees as common to all humans. He does not, in choosing this course, see himself as rendering a duty to some “other” power.
- (ii) We will see that Wang shares with philosophical Daoists, earlier Confucian moral mystics, and Buddhists of most kinds a familiar structure of thought. There is a transcendent and immanent higher reality that all people (perhaps even all things) somehow partake of, ordinarily without being aware of it. The necessary consequence of this ignorance is a life that is unsatisfactory in various ways for different forms of thought: shabby, or ineffective, or unhappy, or miserable. And conversely what counts as “knowledge” brings virtue, power, or bliss. For the genuinely religious forms of this kind of thought the value of the

enlightened state is such that the temporal extent of it often seems to be irrelevant, and so survival after death unimportant. In any case, it is unimportant for Wang.

The desired *knowledge* is not a grasping or conceiving by a knower of a known, but a pulling away of a veil of confusion that separates subjectively the knower from the known. Putting this knowledge into propositional form seems to imply this separation, for the proposition is *about* something *other* than itself, and what one wants in “real” knowledge is the reality itself. So these philosophies are “mystical” in the further specific sense that the highest truth, perhaps *any* truths, are inexpressible in any literal way. Language is then seen as instrumental merely, not necessarily to be kept consistent; and we find in such thinkers a characteristic disconcerting tendency to fuse the predicates “true” and “real,” which persons like me, with a compulsion to orderliness, like to keep distinct. The mystic in grasping truth is grasping reality; and indeed “grasping” is only an ill-behaving metaphor.

The kind of *Confucians*—and Wang is one—who have this pattern of thinking conceive themselves to be different, in that for them the ordinary socially sanctioned moral good is not rejected, as they conceive both Daoists and Buddhists do reject it: early Daoists, in viewing moral standards as conventions that warp innocent human nature; later Daoists, in the essentially selfish quietism of a personal philosophy directed toward the goal of eternal life; Buddhists, in seeing moral norms as forms of “attachment,” merely not as distressing as other forms (e.g., lusts), trapping the individual in the misery of unenlightened existence. Wang Yangming obviously feels the pull of these ways of thinking, but essentially he is a Confucian, saying that *he* in contrast identifies the moral good as the highest type of knowledge—so that for him attaining enlightenment, embodying this moral truth (reality?), means becoming morally perfect, a “sage.”

### 14.3 The Goal

So Wang’s religion is not a theism of devotion and salvation but a religion of self-transformation. But it has a surprising quasi-devotional-soteric aspect. One does not reorient one’s life totally in the way Wang and his “disciples” did unless one is powerfully drawn to *something*, and his reflective reader comes to realize that the goal state of being a “sage” is one that has just as much pull as any kind of religious conception of salvation in “Heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Both Wang and his disciples describe it as a state in which one spontaneously dances in sheer wordless delight. One student freely using the language of Daoism pleads for his teacher to help him break out of his psychic entanglements so that he can “roam the universe with the Creator” (162).<sup>3</sup>

But does Wang’s religion have anything like an object of devotion or trust,

anything like a god? Indeed yes. Mind, the concept which identifies him as a philosopher, is the focus of his religion. As in some kinds of Buddhism, so for Wang, mind is one, individuated as mine or yours, yes, but *one*—"this mind," as he calls it, all the same. Mind—the *real*—is identical with the *true*, the "principle of nature (Heaven)," with all moral truth. Its manifestations in me include my desires and thought, even my confusions and selfish impulses, but also an infallible awareness of that confusion and selfishness, an inner "shining mind," master, teacher, that is both myself *and* other, at least in the sense that for me there can be no justified pride of possession, only the duty to listen, heed, trust, reverence, obey. This aspect of mind Wang found a name for, in the last years of his life. He called it *liáng zhī* 良知, "pure knowing" (the word and part of the idea are from *Mèngzǐ* 孟子 7A15). It is for Wang a "God within" *and* without. It is an object of faith. It is described by Wang and his students in poems which have to be read as hymns:

Pure Knowing has nothing to do with hearing much;  
At the time of the mysterious union of our elements its root was planted;  
If we follow it in our likes and dislikes, that is the learning of the Sage.  
When we lean neither forward nor backward to accommodate things,  
there is the Principle of Heaven. (219)

So writes one of his students. Wang himself closes a poem with these words:

The thousand Sages are all passing shadows;  
It is Pure Knowing that is my teacher.<sup>4</sup>

All of Wang's philosophical theory and suggestive phenomenological description of inner mental workings are directed toward guiding the "student" in what he and they call "the task" (*gōngfu* 功夫 or 工夫)—a never-ending "effort" of self-monitoring and self-change which is to let this inner voice speak clearly and ensure that we will always follow it. It would not be entirely misleading to describe this life of "effort" as conceived by Wang as an active life of constant prayer.

#### 14.4 Wang's World View

Attending to Wang as philosophical theorist requires caution. Sometimes he is carefully analytical and he has certain conceptions he is insistent people get straight. But he often seems to be playing a kind of music with concepts, using them for their effect on you rather than for exact explanations. This mode of expression itself is probably a conscious application of theory: 理, "principle," can't be separated from "things," and so can't be communicated by a teacher in always valid generalizations about what to do, e.g., in this or that

*kind* of situation. So on the one hand the *student*, at a given time, has his or her particular problem situation, with an approach to it proper for him or her, in regard to which there can be no carry-over from earlier situations. On the other hand the *teacher* has his or her problem—this particular student with his or her problem and inner snarls, *now*. So the *teaching*, if it is right, has to be thought of as a kind of specific “dose.”

Wang’s sensitivity to this problem is revealed over and over in a reluctance to have his teachings published, even written down. His student, and brother-in-law, Xú Ài 徐愛, who died quite young (more than a decade before Wang) but did gather together the first collection of conversations with “The Teacher,” does an amusing twist with this problem in one of his prefaces.<sup>5</sup> Another student, he says, heard that he had in mind printing Wang’s words and objected that Wang had told *him* not even to copy down his remarks—his teachings, Wang had said, were “medicinal,” intended only for the occasions that prompted them. Perhaps so, Xu muses—that is, perhaps Wang *did* utter such a “teaching” to the other student at some other time. But if I let myself *now* be bound by that teaching *then*, am I not doing just what my teacher *in* that teaching said I shouldn’t do, that is, taking past occasional teaching as applicable to another occasion? With a little more reflection, Xu finds little difficulty in justifying his project—surely a happy precedent.

With this caveat, we can consider circumspectly what seem to be Wang’s conceptions of how the world, humans, and mind are put together. It is not an entirely consistent set of ideas, but Wang never tried to offer one. It does have a general direction. Wang denies (or tends to deny) the duality of mind and body. If it weren’t for the mind, which is the “true self,” the eyes would see nothing, true; but this simply means that “if there is no true self there will be no body” (122). That is, if we think of mind as a sort of “ghost in a machine,” we have also to turn the thought about and see the ghost as constituting the “machine.” On another occasion he speaks more fully:

The ears, the eyes, the mouth, the nose, and the four limbs are parts of the body. But how can they see, hear, speak, or act without the mind? On the other hand, without the ears, the eyes, the mouth, the nose, and the four limbs, the mind cannot see, hear, speak, or act when it wants to. Therefore, if there is no mind, there will be no body, and if there is no body, there will be no mind. As something occupying space it is called the body; as the master, it is called the mind. (201)

Perhaps this is a sort of “identity theory,” but it is not a reduction of mind to matter. Mind and body seem rather to be equally appropriate ways of describing the same thing.

We see this reciprocity in Wang’s conception of the relation of mind to world. There is, first, the matter of the relation of *my* mind to *my* world. Here

Wang is sometimes almost Berkeleyan. My "clear intelligence," Wang says, sustains all things, but also, "separated from these, there will not be my clear intelligence." But how can "heaven, earth," and all things cease to exist when I do? "Consider a dead person," Wang replies. "That person's spirit has drifted away and dispersed. Where are *that person's* heaven and earth and myriad things" (337)? Yet Wang can turn this directly about. We perceive things with our senses. We "perceive," i.e., respond to the needs, obligations-for-us, inherent in situations, with our "minds"—in the limited sense of "mind" as organ of thought. But the senses and the "mind" have no "substance" of their own: they take their objects as their substance (277). This last idea is linked to Wang's ideal of a properly functioning mind: it is totally and perfectly responsive to every aspect of the situation it confronts right now, like a perfect mirror (21). Nothing lingers from past "reflections" to mar this one, and after this one nothing stays on to mar the next.

Wang says something slightly (or perhaps more than slightly) different when he insists that mind and universe are "one body." This is true for Wang of "my" mind—for example, we have this account of why we sleep at night:

It is a general law in the universe that when it gets dark, things rest. As night falls, heaven and earth become undifferentiated. Forms and colors all disappear. With humans also, the ears hear nothing, the eyes see nothing, and all the apertures are closed. This is the time when "pure knowing" is collected and concentrated. As heaven and earth open up again, all the myriad things reveal themselves and grow. With humans also, the eyes and ears now see and hear, and all apertures are open. This is the time when the wonderful functioning of "pure knowing" starts. From this we see that the human mind and heaven and earth form one body. (267)

But Wang does not really here make a statement about all minds, this one, that one. "It is only because of their physical forms and bodies that humans are separated," he says (337). In short, in respect to mind, we are one, and it is "this mind," not "our minds," that we must consider. "This mind" is the mind of the universe, just as "my mind" is the mind of my body, and in each case "mind" and "body" are interdependent for their existence, "share the same material force," "enter into one another." So "without the pure knowing that is inherent in humans, there cannot be plants and trees, tiles and stones" (274). The universal forces *yīn* 陰 and *yáng* 陽, the states of Quiescence (*jìng* 靜) and Activity (*dòng* 動), are manifest equally in the universe and in our minds, and when Wang shifts into this kind of language (e.g., 157) it is sometimes not possible to distinguish which—mind or universe—he is talking about. Wang's utopianism (see especially 142–43 and 179–80) is a direct inference from this conception of mind and universe, as is the enlightened person's concern to bring that utopia into being:

Man is the mind of the universe. . . . Is there any suffering or bitterness of the great masses that is not disease or pain in my own body? . . . If gentlemen of the world merely devote their effort to extending their pure knowing they will naturally . . . regard other people as their own persons, regard the people of other countries as their own family. . . . When this is done, even if we wanted the world to be without order, it would not be possible. (179)

## 14.5 Wang's Philosophical Psychology

In oneself, the universal processes operate in the following way (Wang, like all Neo-Confucians on this point, takes his conceptions and much of his language from the opening section of the *Zhōngyōng* 中庸, a work more commonly known by the title, *The Doctrine of the Mean*):<sup>6</sup>

- (i) There is the mind *in-itself* (*ní* 體), pure potential mentality, we might say, in the state of "equilibrium" (*zhōng* 中) before capacities for feeling, emotion, desire, intention, thought, are manifest.<sup>7</sup> This is the aspect of "tranquillity" (*jìng*).
- (ii) There is the mind *in function* (*yòng* 用), and if functioning ideally, in balance and rhythm, every emotion, intention, thought are exactly appropriate. Here the mind is said to be in the state of "harmony" (*hé* 和), the state "after the feelings are manifest."

For many Song and Ming Dynasty Confucians these are temporally separate "states," and the religious objective of knowing the mind is sought by quieting it, returning it to "itself." But of course this very effort would be a "function," as would be the desired self-knowing. Seeing this, Wang insists that the two states are not literally "before" or "after." Even sleep is a function (267). We can know and deal with the mind only in its functions. Yet all the time the mind "in itself" is there, and we see it in our "pure knowing," an effortless, incessant self-evaluation by the mind of its functions and of all its objects and projects.

This is not a description of the subjective mental experience of most of us most of the time. Its not being so is what evil is. What happens is not the infusion into mind of some alien principle. Evil is the mind itself functioning in a distorted way (228). Harmony is prevented by one mental activity preempting our attention: we become "attached" to it and what would have been an innocent natural impulse, intention, or thought (generically, a "desire") becomes then a "selfish desire." In letting this happen we "deceive ourselves"; *this* for us is the desire that has to be satisfied, and the possibility of a balanced and appropriate total response of mind to situation is lost. When this happens, the light of our pure knowing, though still there, is lost to us, "obscured"

(蔽) as the sun can be obscured by clouds. But “pure knowing” responds even to this inner situation if we can glimpse its dimmed light, knowing it to be wrong.

Why evil at all? I think Wang has no real answer. He offers us a kind of deterministic account. Some few of us (here he follows the *Doctrine of the Mean* again, chapter 20) are “born with understanding,” but most of us are born heavily “obscured,” and must go through a long process of self-improvement before we are straightened out. Wang also, like Mencius, says that we “become confused and troubled by things coming and going” (311)<sup>8</sup>—environment and the petty way of the world dull us over time. But Wang’s determinism is muted. He is more strongly and explicitly voluntaristic than Mencius. He cannot be really determinist, either in the sense of seeing our choices as causally traceable back to physical events or as seeing our subjective life as an illusory epiphenomenon, because there is no world of sheer physical nature governed by causal necessity contrasting with ourselves. The universe is the body of “this mind,” infused with mentality, and not “other” but “one body” with us.

But if Wang doesn’t account for evil, he does not see it as inescapable. Even the evil person who has “lost his substance” still has it, and could find it again. If you *call* a thief a thief to his face, he will blush (207). Wang is not really interested in the *theory* of evil. His problem is to guide us out of it.

#### 14.6 Wang’s Thought as a “Way”

Wang’s *religion* is one of self-transformation. The good state—total anxiety-free effectiveness, “pure knowing” illuminating every response, the mind like a mirror so that we “roam the universe with the Creator”—has to be reachable, and in some way other than throwing oneself on God and praying for grace. Wang’s religion requires a program of self-cultivation.

And so does his ethics. It is meaningless to say that anything is really good or right and at the same time to say that all “norms” are completely situational, unless one is saying this: that in a particular problem-situation, any morally perfected person would “hear” the voice of inner knowing in essentially the same way. And Wang insists repeatedly on this. The response of action or judgment of two perfected persons would be as alike as two bamboos in one’s garden (293)—which is not to say exactly alike, but alike enough. Each would be an “original,” we might say, but each would be right.<sup>9</sup>

But this still doesn’t make ethics practically interesting unless one can point out the difference between the morally perfect (perfectly perceptive) person and the morally “obscured,” and be guided into a way of becoming perceptive if one isn’t.

Wang’s program of self-cultivation is built on more concepts that were common coin, but he finds it necessary to do a bit of repair work.

### 14.6.1 Self-Cultivation

Wang Yangming had before him a received opinion of several centuries' standing. Zhū Xī 朱熹 (1130–1200) fixed on a classical text (perhaps third century B.C.) that stated a brief enigmatic scheme for one who wished to make oneself both socially effective and morally perfect: outer effectiveness depends on inner perfection. Paraphrasing that text: One had to “cultivate one's person” (*xiū shēn* 脩身); to this end one had to “correct one's mind” (*zhèng xīn* 正心); to this end one had to “Make sincere one's thoughts” (*chéng yì* 誠意); to this end one had to “extend one's knowledge” (*zhì zhī* 致知), and this consists in “investigating things” (*gé wù* 格物).<sup>10</sup> Zhu believed this text to have been written by Confucius. It has entered into the basic idiom of Chinese philosophy.

The last phrase is a philologist's delight. No one will ever know what it really meant in its *locus classicus*. Zhu took it to mean that one must do much reading to “extend knowledge,” i.e., attain in-depth knowledge of the moral rules and standards of society, and the teachings of the wise and good of the past. One could then proceed to the next step, and the next. Or so Wang understood Zhu to mean. As Wang Yangming represents the idea, Zhu was proposing that one first acquire wide knowledge of “principles” (*lǐ*) (i.e., knowledge of a normative kind although conceived in effect as factual knowledge) by studying the world, what is other than oneself, and then engage in a mental exercise Zhu called “seriousness” (*jìng* 敬), to “make one's thoughts sincere,” meaning to make one's thought “whole,”<sup>11</sup> to bring one's motivational structure completely into line with the objective moral order—to overcome the apparent otherness of objective norm and incorporate it into disposition; to close the gap, we might say, between obligation and motivation.

Wang pronounces this impossible (129), and reinterpreted the text (he too, like everyone, believed it to be from Confucius) so as to collapse all the steps into one:

First of all, “things” are not “out there,” “other” with respect to oneself. A *thing* is something I am doing, involved in, the “locus of my thought” (6).

Next, some quick philology on the word *gé* 格, “to investigate.” Wang Yangming chooses another possible meaning, “to straighten out,” “correct,” i.e., to examine what I am involved in, and my process of involvement, to sense how it ought to go (still “investigating” in a sense), recognize that I *have* that sense, and see that it does go that way and that I am effectively disposed toward it as I should be (7).

Finally, Wang moves in on the words “knowledge” and “thought.” “Knowledge” he takes as “pure knowing” or innate moral sense—his *liang zhi* (as I noted earlier, an idea from *Mengzi* 7A15). To “extend” it is to follow out its implications, i.e., make it effective in one's acts (perhaps involving, also, finding out “things” in the ordinary sense). (We might say that Wang's “extending” of knowledge is more like extending one's arm than, say, extending one's vocabulary.)

And a “thought” (yi 意) he defines as any activation of potential mental functions, any “coming out of mind,” emotive and cognitive. So for Wang Yangming, *thought* is identified from the start as *act*. *Liang zhi* itself is *yi*, “thought,” sometimes a *kind* of it (perhaps a separate second-order monitoring function, though Wang does not tend to talk that way) but an aspect or basic “substance” of all “thought.”

### 14.6.2 Knowledge

In spite of Wang’s redefinition of these words, there is a sense in which *liang zhi* really is knowledge, and one does learn in something like the ordinary sense by “investigating,” i.e., acting correctly or seeing to it that one’s action (including *yi*) is correct (*zhèng* 正) and complete (*chéng* 誠).

Perhaps Wang thinks this way: consider what happens when I set out to make something—say, a bookcase; or maybe even a poem or an essay (21, 168). I have an initial intention (thought, *yi*), which begins to shape itself in the process of my working toward the finished object. As I do this, I see in greater and greater detail how it ought to go, and I cannot see this in advance. I can, of course, see part of it in advance, and in many sorts of such projects I have to find out as much as I can in advance, and that is what Wang’s critics keep harping on. But Wang keeps his eye on the part of my “learning” that is essential to my “thing” being real. I work it out, find out about it, straighten it (and myself) out, investigate it and myself, and use this knowledge, all at the same time. But *what* do I “learn” in this way that could be useful later? Hardly something I can store away for “next time,” Wang would have to say. What I learn is (gradually) how to keep my mind, effortlessly, totally open to the instructions of my “pure knowing,” which tells me how to deal with the next situation that comes. My mind becomes a perfect mirror. Nothing sticks to it from past reflections, and after this episode nothing remains.

So although Wang Yangming *seems* simply to pull a philological trick and toss out the meaning “to investigate,” he doesn’t really do so. The *ge wu* process is still a process of *finding something out* as well as a process of moving out from the latent capacity of mind to overt intentional action, and so making and executing a *decision*.

In fact, Wang makes a seemingly exaggerated epistemological claim about *liang zhi*: it is all we need. It gives *all* knowledge of importance, and the *li* of all is in me.

His students object: don’t we have to engage in some hard work acquiring information in the ordinary sense (e.g., about *how* to care for our parents, and what the *rules* are) in order to live responsible moral lives? Wang Yangming answers in various ways, some of them already indicated:

- (1) Only your moral sense can tell you how it should go in this situation. (Sage King Shùn 舜 had no authorities or precedents [139].)<sup>12</sup>

- (2) One doesn't simply go out and gather information. (This would be like eating a lot of food and having it just sit in one's stomach.) One has a concrete problem and proceeds to respond. That response may lead one to the library. Information-gathering, then, is simply an extension of the functioning of *liang zhi*, perhaps just like seeing, in making a bookcase, when one comes to a certain point in the process, that one has to stop and read the directions for mixing the glue.
- (3) Turning this about, if one is gathering facts, one *selects*, i.e., makes judgments of value and appropriateness all the time, and this is *liang zhi* at work.
- (4) Even if one is just perceiving and experiencing, *liang zhi* plays the lead role.

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 *shì-fēi* 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 *zhī xíng hé yī* 知行合一 ("the unity of knowledge and action"). Thus, a student comes to Wang and objects that,

"... there are people who know that parents should be served with filial piety and elder brothers with respect but cannot put these things into practice. This shows that knowledge and action are clearly two different things."

[Wang Yangming] said, "The knowledge and action you refer to are already separated by selfish desires and are no longer knowledge and action in their original substance. There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know. When sages and worthies taught people about knowledge and action, it was precisely because they wanted them to restore the original substance, and not simply to do this or that and be satisfied. 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.'<sup>13</sup> Seeing beautiful colors appertains to knowledge, while loving beautiful colors appertains to action. However, as soon as one sees that beautiful color, one has already loved it. It is not that one sees it first and then makes up one's mind to love it. Smelling a bad odor appertains to knowledge, while hating a bad odor appertains to action. However, as soon as one smells a bad odor, one has already hated it. It is not that one smells it first and then makes up one's mind to hate it. If one's nose is stuffed up, one does not smell the bad odor even if one sees a malodorous object before one, and so one does not hate it. This amounts to not knowing bad odor. Suppose we say that so-and-so knows filial piety and so-and-so knows brotherly respect. They must have actually practiced filial piety and brotherly respect before they can be said to know them. It will not do to say that they know filial

piety and brotherly respect simply because they show them in words. Or take one's knowledge of pain. Only after one has experienced pain can one know pain. The same is true of cold or hunger. How can knowledge and action be separated?" (5)

What we would call a person's act, conduct, etc., is just the visible part of a seamless knowing-doing process. Turning this about, we find Wang Yangming saying that the whole of engaged mental activity from the beginning of any episode of it has to be regarded as "action":

I asked about the unity of knowledge and action. The Teacher said, "You need to understand the basic purpose of my doctrine. 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. One must go to the root and go to the bottom and not allow that evil thought to lie latent in one's mind. This is the basic purpose of my doctrine." (226)

### 14.6.3 The "Task"

For Wang this means that the subtlest incipient movings of mind are extraordinarily important. If we take the ordinary view that our inner mental activity ("knowing") and our overt behavior are separate areas of our moral lives, then our inner dispositions will always be at war with the norms we and others set for ourselves in behavior. At best anxiety, indecision, ineffectiveness will be inevitable.

So self-cultivation, the "task" of self-attention and self-perfecting, (i) must be *incessant*, and (ii) must primarily be directed, not to learning rules, acquiring "wisdom" in the ordinary sense by reading and studying, but directed to the constant stirrings of mind just as it begins to "function" (234). Our "pure knowing," if we constantly attend to it, will tell us unerringly if a "thought" be "selfish"—excessive or deficient; and we are to correct it—thereby "investigating" the "thing" that engages us—*then and there*. For the beginner this is hard. For the perfected person it is easy and natural (although the "task" [*gongfu*] never ceases, even for such a one). For the perfected person, as soon as *liang zhi* identifies a "selfish desire" it is resolved. For the beginner, it is more difficult; at this point the "task" is literally one of "creating something out of nothing." There, "everything depends on making up the mind" (115), so that the strength of a total initial resolve will carry "effort" forward.

But how? (i) How does the student *carry out* this direction to "make up

one's mind," and (ii) how does one learn to *recognize* the inner voice, even if one wants to follow it? How does a teacher teach one *these* things?

There can be no formal answer. As to the first, all Wang can do, really, is scare his students, shock them. "You are having difficulty," Wang says to some of them; for "you have not really made up your minds to become sages." "But we *want* to make up our minds," they reply desperately. Wang responds:

If you really have the mind to become a sage, your "pure knowing" should be extended to the utmost in everything. If in your "pure knowing" you retain the least trace of alien thought, that is not the mind determined to become a sage. (260)

The students perspire with fright—seeing, without seeing, that total commitment is required *for* total effort, yet that effort constitutes that commitment.

Often Wang simply offers his students a formula and tells them to have faith in it, not to jiggle it. (Watch my finger, the ophthalmologist tells me—not here, *here*.) One is to search for the roots of selfish desire for sex, fame, profit as they are beginning to stir in the mind, and wipe them out. "Is this not like cutting out flesh to patch up a sore?" one student cleverly asks. Wang is not amused: this teaching of mine is a good medicine for you. If you can't use it, don't spoil it for others. Someone among you is undermining me (279). Again, they are frightened, not seeing what Wang sees they are not yet ready to see, that the question does perceptively identify a real difficulty—that the intense desire for perfection that Wang has to arouse and exploit at the beginning does itself become an obsession that will block its own realization.

What is the "task," concretely—how does one recognize and apply or "extend" one's "pure knowing"? Wang's teaching taken *in toto* is paradoxical here. He *says*, over and over, that "effort" must be "concrete"—one must be "doing something," involved in some problem that matters. Yet almost always, when a student asks a question and Wang answers, question and answer are abstract—often, probing for the feeling-shape of formulaic passages in the *Mengzi* or the *Great Learning*. Wang once explicitly *says* that even his "pure knowing" concept is like the Chan (Zen) master's dust whisk—words used as gesture, because words *really* fail. The student must find the way for himself (280). Wang himself, before hitting on "pure knowing" (*liang zhi*) uses the words "this little bit" (of intuition in the mind), *zhè xiēzi* 這些子 (208).

In part, Wang's problem is like that of the piano teacher trying to "tell" a student how one's inner finger-wrist kinesthetic state should be if one is playing correctly (and how to *get* it that way). But the problem is deeper. In *gongfu*, the "task," there must be total seriousness; that is its essence. So, there can be no demonstration, no example, no use of paradigm case to explain (at most, rarely, to remind). To have an example, Wang has to catch a student with a real problem. A student is sick (215). The conversation is light and witty, yet serious:

sickness is hard to deal with (*ge*, investigate/do right)—“how does it seem?” “The task is difficult.” “Be cheerful; that’s your task now,” i.e., just the way we’re doing it. Another student receives word that his son is dangerously ill and is distressed. Wang moves in on his problem: watch yourself *now*. A father’s concern for his son is commendable, but everything has its measure, and you are overdoing it. There is *your* task now (44). A student is prone to anger and criticism of others (245). *Your* task is to examine yourself, Wang warns him. “Whenever someone should be criticized or refuted”—even if he really should be—“*you* should immediately see in this your selfish desire to become a big fellow, and overcome it.”

I can feel these examples, too, not in the way the people involved in them felt them, of course. Others are closer to me. I am a writer and teacher—those are my “things.” And we have *our* problems. How does Wang talk about that? One student writes an essay and worries about what the exercise of thinking it out and finding the words does to him: “It lingers in my mind.” It’s all right to think as hard as you need to when writing, Wang says, but after it’s done let go of it; don’t hang on to it or be narcissistic about it (233). The man writes a poem on the occasion of a friend’s departure, and shows it to Wang. Wang only *seems* to be abstract:

Whenever one writes, one should do so within the limit of one’s capacity. If one is too excessive in expression, then one will not be carefully employing words or really being sincere.

One writes, and as one writes one thinks of an expression, reaches for a phrase that might impress, one feels; but it isn’t quite one’s own: one overreaches, and there is an intuition of honesty that tells one this. This, too, I take it, is “pure knowing.” And *I* know what this is. Am I getting it right *right now* as I try to convey to *you* my perception of Wang’s thinking? Or am I saying something that tempts me because ever so slightly I felt it would impress, or bring a chuckle? I *do* know the difference, if I will let myself. I could be *confused*, of course, *about* Wang. But I knew—really—what I needed to *do* in order not to be, as I did my work.

I think I have once seen Wang himself engaged in *gongfu* (101). A student is weeding the flowers in his garden, and Wang is there with him. The student makes light conversation (you all know how we do it) cleverly fitting the serious and the trivial together: “How difficult it is in the world to cultivate good and remove evil!” We are back with Mencius and the farmer of Song (2A2.16), and the remark about the people who don’t even bother to “weed” their minds. Wang’s answer has a verse-capping tone of pleasantry—“Only because you do not really try.” But it is an answer, and the student is entitled to suppose he means it. A little later Wang catches himself. His answer is not the answer *this* student, *now*, should have; it is too easy, and closes off too quickly a conversation

that could become uncomfortably difficult for the teacher himself. Wang opens it up again, and things get serious. Your remark, he says in effect, shows that your excessive concern with “weeding” (with self-cultivation) is itself selfish. You should see that “the spirit of heaven and earth is the same in flowers and weeds. Where have they the distinction of good and evil,” in any ultimate sense? And the conversation is at once shifted to the difficult question whether this “beyond good and evil” conception of humans does not make Wang a Buddhist. No, Wang tries to explain. It is liking and disliking that make a flower a “flower” and a weed a “weed,” even in the garden of one’s impulses. But even this kind of liking and disliking (approving and disapproving) can be natural, “following the principle of nature,” or forced and anxious. Wang is thus led into the most difficult thing he can talk about, how it is that the mind can be simultaneously tranquil and active, in “equilibrium” and in “harmony.” He, as teacher, saw that getting into this thicket was *his* task at that moment—that he must not close off the conversation with a smooth answer. We teachers are often in similar situations with our students—though *our* problems are not Wang’s—and we know the difference, I think, between heeding and not heeding the voice that tells us what our job is.

## 14.7 Conclusion

Let me call your attention to what I think I have been doing in the last few minutes.

It is a strong temptation for anyone who has to get into philosophy through careful historical reconstruction—and when working on Chinese philosophy one is always doing that—to separate off the problem of description from the problem of criticism. I will find out *what* this person is saying, I tell myself. As to the question whether the person is *right* in saying it, there is always tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.

What would Wang Yangming say of one thus tempted to separate one’s intellectual-historian self from one’s philosophical self? I think it is clear what he would say: such a person would be treating “knowledge” and “action” as two separate things, and in the end, such a person is deceiving him- or herself.

I have closed this lecture with the cautious suggestion that Wang is on to something, and something important. I did not do this because I got his message and accepted it. I did it because (this is the irony) I found that the problem of interpreting him drove me to it. How does one interpret Wang’s abstractions about *liang zhi* and *gongfu*? He answers, *bì yǒu shì yān* 必有事焉—you must test them out in your own problems—not in examples that he shows you or that are made up, but in your own.<sup>14</sup> The only fair thing to do is to try it. And now the irony is that just so far as I do this successfully, *do* succeed in getting a reasonable fit of what he says over something important to *me*, I seem to reveal to myself that Wang Yangming is right.