

A New Interpretation of Wang Yangming's Doctrine of the Unity of Knowing and Acting

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I

The philosophy of Wang Yangming has been under the profound influence of Zhu Xi although it is also a refutation to that of the Cheng-Zhu School (Tang 1990: 291-350). Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is of no exception. Therefore, it is not difficult to find some commonalities of their views on the relationship between knowing and acting. For example, Wang agrees with Zhu on the views that genuine knowledge warrants action (Zhu 2002: 3483) and that knowing and acting reinforces each other; intelligent knowing leads to serious acting, and vice versa (Zhu 2002: 457). However, what Wang disagrees with Zhu is that for Zhu knowing is, at bottom, before acting; instead, for Wang, they are fundamentally one. The reasons why Zhu stresses knowledge first and action later are it is the normative structure of moral knowledge, and second, it is apparent to common knowledge. As to moral knowledge, Zhu advocates that (moral) pattern (*li*理) that one's heart/mind has or grasps (*xin ju li*心具理 or *zhizhi*致知), through the effort of investigating things or affairs (*gewu*格物), can enable one's intention sincere (*chengyi*誠意), which then warrants one's earnest action to act on it (*lixing*力行). Accordingly, knowing is fundamentally before acting. Also, it is right to common knowledge, as Zhu says if one wants to travel to Changan, one has to know where Changan is before one goes there (Zhu 2002: 2308). In sum, for Zhu moral and other knowledge all fall under a specific normative structure of knowing precedes acting.

In contrast, Wang has an entirely different account of moral knowledge. For him, (moral) pattern is what one's heart/mind issues (*xin ji li*心即理 or *liangzhi*), as an active response (not a passive reaction) to a particular situation encountered that constitutes an action, so is inherently motivational. Thereby, knowing and acting are just parts of one single response of the heart/mind. In response to the query about there have been people who know what should do but do not act, Wang explains that it is because of the inherent motivation of the heart/mind that brings together knowing and acting is cut off by selfish desires (*siyu*私欲), resulting in the separation of knowing and acting. On this account, if one's heart/mind can function in its original state (*benti*本體) without being beclouded by selfish desires, its active response as issuing (moral) pattern, or in other words

as good knowing, falls under a specific normative structure of knowing and acting are one.

Since Zhu has a different conception of the heart/mind that does not recognize Wang's idea of good knowing, there is no point for his followers to question whether good knowing implies knowing and acting are one. Instead, it is quite easy for them to criticize that the claim that knowing and acting are one is wrong to common knowledge. Should one not know where Changan is before one goes there? In order to reply to this criticism, there are two possible ways. One is to distinguish moral knowledge from other knowledge, defending the doctrine of knowing and acting are one is only applicable to the former but not the later. Another way is to argue that even to common knowledge, its normative structure is still knowing and acting are one. Almost all the past studies have not touched upon this criticism, or they might consider Wang did not and cannot give any reasonable reply. We aim to argue that Wang does give his reply by adopting the second way aforementioned. The evidence is in Wang's "Answer to Gu Dongqiao," where Gu has cast doubt on the view that knowing and acting are one. He says,

Nevertheless, in the performance of a task, there must be a distinction between what to do first and what later. For example, one knows the food before one eats it, knows the soup before one drinks it, knows the clothes before one wears them, and knows the road before travels on it. It is not true that one performs an act without first of all knowing the thing to be acted on. The difference [between knowing first and acting later] is, of course, a matter of an instant. I do not mean to say that it is comparable to one's knowing today and then acting tomorrow. (Wang 2011: 47; Chan 1963: 679-680 with slight modification)

According to Wang's answer, as follows, he holds the view that even in the cases of eating food, drinking soup, wearing clothes, and traveling on the road, knowing and acting are one.

One must have the desire for food before one knows food. This desire to eat is the intention; it is already the beginning of the action. Whether the taste of food is good or bad cannot be known until the food enters the mouth. Is there anyone who knows the taste to be good or bad before the food enters the mouth? One must have the desire to travel before one knows the road. This desire to travel is the intention; it is already the beginning of the action. Whether the forks of the road are rough or smooth cannot be known until one oneself has gone through them. Is there anyone who knows whether the forks of the road are rough or smooth before going through them? The same is without a doubt about the cases that one knows the soup before one drinks it and that one knows the clothes before one wears them. (Wang 2011: 47; Chan 1963: 680 with slight modification)

It must be recognized that Wang does not articulate his argument clearly. So we have to do the job for him.

II

Warren G. Frisina may be the only scholar who once argued that Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is "the structure of knowledge in all its forms." (Frisina 2002: 74) However, he does not pay attention to the dialogue between Gu and Wang quoted above. Hence, his additional argument for Wang is merely ontological. That is to say, for Wang, knowledge is not purely cognitive; instead, it is something that can reconstruct one's relationship with it and thus lead to one's self-transformation. He considers that Wang's goal "was to remove an *epistemological* dualism that focused a student's attention on learning before action." (Frisina 2002: 74) We shall not follow his line of argument, but rather to reveal three epistemological arguments, which Wang should hold for his doctrine.

First, according to Wang's answer to Gu, Wang reminds us that for all sorts of knowledge there is desire (*yu*欲) and intention (*yi*意) behind, and it is the beginning of the action. We can articulate this view as follows:

Knowing X entails a desire for X that is a form of intention to know X, and an intention to know X is the beginning of the action.

Let us consider Mary sees a mouth-watering cake in the window of a bakery on her way to work. To say she sees the cake is tantamount to say she knows the cake, for knowledge would be a state of recognition. Moreover, there must be a desire for the cake together happened (*juqi*俱起), which is not limited to eating. This desire is indeed an intention that not only motivated Mary to see the cake but would also motivate her to walk into the bakery to check out or to buy the cake. Of course, this intentional action may be interrupted or changed by another intention of her, such as to go to work on time when seeing a bus is coming.¹ Accordingly, knowing and acting are one and inseparable.

One may wonder whether Wang mixes up the physical and psychological action when he takes intention as intentional action and says that "things or affairs are that to which intentions are directed." (*yi zhi suo zai bian shi wu*意之所在便是物) (Wang 2011: 6) Is this question true? Well, take any domain of human action, if it is not merely physical motion, it is necessarily intentional, where the intention is already there and serves as the beginning of the action. Admittedly, the

1. However, Wang seems not having consider the case of subconsciously seeing or knowing that does not have a together happened desire or intention. Let us consider Mary glimpses a mouth-watering cake in the window of a bakery on her way to work. She glimpses the cake so she knows there is the cake in the window of a bakery, however, she does not have a desire for the cake together happened. As the majority of all sorts of knowledge humans have are consciously knowing, this pitfall may no be critical to Wang's doctrine.

intention can be interrupted, changed or replaced by another one so cannot reach out as action. So, Wang does not claim that the idea of intention is identical to the idea of action. What he claims is that intention and action are indeed one matter. Then we have to reinterpret Wang's statement about knowing is "*shi*始" of acting and acting is "*cheng*成" of knowing. The term "*shi*始" is usually translated as the beginning, and "*cheng*成" as the completion and the statement as "knowing is the beginning of acting and acting is the completion of knowing." (Chan 1963: 669-670) This translation gives the impression that there is a temporary gap between knowing and acting as if knowing is before acting although they are bound together (Chen 1991: 99). If that is so, the statement is inconsistent with Wang's doctrine of knowing and acting are one, not to say Wang made the statement at the time he advocated his doctrine. Therefore, the term "*shi*始" should not refer to the beginning; instead, "*xing zhi shi*行之始" refers to the intention that is the beginning of the action. As "*shi*始" is not a temporal concept, "*cheng*成" as well should not refer to the completion but the achievement (*chengjiu*成就). In sum, the statement means that knowing always involves the intention of knowing, which is the beginning of acting, and the knowing action achieves knowledge. Knowledge itself is a human achievement.

The second argument Wang could hold for his doctrine is that we should conceptualize knowledge as a holistic knowing process or activity.² It runs as:

Knowledge C (the knowledge of Changan): There is an altogether happened desire for C (Dc) that is also an intention of knowing C (Ic), which is the beginning of an intentional action (IA). For example, we want to travel Changan, or we have to do a research project on Changan, or anything related to Changan.----->Under the motivation of Dc or Ic, if not being cut off by other desire or intention, we will then proceed to collect information of Changan by reading books, asking people who have been in Changan, and searching Google, and so on. That is an intentional action IA1, resulting in KC1; the superficial knowledge of Changan.----->Keeping under the motivation of Dc or Ic, if not being cut off by other desire or intention, we would go to Changan to know more about the city. That is an extension of our intentional action IA2, and because we ourselves have gone through the city, we can get an in-depth knowledge of Changan KC2.----->Still, keeping under the motivation of Dc or Ic, if not being cut off by other desire or intention, we would decide to stay at Changan for a period. That is a further extension of our intentional action IA3 that can enable us to have a more in-depth knowledge KC3 than KC2.----->The knowing process can keep running.

2. In thinking of this epistemological argument for Wang's doctrine, I am indebted to the inspiration of Ernest Sosa's talk on "Insight and Understanding"; the talk for the 24th Tang Chun-I Visiting Professorship of the Department of Philosophy, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on March 30, 2017. See also Ernest Sosa, "Getting it Right," <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/25/getting-it-right/>; *Epistemology* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), Chapter 5 "Knowledge as Action," pp. 71-86.

There are some implications of this holistic conception of knowledge. (1) The key to getting a higher degree of knowledge is to keep consistently our desire or intention of knowing that can further our intentional action for knowing. Also, our desire or intention can be strengthened or transformed during the whole process. Using the example of knowing Changan, our original intention may be to study Changan, but we can strengthen our intention to be having a detailed study by going to Changan if we are dissatisfied with the superficial knowledge we got from books or the Internet. We can also transform our original intention to be traveling Changan after we are impressed by photos of its beautiful landscape. The intention to study Changan and the intention to travel Changan, though seemingly different, are the same one, for they all lead us to achieve a higher degree of knowledge of Changan.

(2) On this holistic conception of knowledge, Wang notes that knowledge is of different degrees or levels (Wang 2011: 126). KC1, KC2, and KC3, as suggested in our Changan example are cases in point. Wang describes the lower degree knowledge as shallow (*qian*淺), rough (*cu*粗), and sensory and verbal (*kuoer tanshou*口耳談說) whereas he describes the higher degree one as genuine knowledge. What we usually think of only practical or technical knowledge is of different degrees, such as playing basketball or swimming, and theoretical or conceptual knowledge is not, such as mathematics and logic. However, this habitual view is doubtful. For if we can move our sight from the objective content to the subjective agent of knowledge, and understand that knowledge is necessarily what the knower knows, it is not hard to imagine that all sorts of knowledge are of different degrees or levels.

(3) For Wang, the effort we can do to enhance our knowledge from the lower to the higher level is to go through the knowing process by ourselves (*qinshen luli*親身履歷), and that is acting. He says as quoted earlier, “Whether the taste of food is good or bad cannot be known until the food enters the mouth;” “Whether the forks of the road are rough or smooth cannot be known until one oneself has gone through them.” Similarly, in our cake example, we cannot know whether the taste of the mouth-watering cake is good or bad until we take a bite of it. The taste of the cake deepens and extends our knowledge of it and thus be called genuine knowledge. By comparison, our seeing or knowing the cake is shallow and rough. In other words, to go through the knowing process by ourselves is to carry out an active inquiry, which can enable us to transform our knowledge from the stage of secondhand to firsthand, just like from KC1 to KC2 and KC3 in our Changan example. Here, the transformation involves a higher order reflection as well as an extension of knowledge.

(4) Wang’s holistic conception of knowledge, moreover, implies knowing and acting are not bound together but are interpenetrating. Although the term Wang uses to associate knowing and acting is “*heyi*合一” that means the unity or to unify, as if knowing and acting are the two to be unified, he clearly expresses that his teaching is pragmatic, like using medicine to heal the sickness of the people of his times, who have separated knowing and acting (Wang 2011: 5). Wang adds, however, that his teaching is not merely pragmatic and also aims to convey a certain view about knowing and acting are essentially one. He says, “if this is understood, then when only knowledge

is mentioned, action is included, and when only action is mentioned, knowledge is included.” (Wang 2011:5; Chan 1963: 670) If using the words of Ernest Sosa, the teaching of Wang is to say “judgment and knowledge itself are forms of intentional action” or “knowledge as action.” (Sosa 2017: 71) Although Zhu Xi also emphasizes the mutual reinforcement of knowing and acting and hence their inseparability, they are not one but the two that should be bound together. By contrast, Wang emphasizes the mutual reinforcement of knowing and acting because they are an interpenetrating one. That is why Wang deliberately exchanges the descriptions of knowing and acting. He describes knowing should be sincere and earnest (*zhenqie dushi*真切篤實), which are used to describe acting, but if knowing is an intentional action, then it can be said as sincere and earnest. He describes acting should be intelligent and discriminating (*mingjue jingcha*明覺精察), which are used to describe knowing, but if acting is the process of knowing, then it can be said as intelligent and discriminating (Wang 2011: 47, 232, 234). After all, “knowing and acting are two words saying one effort.” (Wang 2011: 233)

(5) To know is to learn, so Wang’s doctrine is the same to claim that learning and acting are one, as he puts it, “For all sorts of learning, there is no learning that is without acting, for the beginning of learning is already acting.” (Wang 2011: 51) The examples he gives are one has to pull the bow and shoot the arrow to hit a target so that one can be said as learning archery, and one has to hold the brush and dip it in ink to write on paper so that one can be said as learning calligraphy. Although his examples may have the impression that only practical learning and acting are one, Wang ascribes to all sorts of learning the oneness with acting. That is why he interprets the five steps of learning in the *Zhongyong*, including extensive study (*boxue*博學), careful inquiry (*shenwen*審問), careful thinking (*shensi*慎思), clear discrimination (*mingbian*明辨), and earnest practice (*duxing*篤行), are all about acting for learning and not only earnest practice refers to acting. Consider an example of John is learning arithmetic in his mathematics class. He learns to multiply seven by seven is forty-nine from the multiplication table which his teacher tells him is true. He thereby knows through deference the truth of the multiplication table but falls short in his understanding of why the table is true. If he does have an intention to learn arithmetic, saying out of intellectual curiosity, which is not interrupted, he then will be motivated to carry out an active inquiry to know the underlying principle of multiplication and hence gets an insight of his own into understanding why the multiplication table is true. In other words, he has transformed his learning from the superficial to the genuine, from the lower level to the higher level of knowledge, and from the secondhand to the firsthand, which deepened and extended what he learned.

Now, we have to consider some possible criticism from the perspective of Zhu Xi. Zhu scholars might argue that it is not necessary to adopt the holistic conception of knowledge offered by Wang. It is because if one conceptualize knowing from a local perspective, we can find at some point knowing is before acting, such as using our Changan example, KC1 is before IA2, and KC2 is before IA3. Antonio S. Cua also considers that there should have a differentiation between different stages of knowledge, as he calls knowledge that is anterior to action as ‘prospective knowledge’

and knowledge that is posterior to action as 'retrospective knowledge' (Cua 1982: 15). Since Cua does not think that Wang intends his doctrine to apply to all sorts of knowledge, the distinction between prospective knowledge and retrospective knowledge is all about moral knowledge. For him, when knowledge is before action, it is prospective knowledge anticipating the moral dimension of a situation; and when the action leads to the completion of moral knowledge, it engenders retrospective moral knowledge that is knowledge confirmed by actual experiences (ibid, 69). Regardless, we can find as well at some point acting is before knowing, such as IA1 is before KC1, IA2 is before KC2, and IA3 is before KC3. Here, Zhu scholars might further argue that it is therefore optional to adopt either a local or a holistic perspective of knowledge.

Would Wang accept this conclusion? Well, no doubt he would reject it. As we mentioned earlier, Wang reiterates that the prevailing view on knowing first and acting later is not a minor mistake and that his doctrine aims not only to correct this mistake pragmatically but also to reveal the original state of knowing and acting that they are one. The reasons Wang would propose to argue against adopting the local perspective of knowledge are: (1) It does not pay attention to the fact that for any knowledge there is always an altogether happened desire that is a form of intention to know, and that is already the beginning of acting. In other words, it is not aware of the fact that knowledge itself is a form of intentional action. (2) It then does not notice that the essential to obtain genuine knowledge, the higher level or firsthand knowledge, lies on nurturing the desire or intention of knowing not to be interrupted to carry out itself in the end. (3) More worrying, it implies the suggestion that there is not a single intention but are different intentions going through the process of knowing. One has to have the intention of knowing and then to make up another intention to act on what one knows and then to make up an additional intention to know what one can know from one's action and then make up another additional intention to act on what one knows from one's action, and so on. Consider the examples Wang uses from the *Daxue* of loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors to convey his view on knowing and acting are one. When one sees a beautiful color, one likes it upon seeing it; similarly, when one smells a bad odor, one hates it upon smelling it. What Wang wants to stress in these examples is that there should be no gap between seeing (knowing) and like (acting), or smelling (knowing) and hate (acting). Furthermore, what enables the gap does not exist between knowing and acting is the single intention that is going through the course. Accordingly, Wang says, "as soon as one sees a beautiful color, one has already liked it. It is not that one sees it first [that is one's intention is directed to] and then makes up one's mind [another intention] to like it;" "as soon as one smells a bad odor, one has already hated it. It is not that one smells it first [that is one's intention is directed to] and then make up one's mind [another intention] to hate it." (Wang 2011: 4; Chan 1963: 669 with modification) That is to say, if one's intention of knowing is interrupted by another intention such as selfish desires, there is the separation of knowing from acting.

Let us turn to the third epistemological argument for Wang's doctrine. This argument is predicated on his understanding of the inner structure of the knowing capability. That is, according

to Wang, the person or the body (shen身), the heart/mind (xin心), intention (yi意), knowing (zhi知), and things or affairs (wu物) are all one (Wang 2011: 6-7, 27, 53-54, 86-87, 103). In response to a query about how the external things and affairs can be the one with the body, the heart/mind, intention, and knowing, Wang replies,

Ears, eyes, mouth, nose, and the four limbs are the body, can they see, listen, talk, and move without the heart/mind? The heart/mind wants to see, listen, talk, and move, it cannot do so without ears, eyes, mouth, nose, and the four limbs. So without the heart/mind, there is not the body, and without the body, there is not the heart/mind. However, referring to the extensity, it is the body; referring to the control over the body, it is the heart/mind; referring to the emission from the heart/mind, it is the intention; referring to the intelligence of the intention, it is knowing; referring to which the intention is directed, it is the thing or affair. All are one. (Wang 2011: 103)

In another context, Wang puts it, “The heart/mind is the lord of the body, intentions are the emission from the heart/mind, knowing is the original state of intentions, while things or affairs are that to which intentions are directed.” (Wang 2011: 6-7) All these illustrations suggest that for Wang, the inner structure of the knowing capability is the ground for his having the appropriate conceptions of the body, the heart/mind, intention, knowing, and things or affairs as well as his teaching of knowing and acting are one.

The above discussion can help reveal how this inner structure of the knowing capability operates in the formation of knowledge. As to all sorts of knowledge except the moral one, it runs as follows: (1) The person or the body is the agent. (2) The heart/mind is cognitive, and (3) the intention emitted from the heart/mind is intentionally to know, which is already the beginning of acting. (4) If this intention is not interrupted, it then can carry out itself as knowing and acting are one. (5) As a result, the agent can obtain genuine knowledge through the mutual reinforcement of knowing and acting, which is generated from their interpenetration.

As to moral knowledge, it similarly runs as follows: (1) The person or the body is the moral agent. (2) The heart/mind is moral, which Wang names it good knowing, and (3) the intention emitted from the heart/mind is to like good and to dislike evil, which on the one hand simultaneously gives the moral agent the knowledge of good and evil and is the beginning of a moral action on the other. (4) If this good intention is not interrupted, it then can carry out itself as knowing and acting are one. (5) As a result, the moral agent can obtain genuine moral knowledge that is also genuine moral action through the mutual reinforcement of knowing and acting, which is generated from their interpenetration.

To conclude, Wang does intend his doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting to apply to knowledge in all its forms. Therefore, the difference between moral knowledge and other knowledge lies not in their shared normative structure of knowing and acting are one. Instead, it

lies in their nature, effect, and origin. In short, for Wang, moral knowledge is different from other knowledge because it is normative knowledge, so it should have a unique binding force on our behavior, and more importantly, it is our self-knowledge.

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