

## Exploring the Sincerity of the Will:

### Comparative Analysis of Chu Hsi, Wang Yang-ming, and Śaṅkara

This paper primarily focuses on a pivotal argument within "The Great Learning" between Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-ming. Specifically, this argument revolves around whether one should prioritize investigating things before cultivating the sincerity of will or vice versa. In simpler terms, does genuine sincerity need to precede the exploration of a matter one deeply cares about, or does sincerity naturally evolve due to the initial investigation of the issue? Through thoroughly exploring various issues stemming from Chu Hsi's perspective, I contend that Wang Yang-ming's stance, asserting that the sincerity of one's will should precede the investigation of things, appears more compelling than Chu Hsi's viewpoint. Furthermore, I extend this argument to draw parallels with Śaṅkara's "A Thousand Teachings," which similarly underscores the necessity of sincerity of will preceding the examination of matters, given Śaṅkara's stringent criteria for his students.

On one side of the debate, Chu Hsi asserts that one's will can only become sincere after thoroughly investigating things. Conversely, Wang Yang-ming contends that any investigation of things lacks credibility unless it is grounded in the sincerity of one's will. More specifically, Chu Hsi posits that the inherent principle of li is inherent in the tangible world, while Wang Yang-ming posits that it resides preeminently in the mind. In essence, the crux of the debate between Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-ming does not concern ontological inquiries about the inherent principle of li; it is assumed that this principle permeates everything. The core issue revolves around whether Wang Yang-ming's

principle, already rooted in the mind, naturally extends to the external world or if, following Chu Hsi's stance, an investigation of worldly phenomena must precede the discovery of the principle of li. Chu Hsi's position presupposes that the inherent principle of li cannot manifest within the sincerity of the will required to investigate worldly matters. In essence, both positions are comparable; their divergence lies primarily in whether the sincerity of the will is inherently entwined with the principle of li.

However, both of these stances raise compelling issues. For instance, what motivates Chu Hsi's inclination to investigate things if not a genuine desire to acquire knowledge? If one's will to investigate exists, why can't this innate will be the starting point for exploring the world's phenomena? Regrettably, Chu Hsi does not address these inquiries adequately within his concise remarks on "The Great Learning." On the other hand, if we begin with Wang Yang-ming's emphasis on the sincerity of the will preceding an investigation of things, why does Wang Yang-ming assert that one's will requires correction? Does this imply that one's will is inherently insincere or flawed? Can it still serve as a suitable starting point if it necessitates correction? If not, it logically follows that sincerity of the will cannot precede an investigation of things. Moreover, what happens when the will is not yet sincere but is already considered inherent in the principle of li? These are the questions I will delve into in the subsequent paragraphs, commencing with an examination of Chu Hsi's perspective.

The sincerity of one's will when embarking on an investigation of the tangible aspects of our world may not yet be genuine due to the mind's incomplete understanding of li. In his commentary on "The Great Learning," Chu Hsi reflects that "there is not a

single thing in which [li's] principles do not inhere."<sup>1</sup> While the debate regarding whether the mind can be considered a tangible element of this world or not will be addressed later in this paper, I am assuming, for the moment, that Wang Yang-ming rightly posits that the mind and the tangible world operate as an interconnected whole. If li is indeed the guiding principle in all things, then, by extension, the mind itself must be one of these things in which li inherently resides. Consequently, the will of the mind to investigate things in which the principle of li inheres may or may not be genuinely sincere at its inception. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the will exists if li is indeed inherent in all things. Chu Hsi's position, which maintains that the sincerity of one's will cannot be inherently rooted in the principle of li, leads him to argue in favor of the necessity of investigating worldly matters prior to achieving sincerity. This could explain why Chu Hsi asserts that, without investigating the elements of our world, the mind's will must inherently lack sincerity.

However, it does not necessarily follow that the will of the mind must inherently be insincere before investigating things, which leads to the discovery of the inherent principle of li. The principle of li, often considered the dwelling place of "the highest good,"<sup>2</sup> inherently cannot accommodate insincerity of will if it represents the pinnacle of goodness. Put differently, the highest good cannot coexist with insincerity; it is fundamentally incompatible. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the sincerity of the will must already be inherently sincere within the principle of li. Assuming that the mind

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<sup>1</sup> Chan, *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 89

<sup>2</sup> *Philosophy*, 84

represents one of the entities in which the principle of li inherently resides, one might argue that this sincerity of the will could still be latent or concealed, not yet fully manifesting as clear and unmistakable sincerity. Yet, it is crucial to recognize that even if the will of the mind may not have achieved complete sincerity, it does not imply that the sincerity of the will does not exist within it. Hence, I have explored whether the sincerity of the will inherently belongs to li. For the principle of li to genuinely serve as the abode of the highest good, it must logically exclude any association with insincerity. Instead, it must inherently encompass the sincerity of the will as its defining characteristic, as this sincerity represents the core of goodness.

Because the foundational premise of Chu Hsi's argument appears flawed, it gives rise to several other critical issues that undermine his position. Some of these issues are brought to the forefront here. Chu Hsi, for instance, contends that the sincerity of the will equates to a form of self-deception, where we might "hate a bad smell or love a beautiful color."<sup>3</sup> He advocates for impartiality in one's will when investigating worldly matters because he posits that the will is inherently insincere. According to Chu Hsi's argument, if the will were sincere, it would already be grounded in equanimity. However, a fundamental question arises: How can the will be deemed insincere if it is already inclined towards equanimity? After all, the will exists inherently within the principle of li. This apparent contradiction highlights a significant challenge in Chu Hsi's argument.

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<sup>3</sup> *Philosophy*, 89

Chu Hsi goes a step further by asserting that those who reason in a monistic manner are superior to those who adopt a dualistic approach. He defines dualism as exemplified by hating an unpleasant odor and loving a beautiful color as "satisfying oneself."<sup>4</sup> According to Chu Hsi, self-satisfaction through dualistic thinking diverges from genuine investigation into the nature of things. This perspective leads to the conclusion that the sincerity of the will cannot serve as a suitable starting point for a thorough investigation of worldly matters. If one is solely driven by the desire to gratify oneself, the sincerity of one's will becomes questionable. However, it can be argued that Chu Hsi may have missed a crucial point in his reasoning. By labeling one person as superior and another as inferior based on their reasoning, Chu Hsi engages in the dualistic behavior he deems inferior. This paradox underscores the idea that an individual is one of the entities within this world in which the principle of li inherently resides. If we consider the principle of li to represent the highest good, it logically follows that this principle must encompass the sincerity of the will as an integral component. Consequently, the question arises: How can Chu Hsi judge something within this world, where the principle of li must inherently exist, as inferior? These are problematic issues that Chu Hsi does not adequately address in his argument.

These inherent contradictions within Chu Hsi's standpoint prompted Wang Yang-ming to advocate for the primacy of the sincerity of the will preceding the investigation of things. In Wang Yang-ming's interpretation, Chu Hsi's theory posits that the mind should

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<sup>4</sup> *Philosophy*, 89

engage with things to explore the inherent principles, inadvertently treating things as external entities, creating a separation between the mind and the principle.<sup>5</sup> Now, let us return to whether the mind represents an entity within this world in which the principle of li inherently resides. If, as Wang suggests, the term "mind" essentially equates to the will, it implies that the will is an integral aspect of the mind. In other words, one of the intrinsic qualities of the mind is its capacity to will. Hence, it logically follows that the will and the mind are inseparable due to this inherent property. Furthermore, because the principle of li stands as the highest good, it must inherently encompass the sincerity of the will. For Wang Yang-ming, where the mind equates to the will, and the will is an element inherent in li, which represents the principle being the highest good, it must follow that the sincerity of the will is an inherent aspect of li right from the outset.

It is crucial to highlight that Chu Hsi undertook a significant rearrangement of "The Great Learning" text to align it with his interpretation of what it should signify. Conversely, Wang Yang-ming emerged as the proponent of returning the text to its original form, where the sincerity of the will precedes the investigation of things. The degree to which Chu Hsi's reconfiguration of the text, despite its lack of justification, influenced subsequent commentators sheds light on why Wing-Tsit Chan, the author of the *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, aligns with Chu Hsi's perspective rather than Wang Yang-ming's.

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<sup>5</sup> *Philosophy*, 655

To put it plainly, eliminating what is incorrect from the mind reveals the sincerity of the will; it does not create it. Therefore, I respectfully disagree with Chan's assertion that "the fundamental difference between Chu and Wang lies in the fact that Chu's approach is intellectual, Wang's is moral."<sup>6</sup> Chan characterizes Wang Yang-ming's perspective as moral because, according to him, Wang Yang-ming favored interpreting the sincerity of the will as the removal of "what is incorrect in the mind to preserve the correctness of its original substance."<sup>7</sup> However, as Chu Hsi pointed out, this interpretation can be misleading because the principle of li inherently resides in all things. By its very nature, Li represents a principle of the highest good. When eliminating what is incorrect from the mind occurs, it does not necessarily result in a mind devoid of what was deemed incorrect. Instead, it restores the mind to its original state, as it inherently exists within the principle of li. If li embodies the highest good, it must inherently encompass the sincerity of the will from the beginning. Consequently, I have demonstrated that correcting the mind does not presuppose an initial state of insincerity.

Because Chan aligns himself with Chu Hsi, whose core premise in opposition to Wang Yang-ming's stance appears flawed, Chan's position also encounters several challenges. To illustrate, in an attempt to demonstrate that Wang Yang-ming misconstrued the concept of the sincerity of the will, Chan contends that Wang Yang-ming misunderstood its definition. In Chan's own words, "Wang's theory is entirely subjective... it is difficult to accept his version [because] his interpretation is... based on the theory that

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<sup>6</sup> *Philosophy*, 655

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophy*, 655

the mind and things are one."<sup>8</sup> However, as previously demonstrated, Wang Yang-ming's perspective does not simply assert that this world and the mind function as an indistinguishable unity. Instead, it posits that the mind constitutes one of the entities within this world in which the principle of li inherently resides. Besides, it asserts that the mind is inseparable from the will. Therefore, it logically follows that the sincerity of the will must inherently exist within the principle of li. If, according to Wang Yang-ming, the mind is synonymous with the will, it becomes plausible to argue that the sincerity of the will is already present before investigating worldly matters.

Regrettably, Chan bolsters his argument against Yang-ming by recounting an anecdote. He recounts that when asked to elucidate the connection between "the mind and blossoming trees on the high mountains," Yang-ming seemingly provided a relatively concise response: "Their colors show up when you look at them."<sup>9</sup> Chan's retelling of this episode may be uncharitable towards Yang-ming since he fails to engage with the deeper meaning of Yang-ming's statement. However, an alternative interpretation of Yang-ming's response may explain why he answered this way. Yang-ming's perspective might suggest that when one directs their mind's focus towards the colors of blossoming trees, the mind connects these colors and the mental representation of flowers already present within it. In essence, the colors become an attribute or property of the mental representation of flowers. In this context, although the property of the flower is not identical to the flower itself, their relationship can be seen as one of genitive unity, indicating their intrinsic

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<sup>8</sup> *Philosophy*, 655

<sup>9</sup> *Philosophy*, 655

interconnectedness as a singular entity. It is important to remember that Yang-Ming's philosophy revolves around the idea that the mind and the tangible aspects of the world function as a harmonious whole. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that the colors of the flower and the flower itself share a similar genitive relation of oneness within Yang-ming's framework. Setting aside Chan's potentially uncharitable interpretation of Yang-ming's words, one can conclude that Yang-ming's assertion that the sincerity of the will must precede the investigation of worldly matters appears significantly more plausible than Chu Hsi's position.

Now, let us turn our attention to Śaṅkara. Does Śaṅkara prioritize the commencement of an investigation of things or the cultivation of the sincerity of the will in his philosophy? Or does this distinction even hold significance within his framework? Śaṅkara's criteria for his pupils shed light on his perspective. He requires that they be Brahmins who possess both internal and external purity.<sup>10</sup> To put it more explicitly, these Brahmins must inherently embody qualities such as dispassion, desirelessness, and self-control, well-documented in the scriptures.<sup>11</sup> If a pupil has already attained these qualities, Śaṅkara recognizes them as a Brahmin. The question arises: What is the source of these inherent qualities within the Brahmin? The answer can be traced to the purificatory rites the Brahmin has undergone. These rites, in essence, have infused the Brahmin with these inherent qualities, serving as the foundation upon which their sincerity of will and pursuit of knowledge are built.

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<sup>10</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 211

<sup>11</sup> *Teachings*, 211

These purificatory rites serve as a testament to the inherent sincerity of the Brahmin's will. Over time, these rites have consistently guided the Brahmin onto the correct path of understanding. This explains why Śaṅkara deems such a Brahmin qualified to study under his guidance. Furthermore, much like Wang Yang-ming's concept of the sincerity of the will, which corrects what is deemed incorrect in the mind without assuming an initial insincerity of the will, the purificatory rites do not purify the Brahmin. Instead, they reveal the inherent purity that already exists within the individual. By the time the Brahmin embarks on the journey of investigating things through submission to his teacher, he already possesses an innate purity of will due to the purificatory rites he has undergone. His merit derives from this intrinsic sincerity of the will. Therefore, Śaṅkara's approach can be seen as commencing with the sincerity of the will in the pursuit of investigating things when the Brahmin seeks his guidance. In this regard, Śaṅkara's philosophy aligns more closely with the teachings of Wang Yang-ming.

It might be contended that Śaṅkara's philosophy indeed commences with an investigation of things. After all, the Sruti, upon which Śaṅkara's philosophy is fundamentally built, declares that "having scrutinized the worlds built up by action, a Brahmin should arrive at indifference."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as I have previously elucidated, this does not necessarily imply that the Brahmin acquires the sincerity of the will through an investigation of things. Instead, it underscores that the monistic principle of li is already inherently present. The Brahmin, purified through the purificatory rites, merely uncovers

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<sup>12</sup> *Teachings*, 211

this inherent sincerity of the will in investigating things—a sincerity that was already an intrinsic aspect of the principle of li.

Can Brahman be considered an ontological principle akin to li? The inherent ubiquity of both Li and Brahman seems to suggest so. Moreover, when we examine Sruti's assertion that "when knowledge [of Brahman] is firmly grasped, it is conducive... to the continuity [of knowledge of Brahman],"<sup>13</sup> it becomes evident that the concept of continuity is shared between both Brahman and li. This is because li inherently resides in all things, just as the continuity of knowledge regarding Brahman persists. For a Confucian student following Wang Yang-ming's teachings, the sincerity of the will serves as the initial step towards investigating things, ultimately unveiling li's pervasive and continuous quality. In a parallel vein, Brahman's pervasive and unbroken nature leads Śāṅkara's students to perceive it as a singular and continuous entity, allowing for a profound understanding of its essence.

Hence, it appears more plausible that Chu Hsi rearranged the text of "The Great Learning" because he could not reinterpret the original arrangement to align with his desired interpretation. In contrast, Wang Yang-ming's version of the text preserves its original intent. Consequently, the investigation process stems from the sincerity of the will, aimed at uncovering the inherent sincerity within. Moreover, considering that Brahman shares the same inherent pervasive and continuous quality as li, it suggests that Brahman

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<sup>13</sup> *Teachings*, 211

and li are integral components of a singular entity. Therefore, it becomes reasonable to surmise that Brahman and Li function in a comparable manner in this aspect.

Enhanced by the purificatory rites that the Brahmin are obligated to undertake, it becomes apparent that the sincerity of the will, akin to Li's inherent quality, also resides within Brahman. To put it differently, Brahman's unceasing presence permeates the Brahmin's existence, propelling them towards exploring the world's phenomena ultimately revealing the highest good wherein the sincerity of the will is inherent. Consequently, not only does Wang Yang-ming's interpretation emerge as more plausible than Chu Hsi's, but it also finds concurrence in the philosophy of Śaṅkara, who would align with Wang Yang-ming's perspective.

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