

ON THE FOUR ORIENTATIONS OF WANG YANGMING'S TENET OF THE UNITY OF KNOWING AND ACTING

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Abstract: When the Ming dynasty Confucian Wang Yangming (1472-1529) proposed his tenet of the unity of knowing and acting (zhi xing heyi 知行合一), he did so because he believed that Zhu Xi (1130-1200), his revered Song dynasty predecessor and architect of the School of Principle (Neo-Confucianism), had wrongly conceptually divided knowledge and action, and that this had led to profound problems of an existential nature for the individual with real-world consequences. For Wang Yangming, the relation between knowledge and action is fundamentally one of identity, an identity grounded in the inherent, true condition of the vital being of the individual, in a unity of mind and body. He called this identity the original condition and original form of knowing and acting, explaining it in various ways. This article first explains how Wang Yangming positioned his tenet in relation to Zhu Xi's conceptualization of the relation between knowledge and action, and then elucidates his conception of the unity of knowing and acting in four orientations, according to the different senses in which knowledge/knowing are understood: as perception, as awareness, as what is known, and as the innate knowing.

With respect to the entire structure of Wang Yangming's philosophy of mind, the tenet "mind is principle (*xin ji li* 心即理)" is the theoretical foundation for the construction of his philosophical system. In his philosophy, this tenet concerns the metaphysical presupposition for a person's existence, reflecting the inherent, real condition of true self's (*zhen ji* 真己) vital being (existence as life), wherein mind is originally identical with principle, the unitary order underlying the cosmos, or what he otherwise calls the *Dao* 道 ("Way"). Through the actions a person takes in their practical life, this *a priori* truth and reality is manifest, enabling it to become experiential truth and reality. As such, the originary truth of human existence is actualized, that is, the actual meaning and value of human existence is realized. As a theoretical link in Wang Yangming's philosophy of mind, the "unity of knowing and acting (*zhi xing heyi* 知行合一)" is the experiential mode by which the identity of mind and principle is realized in our life world. The unity of knowing and acting is the practice of the identity of mind and principle. For this reason, this unity concerns not only epistemological and moral propositions, but even more so existential propositions about a person's actual existence.

I. Two Emphatic Concerns Underlying the Tenet of the Unity of Knowledge and Action

When Wang Yangming proposed his theory of the unity of knowing and acting, he was directing it towards two related matters of concern, the existential and real-world problems. With respect to the latter, as he saw it, following the widespread dissemination of the Song dynasty Confucian (Ruist) philosopher Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) opinion that "knowledge precedes action," people were deeply influenced by this idea and had become deeply entrenched in the malady of separating knowledge and action into two phases. Wang Yangming said,

People today, however, divide knowing and acting into two parts and proceed to act.

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They believe that only after one first knows something can one then act on it. If I now proceed to discuss, practice, and hold conversations, applying myself to the task of [acquiring] knowledge, and waiting until I have acquired true knowledge before proceeding to the task of acting on it, then to the end of my life I will never act and, as well, to the end of my life I will never know. This is not a minor affliction, and it did not come about in a day. When I now talk about a unity of knowing and acting, this truly is the medicine for the disease (Wang, 2011, 1.5).¹

In Wang Yangming's opinion, because the theory that "knowledge precedes action" divides them into two parts, it will inevitably lead to the division of knowledge and praxis into separate phases. Thus, people will fall into grave error: "to the end of my life, I will never act, and I will never know." When he states, "When I now talk about a unity of knowing and acting, this truly is the medicine for the disease," he indicates that his theory is directed towards a target with real-world implications. It was issued as a reprimand for problems arising from the notion that knowledge precedes action, which he calls "prescribing medicine based on the disease." This practical concern expresses the critical character of his theory of the unity of knowing and acting, and his aim in directing his criticism is precise: He attempted to deconstruct Zhu Xi's conception of knowledge and action at a theoretical level. Thus, to understand this critique, it will be helpful to briefly explain Zhu Xi's basic formulation of his understanding of the relation between knowledge and action.

Zhu Xi made the following statements:

Knowing and acting are always mutually dependent. Without feet, for example, eyes cannot walk, and without eyes feet cannot see. In terms of sequence, knowledge comes first, and in terms of relative importance, action is to be emphasized" (Zhu, 1986, 9.148).

In the matter of applying oneself to extending knowledge and assiduously acting one side should not be privileged over the other. If one side is privileged, then one side will suffer a defect. For example, Master Cheng (Cheng Yi 程頤) said, "To cultivate oneself one must be respectful, and advancing in learning depends on extending knowledge." He clearly speaks of them as comprising two legs. Most importantly, he distinguishes a sequence and relative importance. In terms of sequence, extending knowledge should come first. In terms of relative importance, assiduous action is to be emphasized (Ibid.).

Someone asked, "[Zhang] Nanxuan said, 'The extension of knowledge and assiduous action are mutually generated.'" The Master said, "There is no need to understand their mutual generation. Just proceed to carry out each component, and if knowledge has yet to be attained, then seek understanding with respect to knowledge, and if there is action that has yet to be accomplished, then seek understanding with respect to action. After a time, they will be mutually generated thenceforth. Nowadays, when people have not acquired knowledge, they excuse it by saying their actions have not yet been completed. When their actions are wrong, they say that their knowledge has yet to be attained. They only care about blaming one on the other and make no progress (Ibid.).

Zhu Xi's position on knowledge and action can be summarized in three points. First, knowing and acting are in fact two separate matters, and they should not be confused with one another. Cheng Yi, he asserts, clearly spoke of them as comprising two legs. Second, precisely because they comprise two legs, they exist in a mutual relationship.

¹ Wang Yangming 王陽明. *Wang Yangming quanji* 王陽明全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2011). In translating quotations from the *Chuan xi lu*, I have consulted, utilized, and benefited from Wing-tsit Chan's standard translation, *Instructions for Practical Living and other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

In terms of a temporal (or logical) sequence, knowledge precedes action. In terms of importance, action is more important than knowledge. Third, one should not be emphasized at the expense of the other. Zhu Xi states, "If one side is privileged, then one side will suffer a defect." Thus, "knowing and acting are always mutually dependent."

Zhu Xi's position on the relationship between knowledge and action was established on the foundation of his belief that they comprise "two legs." His criticism of Zhang Nanxuan's assertion that "the extension of knowledge and assiduous action are mutually generated" indicates that one need not first understand their mutual generation. So long as one component is carried out and respectively understood, when the time comes, "from then on they will be mutually generated." In other words, the mutual generation of knowledge and action is founded upon attaining a kind of mature realm of practice that comes about after knowledge and action are separately understood.

This interpretation is also clearly conveyed in another of Zhu Xi's conversations:

Someone asked, "[Zhang] Nanxuan stated, 'When practice is effective, knowledge becomes clearer; when knowledge is clear, practice becomes more effective.' What do you think of this interpretation?" [Zhu Xi] replied, "In principle it is indeed like this. In the learner's practice they should advance together, and not get stuck from linking them together, consequently delaying both. Thus, effort should be applied to both, and then, when one achieves success, the two will mutually benefit" (Ibid. 9.2605).

From this dialogue, we can understand what Zhang Nanxuan meant when he said that "the extension of knowledge and assiduous action are mutually generated." For Zhang, "when practice is effective, knowledge becomes clearer; when knowledge is clear, practice becomes more effective." Thus, knowing and acting comprise a mutually triggering and gradually deepening interactional process. However, Zhu Xi merely believed that "In principle it is indeed like this." Clearly, for him, the mutual generation or mutually beneficial nature of knowing and acting is a kind of state of affairs belonging to the moment one achieves success. Nevertheless, based on his separation of knowledge and action, Zhu Xi explained their mutual relationship very clearly and completely. It is undeniable that for Zhu Xi, although knowledge and action are separated, nevertheless "in the learner's practice they should advance together."

Based on this foundational understanding of Zhu Xi's position, some possible interpretations of Wang Yangming's theory of the two can be posited and, as well, preliminarily identified as incorrect, as will be explained in what follows:

1. The tenet of the unity of knowing and acting was intended to stress that in the matter of knowledge and praxis one should not be emphasized to the detriment of the other. The two advance together simultaneously. However, this is in fact Zhu Xi's position, and applying it to explain Wang Yangming's tenet is inappropriate.
2. The unity of knowing and acting means either the mutual integration of knowledge and practice or the application of knowledge in practice. In this case, however, knowledge and practice remain "two legs," and this is still Zhu Xi's point of view.
3. The type of knowledge denoted in the tenet of the unity of knowing and acting is not what one knows (*zhishi* 知識: factual knowledge) but rather *liangzhi* 良知 ("innate knowing"). According to this interpretation, only by interpreting the meaning of knowledge as the innate knowing can we stay true to what Wang Yangming intended to say. Knowledge in this case concerns moral knowledge, as

the innate knowing is fundamentally the sense of right and wrong, an inborn knowledge of the good. Hence, the unity of knowing and acting concerns not non-normative knowledge but rather normative knowledge. The emphasis is on ethical practice. However, the reason this interpretation should be untenable is that if knowledge as Zhu Xi conceived it with respect to action includes knowledge in the sense of factual knowledge, then Wang Yangming's tenet surely must include it in that sense as well. Otherwise, how could it serve as "medicine to treat the disease"?

A correct understanding of the meaning of Wang's tenet of the unity of knowing and acting will in fact dispel each of these interpretations, ones he believed to be either harmful or partial. His insight was that real harm had been caused by a state of affairs wherein "to the end of my life I will never act and, as well, to the end of my life I will never know," and that this problem had arisen because of the influence of Zhu Xi's position on the relationship between knowledge and action. Thus, he proposed their unity as a "medicine to treat the disease," establishing it for the purpose of "redressing bias and remedying error."

However, Wang also repeatedly emphasized that he proposed a unity of knowing and acting not only to achieve this purpose but as well because "the original condition of knowing and acting" has always been like this. In this respect, the tenet is final, one that, to borrow from Buddhist discourse, "dispels partial teachings and reveals the entire truth" and "uncovers the marks and manifests the source." For Zhu Xi, the problem of knowledge and action is primarily treated and expounded upon as one that belongs to the domain of theories of knowledge. Wang Yangming, however, believed that this problem had already changed into an existential one, that it is an existential proposition. It is precisely this concern for the original or fundamental nature of a person's vital being that makes his tenet of a unity of knowing and acting take on rich connotations. Its full meaning can only be adequately expressed in the context of the actual course of an individual's life.

II. "The unity of knowing and acting" means "the identity of knowing and acting (*zhi xing tong yi* 知行同一)."

To counter Zhu Xi's foundational position whereby knowledge and action are separated into "two legs," Wang Yangming proposed his tenet of the unity of knowing and acting, emphasizing that knowledge and action are not "two legs" but rather "one thing." The *Record of Instructions for Practice* states,

[Xu] Ai said, "In saying that knowledge and action are two things, the ancients wanted people to understand and distinguish them clearly, so that on the one hand they practice acquiring knowledge and, on the other, practice taking action, for only then will the practice be correctly situated." The Master said, "This is to lose sight of the fundamental objective of the ancients. I have said that knowledge is action's guiding aim and action is the practice of knowledge, and that knowledge is the beginning of action and action is the completion of knowledge. If you understand this, when knowledge alone is mentioned, action is already implicit, and when action alone is mentioned, knowledge is already implicit. . . . When we understand it in this sense, one word will do" (Wang, 2011, 1.5).

[Wang Yangming said,] "Knowing and acting are actually two words explaining one practice. For this single practice to be explained completely and unproblematically these two words must be used. If one understands the main idea clearly, and understands that it really is one main idea, then even if knowing and acting are divided in two and

explained, when all is said and done go ahead and perform that single practice. Even if at the outset [the two] do not perhaps fuse, in the end [you will have] what is known as one hundred deliberations but an ultimate congruence. If one does not understand the main idea clearly, and originally regarded them as two, then even if knowing and acting are combined together as one and explained, I am afraid that in the end they will still lack a point of unity, much less, if they are also divided into two parts and one proceeds to perform them, this then is from head to tail all the more so lacking in a place to settle down (Ibid., 6.233).

These passages clearly confirm that what Wang Yangming refers to as the unity of knowing and acting is by no means a matter of combining, uniting, or bringing together (*he* 合) two things as one thing (*yijian* 一件). Rather, knowing and acting are originally one thing. Given that they are one thing, the reason for saying “*heyi* 合一 (bringing together or uniting as one)” is that it is only by borrowing these two words that this one matter “will then be explained completely and unproblematically.” Thus, the unity of knowing and acting is essentially the identity of knowing and acting (*zhi xing tong yi* 知行同一). Knowledge and action are simply two aspects of the same practice that manifest in the process of its unfolding. Thus, the two words explain one practice. Given that knowing and acting are originally one thing, distinctions between them based on sequence or relative importance obviously do not exist. In terms of logic, so long as the notion that knowledge and action are “two legs” is eliminated, claims about sequence and relative importance will likewise be eliminated.

How is the identity of knowing and acting possible? Wang Yangming states, “knowledge is action’s guiding aim and action is the practice of knowledge.” According to his understanding, in everyday life, the reason people proceed to do something and do it in a certain way is that they must have knowledge as their “guiding aim,” that is, knowledge serves as the guiding consciousness for undertaking a course of action. For the acting subject, the guiding aim itself exists as a kind of knowledge and, moreover, it is precisely this knowledge that actually guides the generation of action and the way it occurs. Hence, the entire course of action becomes the course of the expression of knowledge. This is why he says that “knowledge is action’s guiding aim.”

Precisely because the entire course of action is the concrete or actual expression of knowledge, the concrete means by which knowledge is realized, he also says “action is the practice of knowledge.” As “knowledge is action’s guiding aim,” knowledge becomes a kind of intrinsic impetus to activity and praxis. Because behavior unfolds only under the guidance of knowledge, “knowledge is the beginning of action,” that is, the starting point for behavioral activity. On the other hand, activity or praxis are simply knowledge in its outwardly manifest form, the practice of knowledge and the experiential mode by which knowledge can be completely actualized. Thus, Wang Yangming says that “action is the completion of knowledge.”

But regardless of whether it is knowing or acting, as Wang Yangming understood them, when viewed as the manifestation of an integral process, each side necessarily simultaneously subsumes the other, and in terms of its processual nature, they are present together at the same time. Consequently, Wang Yangming also stressed that “the genuine and earnest dimension of knowing is acting, and the dimension of clear awareness and refined observation in acting is knowing. The discipline of knowing and acting can never be separated” (Ibid., 1.47). If one’s knowledge of some matter is to attain the level of “genuine and earnest,” then the process of having knowledge attain this level is action. If one’s action on some matter is to achieve the level of “clear awareness and refined observation,” then there must be knowledge guiding it. Action that attains “clear awareness and refined observation” is the actualization of knowledge.

Wang Yangming explains the meaning the unity of knowing and acting in terms of

practice, so we need to return to its source in conduct or practical activity. In the general linguistic context of the Song-Ming School of Principle, practice always concerns conduct or practical activity under the conditions of experience. What should be emphatically pointed out is that as practical activity, practice necessarily manifests as a process. When practice is understood in its sense as process, knowledge and practice are the unified character of the process itself manifesting in two aspects. Because they are two, mutually inclusive aspects of one thing, Wang Yangming says “they can never be separated.” Hence, we can reach this conclusion: the unity of knowing and acting is essentially the identity of knowing and acting.

It should be noted that for Wang Yangming, the unity of knowing of acting is originally practice, the mode necessary to put into practice the identity of mind and principle, this ordinary reality for a human being, such that it genuinely and earnestly, in clear awareness and with refined observation, manifests over the entire course of a human being’s actual life. In this sense, the unity of knowing and acting amply expresses the practical character of Wang Yangming’s philosophy. However, this general explanation alone is insufficient because it is only concerned with overall support for the unity of knowing and acting in its fundamental sense. Further elucidating the ordinary basis making possible the unity of knowing and acting requires penetrating deeply into the level of the “original condition of knowledge and action.” For this, with this general explanation as the foundation we will “speak discriminately,” penetrating deeply into four orientations.

III. The Many Meanings of Knowledge and Knowledge’s Identity with Action.

On several occasions, Wang Yangming said that the reason he proposed his tenet of the unity of knowing and acting was, on the one hand, to “redress bias and remedy error,” prescribing medicine based on the disease and, on the other hand, because the original status of knowing and acting is simply like this, that is, unified. The *Record of Instructions for Practice* states:

My speaking of the unity of knowing and acting today truly is the medicine for the disease, and not something that I have baselessly fabricated. The original condition of knowing and acting is as such from the beginning. Now, if one understands the basic objective, then speaking of them as two [things] will do no harm, for they are still just one [thing]. If one does not understand the basic objective, and then says they are one [thing], how will it be of benefit to anything? This is just idle talk (Ibid., 1.5).

Currently, when I speak of the unity of knowing and acting, although this is a teaching to redress bias and remedy error in our time, nevertheless, the form (*tiduan* 體段) of knowing and acting is also originally as such (Ibid., 6.232).

Wang Yangming unveiled his tenet of the unity of knowing and acting not only to correct moral failings in his time by redressing bias and remedying error but also because this unity is the “original condition of knowing and acting.” Thus, his teaching was both expedient and ultimate.

That said, it might be asked what precisely is meant by “the original condition of knowing and acting?” Nowadays, when people encounter the term *benti* 本體 (alternatively translated as “original condition/state” or “essence/substance”), they might associate it with abstract metaphysical speculation, whereas, for Wang Yangming, *benti* means “original form” (*benlai tiduan* 本來體段). In the linguistic context of the School of Principle, the original form means appearance, that is, the appearance of what he calls the

original condition or essence (of mind or of knowing and acting). For example, the *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* state:

Someone asked, "Mister Li said Yanzi already possesses the appearance of a sage. Are not the two words *ti duan* speaking merely about his appearance?" [Master Zhu Xi] replied, "That is the case" (Zhu, 1986, 24.569).

Thus, the "original condition of knowing and acting" or the "form of knowing and acting" refers to their original appearance or condition. With respect to the original condition of knowledge and action, the statement "the original condition of knowing and acting is like this" means that they are originally identical. Because knowing and acting are the activity of human beings, Wang Yangming's concern for the identity of knowing and acting in its original sense takes as its starting point the wholeness and unity of the person as vital being itself, as well as accordingly revealing the meaning of the unity of knowing and acting as four orientations, as explained in what follows.

III-1 Explaining the Unity of Knowing and Action with Knowing in the Sense of Awareness

For Wang Yangming, the mind is originally a "spiritual clarity (=intelligence)," "void, intelligent, illuminating, and aware," and possessed of an inherent capacity for self-awareness. Awareness is the self-affirmation of the existence of the essence of mind itself (*xinti benshen* 心體本身). Thus, "awareness is the mind." Wang Yangming says, "The mind is not a chunk of blood or flesh. Wherever there is awareness that is the mind. Take, for example, the ears' and eyes' awareness of sight and sound, and the hands' and feet's awareness of pain and itching. This awareness is the mind" (Wang, 2011, 3.138).

Here, awareness specifically refers to a kind of sensation or feeling in one's body or to awareness of a need. For example, when a person says, "I am thirsty," this is really to say that I have become aware of my being thirsty or that with respect to a bodily state of thirstiness my mind possesses a kind of awareness. For a normal person of sound body and mind, if this awareness is absolutely genuine, then he will surely proceed to locate water to drink. If he says "I am thirsty" but nevertheless does not drink the water right before him, then we can conclude that he is not truly thirsty. In this case, knowing that one is thirsty is knowledge and drinking is action. Drinking the water is the true expression of thirst, and thus action is the actual expression of knowledge. As such, knowledge and action are unified.

Wang Yangming also said,

For example, to know pain you must have already been in pain yourself and only then do you know it. To know cold, you must have already been cold yourself. To know hunger, you must have already been hungry yourself. How can knowledge and action be separated? This then is the original condition of knowing and acting when it has not been obstructed by self-centered intentions (Ibid., 1.4).

Here, awareness inherent to the essence of mind itself will invariably lead to corresponding external behaviors. Knowing that one is thirsty, one drinks. Knowing that one is hungry, one eats. Knowing that one is cold, one puts clothes on. Thus, normal, healthy living possesses its own natural order whereby there is a development from the internal to external such that they are consistent. For Wang, this natural order to life which "has never been obstructed by self-centered intentions" is "the original condition (or state) of knowing and acting." As such, "the original condition of knowing and acting" points to the inherent, true condition of vital being, whereby internal awareness necessarily

becomes visible in external conduct. The *Doctrine of the Mean* states, “If one can perfect genuineness in one aspect, that genuineness will appear in one’s form; appearing in one’s form it will become plain” (Eno, 2016, 48). The *Great Learning* says that “when one is perfectly genuine within it may be seen externally” (Ibid., 18). These passages truly speak of human existence in the sense of a complete integration of mind and body: whatever one truly possesses within must be expressed without; originally, mind and body and internal and external are unified.

Wang Yangming’s unveiling of his teaching of “the original condition of knowing and acting” and “original form” of knowing and acting shows that he had established the inherent, true condition of vital being as the foundation for the unity of knowing and acting. Thus, his tenet accordingly becomes an existentialist proposition, one directly linked to actual existence as well as the true expression of its existential character. The “original condition of knowing and acting” enabled this unity to be established on the originary foundation of vital being, while also disclosing a fundamental fact: a person’s external behavior and activity are determined by his or her psychological condition and mental states of consciousness. The entirety of behavioral activity (including language, conduct, attitudes, style, and so on) appears as a visible (exterior) manifestation expressing interior mental states. Thus, it becomes possible to judge the true condition of a person’s interior mental state based on physical activity and conduct.

In fact, the roots of this conception were present at the origins of the Confucian tradition. In *Analects* 5.10 (Lau, 1979, 77), Confucius says, “Now having listened to a man’s words I go on to observe his deeds,” and in 2.10 (Ibid., 64) he says, “Look at the means a man employs, observe the path he takes and examine where he feels at home. In what way is a man’s true character hidden from view?” As well, in *Analects* 2.13 (Lau 1979: 64), Confucius says of the gentleman that “He puts his words into action before allowing his words to follow his action,” and in 4.22 (Ibid., 74) he states that in antiquity men were loath to speak because “they counted it shameful if their person failed to keep up with their words.”

Thus, each of these sayings had already stressed the fundamental identity of the activity of mind and body. It is only this attribute of identity characteristic of the activities of mind and body and interior and exterior (described in the *Great Learning* as “[if] one is perfectly genuine within it may be seen externally”) that is in keeping with the original order of vital being, and which marks the inherent truth of human existence itself. Wang Yangming speaks of the mind as awareness, and action as the authenticity or truth of awareness. Thus, he amply stresses the governing role of mind in relation to body and the unity of mind and body in the order of life, thereby expressing his fundamental concern for human existence. In this sense, the unity of knowing and acting not only captures the inherent, true condition of vital being, it is also the necessary path or mode through which this real life is actualized.

III-2 Explaining the Unity of Knowing and Acting with Knowing in the Sense of Perceiving

The unity of knowing and acting understood in knowledge’s sense as awareness, as presupposed by Wang Yangming, primarily refers to the original order of the mind and body. He states, “Knowing is the original condition of mind; the mind is naturally able to know.” Thus, awareness is a capacity original to the constitution of the mind itself, the original mode by which it recognizes the reality of its own existence. As well, because the mind possesses awareness, it necessarily possesses perception. Perception is the external functioning of awareness. It is the experiential mode by which the essence of the mind links itself together as a whole with external objects. Wang Yangming describes this mode

of functioning with the terms “diffusion (*fasan* 發散)” and “gathering and focusing (*shoulian* 收斂)” (Wang 2011: 1.17). The interaction between the mind and body and the objects comprising the world is, on the one hand, the objective diffusion (*fasan* 發散) of the mind in specific contexts and, on the other, the object’s inward gathering and focusing (*shoulian* 收斂). This horizon of diffusion gathering and focusing is the functioning of perception. This mode of functioning is also essentially the same as what the *Classic of Changes* refers to as stimulus and penetration (*gantong* 感通). This is, in fact, the fundamental mode by which people realize their actual or real-world existence.

In our everyday lives, we are always embedded in various objective relational settings (or contexts), such as our relational interactions with people, the world of things and affairs, and even metaphysical objects of a transcendent nature. So long as vital, conscious activity exists, objective relational settings will also exist. People’s actual lives can only be realized within various objective relational settings. These settings are the experiential field in which I can appear and find expression and the experiential field in which the value and meaning of the existential character and existence of “I” can be realized. In this field, sensory stimulation (*gan* 感) makes possible a suitable expression of “I.”

Sensation is the conscious functioning of the senses. In a specific objective relational setting, through the activity of the senses, people mentally gather the objects in the exterior world with which they interact, becoming a constitutive element of their conscious worlds. At the same time, one opens oneself up to interaction with the object through the activity of the senses. Realizing this relation takes the course of the interactive stimulation between senses and objects as its basic path. From the perspective of “I,” the conscious functioning of sensory activity in a specific objective relational setting is “action.” Because the senses have taken in the object of interaction and become an element of consciousness, it is “knowledge.” For Wang Yangming, as a processual whole, perception is characterized by immediacy and simultaneity. Thus, it is a unity of knowing and acting. Wang Yangming provided an example, stating,

The *Great Learning* points to genuine knowledge and action for people to see, saying, they are “like loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors.” 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. A person with a stuffed-up nose does not smell the bad odor even if he sees a malodorous object before him, and so he does not hate it. This amounts to not knowing bad odor. Suppose we say that so-and-so knows 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 (Ibid., 1)

Wang Yangming took the *Great Learning*’s phrase “like loving beautiful colors, like hating bad odors” and placed it in the human setting of objective interactions and provided his explanation, claiming that it “points to genuine knowing and acting for people to see.” Genuine knowing and acting means the actual state of knowing and acting, the original condition or form of knowing and acting. Seeing and knowing a beautiful color is the identity of perception and knowledge; knowing and loving a beautiful color is the identity of knowledge and action. Thus, Wang Yangming speaks of this as a “unity of knowing and acting.”

What the author of this paper would like to add here is that, for Wang Yangming, seeing and hearing, as sensory activities in specific contexts of objective interaction, are the objective functioning of the inherent knowing of what he calls the essence (or original

condition/state) of mind. In this sense, knowing as the knowing of the mind in its original condition manifests as the actual activity of perception, which is also action. The activity of perception is a mode of expression of the original knowledge of the mind's fundamental state. Thus, it is a unity of knowing and acting.

As for the object, because it becomes the sensory object for "I," its own state of being immediately changes into "knowledge" for "I," which is "knowing (*zhi* 知)" upon "sensory stimulation (*gan* 感)." Thus, the course of "perception (*ganzhi* 感知)" is indeed a unity of knowing and acting. Although there may still be a logical sequence extending from responding to sensing and knowing, as for the actual situation wherein this can be realized in the context of objective relational settings, it is indeed, as Wang Yangming understood it, one of immediacy and simultaneity.

The unity of knowing and acting with knowing understood in perception is discussed early on in the Confucian tradition. For example, the *Classic of Changes* states, "The *Yi* [Changes] is without thought and action; silent and unmoving, when stimulated it penetrates [connects] all circumstances under Heaven" (Adler, 2020, 279). If we were to understand "stimulated (*gan* 感)" as action, then the knowledge implied by "penetrates [connects] all circumstances under Heaven" is undoubtedly brought about from stimulation. Consequently, the moment of "stimulation and penetration (*gantong* 感通)" is the unity of knowing and acting.

The manifestation of awareness and perception as a unity of knowing and acting is interpreted by Wang Yangming as the original condition of vital being. It is a primordial order by which life realizes genuine expression of its existential character or beingness. As he understood it, since the essential being of human beings is originally a unity of knowing and acting, so long as one, at the moment of perception, does not permit the slightest of self-centeredness, of egoistic intentions or desires, to obstruct the natural order of the essence of mind itself, the original identity of knowing and acting will be the actual condition of vital being and find expression, and the exact condition of objective existence can then be truly restored and, therewith, only then can the meaning and value of life truly begin to be established. Thus, the unity of knowing and acting must be amplified to its fullest extent and manifested in the entirety of the objective relational context of our lives, thereby bringing to realization the original reality of our existence.

Wang Yangming states,

Knowing is the essence of mind. The mind is naturally able to know. When you see your father, naturally, you know filiality. When you see your elder brother, naturally, you know respect. When you see a child fall into a well, naturally, you know compassion. This is the innate knowing (*liangzhi* 良知), which need not be sought without. If innate knowing arises entirely free of the obstruction of self-centered intentions, this is what [Mengzi] meant by "if one can enlarge the compassionate heart, his humanity will be inexhaustible." However, when it comes to people, they are incapable of being free from the obstructions of self-centered thinking. Thus, they must apply themselves to the discipline of realizing knowing and rectifying affairs (*gewu* 格物), overcoming self-centeredness and returning to principle. Then the mind's innate knowing will no longer be obstructed, and it will be able to permeate and flow forth, which is to realize its knowing. With this knowing realized one's thinking will be genuine (Ibid., 1.7).

With the essence of the mind's original ability to know as the foundation, Wang Yangming says, "When you see your father, naturally, you know reverence. When you see your elder brother, naturally, you know respect. When you see a child fall into a well, naturally, you know compassion." These are instances of the unification of knowing and acting, where knowledge arises from a stimulus in specific settings of objective relational interaction. The situation is consistent with what Wang speaks of as "loving a lovely

color” or “hating a bad odor,” even if the actual content of the knowledge may differ. For him, stimulation is the objective functioning of the innate knowing inherent to the mind itself, which, in the course of its functioning and insofar as it is entirely free of the obstruction caused by self-centered intentions, can authentically express and manifest its original condition. As such, the mode of its appearance will necessarily be a unity of knowing and acting. Hence, in specific settings of objective relational interaction, a person's existence, the object's existence, and the existence of the relationship can each attain expression according to their inherent, proper condition. Then, the complete unification of mind, body, intention, knowledge, and things can manifest in the subject's mental life.

Thus, for Wang Yangming, the unity of knowing and acting is the natural mode by which the inherent reality of the essence of mind itself can be expressed as it is in the setting of objective relations, as well as the mode by which life's genuine being is actualized. The interference of self-centered (egoic) intentions hinders the true expression of the inherent knowing of the essence of the mind itself. It also disrupts the natural order of the unity of mind and body, dualistically rendering them. Thus, disclosing the unity of knowing and acting in its sense as perception not only discloses the actual status of the activity of life itself but also that this is the mode by which the life world and the realm of value are constructed. The integration of mind, body, intention, knowledge, and thing is essentially the world of the individual's existence as constructed by the unification of knowing and acting and the individual's world of meaning and value. Thus, the sincerity or genuineness of intentions determines whether one has unified knowing and acting. The unification of knowing and acting determines whether the existential nature and the meaning and value of the individual's existence can indeed manifest. It is precisely in this sense that the theory of the unity of knowing and acting fully reflects Wang Yangming's existential concern for human existence.

III-3 Explaining the Meaning of the Unity of Knowing and Acting with Knowledge in the Sense of What is Known

Perception is the general mode by which the individual realizes his or her expression when situated in objective relational settings. If these settings are limited to cognitive relational settings, then perception transforms into a knowledge process. Thus, the unity of knowing and acting concept originally contained epistemological meaning. Indeed, taken in its epistemological sense, Wang Yangming's tenet both corrects the shortcomings of Zhu Xi's claim that “knowledge comes before action” (which divides knowing and acting into “two legs”) and develops ancient Chinese epistemology.

Knowledge and action originally surfaced as a problem of knowledge in the history of classical Chinese thought. Their earliest appearance as paired categories should be found in the “Charge to Yue II (Shuo ming zhong 說命中)” of the *Classic of Documents* (*Shang shu* 尚書), which states, “It is not the knowing that is difficult, but the putting it into practice.” The Song dynasty Ruists Cheng Hao 程顥, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi also frequently reference these two sentences. Considering them alone, since knowledge and action are juxtaposed, it is evident that they are divided in two. However, precisely for this reason, it becomes necessary to clarify their mutual relationship. The conclusion reached by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi concerning the fundamental relationship between knowledge and action—that knowledge comes first, and action after, but that action is to be emphasized over knowledge—can undoubtedly be directly derived from them. When discussing this problem, Cheng Yi once said,

Thus, for a person to act assiduously, they must first have knowledge. Not only is acting difficult, knowing is difficult too. The *Classic of Documents* says, “It is not the knowing that is difficult, but the putting it into practice.” This is no doubt true. However, knowing is also certainly difficult. For example, if someone wishes to go to the capital, they must know from which gate to exit and which road to travel before they can go there. If they do not know, even if they have the desire to go, how will they go? It is not that from ancient times talented individuals with the ability to act assiduously have been lacking, just that few can understand the Way. From this, one can see that knowing is also difficult (Cheng 1981, 18.187).

Here, Cheng Yi clearly discusses the problem of what one knows (or factual knowledge). According to his interpretation, knowledge must come before action because this sequence has always been a practical reality of life. Thus, if one wishes to go to the capital, one must know in advance the right gate to exit and the road to travel; otherwise, “how will they go?” Thus, he says that acquiring knowledge is also not easy.

After Wang Yangming proposed his tenet of the unity of knowing and acting, he was widely criticized, and many were skeptical of it. For example, Gu Lin 顧璘 (1476–1545) once used the case of “travel only after you know the route” to call into question his tenet. Wang Yangming’s reply was,

One must have the desire to travel and then one will know the route. The desire to travel is one’s intention, that is, the beginning of travel. One only knows the danger or safety of a crossroads after having personally experienced it oneself. How could one know the danger or safety of a crossroads without having first personally experienced it oneself? (Wang, 2011, 2.47)?

What Wang Yangming means here is quite clear. The acquisition of concrete, factual knowledge of the danger or safety of a crossroads is entirely identical to personally experiencing it for oneself, this course of action. Knowledge of the danger or safety of the crossroads preceding this experience does not count as genuine knowledge. Thus, Gu Lin says, “genuine knowledge is the basis for taking action, and unless it is acted upon it cannot be called [genuine] knowledge.”

This same issue of travel was also brought up by Wang Chengyu 王承裕 (1465–1538) to question Wang Yangming’s theory of knowledge and action. He likewise believed that one must possess factual knowledge about the destination before traveling, as in the case of going to the capital: “If someone is not familiar with the location of the capital but blindly wishes to go, few are those who, if they do not head south to Yue will head north to Wu.” Wang Yangming, however, replied,

Without hesitation in the face of danger and hardship, determined to move forward—this truly is the meaning of perfecting the genuineness of one’s intentions. If this is the case, then the reason for inquiries about the route, preparing for expenses, and precaution over vessels and vehicles is that these are all necessary. Otherwise, where is the determination to move forward and how does one move forward? If someone is not familiar with the location of the capital and blindly wishes to go, then they merely wish to go and no more and are not truly going. Because they wish to go but are not truly going, they have not inquired about the route, prepared for expenses, or taken precautions over vessels and vehicles. If they are determined to move forward, then they are truly going. Can one who is truly going act like this (Ibid., 4.184)?

For Wang Yangming, if someone “truly goes” and does not just “wish to go” to the capital, then this person will invariably obtain knowledge about the capital through a series of actions. Here, the practical actions of inquiring about the route, preparing for expenses,

precautions over vessels and vehicles, and so on are all necessary, and these series of actions are the practical process through which knowledge of the capital is acquired. This is like the person walking along a road. Only after a section has been walked will they recognize it. If they reach a crossroads and do not know the way, then they will ask before continuing, and then they can eventually reach the desired destination.

These examples demonstrate that Wang Yangming's theory of the unity of knowing and acting originally possessed epistemological meaning. Theoretically speaking, only by subsuming epistemology can his proposition be entirely coherent. As for the epistemological domain of the unity of knowing and acting, the outstanding feature of Wang Yangming's exposition of it is that he grounds it in the inherent, actual condition of the vital activity of the person and then examines epistemological activity anew, thereby revealing the processual identity of knowledge and practice, transforming knowledge into practice and unifying practice with knowledge. Since the processual identity of knowledge and action conforms to the inherent, true condition of vital activity, it becomes the "ought" in the two-way interaction of knowledge and practice. Because the derivation of "ought" is grounded in life's inherent truth, carrying out the "ought" becomes the mode by which the genuine existential nature of life itself is realized. Consequently, as a proposition, the unity of knowing and acting implicitly complements the mind in its original condition and practice. The holistic interaction between learning and acting acquires its meaning because it manifests life's inherent, true nature.

The concept of genuine knowledge (*zhenzhi* 真知) best expresses the value of the tenet of the unity of knowing and acting in Chinese epistemology. Wang Yangming's tenet, in its sense as an epistemological activity, amply stresses the mutually facilitating relationship between practical action and genuine knowledge. Genuine knowledge is not only the intrinsic impetus to practical action, necessarily borrowing practical behavior to express itself; when praxis expresses genuine knowledge, it also expands that knowledge. For Wang, behavioral activity unguided by genuine knowledge is just blind action (*mingxing* 冥行), and knowledge that cannot be put into practice is false knowledge (*wangzhi* 妄知). In the sense that knowing and acting are two sides of a coin and the attribute of identity in the process of practice, the unity of knowing and acting is the fundamental path to the actualization of genuine knowledge, and genuine knowledge is the inevitable outcome of the unity of knowing and acting. In this respect, the tenet is a paradigmatic expression of Wang Yangming's conception of truth. This unity is the path to seeking truth.

Wang Yangming's conception is the outcome of his having amply drawn from various intellectual resources in Chinese history and given them a new synthesis and theoretical summation. In general, Chinese classical culture pays close attention to the authenticity of a person's concrete existence and emotional expression. The *Classic of Documents*' "Canon of Shun (*Shun dian* 舜典)" states that "Poetry shall express intent," highlighting inner intent or aim and poetry's fundamental relation of identity. The traditional interpretation of *zhi* 志 is that it is "where the heart goes" (*xin zhi suo zhi* 心之所之: lit. "the direction of the heart"). However, the author of this paper proposes changing *zhi* 之 to *zai* 在 so that the phrase reads "where the heart is." Intent read as where the heart is, as the location of the heart, is obviously a kind of self-knowledge. As a linguistic act, poetry expresses or embodies one's inner intent (=knowledge). As the Southern Song scholar Cai Shen 蔡沈 put it, "Where the heart goes is called the intent. When the heart has a direction, it must be expressed in words; hence, [the "Canon of Shun"] says 'poetry shall express intent'" (Cai, 1983, 1.13). Clearly, the idea that "genuine knowledge must be manifested in action" is already implicit in Cai's statement.

Although the “Charge to Yue II” in *Classic of Documents* states, “It is not the knowing that is difficult, but the doing,” the direction in Confucius’s thinking about knowledge and action is clear enough even if he by no means spoke of a “a unity of knowing and acting.” The author of this paper believes the opening statement in the *Analects* (“To study and at due times practice what one has studied”) is, in fact, intended as guidance for the entire book. To study is undoubtedly the activity of seeking and acquiring knowledge.

As for Confucius, he said that in learning, he was without a constant teacher (*Analects* 19.22), was “unashamed to ask questions of those below him” (*Analects* 5.15), and spoke of “to study without tiring” (*Analects* 7.2). When Duke Ai of Lu asked about governing, Confucius said, “The governance of Kings Wen and Wu is laid out in bound records,” indicating that he learned from the written word (Eno, 2016, 45). As well, showing his willingness to learn from others, Confucius said, “Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them” (*Analects*, 7.22; Lau, 1979, 88). Concerning learning from history, he said, “A man is worthy of being a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with” (*Analects* 2.11; Lau 1979: 64). And as for learning facts, the *Record of Rites* (*Li ji* 禮記) says, “Confucius said, ‘I wish to see the ways of Xia, and for that purpose went to Qi.’”

It is hard to imagine that all this learning was not manifested in praxis. Thus, learning is a practical activity or performance and, simultaneously, a kind of intellectual activity. Knowing through learning is the unification of performance and knowledge, and what is referred to as practice (*xi* 習) originally means “interning (*shixi* 實習)” or “putting into practice (*shijian* 實踐),” that is, the practical application of knowledge. Thus, the unity of knowing and acting was already implicit in “to study and at due times practice what one has studied” (*Analects*, 1.1).

As for the man “who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in mind what he is already familiar with,” keeping fresh in mind the familiar is action, and getting to know what is new is its outcome. These two surely manifest as a unified process. Wang Yangming once explained, “Since getting to know what is new must come from keeping the familiar fresh in mind, and keeping the familiar fresh in mind is how one gets to know the new, this can also prove that knowledge and action are not two separate parts” (Wang, 2011, 2.58). In *Analects* 7.28, Confucius said, “There are presumably men who innovate without possessing knowledge, but this is not a fault I have” (Lau 1979: 89). Here, “innovate” is action, and innovating without prior knowledge is merely unthinkingly acting. As it is blindly acting, how can there be genuine knowledge? “This is not a fault I have” means that he is without the flaw of innovating without prior knowledge. All of Confucius’s actions are manifestations of genuine knowledge, wherein “genuine knowledge is the basis for taking action.”

The above examples show that Confucius’ record contains a wealth of resources concerning the unity of knowledge and action. The Han dynasty historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–86 BCE) also records Confucius saying, “My desire to convey these [judgments] through hollow words is not as good as demonstrating them through the earnestness and clarity of actions taken” (Sima, 1982, 130. 3297). Confucius emphasizes action; thus, taking action is more earnest and explicit than hollow words. In *Analects* 2.13, Confucius says of the gentleman, “He puts his words into action before allowing his words to follow his action” (Lau, 1979, 64).

Furthermore, both Confucius and Mengzi always regarded introspection as a daily practice that ensured unity of mind and body and internal and external consistency. Such expressions as *san xing* 三省 (“examining oneself three times”), *nei zi xing* 內自省 (“introspective self-examination”), *qiu zhu ji* 求諸己 (“seeking it within oneself”), *fan qiu*

zhu ji 反求諸己 (“turning within and seeking it in oneself”), *nei zi song* 內自訟 (“taking oneself to task within”), *fan shen er cheng* 反身而誠 (“to reflect upon oneself and find perfect integrity”) all stress the same idea: One should ensure that the entirety of one’s conduct and actions are in agreement with the actual state of one’s mind and heart within, that mind and body are unified. For Mengzi, the unity of mind and body is called *cheng* 誠 (“genuineness” or “sincerity”), so he says (*Mengzi*, 7A.4), “To reflect upon oneself and find perfect integrity, there is no delight greater than this” (Eno, 2016, 141). If examining the entirety of the self’s physical activity, one finds that one’s behavior and intelligence are seamlessly in agreement and originally form a whole, then “there is no delight greater than this!” As for Wang Yangming, the unity of knowing and acting is precisely the discipline of perfecting the genuineness of one’s intentions.

Looking outside classical Confucianism, it is worth noting that Buddhism also contains rich intellectual resources about the unity of knowledge and action. The Tiantai school includes a discourse on the dual practice of calming and contemplation (*zhi guan shuang xiu* 止觀雙修), wherein the two teachings of calming and contemplation are the most poignant and critical path for attaining nirvana. Zhiyi 智顛 once said:

Calming is the initial teaching through which one subdues the fetters. Contemplation is the essential doctrine through which one cuts off hindrances. Calming then is the wholesome aid with which one nurtures with care the mind and consciousness. Contemplation then is the wondrous technique which sets in motion spiritual understanding. Calming is the superior cause of meditative concentration. Contemplation is the origin of wisdom (Zhiyi, 1988, 1).

Thus, the two dharmas of calming and contemplation are “like the two wheels of a cart or the two wings of a bird. If one one-sidedly cultivates them, one immediately falls into perverted views” (Zhiyi, 1988, 1). Calming is meditative concentration, and contemplation is *prajñā* (*bore* 般若). Meditative concentration is action, and *prajñā* is wisdom. Wisdom arises from practice, and practice is wisdom. When Zhiyi specifically emphasizes that “wisdom arises from (meditative) concentration,” he has essentially already stressed the processual identity of the practice of meditative concentration and the wisdom of *prajñā*, the unity of concentration (*ding* 定) and wisdom (*hui* 慧).

In his *Shanding zhiguan* 刪定止觀 (Abbreviated and edited *Mohe zhiguan*), Liang Su 梁肅 (753–793) states, “It is not difficult to know (*zhi* 知); only practice (*xing* 行) is difficult. If one knows but does not practice, this is like a snake wrapping around a pearl. Although shiny, what benefit is it to the snake?” If one knows but fails to practice, even if the knowledge is brilliant, in the end, it will be of no benefit. Thus, the idea that knowledge must be put into practice is already evident here.

Ziren 自仁, a student Zhili 知禮 (960–1028), said, “Wisdom (*zhahui* 智慧) is the basis of practice (*xing* 行), and thus practice relies on wisdom for its generation. If practice can bring wisdom to completion, then wisdom relies on practice for its fulfillment. Practice and understanding are mutually reliant; one cannot be missing” (Zong, 1995, *juan* 3). Although Zili still conceptually divides wisdom and practice, he emphasizes that “practice relies on wisdom for its generation” and “wisdom relies on practice for its fulfillment.” Thus, he already views wisdom and practice as an integrated whole. However, it would be difficult to distinguish his formulation from Wang Yangming’s theory of the unity of knowledge and action.

After the Tang dynasty, the most influential school of Buddhism was the Chan 禪 school. The crux of Huineng’s teaching is “illuminating one’s mind and seeing one’s nature; attaining Buddhahood by seeing one’s nature.” The Chan School especially

emphasizes training. “Illuminating one’s mind” is training, and “seeing one’s nature” is training. In the hands of Huineng 惠能 (638–713), the Tiantai school’s “balance of concentration and wisdom in the cultivation of calm abiding and insight” was directly transformed into the “one essence of concentration and wisdom (*ding hui yiti* 定慧一體).” If those who study Buddhism have already intuitively illuminated their original mind, they will spontaneously manifest their original nature and attain Buddhahood.

However, Huineng states, “one who does not know original mind gains nothing from studying the dharma” (Guo, 1983, 15).² If one can know the mind and see nature, one will naturally achieve Buddhahood. However, meditative concentration and wisdom are the keys to illuminating the mind intuitively. Thus, Huineng says, “The foundation of the gate to my dharma is meditative concentration and wisdom.” He says,

Meditative concentration and wisdom are one essence, nondual. Meditative concentration is the essence of wisdom and wisdom is the functioning of meditative concentration. In moments of wisdom, meditative concentration is present in wisdom; in moments of meditative concentration, wisdom is present in that meditative concentration. If you understand this interpretation, you understand the balance of meditative concentration and wisdom” (Ibid., 26).

“Meditative concentration is the essence of wisdom” means action is the basis of knowledge. “Wisdom is the functioning of meditative concentration” means knowledge is completed by action. “Meditative concentration and wisdom are one essence, nondual” is the same as the identity of knowing and acting.

Compared to before, the discussion of the problem of knowledge and action was even more prominent among Song Ruists. As noted above, although Zhu Xi criticized Zhang Nanxuan’s idea that “knowledge and action are mutually generated,” he was not the only one in his time supporting this opinion. Lu Zuqian 呂祖謙 once said, “The extension of knowledge and assiduous action are not two separate matters. Assiduously acting is also how one’s knowledge is extended, just as polishing a mirror is how it is made to shine” (Lu, 2008, 10.260). Since he says that knowledge and action “are not two separate matters,” they are “one matter.” Knowledge is extended while one acts assiduously, much like how a mirror shines when polishing it. The sense that knowledge and action are unified is already quite evident in Lu Zuqian’s statement.

With Zhu Xi’s opinion on knowledge and action as the foundation, the early Ming scholar Wang Hui 王禕 (1322–1374) further expounded upon their relation. He said, “Having understood in the mind, also verify it with the body. Knowing it and acting on it are like two wheels on a cart. When this virtue has been attained, the sages and worthies are the same” (Wang Hui, 1988, 15.278). Similarly, the Ruist Chen Zhensheng 陳真晟 (1411–1474) said, “If a person genuinely knows this learning, then action will be included with it.” Zhou Rudeng 周汝登 (1547–1629) once criticized him, stating, “The commoner said that if knowledge is genuine then action will come with it. The objective of the unity of knowing and acting had already emerged with this” (Zhou, 2015, 777). The early Qing Ruist Li Yong 李顥 (1627–1705) believed that “as a call for future scholars to unify knowledge and action,” Chen’s conception of the two was “brilliant” (Li, 1996, 284)! Nevertheless, Li Yong and Zhou Rudeng were incorrect in attributing to Chen the first call for the unity of knowledge and action because, as explained above, this tenant was by no

² Guo Peng 郭朋, *Tan jing jiao shi* 壇經校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983). For translation, see John R. Mcrae’s *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000).

means new. As well it had already become a philosophical proposition in the hands of Wang Yangming, who thoroughly clarified its implications.

Nevertheless, returning to such explanations as the processual identity of knowledge and action, “knowledge and action are one thing,” as well as “two words explaining a single practice,” these do not fully capture the meaning of the unity of knowing and acting as Wang Yangming understood it. The *Record of Instructions for Practice* states:

I asked about the unity of knowing and acting. Master [Yangming] said, “For this, you must understand the basic objective of the philosophy I have expounded. Only because what people learn nowadays divides knowing and acting into two parts, whenever a single thought is generated, even if it is not good, simply because they have not acted on it, they do not proceed to prohibit it. Now, when I speak of a unity of knowing and acting, it is precisely because I want people to understand that the generation of a single thought is already action. If the point of generation possesses immorality, then subdue this immoral thought. It is necessary to penetrate to the root and penetrate to the bottom, not permitting that single immoral thought to remain latent in one’s mind. This is the objective of the philosophy I have expounded” (Wang, 2011, 3.109–10).

The importance of this record lies in Wang Yangming’s apparent assertion that “the generation of a single thought is already action,” thus revealing another meaning for action. Because all actions manifested through physical activity are presented outwardly, this is the visible dimension of action or, more simply, visible action. “The point of generation of a single thought” refers to such inner mental activity as consciousness, thought, and emotion, and this cognitive activity is hidden; it has yet to appear explicitly. Thus, it is the hidden dimension of action or, put more simply, hidden action. Hidden action is visible action’s pre-formative state.

For Wang Yangming, the unity of mind and body is affirmed as the original truth of vital being, and he insists that the inherent, true nature of life itself be realized to the utmost. Otherwise, one cannot speak of authentic being. Therefore, in theory, he maintains that the hidden and visible form one whole. The exterior behavior in experience is the “action” of “the generation of a single thought” or, as it were, the outward expression or actualized form of the hidden dimension of action. It is nothing more than a shift or migration in the status of action’s existence. For him, whether internal or external, hidden or visible, duality is absent from the processual identity of knowledge and action.

III-4 Explaining the Unity of Knowing and Acting with Knowing in the Sense of *Liangzhi* 良知 (Innate Knowing)

The epistemological dimension of the unity of knowing and acting limits the objective relational setting to the cognitive, relational context in examining the true state of the perception course. Thus, the existing condition of the object is reduced to what is known in the essence of the mind itself. What is known is the reality itself of the object as revealed to the subject in specific relational settings. However, the actual circumstances of a person’s life are not limited to cognitive relational settings, as there are also ethical (moral), emotional, and aesthetic contexts constituting life’s objective relational settings and, regardless, the requirement that the inherent, real condition (or state) of the essence of mind itself faithfully manifest through the activity body in such immediate settings remains entirely the same. Moreover, the faithful expression of the inherent, real condition of the essence of mind itself is, for Wang Yangming, the unity of knowing and acting.

Furthermore, for Wang Yangming, because the inherent, actual condition of the essence of the mind itself is also identical to the innate knowing (*liangzhi* 良知), the unity

of knowing and acting turns into realization of the innate knowing (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知). That is, knowing in his tenet of unity is innate knowing. Wang Yangming states,

The innate knowing is what Mengzi meant when he said, “The sense of right and wrong common to all people.” The sense of right and wrong requires no deliberation to know, nor does it depend on learning to function. This is why it is called innate knowing. It is my nature endowed by heaven, the essence (=original condition) of my mind, naturally intelligent, luminous, clear, and aware (Chan, 1963, 278).

For Wang Yangming, the innate knowing is the mind of the identity of mind and principle, and hence the mind of the *Dao*, or what he refers to as the original mind that everyone possesses. This original mind is one with principle and the *Dao* because this mind is essentially the existence of the *Dao* in the person. Thus, it is also the “nature endowed by Heaven,” and the person’s truly fundamental attribute. The innate knowing is the authentic and original condition of a human being’s intrinsic existence.

The meaning of *zhi* 致 includes “to realize,” “to express,” and “to put into practice.” Thus, the concrete practice of realizing the innate knowing is the actualization of what is original to a person’s life, the realization of the value of the human path, and, simultaneously, the realization of the original reality that is the *Dao*. It is only through the actualization of the innate knowing that an individual’s existence reaches the original truth of his or her existence and, at the same time, for this reason, actualizes a transcendent turn in the realm of his or her life.

The foregoing discussion of the unity of knowing and acting first articulated the theory that this tenet means the identity of knowing and acting, after which four orientations were explored, depending on the sense in which knowledge is understood. The four orientations each fundamentally demonstrate a unity of mind and body. For Wang Yangming, the unity of knowing and acting must be applied to all areas of the individual’s actual life. His insight into the identity of mind and principle became his initial presupposition concerning the original, true condition of human existence, the proper form of life. As the ultimate goal of practitioners of his learning of mind is to achieve sagehood, a person’s commitment must be to transform this *a priori* truth and reality into experiential fact within the many objective relational settings of his or her experiential world, and the only means for realizing this purpose is the unity of knowing and acting. The ultimate principle by which this unity permeates all areas of human life is the realization of innate knowing. It is the sole efficacious experiential mode by which the self recognizes human existence and its meaning and value as self-evident and brought to realization. Thus, the unity of knowing and acting is essentially an existential proposition amply reflecting a fundamental concern that our human existence should be free of the destructive rendering of mind and body.

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