

Nerve/Nurses of the Cosmic Doctor: Wang Yang-ming on Self-Awareness as World-Awareness

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ABSTRACT

In Philip J. Ivanhoe's introduction to his *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism*, he argues convincingly that the Ming-era Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) was much more influenced by Buddhism (especially Zen's *Platform Sutra*) than has generally been recognized. In light of this influence, and the centrality of questions of selfhood in Buddhism, in this article I will explore the theme of selfhood in Wang's Neo-Confucianism. Put as a mantra, for Wang "self-awareness is world-awareness." My central image for this mantra is the entire cosmos anthropomorphized as a doctor engaged in constant self-diagnosis, in which effort s/he is assisted by an entire staff of the nerves/nurses—individual humans enlightened as Wangian sages. In short, I will argue that the world for Wang could be meaningfully understood as a mindful, self-healing body within which humans are the sensitive nerves, using our mindful awareness to direct attention to the affected areas when injury or disease occurs. We are, and must thus recognize that we are, the bold but sensitive nervous system of the cosmos, sharing (like neurons) our loving excitement, carrying out (like a medical nurse) the doctor's orders for the self-care of our cosmic body/medical corps.

KEYWORDS

Wang Yang-ming;
Neo-Confucianism;
self-awareness; medicine;
Philip J. Ivanhoe

For a younger generation of scholars, contemporary U.S. philosopher Philip J. Ivanhoe is easily the most influential translator into English of the Ming-era Neo-Confucian philosophy Wang Shou-jen (1472–1529).¹ He is better known by his literary name, Wang Yang-ming, after the Yang-ming ravine in the K'uai-chi mountain range, where he built himself a cottage (Wing-tsit 64).² Ivanhoe is currently Chair Professor of East Asian and Comparative Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong, and is the author of dozens of books and over 50 essays in Chinese thought. His most recent volume on Wang is a revised edition from 2002 of his 1990 *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yang-ming*.³ In Ivanhoe's introduction to his *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism*, he argues convincingly that Wang was much more influenced by Buddhism (especially Zen's *Platform Sutra*) than has generally been

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recognized.⁴ Starting from this suggestion, and given the centrality of questions of selfhood in Buddhism, in this article I will explore the theme of selfhood in Wang's Neo-Confucianism.

My guidepost in this exploration will be the following claim by Wang: 'To understand Heaven is to understand in the way that those responsible for a district or county understand that the affairs [of their district or county] are their affairs' (*Record* \$6, 145). Springing from this quote, my central question is, what would it be like to be a self that experienced the affairs of the world as one's own? In brief, what flows from this question is that the self for Wang (as for Zen philosophers) is unreal, not merely as metaphysically insubstantial, but also—and more importantly—as ethically all-encompassing. Returning to my guidepost quote, the Chinese character Ivanhoe translates here as 'affairs' (*wu*, 物), can also be translated as 'things', which would suggest the following paraphrase of that quote: the enlightened recognize that everything in the world is their responsibility.⁵ Put as a mantra, for Wang 'self-awareness is world-awareness'. In support of this interpretation, Ivanhoe contrasts the Mahayana Buddhist view of self as empty with the Neo-Confucian view that *li* (禮) constitutes 'the nature of the self as well' (*Ethics* 23).

My central image for this mantra is the entire cosmos anthropomorphized as a doctor engaged in constant self-diagnosis, in which effort s/he is assisted by an entire staff of nerves/nurses—individual humans enlightened as Wangian sages. In short, I will argue that the world for Wang could be meaningfully understood as a mindful, self-healing body within which humans are the sensitive nerves, using our mindful awareness to direct attention to the affected areas when injury or disease occurs. We are, and must thus recognize that we are, the bold but sensitive nervous system of the cosmos, sharing (like neurons) our loving excitement, carrying out (like a medical nurse) the doctor's orders for the self-care of our cosmic body/medical corps. Before I provide textual evidence for this interpretation, from both Ivanhoe's pioneering interpretation of Wang and also my own close reading of Wang, I will first begin with a bit of biography, as Wang's is both particularly striking and relevant for my interpretation.

The Larger-Than-Life Self of Wang's Biography

In the introduction to his *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*, Ivanhoe notes that Wang 'was a man of many means who faced great personal, intellectual, and professional challenges, at times suffered terribly, and almost always managed to triumph' (xiii). In outline, Wang 'had a successful career as a government official, surviving an unjust public flogging and banishment to [the remote and backward province of] Guizhou and eventually rising to become governor of Jiangxi Province' (xiii). Wang was also 'a general who commanded a series of important antirebel campaigns in south and central China and played a major role in the suppression of the revolt by Prince Ning in the summer of 1518—an accomplishment for which he never received due credit' (xiii).

Ivanhoe goes into greater detail in his 'Introduction to Wang Yang-ming' in *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism*. Wang, Ivanhoe writes, was 'the top graduate of his examination cohort in 1481', after which, in 1506, he 'stepped forward to defend fellow officials who had been thrown into prison for opposing' a powerful eunuch administrator (101). For this courageous and just act, much like Boethius in

Ancient Rome, Wang suffered ‘the humiliating, painful, and life-threatening punishment of being publicly caned forty blows at court’, and was then ‘banished to an isolated, minor post in the undeveloped hinterland’ for 2 years (101). Even more impressive than his initial stand, though, is the way that Wang transformed his exile into flourishing triumph. Ivanhoe explains as follows:

As an administrator, Wang significantly improved the economy and security of the areas under his jurisdiction and worked to build schools and encourage education. He originated novel systems of civil defense and pioneered new methods for rehabilitating former criminals, especially those who had taken to banditry and rebellion. (102)

Wing-tsin Chan’s biographical article on Wang supplies several intriguing pieces of information not covered by Ivanhoe. First, Wang actively practiced Daoist techniques aimed at prolonging human life (63). Second, it was his active life in government that turned him against Daoism, Buddhism, and practicing the literary arts, and which likely led to a series of health problems (including hemorrhages) that forced him to retire from public life for 2 years at the age of 30 (64). Third, the inhabitants of the hinterland to which he was exiled included not merely backwards or uneducated Chinese people, but more specifically two aboriginal, mountain-dwelling ethnic groups whom the Chinese call the Miao and Liao (and whose names for themselves include Hmong) (65). Fourth, his most important specific public policy was ‘the ten-family joint registration system in which the families are grouped together with joint responsibility for the prevention of crime and bandit infiltration’ (66). It was the latter policy, moreover, that facilitated Wang’s most impressive military victory, including capturing 100 strongholds and defeating 15,000 rebels in just 2 months (67). Fifth, when he was later awarded the title of Earl, with a huge salary and exemption from criminal prosecution for his descendants, he twice refused it all (70). And finally, he was known to engage in the Chan Buddhist practice of sitting meditation during his own classes (71).

I ask the reader to keep these biographical details in mind below when I discuss Ivanhoe’s criticism of Wang as being against intellectualism, education, reading, and even books per se. Contra Ivanhoe, Wang’s biography illustrates that Wang was very much invested in education, tradition, and the pursuit of justice anchored in and anchored by the things of the world.

Ivanhoe on Wang

With a biographical stage thus set, and before offering my own reading of Wang, I now turn to the groundbreaking analyses in Ivanhoe that made my own possible. Though I, like the majority of scholars working in English, am in broad agreement with Ivanhoe, I will focus here on the place where his and my readings diverge.⁶

Much of our difference lies in Ivanhoe’s criticism of Neo-Confucianism per se, the philosophers of which Ivanhoe sees as fundamentally misunderstanding Kongzi and Mengzi. This misunderstanding, however, is for Ivanhoe both necessary and unconscious, caused by a thousand years of unconscious Buddhist and Daoist influences on Chinese culture and thought. Of particular importance, in Ivanhoe’s view, is the metaphysical system which the Neo-Confucians created from what Ivanhoe views as their unwitting sympathies with Buddhism and Daoism.

In a nutshell, this metaphysical system ‘saw the universe as a vast, interpenetrating system ordered by “pattern” or “principle” (*li*)’ (22). In order to preserve both of these aspects of this crucial concept for Wang, and to emphasize the sense of its self-perpetuating function of providing pattern, I will render *li* hereafter as ‘patterning’. Ivanhoe describes this patterning, effectively, as ‘the ultimate source of the world’s physical and moral qualities’ and as ‘something like metaphysical DNA’ (23). In the latter sense, he elaborates, patterning ‘achieves its ends not by laws but by providing “patterns” and “principles” for things and events’ (23).⁷ I will return to this DNA metaphor for patterning below in support of my own interpretation of Wang’s metaphysically grounded ethics.

Also crucial for my interpretation is the metaphor that Ivanhoe identifies as Wang’s appropriation from his Neo-Confucian predecessor Cheng Hao. For Cheng Hao, people who fail to see the interconnected nature of all human beings—and who therefore lack compassion for all humans—are like people with a paralyzed and numb limb. Specifically, the deadened limb (like the other humans to whom they are connected) can still be injured, even though the person cannot accurately feel that suffering as her/his own (*Ethics* 28). I will return to this metaphor below in order to argue that Wang actually extends it (rather than merely adopting Cheng Hao’s original formulation of it).

My biggest difference from Ivanhoe, however, is that where Ivanhoe criticizes Wang for his alleged Buddhist sympathies I see an interpretive possibility for a conception of self that is relevant for present-day Western philosophy as well. To pinpoint the difference between Ivanhoe’s and my interpretations, I locate that difference in a distinction that Ivanhoe makes and then immediately drops. ‘Wang’s moral paragon’, Ivanhoe writes, ‘was to see the entire universe as his body or, *more precisely, to see himself as part of this universal body*’ (36, emphasis added). The first half of this quote, I would suggest, leads one to quietism, and perhaps even solipsism. Whereas the latter half of the quote supports my own new conception of the cosmos-self as a central nervous system, of which we human beings are the nerves. As Wang puts it in a speech (translated by Julia Ching),

The teachings of Cha’an Buddhism and those of the sages both seek the complement fulfilment of the mind. There is only a slight difference between the two. The sage seeks to fulfill his mind (*ching-hsin*) completely, by regarding Heaven and Earth and all things as one body.⁸

Although this distinction might make no difference to Neo-Confucians in general, for Wang in particular, it is the crucial difference between selfishness and altruism. Or, in a distinction he deploys in the same speech, it is the difference between the ‘Mind of the Way’ [*dao-xin*] versus ‘man’s mind’ [*ren-xin*], in which the human mind ‘contains the beginnings of hypocrisy’ (216).

The most important result of Ivanhoe’s dropping this distinction, for my purposes, is his conclusion regarding Wang’s view of human nature. Although Ivanhoe sees Wang as agreeing with Mengzi regarding the ‘content’ and ‘structure’ of human nature, Ivanhoe insists that Wang rejects outright Mengzi’s insistence that human nature must follow a ‘course of development’ (47). It is this claim that human nature is nondevelopmental that I wish to challenge. In this, I am preceded and supported by Julia Ching’s landmark

monograph on Wang, *To Acquire Wisdom*, which also insists on a developmental aspect of his view.⁹

My first counterexample to Ivanhoe's claim is that Wang repeatedly insists, as Ivanhoe acknowledges, that one must 'extend' *liangzhi* (48). Although one might argue that extension is not the same as development, I would point to the etymological kinship of the two concepts, since to 'develop' means to unfold, and it is by unfolding a material that one extends it further in space (like a bolt of fabric). Usually rendered 'pure knowing', *liangzhi* (my preferred translation being 'virtuous knowing', as I explain below) is often described as Wang's central concept.

A second set of counterexamples to Ivanhoe's claim can be found in Wang's own primary metaphors for human nature, including '*the sun obscured by clouds*', 'pure gold (which is tainted by the impurities of selfish desires)', and a human eye infiltrated by a speck of dust (including gold dust) (50, 73). The developmental aspects of these are (a) the clouds being blown by winds across the sun, (b) the miners' melting of the gold ore in order to purify the gold, and (c) the person's tear ducts and/or fingers removing dust from the eye (respectively). And note that neither the gold nor the sun-as-perceived exists prior to the impurities and clouds in general.

For a third counterexample to Ivanhoe's claim, he himself writes (in his subsequent chapter) about Wang's fight against 'spiritual pollution' and of Wang's project for 'moral cultivation' and 'opportunities for spiritual practice'—and all of these, too, necessarily involve courses of development (73). And for my final counterexample, I quote from Wang's own student, Xu Ai, who compiled and edited Wang's *Record for Practice*. 'When I first encountered his Way, it seemed so easy', Xu Ai writes, but after long study 'I found it rose ever higher [before me]' (*Record* 133–134). Even though what is at issue here are selfish desires, the spread of these desires, and their therapeutic removal, must both, as we say in medicine, follow a certain development.

The importance for Ivanhoe of this distinction emerges more clearly in his later contrast between Mengzi and Wang on self-cultivation, which arguably minimizes the complexity of self-cultivation for Wang by labeling it a 'discovery model' (as contrasted with Mengzi's 'development model') (88). There is already a logical problem here, however, in that the very concept of 'cultivation' implies some sort of process and development, even if only in the sense of an object that is the end product of some process or other. One does not cultivate a garden, or a taste for fine wine, with the first scoop of earth or sip of pinot noir. Additionally, Ivanhoe's translation of 'the signature Neo-Confucian term of art', *ge wu* [格物] strikes me as problematic and merits extended attention. According to Ivanhoe, *ge* (格) can mean 'to reach' (glossed as 'to investigate'), and *wu* (物) can mean 'things', and the combined phrase has historically been glossed as 'investigation of things' (98). In the case of Wang in particular, however, Ivanhoe parses the phrase here as 'the rectification of [thoughts] of things' (*Ethics* 98). Similarly, in Ivanhoe's *Readings from the Lu-Wang School* translations, he renders it as 'the rectification of [thought in regard to] things' (*Readings* 143).

By contrast, one modern dictionary defines *ge* as 'ruled line or space (on paper); category; compartment'.¹⁰ This derives from the fact that the character of *ge* is composed of three other characters, namely 'tree' (*mu*, 木) and thus paper, 'follow' (*zhi*, 攴) and thus reaching, and mouth (*kou*, 口) and thus person, because it is often used in

characters like the English phrase ‘mouths to feed’. Telescoped, it means something like trees following and reaching people in the form of lined, ruled paper.

In sympathy with this etymology, Huaiyu Wang’s insightful article agrees with Zheng Xuan’s gloss of *gewu* (from Zheng Xuan’s groundbreaking commentary on the Confucian Classic entitled *The Great Learning*), as follows: ‘Ge 格, is to come; wu 物, the same as event.’¹¹ In full, Wang Huaiyu’s translation, going back to the ancient religious origins of the characters, is ‘to let things themselves come’, as an elaboration of *gan tong* (感通), ‘to open oneself to and be affected by things’ (210). In contrast to all of this, Ivanhoe’s aforementioned translation as ‘rectification of *thoughts of, or in regard to, things*’ undermines the importance of actual things for Wang. I am not trying here to confuse Zheng Xuan with Wang Yang-ming, but merely to note that Zheng Xuan and Huaiyu Wang agree on the original sense of *gewu*, which would therefore have been available to an indigenous Chinese speaker well-trained in the Classics.

To repeat what I noted above in my introduction, the evidence from Wang’s biography of the importance for him of things themselves includes his career as a general suppressing rebellion, his building of schools, and his rehabilitation programs for the criminal population. There is also ample evidence of the importance of things for Wang in his writings. In one passage, for example, he insists that his students ‘practice morality in the concrete situations of daily life’ (101). In another passage, Wang challenges his student as follows: ‘Why would one not investigate [aspects and details of the world]? One just needs some definite way to proceed?’ (*Record* §3, 138). The student in this passage, like Ivanhoe in this chapter on self-cultivation, appears to mistakenly confuse (a) having one method for all objects of study, with (b) having just one object of study. Wang affirms the former, but would deny the latter.

In a structurally analogous difficulty, the main problem with Ivanhoe’s distinction between Mengzi-as-developer and Wang-as-discoverer (in regard to self-cultivation) is that it falsely equates (a) Wang’s view on the possibility of sudden enlightenment, with (b) the continuous development of extending one’s enlightened thinking to the things of the world. And the latter, even if understood as a refining process, still falls under the heading of a development. This is not to say, however, that Mengzi’s model is not more developmental, and more explicitly and emphatically so, but merely that Wang, too, includes a significant developmental aspect in his conception of self-cultivation.

More precisely, if—as Wang repeatedly insists—we ‘form one body’ with Heaven, earth, and the myriad things, then we are not enlightened until our entire cosmic body is enlightened. In short, individual enlightenment is the beginning, not the end, of self-cultivation. The true end of self-cultivation, by implication, is nothing short of universal social, sentient, and ecological justice. And although one might object that I am confusing application with cultivation, I would argue that, although they can be made meaningfully distinct, cultivation can only be achieved, in Wang’s sense, through application.

The source of this issue can perhaps be located by returning to the aforementioned controversy regarding the Confucian concept of *gewu*, which lies at the core of all Wang interpretation in English thus far. In Ivanhoe’s case, his decision to render *wu* as ‘thoughts’—instead of either the surface meaning, ‘things’, or the etymological root, ‘events’—construes Wang as a simple idealist and minimizes Wang’s dominant orientation toward pragmatist real-world engagement. In other words, although for Wang

thought brings things into existence, thought can only do so while engaged in other things in the world.

Granted, Ivanhoe's is certainly the orthodox interpretation, and one can find textual evidence in support of it if one reads Wang out of context, or reads him only through the filter of his famous dispute with Zhu Xi. As is usually the case, the loser in such a debate is remembered as primarily the mistaken foil of the winner, with the loser's position oversimplified and the winner's position enhanced by incorporating objections from the loser. To relate this back to the specific dispute at hand, while Wang is certainly more thought-oriented than Zhu Xi, Wang is not the diametric opposite of him. Instead, Wang offers us a thought/thing balance, while Zhu Xi leans too far to the 'thing' extreme. It is only from a thing-centric perspective that Wang appears to be a traditional idealist. Here, I concur with Julia Ching, who also refuses to characterize Zhu Xi and Wang as 'belonging to schools of "realism" and "idealism"' (xv).

One problematic result of Ivanhoe's construal, which also constitutes supporting evidence for my position, can be seen in his translation of a passage, which adds material in brackets rather than leaving it as is. More specifically, perhaps in order to support his 'thoughts' interpretation of *wu* in Wang, Ivanhoe translates the first sentence of this passage as follows: 'If one's thoughts are on being benevolent to the people or caring for other creatures, then being benevolent to the people or caring for other creatures are things.' The second is as follows: 'The task of making one's thoughts sincere is nothing other than "rectifying [one's thoughts in relation to] things"' (*Record* §7, 146). Thus, the bracketed addition here literally brackets the world of things, and thereby brackets those things away from the thoughts one has about the things. In other words, this amounts to divorcing thoughts and things—the realms of thinking and acting, respectively—in the very process of attempting to render Wang's famous insistence on 'the unity of knowing and acting' (*Record* §5, 142). The basic point, similar to the view of classic Pragmatist philosophers like William James and John Dewey, is that (a) all action is cognitively infused and directed, and (b) all thought is action-directing and goal-oriented (123). Put differently, thought for Wang is the origin of which action is the completion. Or, more simply, all thought is a kind of action, and all action is (to some degree) thoughtful.

And speaking of the 'unity of knowing and acting', most recent English-language scholarship asserts that it is Wang's central 'doctrine', and the discussion thereof constitutes almost the entirety (outside of Ivanhoe) of that limited scholarship. William Day, however, challenges this dominant view with the following important quote from Wang: 'Only because later scholars have broken their task into two sections and have lost sight of the original substance of knowledge and action have I advocated the idea of their unity and simultaneous advance' (*Instructions for Practical Living* 93, quoted in Day 176, emphasis mine). In other words, this allegedly central 'doctrine' of the unity of knowing and acting is for Wang himself an entirely practical/action-based unity, in that Wang 'only' defended it as a strategic response to the intellectual debates of his particular historical milieu.

I am not denying that there may be trans-historical possibilities here, regarding an alleged human nature, but merely that one should not assume that is Wang's intention. Buttressing this suggestion, Julia Ching even goes so far as to refuse to translate key concepts like *liangzhi* with one consistent phrase in English, both to avoid 'Cartesian

overtones' in 'innate knowledge' and also 'to interpret it according to the different levels of contextual meaning' (xv).

Wang, as a character in *A Record of Practice*, buttresses Day's observation by claiming that what is most important, when one is evaluating a theory, is to explore the motives behind the endorsement of that theory in its own historical context. Wang sets this up by speaking of Confucianism in general. 'This is a critical, practical form of spiritual training' (§5, 141). Next, Wang turns to Confucianism's origins. 'What is the point', he asks, 'of earnestly insisting that knowing and acting are two separate things?' (141) Wang's answer to his own question is that the ancients insisted on this separation 'only because there is [in that era] a type of person in the world who foolishly acts upon impulse without engaging in the slightest thought' (142). Shifting forward to his own era, Wang then says that his own motive for asserting their unity is based on the fact that 'people today instead separate knowing and acting into two distinct tasks to perform and think that one must first know and then only then can one act' (142). Wang then concludes the discussion as follows: 'My current teaching regarding the unity of knowing and acting is a medicine directed precisely at this disease' (142).

By implication, it is a potentially serious mistake to advocate it in the twenty-first-century global world, without first examining the intellectual debates of our own milieu. Also problematically, these scholarly discussions in English of this doctrine emphasize the 'knowing' half of this dichotomy almost exclusively. They do so by focusing on the allegedly individual human mind, in its cognition of affairs, to the exclusion of all the things in the world affected by human actions—the thing with which, in Wang's repeated insistence, our 'benevolence forms one body' (*Questions* §1, 161).

But most concerning, perhaps, and by way of transition to the penultimate section of my own investigation, these discussions elide Wang's own predominantly pragmatic orientation—including as a teacher, governor, general, criminal-reformer, and school-builder. They seem to forget Wang's 40 scars, earned in compassionate and benevolent defiance of an unjust political power. Wang himself, however, could never have forgotten those scars, nor the central importance of the body and worldly things, to which those scars palpably testify. It is for my own pragmatic end of ameliorating this neglect that I now turn to offer my own vision of Wang's writings, including his novel and powerful conception of self—namely the cosmos-as-doctor, of which we humans are the nerves/nurses.

Wang's Nervy-Nurse Selves

As Ivanhoe notes in *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*, in addition to the massive general influence of Buddhism on Neo-Confucians in general, Wang specifically had 'read and at times quoted' the *Platform Sutra* in particular (76). The first indication of this specific influence that can be found, retroactively, in the sutra itself is that it opens with an explicit emphasis on this world (rather than a paradisiacal afterlife). Thus, contra Ivanhoe's characterization of Buddhism, and despite the Western stereotype of religion as such as otherworldly and escapist, the *Platform's* influence on Wang reinforces his Confucian commitment to the things of the present world rather than undermining that worldly commitment.

A second indication of the sutra's influence on Wang is that its protagonist and alleged author—namely Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen—earned his title and position by composing a poem in his mind (14). He could not have written it down because he was illiterate (15). Like Huineng, moreover, Wang too is famous for his poems. His first two significant poems, entitled *Gold Mountain* and *The Moon Obscuring Mountain Lodge*, were written around the age of 10 ('Poetry' 178).

A third indication of the sutra's influence on Wang is that the Zen Patriarch's aforementioned poem compares the heart-mind (*xin*) to a bright, clean mirror that somehow rests on no mirror-stand whatsoever. The mirror-stand, by implication, is the body, and the body necessarily exists for Zen philosophers in light of their pragmatic and this-worldly orientation. As a result, the poems' stated overcoming of mind/body dualism logically reduces the mind to the body (rather than vice versa). Put in Wang's terms, the poem blends knowing and acting into a unity that, though it initially appears reductive of acting to knowing, is better understood as reducing knowing to acting. In other words, according to Huineng's poem, to know a given thing is to be engaged bodily with that thing in a maximally efficacious and seamless way.

A fourth indication of an influence on Wang from this sutra, as Ivanhoe notes in a footnote to his translation, lies in the sutra's claim that stability [*ding*] and insight [*hui*], which form the 'basis' of Huineng's 'teaching', 'are one body [*ti*]'—not two' (17). Note that this structure and rhetoric are identical to those that Wang employs in terms of 'benevolence forming one body' with the rest of the cosmos. The sutra goes on to disparage other views that separate stability and insight, calling such teachings 'dualistic', and associating them with an improper reliance on 'verbal arguments' for enlightenment (17). The sutra identifies one danger in particular from this attempted separation of stability and insight, namely clinging to the insight alone, which it claims amounts to the practice of 'sitting motionless' meditation (18). In fact, not only does motionless sitting fail to reach the sutra's goal of enlightenment, but it has also gone so far as to cause its practitioners 'to go insane' (19). Instead, the sutra insists that 'The Way must be allowed to flow freely', as one moves gracefully through the normal motions of human life (18). These implied criticisms by Zen Buddhism of such meditation are perhaps surprising to a Western audience, given the oversimplifications of Buddhism in general that prevail in the West, according to which a meditator who is sitting motionless constitutes a symbol of the highest possible achievement. To connect both of these criticisms back to Wang, (a) it is not insight, learning, or intellectualism in general that he opposes, but rather a single-minded pursuit of intellect that as a result of that single-mindedness disregards worldly action; and (b) the emphasis on flow prefigures Wang's therapeutic conception of enlightenment and flourishing.

A fifth and final indication of the sutra's influence on Wang can be found in its next section, which elaborates on this stability/insight identity using the analogy of 'a lamp and its light' (19). More precisely, 'The lamp is the embodiment of the light; the light is the function of the lamp' (19). In other words, the lamp is what light looks like as a thing in the world, and the light is the defining activity of being a lamp. By implication, then, 'stability' is what 'insight' looks like in a human in the world, and insight is the defining activity of being stable. Translating this into Wang's terms, my affairs are what Heaven's

affairs look in the form of things within that world, while Heaven's affairs are the defining activities of being a self.

Having established the pervasive influence of Zen Buddhism on Wang, I now turn from the *Platform Sutra* to Wang's own writings. Ivanhoe's collection of Wang's writings begins with his letters. The first letter in Ivanhoe's collection, entitled 'For My Students in Chen Zhou' (1510), again recalls the guidepost quote for my own investigation (regarding Heaven's affairs being my own). Wang warns his students in this letter against becoming like those 'few insightful officials who to some degree understand about seeking the Way, but before they have perfected any real virtue, they show off their abilities and incur the criticism of the vulgar people of the world' (116). Because of this showing off, Wang continues, not only do these scholars 'often stumble and fall', but even worse, they actually even 'become obstacles to the practice of the way' (116). That is, you can learn just enough about the Way so that ignorant people identify it with you—appointing you the symbol or representative of the Way—and consequently attribute your faults (and especially your vanity) to the Way itself. The moral of Wang's story? 'Cut off the desire for reputation and glory', he concludes, 'and apply real effort [to] working on your inner selves' (116).

In this moral, I identify three distinct ontological layers. First, there is the practice of the Way, the metaphysical weave of all the fibers of the cosmos. Second, there is that which William James would call 'the social self', the image/construct of oneself consisting of one's reputation among others in one's society. And the third layer is the inner self, which in the case of the sage circles back around to the first layer (i.e., that of the Way), bypassing the second layer (i.e., that of the social self). This, too, could be understood as another elaboration of my guidepost quote from Wang. To wit, the self of my affairs is—in some sense yet to be fully determined—'inner' rather than 'outer'.

Relatedly, this first letter then turns to an important quoted phrase, 'gathering in the wayward heart-mind', which Ivanhoe observes in a footnote is 'from *Mengzi* 6A11 and refers to those who lose sight of their innate moral sense' (117n34). Reading this quoted phrase alongside the three ontological layers of the previous quote, it would appear that the third (inner self) layer tends to seep (at least in Wang's era) into the second (social self) layer, instead of withdrawing back into the first (the Way) layer. In short, quoting Ivanhoe quoting Wang quoting Mengzi: 'Do not seek to distinguish yourself from others: seek to accord with principle' (*Mengzi* 6A7, Ivanhoe 118). That is, for Wang one should not seek goodness indirectly by way of contrast with the badness of bad people. Instead, one should seek goodness, directly, in the form of a direct harmony with patterning [*Li*, 理] itself.

The second letter in Ivanhoe's collection, entitled 'Reply to Huang Zongxian and Ying Yuanzheng' (1511), borrows the *Platform Sutra's* central metaphor of a mirror. Wang claims that 'the heart-mind of the ordinary person is like a dirty and stained mirror', and that this mirror therefore needs 'cutting away and polishing' (119). As a result of this course of cultivation, 'even the smallest speck of dust will easily be seen, and brushing it off will require little effort' (119). And at this point, Wang concludes, 'one already has realized the true nature of benevolence' (119). Note the initial appearance of paradox here. By focusing obsessively inwardly, on perfecting one's own heart-mind, one can nevertheless achieve, thereby, the virtue of doing good to all the world. Wang is not insensitive to this appearance of paradox, however, and as a propaedeutic cautions

against ‘allow[ing] our delight in ease and dislike of difficulty to lead us to slide into Chan [Zen] Buddhism’ (119).

Wang then elaborates on the danger of this ‘sliding into Zen’ by using a quote from his predecessors, the brother-pair of Neo-Confucian philosophers, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi. Zen practitioners, the Cheng brothers write, ‘lack “righteousness to rectify the exterior life”’ (Chan 281, quoted in Ivanhoe 120).¹² For Wang too, therefore, inner self-cultivation must be a disciplined pursuit of inner virtue (rather than a quietist abstaining from external affairs). Combining this point with the main point that I identified in the first Wang letter, his Way—the way to wind the circle, from the third layer back to the first layer (rather than letting the third layer seep into the second layer)—is to drive oneself inward.

The specific thing to which this inward focus is directed is the subject of the third letter in Ivanhoe’s collection. Entitled ‘To My Younger Brothers’ (1518), it describes the ‘foundational heart-mind’—the Chinese for which is *benxin* (本心)—as ‘brilliant as the noonday sun’ (120). I have modified Ivanhoe’s translation of *ben* (本) here since it uses ‘original’ instead. The oldest meaning of *ben*, from which both ‘original’ and ‘foundational’ evolved, is ‘root’ (as is loosely suggested by the character’s pictorial basis, which adds a horizontal line to the figure for tree *mu* [木] to visual the root). I would argue that ‘original’ unwarrantedly suggests that Wang’s foundation comes first in time, whereas it is better understood as a later, constructed base. In support of this, the roots are not the first or oldest part of the tree; the honor goes to the seed. Instead, the roots grow downward as the rest of the tree grows upward, making the roots a contemporaneous foundation rather than an original source.

The importance of this distinction is that it reopens the question as to whether Wang really views humans as originally pure and good, or whether such pure goodness is merely a possibility for everyone, along the lines of Michelangelo ‘liberating’ his statuesque artworks from the stone. In other words, we all have good down deep, underneath the superficial parts of ourselves, and if we work long and diligently at self-cultivation, we may reach that good foundation. As Wang puts it in a letter to his students, ‘You friends should burnish and polish one another, supporting one another in your shared aspiration to perfect yourselves’ (116). This sounds more like diamonds cutting each other from the rough and into beauty, and less like a mirror being wiped clean. And on what grounds could one justify discarding the precious metals metaphor and retaining the mirror metaphor alone?

Zooming back out to the quote as a whole, although the process to achieve the original heart-mind in any given moment is admittedly simple, it is important to keep in mind that this process does not entail the ability to maintain that original heart-mind for any length of time. ‘The moment’, Wang cautions, that ‘there is a single thought to correct, the *ben* [“foundational”] heart-mind is attained’ (120). Clearly, then, what is at issue for Wang is orientation or comportment (as opposed to location as indexed to some objective/external grid). On the positive side, this comportment-focus in Wang means that the foundational heart-mind is, in theory, attainable by anyone since no one can be located in too bad of a place to do it. But on the negative side, there is no way according to Wang to achieve the foundational heart-mind in a permanent and safeguarded way since even after decades of seeking one could always turn away from seeking correction and become stuck in vice again. In

support of this reading, Wang proceeds to quote the Confucian Classic entitled *The Book of History*. 'The human heart-mind is precarious. The heart-mind of the way is subtle. Be ever-refined and single-minded in order to hold fast to the mean!' (61–62, quoted in Ivanhoe 121).

Shifting, appropriately for Wang, from the theoretical to the practical—from knowing to acting—Wang then proceeds to model and embody the humility and discipline that is entailed for the kind of person or self who possesses this vigilant comportment. The 'bad habits I picked up every day', Wang admits, 'have accumulated to the point where they are now deep-seated flaws, and I now lack the courage to rectify these faults' (121). In short, Wang concludes, 'Do not be like me' (121). Such notes of humility and apology are common in Ivanhoe's collection of Wang's writings, and always at the end of the writing—as the last thing with which Wang leaves the reader. For one example, the fourth letter ends with Wang apologizing for having 'just dashed this singularly poor response off in a hurry' (123). Secondly, the final letter ends with another humble apology, after Wang has described his own illness and imminent death, along with his 'profound sympathy with' Huang Zongxian and Huang Chengfu. 'I hope you will make allowances', Wang writes, 'for my excessive show of emotion' (130). Finally, Wang's *Essential Instructions for Students at Longchang* ends with a humble invitation to correction, with its implied apologetic stance for any uncorrected wrongs. 'You gentlemen [Wang's students] should begin your practice of *encouraging goodness through reproof with me!* (*Readings* 177). It is precisely in such moments, I would argue, that one can find a template for Wang's ideal self or sage. To wit, engage in constant self-excoriations while declaiming that those self-excoriations are failing completely.

The fourth letter in Ivanhoe's collection, entitled 'Letter to Liu Yuandao' (1523), is also of central importance to my investigation in that it introduces the self-cultivation metaphor that inspired my own. Appropriately, in light of Wang's repeated claim that all of the cosmos can be made into one body, this metaphor is a medical one. 'Now, the way that good doctors cure an illness', Wang writes, 'is to match the treatment to the ailment' (122). And though doctors 'do not start out with a fixed prescription', Wang continues, yet 'the principle of getting rid of the illness' per se 'does constitute a fixed approach' (123). In other words, while each of a doctor's treatments should be different, s/he should continuously engage in treatment per se (in one form or another) in order to facilitate health. Put in the famous rhetoric of Luke 4:23, Wang urges the cosmic doctor, 'heal thyself'. Such self-healing, however, is merely a necessary condition—not a sufficient condition—for ethical health. As Wang observes, 'the application of certain medicines can itself *cause disease*' (123).

On just this note, the fifth letter, entitled 'Reply to Inquires Made by a Friend' (1526), returns to an aspect of Wang's thought, which a majority of contemporary scholars writing in English have unwittingly turned from medicine to poison, namely the aforementioned 'unity of knowing and acting' in Wang. 'If one actually engages in the effort of study, inquiry, reflection, and discrimination', Wang writes, then all of them 'are examples of acting' (123). Wang also refers to various thought-terms as constituting 'aspects' of acting and refers to various action-terms as 'aspects' of thinking (124). As he continues, the normative dimension already suggested by 'actually engaging in the effort' becomes more pronounced. He describes comparatively thoughtless action as 'wanton' and comparatively inactive thought as 'reckless'

(124). Wang then concludes his discussion of his reuniting knowing and acting as follows: 'From the beginning, there has always only been a single task [*gongfu*, 功夫]' (124).

The sixth letter, 'Reply to Wei Shiyu' (1527), elaborates on this allegedly central *doctrine* (of 'the unity of knowing and acting') by introducing his corresponding, allegedly central *concept*, namely *liangzhi* [良知].

Whenever an idea arises in response to any thing or affair, this is called a 'thought.' Thoughts can be correct or incorrect. That which is able to know which thoughts are correct and which are incorrect is called *liangzhi*. If one relies on *liangzhi*, one will never act incorrectly. (127)

The dominant translations of *liangzhi* into English thus far have been 'pure knowing' or 'innate knowledge', but I would argue that it is more appropriate to Wang's thought to render *liang* [良] as 'virtuous' or 'refined' (as it has been used historically to refer to a woman's respectability). As a phrase, then, *liangzhi* could be translated as 'virtuously refined knowledge'. Similarly, Julia Ching renders it as 'good knowledge' and characterizes it as both 'inborn and acquired' (66, 113).

In terms of the aforementioned quote from Wang's letters, virtuously refined knowing is the result of the burnishing and polishing of his students as fellow diamonds, cutting each other into perfectly refined relief. The advantage of this alternative translation is that it does not suppress the developmental, ethical, and empowering aspects of the phrase. In short, it appropriately maintains Wang's 'unity of knowing and acting' in the concept to which it is supposed (by most English-language scholars) to correspond. This is not to deny the spontaneous, habitual, or innate dimensions of *liangzhi*, but merely to resist a forgetfulness of its other dimensions.

The lack of such 'virtuously refined knowing', Wang continues, is what makes it 'difficult to begin a task', and also what makes one (for lack of virtuously refined knowing) 'negligent or compromising' in carrying out a task (128). More precisely, in these latter cases, for Wang, people's 'intention to extend pure knowing is not yet sincere or complete and their perception of pure knowing is not yet penetrating and complete' (128). In fact, it is exactly in this 'intention to extend', as a modifier of pure knowing—rather than in pure knowing as a substance or fixed state—that I find the actual heart of Wang's philosophy. And although *liangzhi* for Wang is in some sense the essence of humanity, that essence is nothing for him outside of a chronological and historical process of unfolding realization.

This distinction (between 'pure knowing' and 'expanding virtuously refined knowing'), much like the aforementioned distinction Ivanhoe abandons (between 'seeing the cosmos as one's body' and 'seeing one's body as part of the cosmos'), is critical, if not in its original context, at least in the context of present-day interpretation. On the basis of this distinction, that is, Wang is properly understood as a developmental self-cultivation theorist just like Mengzi. That is, it is not nearly enough for Wang to know 'purely' in one isolated moment, when one is faced with just one of the '10,000' things of our worlds. In fact, this is *never* enough for Wang because one must always be extending that knowing to the next thing in the world, including the past versions of things one once knew. Regardless of whether what is extended here is best termed 'knowledge' or

'humanity', in either case the term in question has undergone a kind of refining development.

The seventh and final letter in Ivanhoe's collection, entitled 'To Huang Zongxian' (1527), elaborates on Wang's centrally important idea of extending refined virtuous knowing. 'Engaging in the spiritual task [of self-cultivation]', Wang writes, 'is ten times more difficult when one holds an official position than when one retires to the mountains and forest glens' (128). To paraphrase, for Wang it is better to be an amateur philosopher than a professional philosopher; better to diagnose one's own ethical impairments than one who diagnoses those of others. One can see here a parallel with the three ontological layers I identified above in the first letter in Ivanhoe's collection (namely the Way layer, the outer-self layer, and the inner-self layer).

Wang then fleshes his metaphor out further in the process of counseling his student Huang Zongxian (and the student's friend, Huang Chengfu). The two friends are to act, Wang advises, as 'co-doctors' for each other. 'The present state of the world', Wang continues, 'may be compared to a person suffering grave maladies. The only real hope of bringing the dead back to life lies with you gentlemen' (130). In this way, as I noted above, Wang goes beyond Cheng Hao's metaphor of the uncompassionate as those with paralyzed limbs. More specifically, at issue in Cheng Hao is merely a single paralyzed limb or a fraction of the body gone numb. For Wang, by contrast, the patient's entire body is affected by the lack of compassion, and to the point of even being (temporarily) dead.

To bring the patient back to life, Wang urges, the two friends must 'really become one with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures, truly "pacify and save" the world' (130). Wang thus leaves us with the conclusion, here, that the world is like a pair of doctors who must take turns resuscitating each other, as it were, taking turns applying the electrical paddles to each other's chests. In order to draw out the implications of this latter idea and to offer my own improvised reformulation of Wang's reformulated version of Cheng Hao's original metaphor, I will now emphasize a few points from the remainder of Ivanhoe's selections from Wang, specifically *A Record for Practice* and *Questions on the Great Learning*.

Beginning with *A Record for Practice*, its first section (hereafter, §1) introduces a phase that is frequently repeated throughout *A Record*, *ming ming de* (明明德). Ivanhoe translates this as 'making bright one's bright virtue' (134). One can discern, however, from the individual characters, *ming* (明), 'bright' or 'clear', and *de* (德) 'virtue' or 'power', that a closer and more inclusive translation would be 'brightening clear virtuous power'. The significance of this alternate translation is that it undermines any sense of individual ownership of said virtue/power, and instead emphasizes the verbal, dynamic sense of bright clarifying qua activity. The larger implication of this alternative translation, in turn, is that it buttresses my challenge to Ivanhoe's characterization of Wang's method of self-cultivation as a kind of 'discovery' (as opposed to what Ivanhoe characterizes as Mengzi's method of 'development'). As the character of Wang says in §2, brightening clear virtuous power [*ming ming de*] 'is never separated or found apart from things and affairs' (137). Put in terms of my point here, for Wang one cannot discover self-cultivation in a moment of enlightenment since no moment is long enough to extend one's knowing to—forming one body with—the myriad things of the world.

Secondly and finally, I turn to Wang's *Questions on the Great Learning*. Its oft-repeated central mantra appears for the first time in §1. 'Great people', Wang writes, 'regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures as their own bodies' (160). Note that Wang is *not* saying that great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad things as *priceless possessions*, nor even as *spiritually the same as themselves*. Great people regard them *as their own bodies*. This is the reason, to use Mengzi's famous example, that one feels such intense fear when seeing a child about to fall into mortal danger. It is because, Wang insists, our 'benevolence forms one body with the child' (§1, 161). In this same passage, Wang then goes on to repeat this 'forming one body' phrase three times, first substituting 'birds and beasts' (for 'Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures'), then substituting 'grass or trees', and finally substituting even 'tiles and stones' (§1, 161). Wang then adds that it is nothing other than this 'forming one body with'—which I will term here 'bodying-extending'—which constitutes brightening clear virtuous power (§1, 162). Finally on this note, this bodying-extending/brightening clear virtuous power [*ming ming de*] requires, for Wang, 'loving the people' (§2, 162).

Wang then makes an observation, using language that could have been quoted from John Dewey's writings, regarding how 'petty persons' are defined by their use of 'the space between their bodies' as an excuse to delude themselves into thinking they do not share one body with the rest of the cosmos (§1, 161). Thus deluded, Wang concludes, such 'petty' people, in their study and knowledge-seeking, '[become preoccupied with] disconnected fragments and isolated shards; confused and disheveled, they have no stable orientation' (§4, 166). In other words, they dim and obscure bright virtuous power, and become smaller, less visible and weaker in the process—like the body of a patient ravaged by an aggressive disease.

Conclusion: Humans as Nerves/Nurses of the Cosmic Doctor

To recapitulate my own central image from my introduction, for Wang the entire cosmos is comparable to a doctor who has the potential to heal itself into a perfectly continuous and fully interconnected body. To clarify, the doctor is nothing without his nursing staff, unable by her/himself to carry out the healing processes. And in its pursuit of this goal of health, we as human beings are comparable to nerves/nurses serving the body that is the cosmic doctor. Our job, finally, is to maintain vigilant sensitivity to our surrounding conditions in order thereby to stimulate/inspire our nearby/fellow nerves/nurses to an activity of similar vigilance—and all in pursuit of a maximally aware, responsive, and flourishing corpus/corps. In support of this contention, remember Wang's repeated insistence to his family, friends, and students to act as health-care workers for each other.

The difficulty we face, as diagnosed by our cosmic doctor, is that most of our fellow nerves/nurses are currently inactive, anesthetized, or off-duty in the hospital of our cosmic body. By and large, that is, we have lost our connections to the other nerves, and to the muscles, skin, and organs that we serve. We have forgotten our supervisor, our colleagues, and the patients who suffer and die needlessly for lack of our mindfulness—all that to which we should be, by our expansive love, attached. And as a result, ignoring our comic doctor's orders, the results all around us are simply disastrous.

Fortunately, however, and in closing, the doctor has a treatment plan in the form of Wang's Buddhist-inspired Neo-Confucian philosophy, as follows:

What do we mean by 'person'? It is the way we refer to the physical operation of the heart-mind. What do we mean by 'heart-mind'? It is the way we refer to the luminous and intelligent master of the person. What do we mean by 'cultivating the self'? It is the way we refer to doing what is good and getting rid of what is bad. (§6, 168)¹³

Put in terms of my central concern here, selfhood for Wang—the cultivation of each individual self—is best understood as the entire body of the cosmos, from the heavens to the earth, and all the animals, plants, and minerals in between, in the process of being activated with the loving mindfulness of us humans—its nery nurses working for the continuous healing of all that we are and share.

Notes

1. From an older generation, important work scholars include Wing-tsit Chan, Julia Ching, and Antonio Cua. See, for example, Chan (1962), Ching (1973), and Cua (1993). Wang-tsit disagrees with Ivanhoe about the extensiveness of the Buddhist influence on Wang, while Ching and Cua share my emphasis on Wang embodiment of his sage ideal in the actual events of his life.
2. Chan (1972).
3. Ivanhoe (2002). (Hereafter, *Ethics*).
4. Ivanhoe (2009).
5. On a similar note, Wang writes elsewhere in that text that 'affairs/things are the Way and the Way is affairs/things' (§13, 156).
6. Virtually every contemporary philosopher writing in English defers to Ivanhoe's interpretations of Wang. For several recent examples of this pervasive influence, see Lu (2014), Huang (2006), Day (2012), Jung (2013), and Kim (2012).
7. In this way, Neo-Confucian patterning resonates strongly with Kant's conception of the imagination. This constitutes further support for my claim that Wang's notion of self is ethically expansive, given Kant's own cosmically expansive conception thereof in his transcendental idealism. For a related analysis of the latter (specifically in Kant's constructivist philosophy of mathematics, see (Hall 2013).
8. From 'On the Reconstruction of the Shan-yin Prefectural School' (1525), quoted in Ching 215.
9. Ching (1976).
10. McNaughton and Ying (1999).
11. Wang (2007). Incidentally, this article is also critical of Wang Yang-ming's interpretation of *gewu* as 'a transitive verb that means "to rectify, to put or set something right"', in part on the grounds that it has 'much weaker editorial and textual evidence in its favor' (209).
12. Chan (1967).
13. This final phrase forms the title of a recent monograph on Wang's political career, Israel's (2014).

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