



Précis and Response to Comments from Liu, Wilson, and Angle

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Abstract

I respond to the insightful comments of LIU Liangjian, Stephen Angle, and Trenton Wilson.

Keywords Unity of knowledge and action · WANG Yangming 王陽明 · *Zhi xing he yi* 知行合一 · Knowledge · Action · Chinese philosophy

1 Introduction

I am honored and grateful to have been awarded the *Dao* prize for 2022. Yong HUANG in his role as editor-in-chief, along with the editorial board and the staff of the journal, have done us all a great service in creating the best journal in English specializing in essays on Chinese philosophy. The work the journal does is valuable not just to those of us working on Chinese philosophy, but also to the field of philosophy as a whole, since the discipline needs a well-known venue where it can find peer-reviewed, high-quality work.

I'm honored to be in some sense brought on the team of this important venture through the award, and I hope to continue to contribute to *Dao* and this cause in the years to come, as well.

The best part of receiving this prize for me has been the intellectual feast I've enjoyed reflecting on the three wonderful commentaries by Professors LIU Liangjian, Stephen Angle, and Trenton Wilson. In what follows I'll present a quick overview of my essay, before giving my responses to the individual commentaries. There's no way I can do justice to the rich detail in these responses in this short space, so I've confined myself to picking out some key themes.

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2 Précis

In a series of essays over the last few years (Lederman 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c), I've developed an interpretation of WANG Yangming's 王陽明 views about the "unity of knowledge and action" (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一). One of my primary goals has been to analyze the kind of "knowledge" at stake in this doctrine. In particular, I've asked: does the doctrine concern an independently specifiable notion of knowledge, or did Wang simply stipulate that his doctrine was true, that is, that the kind of knowledge which interested him was, by definition, unified with action? I've argued that Wang's doctrine was more than a stipulation, defending an interpretation on which the knowledge relevant to the doctrine (what Wang calls "genuine knowledge") is knowledge of the ethical quality of one's own mental events (most obviously "inclinations," *yi* 意). On my interpretation, this knowledge counts as "genuine" when it is not diminished by a form of inner conflict that I've suggested can be thought of as similar to doxastic conflict (Lederman 2022a, 2023b).

An important test of an interpretation of genuine knowledge is whether it adequately makes sense of the kind of "unity" Wang wanted to endorse in the "unity of knowledge and action." As I worked more on this topic, I realized that I didn't know the answer, in part because I didn't know what sense of "unity" was relevant here. My essay in *Dao* was an attempt to address this question, setting aside the details of my own account of genuine knowledge, and just starting fresh from the text.

The essay begins by distinguishing between two aspects of Wang's doctrine, one that concerns *gong fu* 工夫, which I translated (with quite a few qualifications) as "training," and one that concerns *ben ti* 本體, which I translated (with possibly even more qualifications) as "original natural condition." I argued that this distinction between aspects of Wang's doctrine is connected to a distinction between purely therapeutic aspects of the doctrine, and what I said were aspects relevant to "theoretical philosophy." By this expression, I meant that, in speaking about the original natural condition of knowledge and action, Wang made claims which were supposed to be believed in a straightforward way on the basis of evidence. The essay defends this thesis as a response to those who think that Wang was just a kind of "self-help guru," only interested in (say) offering mantras the repetition of which might transform you into a virtuous person, regardless of whether the mantras are true (or even meaningful). I connect this idea, at the end of the essay, to the question of whether Wang might be seen as a systematic thinker.

Most of my essay is devoted to the question of what sense of "unity" is at stake in the *ben ti*, or "original natural condition", part of Wang's doctrine. I argue that a key claim of this part of his doctrine was (working the example of filial piety, *xiao* 孝, which I'll abbreviate using "filiality" and cognates below):

Unity: A person genuinely knows filiality if and only if they are acting filially.

I also argue that Wang would have accepted a similar principle with appropriate substitution of cognates of "fraternal respect" (*di* 悌), "conscientiousness" (*zhong* 忠), and "compassion" (*ceyin* 惻隱).

Following that discussion, I go on to argue that Wang would *not* have accepted the claim that these two were *identical*, that is, that he would have rejected:

Identity: To genuinely know filiality just is to act filially.

None of my three commentators defends the attribution of Identity to Wang, so I won't discuss that principle further below. But I do think this issue is important. A great deal of writing about Wang makes it sound as if any interpretation of his work must vindicate an almost mystical connection between knowledge and action. If I'm right that Wang rejected Identity, there shouldn't be support for an interpretation of that kind.

3 Response to Liu Liangjian

Professor Liu offers careful commentary on several aspects of my essay. A key theme in his response is that the distinction I draw between *gong fu* (training) and *ben ti* (original natural condition) is too sharp. Liu argues that the *gong fu* of knowledge and action is unified in a particular way *because* the *ben ti* of knowledge and action is unified in a (possibly different) way. As he writes: "The unity of knowledge and action as the *gong fu* is grounded on the unity of knowledge and action as the *ben ti*."

I completely agree with Liu that there are deep connections between the two parts of Wang's doctrine: that's part of why it makes sense for Wang to use a single slogan to describe both of them. In the original essay, I focused on the "logic" of unity in these two cases, and I stand by my arguments that their logic is different: Wang does mean something different by "unity" when he talks about the *ben ti* than he does when he talks about *gong fu*. But I completely agree with Liu that Wang sees these two aspects of the doctrine as importantly related. Indeed, I'm quite sympathetic to his suggestion that the *gong fu* of knowledge and action are unified in the way Wang says they are *because* the *ben ti* are unified in the way *they* are.

A second theme in Liu's comments is that what I called Wang's contributions to "theoretical" philosophy, namely, his claims about the *ben ti*, are not, for him, *merely* theoretical; they too are motivated by a practical goal. For instance, Liu writes: "For me, Yangming's doctrine of the *ben ti* of knowledge and action is ultimately for the practical potency and shouldn't be reduced as a theoretical philosophy of the truth about knowledge and action."

I'm to blame for creating a misunderstanding here, and I'm grateful to have a chance to clarify my stance. In saying that Wang is making a "theoretical" claim, I did not mean to be saying that his claim has no practical import or use. By "theoretical," I meant only that Wang intended to make "claims that accurately describe the way things are, and which [Wang] hoped his hearers would believe (or reject) on the basis of evidence" (Lederman 2022b: 570). (This was intended as a stipulative definition, but it was a bit oblique in the original.) As I said at the very start of the essay, right before that definition, I believe that Wang held that such "theoretical" claims are *only* worth making if they have a practical point. As I wrote: "Wang ... held that

one should only consider questions and theories which have some promise to help people with practical matters like these” (Lederman 2022b: 570). So I completely agree with Liu on this point. I too believe (and said in the essay) that Wang always has his eye on a practical goal; my contention that he was making (what I called) theoretical claims wasn’t in any way meant to rule this out.

Since this point is so important, and since my unclarity here has led to misunderstanding before (e.g., Ivanhoe 2022, Lederman 2023c), I want to say it once more: In saying that Wang was doing theoretical philosophy, I did *not* mean to be saying that he studied philosophical questions only because he found them interesting in an abstract sort of way. I meant only that he was making claims that were intended to be believed in a straightforward way on the basis of evidence. This is compatible with these claims being offered for practical reasons, just as a calculation about lunar spaceflight might be both true and offered with evidence, but also presented for practical reasons (to get you to the moon). Indeed, while I hold that Wang offered claims intended to be believed on the basis of evidence, I agree with Liu and others, that he only took an interest in such claims when he believed they had real practical import.¹

Near the end of Liu’s comments, there’s one place where I think we have a more substantive disagreement, or at least, something that feels an importantly different direction, when he says that “the appropriate methodology to read Yangming must be the unity of knowledge and action.” There’s one reading of this where I agree. I agree that Wang only makes theoretical claims *because* he thinks they are practically useful. But there’s a different reading, on which Liu’s point is that Wang’s words do not have truth-evaluable content and are only to be understood in terms of their practical effects (or something like that). This more radical claim is something I definitely do want to reject: I believe Wang did make some claims because he thought they were true, and hoped to persuade his readers to believe them on the basis of evidence and argument. That was a central claim in the essay, and I stand by it.

In addition to the thought-provoking comments on these and many other issues, Professor Liu also makes several helpful corrections, including (embarrassingly) correcting a misreading of the title of Prof. CHEN Lisheng’s book (where I wrote *ren* 人 instead of *ru* 入), a miscitation of the wrong work by SHU Jingnan (a wrong citation key in my bibliography software), and my mistaken claim that Wang never speaks of “genuine action.”² I’m indebted to him for his time and thought.

¹ With this clarification in view, Liu’s criticism of my more detailed reading of the therapeutic/theoretical distinction in some key passages (my T1[a5], T2[e4]) becomes a bit less pointed. Here, Liu claims that Wang is just contrasting an urgent measure with a “long-term measure with standing efficacy,” not contrasting a therapeutic measure with a theoretical claim. I’m not convinced by this reading, but I think it doesn’t matter much once we’re on the same page about what I meant by “theoretical.” If Liu is right that Wang wants his claims about *ben ti* only to be long-term measures with standing efficacy, it’s still quite plausible that they have this efficacy *because* they get at something deeper than the merely (therapeutic) claims, that is, because they are true, and advocated on the basis of evidence. So, once it’s properly understood, my claim would still stand.

² Wilson also points out this error of mine (n. 3, correcting a comment I made on p. 581).

4 Response to Stephen Angle

Professor Angle offers focused criticism of two parts of my essay. First, he disagrees with what I say about how we should understand *ben ti* (which I translated “original natural condition,” but he and Justin Tiwald translated “inherent reality” [Angle and Tiwald 2017]). Second, he disagrees with what I say about Unity (and in particular KA: “if a person genuinely knows filiality, they are acting filially”) as opposed to General KA (i.e., “if a person genuinely knows filiality, they will act filially whenever they are faced with a situation where filial action is appropriate”). Angle’s arguments contribute to a broader picture that he developed in a presentation (that I hope will be a paper someday) defending (something like) the perceptual model that I isolated and argued against in my essays on genuine knowledge (Lederman 2022a, 2023b).

As I’ll say in a moment, I disagree with Angle about some important points here, but we also agree about a lot. More than any specific position I’ve defended in my essays, I’ve wanted to show that careful, detail-driven reading of WANG Yangming bears philosophical fruit. As part of that project, I’ve tried to sketch natural alternatives to my own views, and to develop arguments for and against them. Even though Angle disagrees with the position I ultimately defend in my essay, he picks up on several directions that I wanted to see explored more, so I’m excited to have this “disagreement,” and I hope it will be the first of many of its kind.

But my main job here is to bicker, not harmonize. So let me start with *ben ti*. As Angle lays out, I’ve offered a reading which allows us to make literal sense of a lot of what Wang says, at the cost of attributing two different uses of the term *ben ti* to him across the corpus. Angle, by contrast, has a reading which makes slightly less literal sense of what Wang says in some key places (but he argues the nonliterality can be supported by some parallel usage), and has the benefit of understanding this term always in the same way.

I’m a fan of a lot of what Angle says here. I agree that we should assume that an author’s usage is consistent until proven otherwise, so I agree that Angle has a leg up on that point. But I also think a more literal interpretation is better, other things being equal, so I don’t yet agree that Angle’s reading is clearly the better one. I certainly agree with Angle that sometimes words like “lose” or “cast away” can be used nonliterally (he gives us one passage where *fang* 放 can be used this way). But my suspicion is that this nonliterality is not *that* widespread, and doesn’t cover all of the sorts of evidence I adduced for this distinction in uses of *ben ti*. At this point, that’s just a hunch—I’m afraid I haven’t been able to go systematically through all of the occurrences of *ben ti* even in the passages I cited in the relevant note—but it is my hunch, and I hope one of the two of us (or someone else) will follow up on that question soon.

A more central issue in Angle’s comments is the question of whether to believe KA or to believe General KA, so I’ll focus on this point here.³ One important

³ Prof. Liu also argues for General KA as opposed to KA, so there’s some consonance in the responses on this point.

argument for KA in my essay was based on passages where Wang talks about the extension of knowledge. I argued that Wang sometimes uses “extended knowledge” as roughly equivalent to “genuine knowledge,” and then I observed that Wang sometimes says that being in the right state amounts to being “able to extend” your knowledge. I contended that this latter usage suggests that extending is episodic—it’s something that happens while you are acting but doesn’t endure beyond the action—and concluded that the ability to extend may be something like a disposition, even though extended knowledge itself isn’t. This was part of my case for KA as opposed to General KA.

Angle argues that we can read one passage (*IPL* 139)⁴ that was key to this argument in a different way, so that it describes an ability to acquire a particular disposition (as we might put it), and then offers some new passages, which feature related locutions about being able to extend, that he claims support the dispositional reading of extension. I think Angle’s reading of my key passage is not quite as smooth as mine was (so I still think it’s evidence for my view), and I think his readings of the new passages are interesting but not ultimately decisive: in each case (as I think Angle recognizes), there’s also a very natural reading of “can extend” where the extension is episodic and the disposition is the ability. I don’t think those readings are too far to seek, and it would take a lot of space to give all of them, so I won’t do that here, but I will work one example to give a sense for how it might go, and because I want to argue that, at least in this case, the reading which supports my interpretation is more natural.

A key passage for Angle is the following one, which I’ll give in his translation:

[5] When Mengzi said to “always be doing something,” he meant that throughout their life, the learning of the exemplary person consists purely of “accumulating righteousness.” What is “righteous” means what is “proper.” When the heartmind attains what is proper, it is called “righteous.” If good knowing can be extended, the heartmind will attain what is proper. Therefore “accumulating righteousness” is exactly the same as extending good knowing.

在孟子言必有事焉，則君子之學終身只是「集義」一事。義者，宜也，心得其宜之謂義。能致良知則心得其宜矣，故「集義」亦只是致良知。（*IPL* 170）

Angle argues that the accumulation of righteousness is here said to be a lifelong process that aims at the acquisition of something more like a state, and that, since it’s said to be equivalent to extending knowledge, extending knowledge must be a state too (so maybe we’d call it “extended knowledge”). But this doesn’t seem the correct reading of the passage to me. Wang (roughly) equates Mengzi’s “always be doing something” with “accumulating righteousness” *throughout one’s life*. Note that the “throughout one’s life” is not part of Wang’s quotation of Mencius, but is a part of this equation. It is not that accumulating righteousness as such is a lifelong activity, but rather that episodes of accumulating it occur throughout one’s life. Wang then says that righteousness is to be understood as what’s proper, and that what’s proper is attained when *liangzhi* 良知

⁴ References to WANG Yangming are given by *IPL* with number references from Chan 1983, cf. the English Chan 1963.

(which Angle translates as “good knowing”) is extended. Here it’s pretty clear that *de qi yi* 得其宜 “attain what is proper” is a momentary achievement. In the concluding sentence of the passage, Wang then claims that this (episodic) attainment of what is proper counts as “accumulating righteousness.” Since both of these are also equated with extending one’s knowledge, it follows that accumulating righteousness and extending knowledge must also be understood as episodic, contrary to Angle’s view.

The interpretation Wang gives here is almost certainly not the most natural interpretation of what Mengzi was saying. But in my view, that’s the whole point: Wang is making an argument in the passage for a surprising reading of Mengzi’s phrase “accumulating righteousness” which fits better with Wang’s philosophy. This is standard fare in Wang’s writing: he often gives a series of controversial equivalences of key terms, in order to move us from one term that he doesn’t like to one that he likes better, and in which he’d prefer to couch his theory. Here he’s precisely trying to interpret away an aspect of “accumulating righteousness” that doesn’t fit well with his view. And so, far from strong evidence for Angle’s view, I see the passage as actually great evidence that Wang was committed to the view I attribute to him: he’s twisting the words of Mengzi because they don’t look like they’re compatible with his views about episodic achievements, and he wants to show that they are.

As I said before, I won’t wade into too many details here at the risk of losing sight of the big picture, but I think there are similarly attractive alternative readings of Angle’s other passages, which similarly support my interpretation, rather than Angle’s.

A second argument for KA in my essay provides evidence for that claim *by contrast* to General KA. The argument turns on the observation that there is a simple quasi-logical relationship between Means KA (“People come to genuinely know filiality only by acting filially.”) and KA, while there is no such connection between Means KA and General KA. If we generalize Means KA beyond the first moment of action, so that it says that one can preserve this knowledge also only by acting filially, it (essentially) implies KA. But Means KA doesn’t have this relationship to General KA, since dispositions aren’t in general acquired by episodes of their exercise. As I put it in the essay: glasses don’t become fragile by breaking. Angle gives some inspiring discussion here, with a nice example of playing the jazz double bass, but ultimately I don’t see how his discussion engages with this argument. In his example, Means KA is true, and the process which gives rise to the knowledge does produce a certain kind of disposition. But the disposition doesn’t have the right form to vindicate something like General KA, and more importantly this case doesn’t clarify why we’d expect General KA to hold, once we have Means KA in view. By contrast, as I said, a natural generalization of Means KA basically entails KA, which gives us reason to attribute KA to Wang, but doesn’t give us a reason to attribute General KA to him.⁵

⁵ In a few places, Angle says that we should view action as a *test*, which reveals whether or not we continue to have the relevant knowledge. It’s certainly an interesting idea that action should be seen as a test, but again I don’t see how it helps us to connect Means KA with General KA. It’s absolutely true that (in line with General KA) you can test whether a glass is fragile by breaking it, but I don’t see why this would illuminate the connection to Means KA, since the glass doesn’t become fragile by breaking. Conversely, even if you know red by seeing it, it doesn’t follow that you’ll always see red when it’s presented to you. So there’s not a general relationship between Means KA and General KA, which was my main contention.

As I acknowledged on p. 589 of my essay, there is a big question mark (or, to say it more directly, a real problem) for my interpretation, in that it seems to require an odd reading of one key passage which suggests that Wang was (also) interested in a longer-lived state of knowledge. As I said (and Angle says too) this is important evidence for his interpretation instead of mine. But I'm not convinced that the new evidence and arguments Angle brings in his essay have changed the balance of considerations from where I was when I wrote my essay. He's helped us by articulating a different path in more detail, but I still think his path is less attractive, and he hasn't undercut my key arguments for that conclusion.

Setting aside these details, I want to close by considering what's at stake in the debate over whether Wang endorses KA or General KA. As I discuss in Lederman 2023a (in nn. 9, 41, 49, which tell a parallel story to the one in the main text), it's compatible with my view of genuine knowledge that Wang endorses General KA, *provided* we then understand genuine knowledge as a disposition to experience (what I there called) episodes of genuine knowledge, that is, episodes of extending one's knowledge.

So the deep question here, in my view, is not so much the letter of the principles KA and General KA, but rather what kind of work Wang wanted genuine knowledge to do. My interpretation is incompatible with the claim that Wang held that genuine knowledge *explains* how people perform virtuous actions. So if Angle (or someone else) thinks Wang held General KA because they think he had this view of the role of genuine knowledge, then we would have a real disagreement. In my view, Wang was deeply committed to the idea that knowledge is not the *basis* for action. A crucial part of my interpretation is that (for Wang), genuine knowledge comes along for free when we act virtuously. I believe this is one of the main things Wang rejects in ZHU Xi 朱熹 (or at least Wang's version of ZHU Xi). A person's action on any given occasion will always be virtuous *not because* of a capacity they previously acquired, and which they are now exercising, but because they are on this occasion free of selfish desires and inclinations. Wang is strongly opposed to the idea that a person who has been virtuous in the past can rest on their laurels and just be guaranteed to act virtuously the next time. And he is strongly in favor of the idea that, no matter what mess you have made of your life in prior days or years, today you could break through and be virtuous.

5 Response to Trenton Wilson

Professor Wilson's rich essay points in many directions I never would have been able to develop on my own. Philosophers working on ancient Greek philosophy have benefited enormously from a very close working relationship with classicists. I believe those of us based in philosophy who work on Chinese texts (and perhaps most of all, me) could similarly benefit from deeper working relationships with sinologists, and I hope for a world where we do.

Wilson in particular is a model of someone who has been willing to go well beyond his home territory to talk to us outlanders. I hope his work in this

direction will also inspire other historians to help those of us with our home in philosophy to build better bridges between our fields.

Wilson brings our attention to a deep issue about how Wang understands conflict arising from the demands of different social relationships. Wang discusses several famous examples of virtuous agents who are caught between different forces, for instance, King Wu 武 who didn't mourn his parents (thus failing to do the paradigmatically filial action), and instead marched to war (thus paradigmatically displaying his care for the people). Wilson asks: what would Wang say Wu genuinely knew in this case? Filiality? Care for the people? Both?

In my essay I said that Wu would genuinely know filiality (Lederman 2022b: 592), and Wilson charitably understands this remark to show that I believed that when people deliberate, and correctly decide to go with one virtuous action as opposed to another, as in Wu's case, they have genuine knowledge of all the virtues involved. That certainly would have been an interesting position. But sadly Wilson is being *too* charitable here, and my own claim was instead based on a (somewhat embarrassing) mistake: I mistook the example of King Wu for a nearby example where Shun 舜 acts filially, and was thinking of the example as a paradigmatic example of filiality, which it isn't. So I agree with Wilson that I made a mistake here, and I should have said that Wu only has genuine knowledge of *care for the people* (not filiality) in this case. I also agree with Wilson's arguments that genuine knowledge is *not* unified across all social relationships; indeed, he's done us an important service by laying out as strong a case for that claim as I know of in the literature.

There's a further deep question hovering around Wilson's discussion, which he touches on from time to time, but which I want to bring out a bit more thematically. Wang is fairly clear throughout his writings that virtuous action will *feel* smooth, without hitches or tugs in different directions. But when we reflect on cases like that of King Wu, this claim can seem quite implausible. Couldn't King Wu still have been virtuous even if he felt remorse for being unable to mourn his parents as he marched off to war? Indeed, wouldn't he have been *more* praiseworthy, if he marched with heaviness in his heart about the difficult decision he'd been forced to make?

I myself am puzzled about this question, not just as it arises in Wang's writings, but in the tradition as a whole. There are many discussions of virtuous action in the face of conflicts between different social relationships, like the case of King Wu. But in spite of this, the tradition settles on a conflict-free, "flow" view of the feel of virtuous agency. Very little is said to square these two different ideas, and Wang is not alone in (apparently) feeling that such putative conflicts don't require sustained discussion. This seems to me a big problem for readers of WANG Yangming, and I wish I had something better to say about it. Maybe Wilson or someone else will help us to get a better understanding of how these ideas might not have seemed in tension to Wang, or provide some other reason why he seems to say so little addressing this apparent problem. But, for what it's worth, this seems to me a hard and important historical question for everyone, not a particular problem for my interpretation.

At the end of the essay, Wilson presents a wonderful portrait of the challenges of the exercise of *liangzhi* in fallen times, that makes this problem even more vivid, from the perspective of Wang's own experience. Wilson shows how, in regard to his wartime duties, Wang displayed exactly the kind of conflicted psychology that, according to him, virtuous agents shouldn't have. As Wilson documents, Wang seems not to have been torn about not being able to care for his sick father, when he himself went off to war, since he seems to claim that there just was no conflict in that case. (Though maybe in writing about this, we can see him as "protesting too much," suppressing a conflict he felt.) But Wang does seem to have been very conflicted about the work of killing he was called on to do in war, even if this was in fact his duty. Wilson's discussion is rich and poignant on these issues, and I encourage anyone interested in Wang to read it more than once.

This portrait makes the philosophical question I posed above even more pressing. If Wang himself felt this kind of conflict, was he committed to thinking that he himself was not acting virtuously? Or did he just not connect his view that virtuous agents would be free from conflict to his own conflicted state? If forced to guess (but this is really just speculation) I might say that Wang thought he was acting at the pinnacle of virtue *attainable given his political situation*, while acknowledging that ideal virtue could only be attained in better political times. If Wang did endorse this view (I don't have any evidence he did), it would be striking that he didn't develop a more systematic account of such second-best virtuous action, and how to cope with these inner conflicts, especially given that he himself seems to have experienced them.

Declaration The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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