

Two Letters on the Unity of Knowledge and Action by Wang Yangming

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December 4, 2022

Here I translate two excerpts of epistolary exchanges, which record Wang Yangming's mature views on the unity of knowledge and action. The letters, which come down to us as excerpts in Wang's collected works, date from 1524. They show clearly that Wang continued to espouse the doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action after the watershed moment in his philosophical development, around 1521, when he began to emphasize the notion of *liangzhi* (良知). To my knowledge, neither exchange has been translated into English before. In particular, they do not appear in Julia Ching's important collection of the philosophical letters of Wang Yangming (Ching (1972)).

In 2020, I produced these rough translations as a way of sharing my interpretation of some key passages with interested friends. The translations are not particularly well done. But over the last few years, I have had cause to share them with several correspondents, who were kind enough to say that they found them useful. So, after some reflection, I have decided to share them publicly, in the hope that the benefits of giving those with limited Chinese some form of access to the texts will outweigh any confusions my poor translations may occasion.

1 Letter to Zhu Shouxie (1524)

書朱守諧卷 甲申

You, Shouxie, asked me about engaging in learning. I said: "It's just a matter of establishing a commitment." You asked me about establishing a commitment. I said: "It's just a matter of engaging in learning."
5

守諧問爲學，予曰：「立志而已。」問立志，予曰：「爲學而已。」

You, Shouxie, didn't fully understand. I said: "If in learning how to be a sage, someone has not established a commitment that they must be a sage, then while they may want to engage in learning, are they engaging in learning? If someone has a commitment, but does not exert effort daily to realize it, then while they may want to establish a commit-

守諧未達。予曰：「人之學爲聖人也，非有必爲聖人之志，雖欲爲學，誰爲學？有其志矣，而不日用其力以爲之，雖欲立志，亦烏在其爲志乎！故立志者，爲學之心也；爲學者，立
5R
10R

ment, how could this count as a commitment? Thus 'establishing a commitment' is the mindset for engaging in learning; 'engaging in learning' is the task to which one establishes a commitment. You can compare this to the game of Go.² Go is the task. To 'concentrate the mind and extend one's commitment', is to be singleminded. To 'think a swan is approaching' is to be of two minds. 'To only listen to Chess Master Qiu' is to concentrate on the task. 'To think about taking one's bow to shoot it' is to be divided between tasks."

Shouxie said: "People say: 'when knowledge is not yet perfect [至], action is not efficacious.'³ Since I do not have knowledge, by what means can I act?"

I said: "The mind which judges right and wrong is knowledge. Everyone has it.⁴ Do not worry that you do not have knowledge; worry only that you do not allow yourself to know. Do not worry that your knowledge is not yet perfect [至]; worry only that you are not extending [致] this knowledge.⁵ Thus it is said: 'Knowledge is not difficult; only acting is difficult.'⁶ Now when I meet people on the street, I tell them that for any humane and righteous task, they are all able to know that it is good. I tell them that for any inhumane and unrighteous task, they are all able know that it is not good. If people on the street are all able to know this, then how would you not know it? If you know that [the task] is good, and you extend this knowledge which knows that it is good so that you necessarily perform it – then your knowledge has become perfect [至]. If you know that it is not good, and you extend this knowledge that knows that it is not good, so that you necessarily do not perform it – then your knowledge has become perfect [至]. Knowledge is like water. All people's minds know, just as all water flows down. If you open a way and let it go, then there is no [water] that will not go down.⁷ To open a way and let it go, this is called the extension of knowledge. This is what I call the unity of knowledge and action. How can you doubt these words? The way is one, that is all."⁸

志之事也。譬之奕焉，奕者，其事也；『專心致志』者，其心一也；『以為鴻鵠將至』者，其心二也；『惟奕秋之為聽』，其事專也；『思援弓繳而射之』，其事分也。」 15R

守諧曰：「人之言曰：『知之未至，行之不力。』予未有知也，何以能行乎？」 20R

予曰：「是非之心，知也，人皆有之。子無患其無知，惟患不肯知耳；無患其知之未至，惟患不致其知耳。故曰：『知之非艱，行之惟艱。』今執途之人而告之以凡為仁義之事，彼皆能知其為善也；告之以凡為不仁不義之事，彼皆能知其為不善也。途之人皆能知之，而子有弗知乎？如知其為善也，致其知為善之知而必為之，則知至矣；如知其為不善也，致其知為不善之知而必不為之，則知至矣。知猶水也，人心之無不知，猶水之無不就下也；決而行之者，無有不就下者。決而行之者，致知之謂也。此吾所謂知行合一者也。吾子疑吾言乎？夫道一而已矣。」 25R

(Wu et al. (2011) 307-8)

2 Letter to Zhu Yangbo (1524)

You, my wife's nephew Zhu Yangbo, replied to my letter seeking to learn. I had already told you my theories about getting a handle on things (*gewu*), and extending knowledge. On another day, you asked
5 again saying: "Extending knowledge is extending the mind's *liangzhi* – this is what I already heard you teach. But in all the world the Patterns of affairs and things cannot be exhausted, so can one really reach their end just by extending one's own *liangzhi*, or will
10 there still be something to seek outside?"

I replied to your letter, saying: "The original substance (*benti*) of the mind is nature. Nature is Pattern. How in all the world could there be nature outside of the mind? How could there be Pattern outside of
15 nature? How could there be Pattern outside of the mind? To seek Pattern outside of the mind is Gaozi's theory that 'righteousness is external'.⁹ The Pattern is the ordered pattern of the mind. This is Pattern: when it is manifest in regard to parents, it is filial
20 piety; when it is manifest in regard to the ruler, it is conscientiousness; when it is manifest in regard to friends, it is trustworthiness. The full extent of the thousand changes and ten thousand transformations cannot be exhausted, but all of them are manifested
25 by my one mind. Thus to say that focus, seriousness, stillness and singlemindedness are [means for] nurturing the mind and to take learning, inquiring, thinking and debating to be [means for] exhausting Pattern, is to divide the mind and Pattern and make
30 them two.¹⁰ But if my theory [is correct], then focus, seriousness, stillness and singlemindedness are also means for exhausting Pattern, and learning, inquiring, thinking, and distinguishing are also means for nurturing the mind – then one does not say that
35 when someone is nurturing their mind there is nothing that is called Pattern, and that when someone is exhausting Pattern there is nothing that is called the

書諸陽伯卷 甲申

妻姪諸陽伯復請學，既告之以格物致知之說矣，他日，復請曰：「致知者，致吾心之良知也，是既聞教矣。然天下事物之理無窮，
5 果惟致吾之良知而可盡乎？抑尚有所求於其外也乎？」

復告之曰：「心之體，性也，性即理也。天下寧有心外之性？寧有性外之理乎？寧有理外之心乎？外心以求理，此告子『義外』之說也。理也者，心之條理也。是理也，發之於親則為孝，發之於君則為忠，發之於朋友則為信。千變萬化，至不可窮竭，而莫非發於吾之一心。故謂端莊靜一為養心，而以學問思辨為窮理者，¹¹析心與
10 理而為二矣。若吾之說，則端莊靜一亦所以窮理，而學問思辨亦所以養心，非謂養心之時無有所謂理，而窮理之時無有所謂心也。
20 此古人之學所以知行並進而收合一之功，後世之學所以分知行為先後，而不免於支離之病者也。」

mind. This is what the ancients' learning took to be the practice of jointly promoting knowledge and action, so that they are unified. Because later generations' learning divided knowledge and action into earlier and later, it could not avoid the ills of fragmentation."

You said: "But Zhu Xi speaks of 'the etiquette for how to warm and cool [one's parents' bed]' and 'what is appropriate for how to respect and take care of [them]': is this not the practice of extending knowledge?"¹²

I said: "This is what is called knowledge, but it cannot yet be taken to be extended [致] knowledge. If we know the etiquette for how to warm and cool [our parents' bed], we must concretely extend [致] the practice of warming and cooling it, and only then will our knowledge be perfect [至]; if we know what is appropriate for how to respect and take care [of our parents], we must concretely extend [致] our efforts in respecting and taking care [of them], and only then will our knowledge be perfect [至].¹³ In this way we can extend [致] our knowledge. But if one just vacuously knows how to warm, cool, respect and take care, and straightaway calls this extended knowledge, then who would not have extended their knowledge? The *Changes* says: 'His knowledge is perfect [至]; he perfects [至] it'.¹⁴ 'Knowledge is perfect' [describes] knowledge. 'Perfects it' [describes] extending knowledge. This is the unchanging teaching of the Confucian school which 'is prepared to await a sage for a hundred generations without confusion.'¹⁵

曰：「然則朱子所謂『如何而為溫清之節』，『如何而為奉養之宜』者，非致知之功乎？」 30R

曰：「是所謂知矣，而未可以為致知也。知其如何而為溫清之節，則必實致其溫清之功，而後吾之知始至；知其如何而為奉養之宜，則必實致其奉養之力，而後吾之知始至。如是乃可以為致知耳。若但空然知之為如何溫清奉養，而遂謂之致知，則孰非致知者耶？易曰：『知至，至之。』知至者，知也；至之者，致知也。此孔門不易之教，百世以俟聖人而不惑者也。」 (Wu et al. (2011, p. 308)) 35R 40R 45R

Notes

1. Thanks to Suhyun Ahn, Jennifer Eichman, P.J. Ivanhoe, Justin Tiwald, Hwa Yeong Wang and Trenton Wilson for helpful comments. They bear no responsibility for my mistakes.

2. Wang alludes to *Mencius* 6A.9, which Van Norden (2008) translates as:

Now, *go* is an insignificant craft. But if one does not focus one's heart and apply one's intention, then one won't get it. 'Go Qiu' was the best at *go* throughout the world. Suppose you told Go Qiu to teach two people *go* and one focuses his heart and applies his will to it, listening only to Go Qiu. The other, although he listens to him, with his whole heart thinks about hunting swans, reflecting only upon drawing his bow to shoot them. Although he learns together with the other person, he will not be as good as he. Will this be because his intelligence is not as great? I answer that it is not.

今夫弈之爲數，小數也；不專心致志，則不得也。弈秋，通國之善弈者也。使弈秋誨二人弈，其一人專心致志，惟弈秋之爲聽。一人雖聽之，一心以爲有鴻鵠將至，思援弓繳而射之，雖與之俱學，弗若之矣。爲是其智弗若與？曰非然也。」

3. The closest canonical reference for this quotation I've been able to find is from *Zhuzi Yulei*, where in a discussion of *Analects* 2.24, we find: "Knowledge is not yet perfect, so performance is not efficacious." (知之未至，所以爲之不力 Li & Wang (1986, p. 734)). The popular saying that Zhu Shouxie references clearly alludes to the *Explanation on the Text* 文言 for the hexagram *qian* 乾 in the *Book of Changes*, "His knowledge is perfect [至]; he perfects it" (知至至之). On its own, this passage can be interpreted in numerous ways, and perhaps is most naturally translated as "Knowing perfection, he perfects it". But in the context here, Wang and Zhu Shouxie both speak of knowledge "not yet" being perfect (未至), so that the first 至 is fairly clearly to be understood as a verb. See n. 5 for discussion of 至. For an English rendering of the surrounding text, see Lynn (1994, p.135); with Zhu Xi's commentary, Adler (2019, p. 62).

4. Here Wang is alluding to *Mencius* 6A.6.

5. For the rest of the paragraph, Wang plays on the words 至 and 致, which are graphically as well as semantically related. Strictly speaking, the former is an intransitive verb, "arrive, approach, become extended, become perfect", and the latter is a causative version of this verb "cause to arrive, cause to approach, extend, cause to become perfect". The two characters are pronounced in the same way. In the set phrase "致知" from the *Great Learning*, it is standard to translate 致 as "extend" (as in "the extension of knowledge"), and I have followed that practice here. I have translated 至 as "become perfect" (and variants of this), but I sometimes also interpret it as a transitive verb, "perfect".

6. *Classic of Documents*, Book of Shang (書經, 尙書, 說命中); Legge (1865 (1960), Part IV, Book VIII, part 2, pg. 258).

7. *Mencius* 6A.2

8. The last two sentences allude to *Mencius* 3A.1, in the translation of Van Norden (2008): “Do you doubt my teachings, your lordship? The Way is one and only one.” (世子疑吾言乎？夫道一而已矣).
9. *Mencius* 6A.4-5.
10. Learning, inquiring, thinking and distinguishing are described in *Zhongyong* 20 (in the numbering from the *Sishu* arrangement). For an English translation, see Plaks (2003, pg. 42), who renders the terms “study...question...ponder...scrutinize.” For English with Zhu Xi’s commentary (and Chinese text), see Johnston & Ping (2012, p. 458-61).
11. The *Zhonghua shuju* edition (Wang & Zhao (2015)) reads 辯 for 辨 here and below. I follow the *Shanghai* edition (and standard editions of *Zhongyong*) in printing 辨.
12. Zhu Xi, “Some questions on the *Great Learning*” (大學或問): “If you want to be filial, then you must know what the way of filiality is: what is appropriate for how to respect and take care of them, and the etiquette for how to warm and cool. If there is nothing that you have not exhausted, you will be able to do it; it is not something you can attain just by relying on this one character ‘filiality’.” 如欲爲孝則，當知所以爲孝之道，如何而爲奉養之宜，如何而爲溫清之節，莫不窮究然後能之，非獨守夫孝之一字而可得也。(Zhu *et al.* (2010, 6 冊, p. 525))
- Zhu Xi himself is alluding to a quotation of Cheng Yi: “It is necessary to know what the way of filiality is: how one must attend upon them, and how one must warm and cool – and only after one will be able to exhaust the way of filiality” (須是知所以爲孝之道，所以侍奉當如何，溫清當如何，然後能盡孝道也。Wang (2004, p. 206) Cf. Zhu *et al.* (1985, p. 63), with English in Chan (1967, pg. 66, number 61)).
- The original discussion of warming and cooling comes from the *Book of Rites*, “Summary of the Rules of Propriety” (曲禮上), which Legge (1885, p. 67) translates as: “For all sons it is the rule:—In winter, to warm (the bed for their parents), and to cool it in summer; in the evening, to adjust everything (for their repose), and to inquire (about their health) in the morning...” (凡爲人子之禮：冬溫而夏清，昏定而晨省 Ruan (2009, p. 2667)). The original text of the *Rites* itself does not explicitly mention the bed of parents (it is also not mentioned in the text above), but it is discussed already in the commentary of Zheng Xuan (鄭玄, c. 127-200). Neither the *Rites* nor Zheng Xuan has an expression corresponding to “respecting and taking care of”, but Kong Yingda’s (孔穎達, 574-648) sub-commentary (禮記正義) glosses the passage by saying “this section elucidates the rites for a person’s serving their relatives and respecting and taking care of them” (此一節明人子事親奉養之禮 Ruan (2009, p. 2667)).
- Wang responds to similar questions in “The Instructions for Practical Living (傳習錄) §4 and §138-139 (using the section numbers of Chan (1983), and, in English, Chan (1963)).
13. See above, n. 5 for discussion of 至 and 致.
14. *Explanation on the Text* 文言 for the hexagram *qian* 乾 in the *Book of Changes*. For an English rendering, see Lynn (1994, p.135); with Zhu Xi’s commentary, Adler (2019, p. 62). See n. 5 for discussion of 至.
15. *Zhongyong*, 29, where this is glossed as “knowing people” (知人). For English translation, see Plaks (2003, p. 50) and (with Zhu Xi’s commentary), Johnston & Ping (2012, 478-9).

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