

Response to Ivanhoe, “The Introspective, Perceptual, and Spontaneous Response Models of Wang Yangming’s Philosophy”

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I am grateful to P. J. Ivanhoe for publishing his critical reactions to my work (Ivanhoe (2022)). I have learned a great deal from Professor Ivanhoe over the years. He graciously gave me detailed comments on numerous drafts of my papers before they went to press, saving me from many errors in the process. And even before he and I began to correspond, his writings were an important inspiration for my own work (Ivanhoe (2000), Ivanhoe (2002), Ivanhoe (2009), Ivanhoe (2011)). I have always understood scholarly disagreement to be the highest form of compliment one can pay to another’s work. I hope it is clear that the criticisms I have offered of Ivanhoe’s writings are precisely such an expression of my admiration for them.

The present moment promises to be an exciting time for the study of Wang Yangming. There is a convergence of interest in Wang’s thought, and many new kinds of conversations, across disciplines and continents, have been rekindled in recent years. In a time of excitement like this, where there is an unusual frenzy of activity, I think it becomes especially important to take care that we do not move too quickly, and jump to conclusions. Perhaps the best way of doing this is to invite others to check one’s work, by stating one’s reasoning and the evidence for one’s conclusions as directly and transparently as possible. So I think it is helpful that Ivanhoe has laid out his criticisms in public. I myself would have liked to publish a response to his paper as well, but unfortunately the *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* does not publish response-papers. Initially, this made me inclined to leave our exchange at that, but after some deliberation I have decided that it may still be worth posting a reply publicly, in the hope that it can

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contribute to our joint understanding of these difficult issues.

There are several places in Ivanhoe's paper where I believe there has been some misunderstanding of what I have written. It does not seem to me fruitful to discuss these misunderstandings point by point—as scholars of Chinese philosophy know all too well, sometimes more commentary can make for more confusion, not less. But I would ask that anyone interested in these questions consult my papers alongside Ivanhoe's description of them. By the same token, it is clear that Ivanhoe believes that I have misunderstood him, so I would also ask that readers read his earlier works on the topic, and not take my word for the positions I attribute to him.

Ivanhoe's paper makes two serious objections to my interpretation of Wang Yangming. Both of these concern the same key passage, from the "Questions on the Great Learning" 大學問. The relevant passage reads as follows:

意念之發，吾心之良知既知其為善矣，使其不能誠有以好之，而復背而去之，則是以善為惡，而自昧其知善之良知矣 (Wu *et al.* (2011, 26.1071))

My translation of this passage was:

When a [good] motivating concern arises, the *liangzhi* of your mind already knows that it is good. Suppose you do not wholeheartedly love it but instead turn away from it and diminish it. You would then be taking what is good to be bad and obscuring your *liangzhi* which knows that it is good. (Lederman (2022a, p. 187))

Ivanhoe objects to two aspects of my translation here. First, he correctly notes that my translation of *qu* 去 as "diminish" is unusual, and suggests that it should instead mean "cast out". Second, he says that my translation of *yi...wei* 以...為 as "take...to be" is overly intellectual, and suggests that the phrase should instead mean something more behavioral like "treat... as". His suggested translation is:

Whenever a [good] thought or idea comes forth, the pure-knowing of your heart-mind knows that it is good; if you do not sincerely like it, but instead turn your back and cast it out, then you treat what is good as bad and obscure your pure knowing, which knows that it is good. (Ivanhoe (2022, p. 63))

I'll take these points in order, starting with "diminish". Ivanhoe is absolutely right that "diminish" is not the first translation you'd think of when you read this passage. In fact I agree with Ivanhoe that this is more of an interpretation of the passage than a translation. But I do think that interpretation is justified. In n. 35 of the same paper in which the translation appears (Lederman, 2022a), I discussed why I opted for this interpretative translation, considering essentially the same point that Ivanhoe raises here. Earlier in the paper I had suggested that the passage supports seeing Wang as endorsing the general claim that, if one does not wholeheartedly love a motivating concern, one instead turns away from it and "diminishes" it. But I observe that Wang does not make *exactly* this claim:

On its own, this phrase ["if one does not wholeheartedly love a motivating concern, but instead turns away from it and diminishes"] could be read as saying not that wholeheartedly loving an inclination on the one hand and turning away and diminishing it on the other are exhaustive alternatives but only that turning away from and diminishing an inclination is a special, extreme form of failing to wholeheartedly love it. This interpretation would seem on an even stronger footing if one reads (as is linguistically possible) the words I have translated as "diminish" (去) and "promote" (為) as "eliminate" and "enact", respectively. But in the context of Wang's argument here, this reading and the associated translation are disfavored. Wang clearly takes his argument to show that *liangzhi's* powers are not fully exercised if one does not wholeheartedly love a good motivating concern. If he thought that turning away and diminishing a good motivating concern was just a special case of failing to wholeheartedly love it, then there would be an obvious gap in his argument: he would have failed to show that *liangzhi's* knowledge would also be degraded if the person exhibited different, less extreme ways of failing to wholeheartedly love the relevant inclination.

I slightly regret writing "as is linguistically possible" instead of "as is linguistically more natural" in the parenthesis above. But the basic point stands regardless. Wang's overall line of thought in the passage seems to depend on the idea that, if a person does not "sincerely love it" (誠有以好之), then they will "turn their back on it and diminish it" (復背而去之). This claim is implausible if we read *qu* 去 as "eliminate", since it seems possible

that someone might fail to “sincerely love” (or “like”) an inclination and yet not “eliminate” it. And this was why I adopted a softer interpretation of *qu* 去 here, even if it is linguistically unusual.¹

So, I do stand by the argument of this footnote, and my interpretative translation of the passage. But that’s actually not the main point I wanted to make. The main point is that I don’t think the issue matters to the project of my paper. Even if you reject my argument, and hold that we should read *qu* 去 here as “eliminate” or, in Ivanhoe’s terms, “cast it out”, nothing important in the paper would change. (That’s why the argument was in a footnote.) If we read 去 as “eliminate” it makes Wang’s endorsement of the relevant claim (which becomes: “if one does not sincerely love it, one turns one’s back on it and eliminates it”) harder to understand. But that claim is pretty clearly in the text, and I don’t think there’s any real question of whether Wang endorses it (Ivanhoe certainly doesn’t suggest otherwise). The interpretation I advance in my paper relies on the fact that Wang endorses a conditional that ties failing to wholeheartedly love the motivating concern to the claim that one will *qu* 去 it. The interpretation does not depend on details about how we should interpret the consequent of this conditional. If the best understanding of *qu* 去 makes the conditional claim implausible, that is a problem for Wang Yangming. But it’s not a problem for my interpretation of him, since it’s clear that, whatever it means, Wang endorses this claim.

Turning now to the second point, Ivanhoe says that my translation of “take” is overly intellectual, overly cognitive. In this case, I want to take a bit of a stronger stand. Whereas I completely agree with Ivanhoe that “diminish” is an interpretative translation of 去 (I only adopted it because of the argument I’ve just discussed), I do think that “take” is a perfectly natural literal translation of 以...為. Ivanhoe’s “treat” is sometimes a good translation too; it’s just not uniquely preferred. But this point isn’t a big deal. What Ivanhoe really objects to (and this is fair enough!) is my claim that “taking” involves (in my words) “something like a belief” or something “more doxastic”, and this latter point is a big deal. The passage is my key evidence for the view that something “like a belief” is involved at all, one of the central claims of my paper.

¹Ivanhoe’s own “cast out” could be made consistent with my argument above, if he understands “cast out” in a way that is not as strong as “eliminate”. For perhaps on his preferred way of understanding “cast out” it would be plausible that if a person does not sincerely love (or in his terms “like”) the *yinian* 意念, they would “cast it out”. But if this is right, there does not seem to me an important philosophical difference between the translation of “diminish” and the translation of “cast it out” (in the weak sense).

So the crucial question is: would Ivanhoe's alternative translation eliminate this key evidence for my view? I don't see how it could. The reason is that just like "taking...to be", the relevant sense of "treating...as" *also* requires something plausibly "more doxastic" and more "like a belief" than what other locutions in this passage require. It's true that there may be an *English* use of "treat...as" which is purely behavioral. For instance, maybe someone can treat you as a friend, when really they dislike you. But I'm pretty sure that *yi...wei* 以...為 here doesn't have that kind of meaning. Perhaps "treat" involves a *more* behavioral component than "take" but it's not exclusively behavioral: the person considered here really does treat (in the sense of "regard") the good thing as bad; they're not faking it. And if that's right, then the different translation doesn't matter. So long as the expression here means a kind of "treating...as" which involves *really* regarding the object that way (and I think it's clear it must), my interpretation here is secure. What Wang expresses by this locution is, after all, something which involves "something like a belief" or something "more doxastic".²

Ivanhoe claims that my translations here are the product of an antecedent commitment to read Wang's philosophy as "chiefly concerned with epistemology" (p. 62).³ But whether or not one agrees with Ivanhoe that I've made mistakes, this commitment of mine can't be the explanation, since I simply have no such commitment. I believe (and am even in print saying explicitly!) that Wang thought the epistemology was if anything just a tiny corner of his philosophy, and not a very important corner at that (Lederman (2022b, §2)). Like Ivanhoe, I see Wang as primarily a practically-minded philosopher, who wanted to improve his students' moral character, not someone who was above all focused on theoretical issues. (In the paper I just cited, I explicitly take up the question whether Wang is interested in theoretical philosophy *at all*.) In my work on Wang Yangming, I've taken an interest in epistemological aspects of his view. Partly, I think they were interesting (I hope you'll agree!). Partly, too, this was a place where I thought I could help to make progress on our understanding of his thought. But in choosing to write about these aspects of Wang's thought, I certainly didn't

²By "belief", I don't mean something fancy like a religious belief. I just mean the kind of belief you have when you think it's going to rain, or think you're out of eggs. Belief of this kind doesn't require any kind of fancy cognitive endorsement; it is paradigmatically expressed in a form of behavioral "treating", "acting as if".

³In n. 41 he writes: "It is not altogether clear what motivates Lederman to interpret Wang's philosophy as primarily concerned with epistemology. The examples discussed here are offered as illustrations of the potential hazard of beginning with and remaining within the grip of this hermeneutical commitment." See also p. 46.

mean to claim that this was all there was to Wang's philosophy. My very first published paper spent a great deal of time discussing Aristotle's views about why blood is hot. By choosing to write about that topic, I was not claiming that Aristotle's philosophy was "chiefly concerned with" hematology.

Ivanhoe's specific allegation about my focus on epistemology is part of a broader charge, that I'm so in the grip of the ideology of Western philosophy that I can't read the texts for what they say (p. 55). Now, anyone, whoever they are, wherever they're from, and whatever they're reading, runs the risk of reading their own concerns into a text. We face a special form of this risk when we read texts from another period, originally written in another language, in a culture quite different from the one in which we grew up. One reason I write long footnotes with detailed arguments about specific interpretations and with many supporting citations is because, in the face of exactly this kind of risk, I want to be as clear as I can about why I make specific claims, about what my evidence for them is. But of course no matter how hard one tries, one could still fail, and Ivanhoe clearly thinks I've done just that.

This is an important allegation, and it's helpful that Ivanhoe has brought it out in the open. But anyone making such a sweeping charge should have clear and conclusive evidence to support it, and, in particular, they should have evidence that is based in the texts. If my Western or philosophical preconceptions are really driving my interpretations in the way Ivanhoe suggests they are, their effects should be visible in specific claims I make. There should be passages where a person can say "here is a place where you use a notion that Wang wouldn't have accepted, and here are the texts to show why". The charge shouldn't come down in the end to the claim that what I'm saying sounds different from your favored interpretation, or different from what you expected a Chinese text to say. In the past, when Ivanhoe has pointed out to me a passage of Wang Yangming where I'd gotten things wrong, and given me evidence to support it, I've been able to say "I agree, that's a place where I'm making a mistake". I hope and believe that, if I were to be presented with such evidence again, I'd be able to accept the correction and change my view. But I don't see that he's done that here, and, as a result, I don't see what evidence he's given to support his sweeping charge.

Ivanhoe suggests a few times in his paper that I've misinterpreted him in attributing the "Perceptual Model" to him. I want to say publicly that I'm sorry for this. It's a shame to feel misread in print. I thought he and I had agreed that this was a reasonable view to attribute to him before the

papers went to press, but obviously I was wrong, and I'm sorry. At the same time I will say that I'm not yet clear on how Ivanhoe's new "Spontaneous Response Model" differs from what I called the "Perceptual Model" in my other work. He writes that, according to him, "we should understand [Wang's] teachings about pure and genuine knowing in terms of a seamless process of perceiving, construing, assessing, and acting" (p. 60). If perceiving is, as Ivanhoe says, a key part of the seamless process that is genuine knowledge, then it sounds to me as though perceiving can be a part of episodes of genuine knowledge, which was the characteristic claim of the Perceptual Model as I described it (Lederman (2023, §3)). I suspect I'm the one being obtuse here, but in the interests of trying to clarify where we both stand, I hoped it would be helpful to mention where I'm still stuck.

I am grateful to Ivanhoe for his sustained discussion of my work, not just in his published paper, but, as I've said, in his myriad written comments on my work before it went to press. By expressing my disagreements with him here, I mean to express again my admiration for his work—not just his writings about philosophical issues, but also his wonderful translations, which have brought these important, beautiful, and inspiring texts to so many who wouldn't otherwise have had access to them at all.

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