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Wang Yangming as Virtue Ethicist

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WANG Yangming as a Virtue Ethicist

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Three ideas are implicit in the title of this chapter. To begin with, it is constructive to view WANG Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529), widely acknowledged as the most influential Confucian thinker of the Ming dynasty, as a virtue ethicist. Second, because Wang has much in common with many other Neo-Confucian philosophers, the Neo-Confucian approach to ethics quite generally can be fruitfully understood as a type of virtue ethics. If this is true, then a third idea also follows, namely that Western virtue ethicists should pay attention to Wang and to Neo-Confucian philosophy, because here is a new (to the Western philosophers) source of thinking about ethics from which they may well have things to learn. For the most part, the latter two ideas will remain implicit in this essay. My primary focus is on the structure of Wang’s ethics; on why he is best regarded as a virtue ethicist; and on how he believed that people are able to develop themselves such that they become virtuous and follow the way (dao 道). I am confident that readers interested in other Neo-Confucian philosophers, or in virtue ethics itself, will see the relevance of the present analysis of Wang’s ethics to their own concerns.

In order for any of this to make sense, before turning to Wang’s philosophy we need a basic understanding of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is an approach to ethics that puts a person’s character, and thus his or her virtues, at the center of its analysis. In ancient Greece such views predominated, but in recent Western moral philosophy, utilitarian and Kantian ways of understanding morality have been more influential. According to these latter views, the chief goal of morality is to articulate a rule in accord with which we can choose “right” actions, as opposed to the broader but more diffuse goal of being a “good” person on which virtue ethics

\[\text{1 For a significant discussion in Chinese of early Confucianism and virtue ethics, see Chen (2002).}\]
focuses. In recent decades, virtue ethics in the West has been experiencing a sustained revival. It is generally agreed today that virtue ethics represents a broad approach to ethics that encompasses a variety of specific — and not necessarily compatible — strategies. For instance, some philosophers today follow Aristotle in grounding their interpretation of virtue ethics on an idea of the good or flourishing life; Aristotle called this eudaimonia. Other contemporary philosophers develop different ideas in Aristotle, focusing on the capacities for perception and practical reasoning that are said to characterize the virtuous person, or phronimos. A third movement within contemporary virtue ethics looks to Hume and other “sentimentalists”; for these philosophers, virtue is to be found in the development of admirable sentiments like empathy. Nietzsche, Plato, the Stoics, and medieval thinkers like Aquinas are yet further sources for contemporary virtue ethics in the West.

What are we saying, then, when we label WANG Yangming a virtue ethicist? Is he a follower of one or another Western philosopher? Of course he is not. Rather, there is what Wittgenstein called a “family resemblance” among all these approaches to virtue ethics. In one way or another, all emphasize the development of dispositions to respond well to one’s circumstances. Such dispositions express a fine character, and offer a way of thinking about the moral life that does not rest in following rules. Rules of different kinds may be important, but in one or another way, nearly all virtue ethicists agree that rules cannot be fundamental. Furthermore, the responsiveness that is so central to virtue ethics cannot be merely a matter of self-control or the exercise of will-power. The inner traits of a virtuous person should be such that he or she responds in a more spontaneous or automatic fashion. By calling WANG

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2 This is not to imply that virtue ethics has nothing to say about “right action.” Considerable effort has been spent by recent Western virtue ethicists to show that virtue ethics can help to guide action. The focus of the theories is not on action, however, but on the character of the agent.

3 Good sources on disparate approaches to virtue ethics include Crisp and Slote (1993) and Welchman (2006).

4 My characterization of virtue ethics here is influenced by Swanton (2006: 19, 26).

5 For most virtue ethicists, there is still room for reasoning about what to do. Some (following Aristotle) give reason a central place in their theories. Others (following Hume) do not, yet this
Yangming a virtue ethicist, therefore, I am claiming that he, too, focuses his understanding of ethics on the development of dispositions to respond well to one’s circumstances. We will see that for Wang, there is a sense in which the ethically-cultivated person has a disposition to respond correctly to the world, but rules are still not fundamental. In addition, this disposition springs from a fine internal state rather than from self-control, and the ease (or spontaneity) with which a sage responds to ethically complex circumstances is a theme running throughout Confucian philosophy that is also prominent in WANG Yangming’s thought.⁶

In addition to these general characteristics that make Wang a virtue ethicist, it is worth dwelling for a moment on his use of the term de 德. De is typically translated as “virtue,” and I will follow that practice. The term has a long and interesting history but my concern is with how Wang and his fellow Neo-Confucians understand the term. Neo-Confucian thinkers believed that certain moral capacities already exist within each of us, although these capacities are typically obscured and need considerable effort to be realized. A central theme of this essay is that for Wang, the effort in question entails the establishment of a disposition to view the world in a certain fashion, and that the maturation of this disposition is de or virtue. Wang regularly connects de 德 (“virtue”) to its homonym de 得 (“attain”). For instance, he says “One calls the universal mandate (tianming 天命) within me my nature; when I attain (de 得) this nature, one calls this virtue (de 德)” (Wang 1992: 1168). Having “attained” one’s nature means to have actually realized it as a firm disposition. ZHU Xi makes this more explicit than does WANG Yangming. I believe Wang would have endorsed the following statement by Zhu: “If one is loyal (zhong 忠) today, but not tomorrow, then one hasn’t attained it in oneself, and this cannot be called de 德” (Zhu 1997: 778).⁷ There are certainly ways in which Wang’s use of de does not map perfectly on to classical or contemporary Western uses of virtue, which are themselves also does not mean that moral reactions are simply brute feelings, immune to discussion of which factors are (and are not) relevant to a proper reaction. For one discussion of these matters, see Hutton (2001).

⁶ In this regard, it is relevant that a number of scholars in recent years have argued that we should view classical Confucians as virtue ethicists. See, for example, Hutton (2001); Slingerland (2001); Van Norden (2007); Yu (2007); and Sim (2007).

⁷ See also the discussion of this theme in Huang and Wei (2007: 101).
somewhat disparate. Wang does not speak of particular traits of character as virtues, but rather sees them as aspects of the unified de one has attained. The idea that de is the realization of something we already have within us is also quite different from many theories within Western virtue ethics. Be this as it may, “de” and “virtue” are close enough not to undermine my earlier claim that Wang’s Neo-Confucian ethics bears a strong family resemblance to Western virtue ethics.

I explore Wang’s distinctive views under two main headings. The first part of the essay looks at the contents of Wang’s virtue ethics: what is it that our mature dispositions are supposed to lead us to do? In brief, I show that Wang thought we should be responsive to all the values relevant to a given situation. The virtuous person is one who responds in such a way as to harmonize all these values. Wang believed there is an objectively right response, but also that this is relative to agent and situation. No explicit rules can capture what we are supposed to do; instead, Wang’s focus remains on the qualities of an agent that lead to the right responses. In the second part of the essay, I turn to the question of how our dispositions are supposed to mature, such that a fully virtuous person (that is, a sage) can respond spontaneously. I conclude by showing how Wang’s position can help contemporary Western virtue ethicists who are striving to understand what it takes for one’s moral concern to be actively engaged in a given situation. In short, understanding WANG Yangming as a virtue ethicist both opens up new and fruitful ways to understand his views, and suggests ways in which philosophers (both East and West) can learn by engaging with these views.

Where virtue leads

I begin now with the question of the content of our virtuous responses: where does virtue lead us? This will then set the parameters for the question of how we can achieve such a state, which will be the topic of the second part of the essay. As we look into Wang’s discussion of virtuous responses, we will need to find a way to reconcile two kinds of vocabulary. On the one hand, virtuous dispositions are located in individuals, are constituted by their subjective responses to situations, and are supposed to feel right to the virtuous agent. On the other hand, there are numerous ways in which Wang signals that virtuous reactions are objectively correct. Recall from above that virtue is the “universal mandate” within one; elsewhere, he says “Universal coherence is brilliant virtue, so exhaustively [realizing] coherence is the means to making clear
one’s brilliant virtue” (Wang 1983: 39 [§7]). Although we will need to look more into the significance of “universal coherence,” both quotations seem to point toward a correctness that is sourced outside one’s subjective reactions.

“Coherence” (li 理) is both one of the most central, and most difficult, of all Neo-Confucian ideas. I choose to translate li as “coherence” because this word captures much of the term’s meaning, which is the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together. The metaphysical grounding for coherence is the insight, adapted from Buddhism, that all things are interdependent. This interdependence and the resulting possibility that all things can fit together are objective facts about the world. For Neo-Confucians (and especially for Wang Yangming), however, coherence is also partly constituted by our own human reactions to the world, and in this sense is partly subjective. “Subjective” does not mean that we get to decide what counts as “coherent,” but rather that coherence is partly determined by what one scholar has called “our profoundest reactions” (Graham 1986: 426), the paradigm of which is our valuing of life. Wang Yangming puts particular stress on our role in constituting coherence, saying that our heat/mind itself is coherence. (Wang 1983: §§117, 140, and 22). Another important feature of coherence is that Wang and other Neo-Confucians see that it can be parsed on many different levels. One can speak of the li of an individual thing, of a system of things, or of the whole universe. In fact, because of interdependence, when one refers to the li of an individual thing — say, that the coherence of a boat is that it floats — one is also making implicit reference to higher levels of coherence. What is immediately relevant about that particular wooden structure (which we call a “boat”) is that it floats. But this is relevant because it is of a size to carry humans, and humans have a need to cross rivers. So there are many patterns of coherence that together constitute the coherence of a given boat. The Neo-Confucian slogan for this is “coherence is one, yet distinguished into many (li yi fen shu 理一分殊).” A final point to note about coherence is that it is never merely “descriptive”: because of the ways it is partly constituted by human reactions and valuings, it is always normative. We have already seen this in relation to the coherence of a boat. Similarly, when we say that the li of a particular human relationship involves children respecting and caring for their parents, we are saying that coherence (value and intelligibility) is attained by
seeing the situation as structured by filial piety: this is part of what it is to identify the constituents of the situation as “children” and “parents,” in the first place.⁸

For our purposes here, it is important that many Neo-Confucians, Wang Yangming among them, saw an intimate tie between the ideas of coherence and harmony. Indeed, harmony can often be seen as a more concrete way of articulating the abstract idea of coherence. For instance, Chen Chun (a prominent follower of Zhu Xi) connects the two as follows:

When [the emotions] are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, they can then be called harmony. Harmony means not to contradict. When the coherence (li) inside is manifested, one feels pleasure when there should be pleasure and is angry when there should be anger, without contradicting coherence in any way. That is attaining due measure and degree. Attaining due measure and degree is simply achieving the coherence of what should be, without any excess of deficiency, and not in conflict with coherence.

That is why it is called harmony (Chen 1986: 123; slightly modified).

According to Chen, harmony is the realization or instantiation of coherence in one’s responses. As such, it must be related to what Wang Yangming calls “virtue,” since we have seen that that is also the realization of coherence.

What, more concretely, does it mean to realize coherence? In other words, when Neo-Confucians talk about realizing the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together, what do they have in mind? Here many Neo-Confucians would turn to a famous essay by one of the earliest Neo-Confucians, Zhang Zai (1020-1077). Zhang’s “Western Inscription” begins to flesh out the idea of inter-connectedness that coherence and harmony involve. Its first lines resound with empathy:

Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. The great ruler [i.e., emperor] is the eldest son of my parents [i.e., heaven and earth], and the great ministers are his stewards.

Respect the aged — that is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Show deep

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⁸ These are admittedly deep waters and the interpretation I offer here is controversial. For extended exposition and defense, see chapter two of Angle (2009).
love toward the orphaned and the weak — this is the way to treat them as the young should be treated (Chan 1963: 497).

Zhang goes on to cite several examples of ancient moral heroes, each of whom manifested his devotion to his parents in a different way. The differences among the examples are important, because Zhang’s essay is not about the universal application of a single principle: it expresses an ideal of organic harmony in which all care for one another as is appropriate to the circumstance.⁹ In Zhang’s admittedly schematic terms, “respect” is appropriate to the elderly, and “deep love” to the young. At a higher level of abstraction, Zhang marks another difference: he regards all “people” as siblings, whereas all “things” are companions.

We will shortly see that WANG Yangming himself offers another famous articulation of the idea that harmony (and coherence) means a kind of oneness among all things in which differences are nonetheless preserved. First, though, let us look at a passage in which Wang responds to a student’s telling him that the student was experiencing unbearable sorrow (you 悼) upon receiving a letter saying that the student’s son was seriously ill. Wang says:

This is the time for you to exert effort. If you allow this occasion to go by, what is the use of studying when nothing is happening? People should train and polish themselves at just such a time as this. A father’s love for his son is of course the noblest feeling. Nevertheless, there is naturally a place of equilibrium and harmony within universal coherence. To be excessive means to have selfish thoughts. On such an occasion most people feel that according to universal coherence (tianli 天理) they should be sorrowful. They do not realize that they are already affected by worries and anxieties and their heart/minds will not be correct. Generally speaking, the influence of the seven emotions is in the majority of cases excessive, and only in the minority of cases insufficient. As soon as it is excessive, it is not in accord with the original condition (benti 本體) of the heart/mind. It

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⁹ By “single principle,” I have in mind something like the consequentialist maxim “Do that which maximizes good consequences.” That is, a “principle” is something that can be stated and applied to cases. This is certainly the most common understanding of “principle” in contemporary English-language philosophy, which is one reason why the old-fashioned translation of li as principle is so misleading.
must be adjusted to reach the mean (zhong 中) before it becomes correct (Wang 1983: 82 [§44]; Wang 1963: 38-39 slightly mod.).

It is critical not to mistake Wang’s position here. He is not saying that feeling sorrowful for a son’s suffering is selfish indulgence, nor that a sage would be indifferent to such plight. The student’s difficulty is severe — he is suffering “sorrow and depression that he cannot bear” (ibid.) — and Wang’s aim is to help him see that there is a vector of harmony in which all the concerns of his life and present situation complement one another — form a “coherent” whole — so that he can go forward. Wang’s goal is to enable the student to understand the coherence of his own responses and to see new opportunities for creative responses — that is, for responses that are different from his past self-pity, that lead to more fruitful inner and outer states, and that bring him to a feeling of subjective rightness in his reactions.

Another way that we might mistake Wang’s position is to neglect the objective correctness at which he wants his student to aim. A feeling of subjective satisfaction is not sufficient to show that one has responded correctly, because often enough one can misread one’s own inner states. As noted above, the coherence of an individual situation is itself nested in broader patterns of coherence, such that the harmonious reaction that is in keeping with coherence is always sensitive to all the relevant factors. In particular, because he believes that “the influence of the seven emotions is in the majority of cases excessive,” Wang’s teachings about how to reach harmony often involve exerting effort to restrain one’s feelings. At the same time, Wang allows himself considerable situation-specific flexibility via a distinction between excess, which is always bad, and extremity, which may be appropriate. In a letter to a different student, Wang writes,

There is harmony in sorrow (ai 哀). This refers to its taking rise from complete sincerity (cheng 誠) without any affectation. The excess of emotion is not harmony. The [bare] movement of our qi 氣 is not harmony. To be attached to selfish desires and stubbornness is not harmony. The infant cries all day without hurting his throat. This is the extreme of harmony (Wang 1985: 27, 13a; Wang 1972: 22 slightly mod.).

Wang recognizes that it is possible to believe mistakenly that one’s feelings and thoughts (yi 意) are liangzhi 良知, though in response he simply instructs his students to apply more effort to introspecting the difference (WANG 1972: 114).
In other words, sorrow that is completely sincere, that manifests complete integrity with one’s situation, can be extreme yet still harmonious.

Sorrow is a vital human emotion, as appropriate to sages as it is to the rest of us. To feel sorrow is to feel badly because someone or something has suffered or died. It is purest — unmixed with other feelings like regret or shame — when the suffering or death was inevitable, or at least beyond one’s control. Sorrow is always something that we gradually work through: if one’s sorrow diminishes too rapidly, we show inadequate respect and raise questions about the genuineness of our compassion toward the person or thing prior to its suffering. Since sorrow is linked so closely, even for sages, to the notion of our limited ability to affect the world, it can be terrifying and threaten to consume us, as the passage above suggests. Both classical Confucians and Neo-Confucians embraced rituals like funerals and the three-year mourning period as a means to express and work through our grief in appropriate ways.

WANG Yangming articulates some of the underlying dynamic behind sorrow in an important passage that also bears on situations of apparent conflict:

[A student said,] “The great man and things form one body. Why does the Great Learning say that there is relative importance (hou bo 厚薄) among things?”

The Teacher said, “It is because of coherence that there is relative importance. Take for example the body, which is one organic entity (yi ti 一體). If we use the hands and the feet to protect the head, does that mean that we go too far in treating them as less important? This simply accords with their coherence. We love both plants and animals, yet we can bear (ren 忍) nurturing animals with plants. We love both animals and men, and yet we can bear Butchering animals to feed our parents, provide for religious sacrifices, and entertain guests. We love both parents and strangers. But suppose here are a small basket of rice and a platter of soup. With them one will survive and without them one will die; there is not enough to save both parent and stranger. We can bear preferring to save the parent instead of the stranger. In each case, these all accord with coherence. As to the relationship between ourselves and our parents, there cannot be any distinction of…greater or lesser importance, for being humane to all people and feeling love for all things comes from this affection toward parents. If in this relationship we can bear any relative importance, then anything can be borne (Wang 1983: 332 [§276]; Wang 1963: 222-223 substantially mod.).
This is a key passage because, although it does not mention sorrow explicitly, it helps us to see that Wang recognized the emotional complexity attending many of the situations with which we are faced. The context for Wang’s statement is formed by two famous passages from *Mencius*: first, that “all people have a heart/mind than cannot bear the suffering of others,” and second, “For all people there are things they cannot bear. To extend this to what they can bear is humaneness.”\(^{11}\) The basic idea is that we should extend our compassion from simple and clear situations to those that are more distant or complex — the latter being cases in which we currently can, but should not, bear others’ suffering because we do not yet attend carefully to them. Wang makes no suggestion, however, that Mencius’s idea of extending humaneness applies to cases like those he is considering. It would *not* be more humane to be unable to bear feeding one’s parent instead of a stranger; in this case, as in each of the others, the universe is patterned in such a way that we should and must bear choosing parents over strangers, sacrifices over animals, and so on.

By using the word “bear” Wang signals that pain or sadness attend to such choices. In the simplest case, it hurts to protect our head with our arms. But it is the right thing to do, and we can bear the pain. It’s one of the things that arms are for.\(^ {12}\) The same goes for each of the other cases. Of course we feel sorrow as a stranger starves to death: this is a natural and appropriate part of our reaction to the situation Wang describes. It may take us some time to get over our sorrow; the process of working through our sorrow may involve re-doubling our commitment to ending world hunger or establishing a relationship with the dead person’s family. We certainly wish things had been otherwise, but I believe Wang would insist that while sorrow is appropriate, regret is not. By “regret,” I mean feeling badly because one did not respond to a given situation in some alternative way. Non-sages should often feel regret, reflecting that if only they had been better people — better cultivated, better able to see a harmonious solution — the situation might have been resolved differently. The important point for our present concerns, however, is that Wang sees that both extremity of reaction, and a balance of different feelings

\(^{11}\) *Mencius* 2A.6 and 7B.31 respectively (*Mencius* 1970: 82 and 200).

\(^{12}\) Contrast Wang (1983: 319 [§254]), in which Wang discusses cases in which we “bear” things that we should not, and thus “harm coherence.”
(pleasant and unpleasant), can be involved in the harmonious reaction to which our virtuous dispositions should lead us.\textsuperscript{13}

I turn now to another passage that will help me to flesh out both the appropriateness of different sorts of reactions, and particularly the vast scope of Wang’s ideal of harmony:

That the great man can regard the cosmos, earth, and the myriad things as one body is not because he intends (\textit{yi} 意) it be so, but because of the natural humaneness of his heart/mind.... Even the heat/mind of the small man is no different. Only he himself makes it small. Therefore when he sees a child about to fall into a well, he cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration.\textsuperscript{14} This shows that his humaneness forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when he observes the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, he cannot help feeling an “inability to bear”\textsuperscript{15} their suffering. This shows that his humaneness forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as he is. But when he sees plants broken and destroyed, he cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that his humaneness forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as he is. Yet, even when he sees tiles and stones shattered and crushed, he cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that his humaneness forms one body with tiles and stones. This means that even the heart/mind of a small man forms one body with all (Wang 1985: 26, 2a; Wang 1963: 272 slightly mod.).

\textsuperscript{13} Elsewhere I discuss issues surrounding situations involving apparent conflicts in much more detail, and argue that Neo-Confucians would have denied that sages face tragic dilemmas (Angle 2009: chapter six).

\textsuperscript{14} A reference to \textit{Mencius} 2A.6.

\textsuperscript{15} Also from \textit{Mencius} 2A.6, and see also \textit{Mencius} 1A.7, where King Xuan exhibits similar feelings on seeing an ox being led to ritual slaughter. In addition, \textit{Mencius} 7A.45 bears comparison with Wang: “A gentleman is sparing (\textit{ai} 愛) with things but shows no benevolence toward them; he shows benevolence towards the people but not filial affection (\textit{qin} 親)” (\textit{Mencius} 1970: 192 slightly mod.). The chief difference with Wang is that the underlying sense of continuity emphasized by Wang — since all the feelings he identifies are aspects of “humaneness” — is very attenuated in \textit{Mencius}. 
The passage contains two key ideas. First, all people already form “one body” with the myriad things, in the sense that we naturally, spontaneously experience the feelings that Wang describes, even though most of us will not reliably follow through on these feelings. Second, the feelings are different, depending on our relationship to the things in question. In other words, Wang’s vision embraces both unity and difference, the hallmarks of harmony.

It is natural to want to hear more about how we move from the mere initial feelings that we are all said to have, to the fully developed reactions of a sage. Since this is the main focus of the second part of this essay, I will not linger on it here. More relevant to present concerns — namely, the nature of the harmony ideal itself — is the amazing scope of that ideal. ZHANG Zai’s reference to seeing all “things” as one’s “companions” is here made more concrete. We feel “regret,” Wang says, even upon encountering shattered roof tiles. Is this plausible? Perhaps, one might grudgingly concede, we do sometimes feel regret, but is that not always a matter of projecting some human concern or other onto the situation? According to this line of thinking, our regret is not for the roof tile itself, but for those who live beneath the roof and who suffer from the leaks and drafts it causes; those who were swindled by a salesman of shoddy tiles; or what have you. Perhaps the tiles are part of a dilapidated, but once-proud, landmark; in this case, our regret may be for the decline of our town or even our civilization. Even in these cases, however, what we regret is ultimately our own diminished state.

At the core of this objection to Wang’s expansive vision is an unwillingness to see ourselves as fundamentally a part of the world we experience. The objector therefore feels that we can only react to the tiles insofar as we “project” our own interests onto them; this is seen as fundamentally discontinuous with our reactions to the threat faced by an innocent child or to imminent suffering on the part of a sentient being. Wang’s response is to insist that we are not “projecting” anything onto the tile when we feel regret for any of the reasons cited above: the tile is not independent from those living beneath it, those who sold it, and so on. Each person, animal, plant, and tile exists in a web of inter-relationships that structures the cosmos. In certain circumstances it is relatively easy to notice that in some particular way, our world has tipped out of balance. Wang is attempting to articulate some of these paradigmatic situations in which our oneness with our world readily reveals itself, building on the examples already suggested in Mencius. One way to articulate the intuition driving this commitment to harmony is to say “Everything matters.” To see how things matter, we sometimes have to look more carefully, or
look from a different perspective, or recognize relationships and possibilities to which we had
previously been blind. In addition, everything does not matter in the same way, or to the same
degree. The ways in which we must learn to look at things — to look more imaginatively, seeing
new possibilities — are central to much of the rest of this essay.

How to be good

In what is probably the most famous description of a sage in all of Chinese philosophy, the
Analects tells us that when Confucius reached the age of seventy, he was able to “follow his
heart’s desire without overstepping the bounds” (Analects 2:4). It seems that Confucius came to
be able to act properly without even trying. Now at least some of the time, acting properly is easy
for most of us. When not faced with a difficult choice or temptation, perhaps we get along fine.
The Analects is nonetheless making a very strong claim. Confucius, we may assume, did find
himself faced with difficult choices or temptations, and still he was able to follow his heart’s
desires. The implication is not that Confucius was lucky not to be challenged, but that
successfully meeting any challenge was easy. How is this possible?

Wang Yangming’s commentary on Analects 2:4 offers an important clue as to how he
would answer this question. Wang is recorded as having had the following conversation with a
student named Tang Xu:

Tang Xu asked, “Does establishing one’s commitment (li zhi 立志) mean always to
preserve a good thought, and to do good and remove bad?”

[The teacher] replied: “When a good thought is preserved, that is universal coherence....
This thought is like the roots of a tree. Establishing one’s commitment is nothing other
than nurturing this good thought. To be able to ‘follow one’s heart’s desire without
overstepping the line’ is simply when one’s commitment has reached maturity” (Wang
1983: 89 [§53]).

16 Significant parts of this section draw on Angle (2005), though I have made changes to the
presentation of the argument throughout.

17 Contrast Chan’s translation, which effaces zhi 志 completely (Wang 1983: 43).
At the core of Wang’s understanding of Analects 2:4 is the idea of “commitment” (zhì 志). Zhi is a characteristic that one’s heart/mind can come to take on:

When a good thought arises, recognize it and develop it fully. When a bad thought arises, recognize it and stop it. Recognizing-and-developing and recognizing-and-stopping is commitment (zhì) (Wang 1983: 100 [§71]; Wang 1963: 49).

Commitment means that one’s heart/mind recognizes-good-thoughts-and-develops-them, or recognizes-bad-thoughts-and-stops-them. My hyphens are meant to emphasize that to the degree one has zhi, the recognition and development (or stopping) are part of a single process. Wang emphasizes the intimate relation between the two sides of this process in his famous doctrine of the “unity of knowledge and action.”

To make a commitment, in short, is to seek to develop something: the disposition, we might say, to “know-and-develop” good thoughts and “know-and-stop” bad ones. To say that Wang is talking of commitment in this sense, however, looks initially to run headlong into P. J. Ivanhoe’s well-established argument that whereas talk of “development” is appropriate to the self-cultivation model of a classical Confucian like Mencius, according to whom we begin with rudimentary moral tendencies that must be developed if we are to improve morally, WANG Yangming’s understanding of self-cultivation is very different. Wang focuses on the idea of “discovery” of an already-existing moral capacity, our liangzhì (良知), which Ivanhoe translates as “pure knowing.” This capacity needs no development — it comes fully-formed — although we must discover it within ourselves and clear away various obstacles to its functioning.18 In fact, my talk of dispositions and commitments fits better with Ivanhoe’s model than it first appears, since it is precisely by solidifying our commitment that we are able to give our liangzhì its proper role in our moral lives.

18 See chapter five of Ivanhoe (2002). Also see Ivanhoe (2000). Ivanhoe describes ZHU Xi’s approach to self-cultivation as “recovery.” Van Norden (2007) has argued that ZHU Xi combines a “discovery” model of with elements from “development” and “reformation” models. These both contrast with the pure “discovery” model they see at work in WANG Yangming. I am suggesting here that Wang, too, must be seen as more of a mixed case.
Ivanhoe argues persuasively that unlike Mencius, the growth of moral feelings does not figure in Wang’s understanding of human nature or self-cultivation. Ivanhoe points to Wang’s use of metaphors like the sun obscured by clouds, pure gold which can be tainted, and a perfect mirror marred by dust: all suggest that a fully-formed moral faculty lies within each of us, though in each case its functioning is impaired (Ivanhoe 2002: 48-50). Passage 30 of Wang’s Record of Practicing What Has Been Transmitted, however, shows that something else must also be going on. It reads, in part:

Establishing a commitment and applying effort are like planting a tree. When the tree first sprouts there is still no trunk. Then there is a trunk, but there are still no branches. After there are branches, then there are leaves. After there are leaves, then there are flowers and fruit. When one first plants the root, one should only be concerned about nourishing and caring for it. Do not think about the branches. Do not think about the leaves. Do not think about the flowers. And do not think about the fruit. How does dreaming about these things help in any way? Do not neglect the work of nourishing and caring, fearing that there will be no branches, leaves, flowers, or fruit (Wang 1983: 68 [§30]; Ivanhoe 2002: 104).

In light of Wang’s comment on Analects 2:4, we should read the present passage as showing that part of Wang’s picture of self-cultivation involves the deepening or maturation of our zhi, our commitment. Trees mature and grow; so must our zhi. Many of the passages in which Wang discusses zhi make explicit that it is something admitting of degrees; it can deepen over time. Admittedly, Wang is after something quite different from Mencius: Ivanhoe is absolutely correct that there is a “discovery” aspect to Wang’s model of cultivation. Consider the following passage:

[A student] asked about “establishing commitment.” The teacher said: “It is simply to want to preserve universal coherence in every thought. If one does not neglect this, in time it will naturally crystallize in one’s heart/mind. This is like what the Daoists call “the congealing of the sage-essence.” If the thought of universal coherence is always preserved, then the gradual steps to the levels of beautiful person, great person, sage, and
spiritual person are all but the cultivation and extension of this one thought (Wang 1983: 57 [§16]. Wang 1963: 25 slightly mod.).

What needs to grow, in other words, is the consistency with which we “want to preserve universal coherence in every thought”: this consistent disposition is zhi 志. Universal coherence itself and our ability to identify it — topics I will take up below — do not develop. We must discover the ability to identify universal coherence, and thus ultimately coherence itself, within ourselves. The process of deepening our commitment is certainly related to increasing the purity with which our liangzhi 良知 shines forth. As I see it, there are two active aspects to cultivating one’s commitment, which can be viewed as two sides of a single coin. One is the negative aspect on which Ivanhoe focuses, namely pruning selfish desires. The positive aspect, which serves to bind the whole process together (and make it considerably more plausible), I characterize as looking actively for harmony in the universe.

Before pursuing the idea of “looking actively for harmony” more directly, we should first consider Wang’s famous doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action. Wang introduces this idea by arguing that when we see a color as beautiful, we thereby love it. We do not first see it as beautiful and then subsequently decide to love its beauty: instead, “knowledge” that it is beautiful and the “action” of loving it come together. If someone agreed that a particular color was beautiful, but did not feel any love for it, we would have to wonder whether such a person shared our concept of beautiful. Of course, Wang’s main concern is not with beauty; his discussion of loving beautiful colors is only by way of analogy to the main subject, which is ethical knowledge and action. Directly after his discussion of loving beauty, Wang continues:

Suppose we say that so-and-so knows filial piety and so-and-so knows brotherly respect. They must have actually practiced filial piety and brotherly respect before they can be said to know them. It will not do to say that they know filial piety and brotherly respect

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20 Chen Lai’s major Chinese-language study of Wang Yangming also puts some emphasis on what one could call a positive side to the process of self-cultivation, especially in the context of Wang’s doctrine of “extending liangzhi 至良知”; see Chen (1991: 178-85).

21 For more discussion, see Chen (1991: ch. 5) and Angle (2005).
because they show them in words. Or take one’s knowledge of pain. Only after one has experienced pain can one know pain (Wang 1983: 33 [§5]; Wang 1963: 10).

To a reader with contemporary Western philosophical sensibilities, this passage — particularly the bit about pain — makes it sound as if Wang is emphasizing what have come to be called “qualia”: one cannot know what pain is unless one knows how it feels. But this is not Wang’s point, just as his point regarding beauty is not that one must know how a beautiful color looks in order to truly know what beauty is. Rather, he maintains that one must react to beauty by loving it; similarly, one must react to pain by avoiding it (all else being equal). Not to react in this way is to fail to grasp the normative import of identifying something as pain: as above, Wang is making more than a descriptive prediction about people’s reaction to stimuli here.

There is a lot packed into this passage, including opposition to too much book learning and a related emphasis on the need for actual experience, in concrete particularity. Be all this as it may, if we focus on the main issue at hand, we might feel tempted to conclude that there is an important disanalogy between the beauty case and the filial piety case. In the former, Wang says that knowing something as beautiful is to love (hào 好) it, which we can gloss as having a positive attitude toward it. In the filial piety case, Wang says that only if we have actually practiced (xíng 行) it can we be said to know it. “Practice” (xíng) is the same word that is translated as “action” in the slogan “unity of knowledge and action.” Xíng seems to be about more than just feelings, but then how can Wang think that the two cases are analogous? Has this discussion, in the end, actually helped us to see how perceptual “knowing” is linked to reliable ethical “action”?

The answer to this question is “yes” because Wang’s ideas about perception are indeed central to understanding his picture of mature virtue, but before we can complete the picture we need to return to the idea of commitment. To help us do so, consider the following passage from philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who has made many contributions to contemporary virtue ethics:

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22 The parable of the tiger, cited by both the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi — but not by Wang — makes this point explicitly (Graham: 1992: 80; Chen 1987: 247).

23 Nussbaum herself is not committed to the category of “virtue ethics,” and indeed her sources of philosophical inspiration are diverse. Nonetheless, much of her work is closely cognate with
Perception is not merely aided by emotion but is also in part constituted by appropriate response. *Good perception is a full recognition or acknowledgment of the practical situation;* the whole personality sees it for what it is. The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say, in addition, that a part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person doesn’t really, or doesn’t fully, *see* what has happened.... We want to say that she is merely saying the words, “He needs my help” or “She is dead,” but doesn’t yet fully *know* it, because the emotional part of cognition is lacking (Nussbaum 1990: 79 emphasis added).

Wang Yangming would clearly agree that perception is in part constituted by appropriate response. Nussbaum’s reference to one who merely says the words without feeling the response sounds remarkably like Wang’s “It will not do to say that they know filial piety and brotherly respect because they show them in words.” We might also find in Nussbaum’s reference to “acknowledgment” a hint of what still needs development, both for her account and for Wang’s, namely something more about the active contribution an agent must make to a situation in order not just to “know,” but to “acknowledge.”

In fact, “acknowledgement” may still be too passive for Wang. He is concerned that we make a vital commitment to learning and to the pursuit of virtue. This commitment is well-described by the contemporary scholar A. S. Cua as a “commitment to humaneness (*ren* 仁).” If we recall Wang’s discussion of forming one body with all things from above, we will see that to feel humaneness for all is to care for all, each in its own way or to its appropriate degree. What this way or degree is, however, must depend on the over-all context. Cua writes that for Wang Yangming, moral perception is therefore (1) mindfulness of whole situations; and (2) directed at *li* (or coherence) as an organic unity. In my terms, this is to say that our perception is not passive, but directed toward the realization — a usefully ambiguous word — of harmony. Commitment

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that of scholars who do identify as virtue ethicists. For other important sources of contemporary thinking about moral perception, see (Murdoch: 1970); Wiggins (1980); McDowell (1979); Sherman (1989); Blum (1991).
to humaneness is commitment to *li*, which in turn simply is a commitment to harmony. Cua argues that:

> [Adopting] *ren* as a governing ideal of one’s life does not imply a determinative conception of the ideal to be realized. It is to adopt an attitude and to resolve, with one’s heart and mind, to look at things and events in such a way that they can become constituents in a harmonious unity without the unity being specified in advance of experience of man’s confrontation with the changes in the natural world. Thus, to adopt this ideal attitude is to see human life in its morally excellent form, as possessing a coherence in which apparently conflicting elements are elements of an achievable harmonious order. The presence of conflicting elements is in experience a fact to be acknowledged. Acknowledgment brings with it a task of reconciliation. Since the desired coherence of the moral order is not spelled out *a priori*, harmonization of the conflicting elements in experience is essentially a *creative* endeavor on the part of both the Confucian moral theorist and the agent (Cua 1998: 124-5).

I find Cua’s articulation of the active nature of moral perception to be compelling. We do not just passively notice moral features: We commit to seeing “human life in its morally excellent form, as possessing a coherence in which apparently conflicting elements are elements of an achievable harmonious order.” This idea certainly needs spelling out, but I believe it can be sustained, and I believe it offers the prospect of both fitting together disparate aspects of Wang’s vision, and illuminating the idea of virtue more generally.

One of the key ideas Cua puts forward is the commitment to an ideal of resolving apparent conflicts. A second important aspect of his position is that these resolutions are “not spelled out *a priori,*” from which he concludes that harmonization is “essentially a creative endeavor.” I believe that Cua’s talk of “creativity” is something of an exaggeration, but he is certainly on the right track. Wang understood that virtuous perception-cum-activity is not a fundamentally rule-governed activity, even if much of the time we get along just fine by following rules. In one key passage, Wang discusses the ancient sage-king Shun, who agreed to marry the sage-king Yao’s daughters without first getting permission from his own parents, since his parents would have denied permission, being intent on seeing that Shun’s younger brother prosper, rather than Shun himself:
As for Shun’s marrying without first telling his parents, was there someone before him who did the same thing and served as an example for him, which he could find out by looking into certain records and asking certain people, after which he did as he did? Or did he search into the innate knowledge in an instant of his heart/mind’s thought and weigh (quan 權) all factors as to what was proper, after which he could not help doing what he did (Wang 1983: 182 (§1395); Wang 1963: 109-110 slightly mod.)?24

The conclusion of this passage — that upon weighing all factors, Shun “could not help doing what he did” — is certainly relevant to an understanding of Wang’s “unity of knowledge and action” doctrine. Our principal interest here, however, is in the appearance of conflict and the explicit statement that no resolution is spelled out a priori. Should Shun ask his parents’ permission, or should he marry in order to provide them with grandchildren? Wang insists that neither prior texts nor exemplars could answer this for Shun.25

How, then, was he to deal with the situation? Cua’s gloss would be that since Shun was committed to the ideal of li (or coherence), he was determined to find a way to see the conflictive elements of the situation as amenable to the creation of a harmonious whole. He weighs all factors, sees a solution, and acts. It would be wrong to say that Shun simply came to see that in all cases, it is better to provide one’s parents with grandchildren than to ask their permission for marriage. Such a rule could easily turn into a convenient excuse for children systematically to disobey their parents. Wang avoids such a formulaic reading of the resolution when he says: “If Emperor Shun’s heat/mind was not sincere about [avoiding leaving his parents with] no posterity... then [his] marrying without telling his parents ... would be a case of the greatest filial impiety” (ibid). Perhaps more importantly, although Wang does not mention it, the case of Shun and his parents is not confined to one, isolated decision. Li is about patterns through time and space, so we should expect a harmonious resolution to be more like a process than a single action. Indeed, it should pick up on and incorporate pre-existing tendencies and past events, as well as

24 For an early discussion of this story, see Mencius 5A.2.

25 Wang expressed a similar idea when he explained that it is wrong to be attached to the idea that weeds are always bad, or flowers always good; one needs to follow universal coherence (as it applies to a given, particular situation) rather than following an inflexible rule (Wang 1983: §101).
look to future ramifications. Often it will primarily be by looking to these broader dimensions of situations that we will be able to see possibilities for harmonious resolution.

We can now begin to pull together different strands of the chapter’s argument. Virtue, for Wang Yangming, involves the development of mature dispositions to see situations in terms revealed by one’s innate liangzhi, which he tells us means to see-and-feel the world in terms of humaneness, compassion, and harmony. We all have the capacity to see-and-feel the world in these terms, but realization of this capacity requires considerable effort on our part. This effort is Wang’s project of moral education, which can be seen as involving both a positive and a negative side. Negatively, Wang teaches us to pare away problematic selfish intrusions into one’s vision. Positively, he says that our commitment to looking for harmony in the world needs to mature. Wang believed that as we gradually progress, we get ever better at attaining the goodness that lies latent within us: our virtue becomes ever more robust and clear. Still, it is possible to wonder whether Wang’s belief that coming to see the world in terms of humaneness and harmony will really have the result that he expects. The contemporary philosopher Lawrence Blum has observed, “Seeing a situation in moral categories does not entail seeing one’s moral agency as engaged by that situation. People often see a situation as involving a wrong but not regard themselves as morally pulled to do anything about it” (Blum 1991: 708 n. 9). Might Wang have had a response to this objection? If he would have, then we may begin to see ways in which viewing Wang as a virtue ethicist contributes not only to our understanding of Wang, but also to broader discussions in philosophy.

26 Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of the similarities between creative response, in much the sense I am describing, and improvisational rather than score- or script-based performance, is helpful here. “The salient difference between acting from a script and improvising is that one has to be not less but far more keenly attentive to what is given by the other actors in a situation.” “[She] must suit her choice to the evolving story, which has its own form and continuity.” As in jazz improvisation, Nussbaum continues, “The perceiver who improvises morally is doubly responsible: responsible to the history of commitment and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context; and especially responsible to these, in that her commitments are forged freshly on each occasion, in an active and intelligent confrontation between her own history and the requirements of the occasion” (Nussbaum 1990: 94).
Blum illustrates his concerns with the following case. Considering and building on this case will enable us to distinguish passive moral perception from the active perception that Wang emphasized. This difference is crucial for understanding the link with action:

Tim, a white male, is waiting for a taxi at a train station. Waiting near him are a black woman and her daughter. A cab comes by, past the woman and her daughter, and stops in front of him. Tim, with relief, gets in to the cab.

Tim’s relief at having gotten a cab might block from his full awareness the cab driver’s having passed up the black mother and child in favor of him. What is salient in Tim’s perception might simply be the presence of the cab.

But suppose that once in the cab Tim, idly ruminating, puts the pieces of the situation together and comes to see it now (in retrospect) in a different way. He sees the driver as having intentionally passed up the woman and child. Suppose he also infers that the driver did this out of racism.... Whether Tim is correct in this inference is not so important as whether the inference is a plausible one, which I am assuming it to be. This perception of racism becomes his “take” on the situation. He now sees an issue of injustice in the situation in a way he did not at first.... Prior to any action Tim might take in the situation, it is (ceteris paribus) a (morally) better thing for him to have recognized the racial injustice than not to have done so (ibid. 706-707).

Blum then adds in a footnote that for all the importance of perception, its link to action is still poorly understood:

For example, even when Tim comes to see injustice as having taken place, he may think of that injustice as over and done with and not implying anything for him to do about it. The issue of what makes a moral being see her sense of agency as engaged by a situation — and how perception fits into this — deserves further exploration than I can undertake here (ibid. 708 n. 9).

The example of Tim shows that one can see a situation in moral categories and yet not act.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on what Tim might be feeling. Is he too tired after a long trip to work up the indignation that might otherwise move him to act? Or perhaps he’s furious, but too confused about what it makes sense to do? Is he too shy to interfere? On the
other hand, he may see the situation, for all its wrongness, as simply not his problem. Maybe he sees the world as full of injustice, with no hope for improvement; or maybe he’s less pessimistic that this, but still sees such problems as the concern of (some specific, or a vaguely general) “others.”

As I understand him, Wang says that the route to virtue lies in maturing one’s commitment to looking for harmony in one’s world. Although Tim makes progress in focusing enough on his situation to see it in moral terms, he is still far from exemplifying Wang’s “mature commitment.” That commitment entails a kind of active effort to realize harmony in both the cognitive/affective and actualizing senses of “realize”: to see-and-feel how it might emerge from the present configuration of people, relationships, and so on, including one’s own position in the web of events and relations making up the situation; and, by realizing one’s dynamic position, move toward actualizing the harmonious possibilities inherent therein. I believe it makes sense to think of “realize” as having an affective dimension: often, our realization can be sparked by feeling something about a given situation even before we grasp the idea in more cognitive terms. Even if this is stretching the meaning of the English word “realize,” it is certainly what Wang has in mind. The reactions of our xin (heart/mind), as we have seen, are as much affective as they are cognitive. When a commitment of this kind has matured, one has a settled disposition to look to realize harmony, which involves (among other things) seeing-and-feeling what one’s “sense of moral agency” can contribute to realizing the harmony. Such a settled disposition, of course, is precisely what Wang characterizes as “virtue (de).” As with “realize,” “seeing-and-feeling what one can contribute” combines Wang’s knowledge and action. With mature commitment, that is, there is no mere noticing that the world can be viewed in moral terms; one views the world actively, looking for the appropriate configuration into which events can resolve themselves.

Exactly which further actions follow from looking to realize harmony in a given situation depend on the details of the situation. We can imagine Tim with the commitment and sagely ease of a seventy-year-old Confucius, and point out some of the things that would have been different. Tim-the-sage might be tired after a business trip, but would surely see the mother and daughter as he stepped up to the curb, and this seeing would not be a mere noticing, but an acknowledging. Here we are together, his smile would say. Perhaps some banter about her charming daughter — the appropriate ritual for the situation — and then up comes the cab, past the mother and stopping in front of Tim. Tim speaks to the driver, offering a charitable gloss on the driver’s
action — as the “teaching” most likely to make a difference in this context — and beckons the others to take their rightful seats. With a wave at the departing girl and her mother, Tim stands back to wait for another cab, reflecting on how far his society still needs to improve. This, then, is full virtue, and exemplifies the “ease” of a sage. It comes from mature commitment. This commitment does not simply involve paring away all traces of the “self” through sheer acts of will. On Wang’s picture, the commitment is, put positively, to look humanely for harmony. Paring away selfish perspectives is the negative side of the coin; looking for harmony is the positive side. We are not asked to make unsupported acts of will because (1) there is a process through which we can build up our abilities to do these two things; and (2) the two sides of self-cultivation are mutually-reinforcing.

Wang’s vision of active moral perception is very powerful, combining as it does a role for moral sentiments, the idea of cognitive-cum-affective perception, and the force of non-rule-bound constraint by harmony (or coherence). I have already mentioned several contemporary Western virtue ethicists who have emphasized the role of some kind of moral perception; the idea that, as Iris Murdoch put it, “true vision entails right conduct” (Murdoch 1970: 66) is very enticing. I hope it is clear by now that Wang Yangming shares enough with these modern thinkers (and, in various ways, with the earlier Western philosophers on whom the current scholars draw) that putting him into dialogue with them can benefit both our understanding of Wang, and our efforts to develop virtue ethics further. Neither Wang nor contemporary virtue ethicists have all the answers we need, but once we recognize that Wang Yangming is a virtue ethicist, we have more hope of finding answers together in the future.

27 In light of my discussion of sorrow earlier in this essay, note that Tim’s reflection on how far his society needs to improve will be tinged with sorrow or grief; this does not alter the ease with which Tim-the-sage responds to the situation.

28 Michael Slote (forthcoming) has highlighted Wang as an early anticipator of later Western sentimentalist virtue ethics, insofar as his idea of the feeling of forming one body with all things suggests the modern idea of empathy.
References


