

WANG YANG-MING ON SELF-CULTIVATION

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In this paper, I discuss Wang Yangming's views on self-cultivation, with special emphasis on his interpretation of the four aspects of self-cultivation presented in the *Daxue* and his Four Sentence Teaching. It will not be possible to understand his views without discussing two other teachings of his, that the heart/mind is pattern (*xin ji li* 心即理) and that there is a unity between knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一). I will therefore begin with a discussion of these two teachings, proposing an interpretation on which they are intimately related. I then turn to Wang's interpretation of the four aspects of self-cultivation presented in the *Daxue* – *ge wu* 格物, *zhi zhi* 致知, *cheng yi* 誠意, *zheng xin* 正心 – and his views on the relation between them. Finally, against the background of this discussion, I will consider his Four Sentence Teaching, showing how it incorporates two pictures of the self-cultivation process. Throughout my discussion, I will refer to ways in which Wang's thinking differs from Zhu Xi's, though I will not be directly discussing Zhu's thinking.¹

I. HEART/MIND IS PATTERN (*XIN JI LI* 心即理)

Wang Yangming often criticizes Zhu Xi for advocating that we seek goodness in things and affairs; instead, for Wang, goodness resides in the heart/mind, even though it is not separate from things and affairs.² This criticism he sometimes puts by saying that Zhu has separated the heart/mind and pattern (*li* 理) into two when they are fundamentally one; according to Wang, the heart/mind is pattern (*xin ji li* 心即理).³ This teaching of Wang's is subject to different interpretations. At times, he speaks as

if its point is pragmatic, serving to urge people to attend directly to the heart/mind in self-cultivation. For example, he observes that people of his times have separated the heart/mind and pattern in that they seek to act in a way that looks good without actually attending to the heart/mind, and that his teaching serves to correct this tendency.⁴ So understood, his teaching is not something that Zhu would disagree with. Wang's remarks about the original substance (*ben ti* 本體) of the heart/mind, however, suggest that there is more content to his teaching that distinguishes his position from Zhu's.

In addition to identifying the heart/mind directly with pattern, Wang also identifies it with nature (*xing* 性) which is in turn identified with pattern, and describes nature and pattern as the substance (*ti* 體) or original substance (*ben ti* 本體) of the heart/mind.⁵ The heart/mind's capability of awareness he refers to as *zhi* 知, or knowledge, and describes it as the original substance of the heart/mind.⁶ And, borrowing the expression from *Mengzi* 7A:15, he also refers to it as *liang zhi* 良知, or truly good knowledge, which he again describes as the original substance of the heart/mind.⁷

Now, Zhu Xi holds the view that the heart/mind embraces nature and emotional propensities (*xin tong xing qing* 心統性情); he describes nature as the substance of the heart/mind and emotional propensities (*qing* 情) as its function. For Zhu, nature is identical with pattern, and to say that nature is the substance of the heart/mind is to say that, in its original state, the heart/mind has knowledge of pattern, where such knowledge is akin to a form of perceptual relation. Commenting on Zhu's idea and while still referring to nature as substance and emotional propensities as function, Wang notes that substance and function are actually the same, though substance has to do with the aspect that is difficult to know and function with the aspect that is more conspicuous.⁸

What Wang has in mind is explained in the context of his comment that the heart/mind does not have any substance other than taking as its substance the right and wrong of its responses when affected by the ten thousand things.⁹ This idea is illustrated by reference to the sense organs – for example, the eye does not have any substance other than taking as its substance the colors of the ten thousand things that it perceives. This illustration suggests that for Wang, the heart/mind does not, in its original state, relate to pattern in a way akin to a perceptual relation. Indeed, there is no pattern for the heart/mind to relate to independently of the heart/mind's responses; instead, pattern resides in the responses of the heart/mind in its original state. Since pattern does not exist independently of the heart/mind's responses in its original state, Wang puts the point by saying that there is no pattern outside of the heart/mind.¹⁰ But these responses also constitute the function of the heart/mind, and for this reason substance and function are not separate. At best, if we are to draw a distinction, function has to do with each and every of the concrete responses of the heart/mind, while substance concerns the totality of such responses conceived in the abstract.

While this discussion helps bring out a substantive difference between Wang and Zhu, further understanding of their difference requires an examination of their different views on the relation between knowledge and action. Zhu regards knowledge as guiding action – it is the heart/mind's grasp of pattern that should ideally guide its responses. Wang, on the other hand, conveys a different view in his teaching about the unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一).

II. UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION (*ZHI XING HE YI* 知行合一)

Wang explains his teaching in different ways in different contexts, and there are at least three dimensions to his teaching. First, on some occasions, he presents the teaching as highlighting the point that, for someone to really have knowledge, the

person needs to have acted accordingly. If one knows that something is good, one should then extend (*zhi* 致) this knowledge and do good, and this is the point of his teaching about the unity of knowledge and action.¹¹ On this account, what the teaching highlights is that corresponding action is needed before one can truly be described as having knowledge.

The second dimension of his teaching highlights its pragmatic aspect. On some occasions, Wang observes how people of his times, having separated knowledge and action, thought that they can first attend to learning and defer to a later stage proper attention to their heart/mind. This separation makes the learning process fragmented; one should instead attend to both knowledge and action at the same time, and this is the point of advocating a unity of knowledge and action.¹² Even worse, having separated knowledge and action, people thought that it would be fine to have an occasional bad thought as long as they have not acted on it. According to Wang, advocating the unity of knowledge and action serves to alert people to the fact that just the emergence of a thought is itself an action, and so if there is something bad in one's thought, one needs to correct it immediately.¹³ On this account, his teaching serves a pragmatic purpose, urging people to attend properly to their heart/mind. This second dimension is compatible with the first, and neither identifies any substantive difference between him and Zhu Xi.

There is a third dimension of his teaching that does distinguish his position from Zhu's. On one occasion, having made the point that the teaching serves to alert people to the importance of action, Wang adds that though the teaching is directed at certain defects among people of his times, it also serves to describe what knowledge and action are originally like.¹⁴ In response to a query about people who know they should be filial but who cannot act accordingly, he responds that, in such instances, knowledge and action are already separated by self-centered desires (*si yu* 私欲) and

no longer reflect their original substance.¹⁵ So, the teaching is also intended to convey a certain view about how knowledge and action are related in the original state of the heart/mind.

That relation is conveyed by Wang using the example from the *Daxue* of loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors.¹⁶ When one sees a beautiful color, one likes it upon seeing it; it is not that one first decides one should like it and then likes it. That is, even if part of the response involves some kind of judgement, whether it be the judgement that the color is beautiful or that one should like it, one's liking the beautiful color is not guided by any such judgment. The same is true of one's hating a bad odor or liking certain kind of food that one has tasted.¹⁷ Extending this to other contexts such as serving parents, one's heart/mind in its original state would move one to serve parents in a certain way upon awareness of their situation without depending on any judgement that one should so act, even if one's response to the situation might involve some such judgement. This view stands in contrast to Zhu's, which ascribes to knowledge a guiding role over action. According to Wang, when the heart/mind responds in its original state, knowledge and action are just parts of one single response without the former guiding the latter.

This dimension of Wang's teaching is compatible with the two other dimensions described earlier. While the former concerns what the original state of the heart/mind is like, the latter two concern those who have deviated from this original state. The latter two dimensions show that the teaching also serves to urge such people to take action seriously, making the point that corresponding action is needed for one to truly have knowledge. Thus, after having explained his teaching in relation to the original state of knowledge and action, Wang adds that his teaching is also directed to people who have deviated from this original state.¹⁸

It follows from Wang's teaching that knowledge and action are not separate

when the heart/mind responds in its original state. While one might have the thought that one should so respond and in that sense have knowledge, that knowledge is part of and does not guide the response. Action is constituted by that response, which also includes the thought of so responding. Thus, the terms *zhi* 知 (knowledge) and *xing* 行 (action) are just two different ways of describing the same response, one emphasizing the thought that is part of the response and the other emphasizing the actualization of the response. Thus, for Wang, the terms *zhi* and *xing* refer to the same thing, the former emphasizing the conscious discernment (*ming jue jing cha chu* 明覺精察處) and the latter the intimate actualization (*zhen qie du shi chu* 真切篤實處).¹⁹ On this view, pattern is not something grasped independently of the response; instead, it is revealed in the response itself and does not exist independently of it. Accordingly, it follows from the teaching of the unity between knowledge and action that it is an error to seek pattern outside the heart/mind, a point conveyed by the teaching that the heart/mind is pattern.²⁰

This linkage between the two teachings is stated explicitly by Wang in response to the question whether knowledge and action are really one or whether this teaching is just a way to urge learners to act on what they have learnt.²¹ In response, Wang reiterates that knowledge and action really are not separate in the original state of the heart/mind, and that once one realizes this, one also sees that pattern is not outside of the heart/mind. For example, it is because the heart/mind responds in a filial way toward parents that there is the pattern of being filial; if the heart/mind had not so responded, there would not have been the pattern of being filial. From Wang's perspective, Zhu Xi, though insisting that pattern also resides in our heart/mind, has already separated the heart/mind and pattern by speaking of pattern in affairs and then insisting that pattern also resides in the heart/mind. Presumably, the separation refers to the fact that Zhu regards pattern as residing in the heart/mind only as something

that the heart/mind grasps, unlike Wang himself who regards pattern as residing in the responses of the heart/mind as such. Zhu's view leaves room for his idea of seeking pattern in things and affairs as a way of restoring the heart/mind's original grasp of pattern, but for Wang, to seek pattern outside the heart/mind is to commit the error of separating the two. It is because one has separated knowledge and action that one would seek pattern outside the heart/mind, and in this way the two teachings are connected.

III. *GE WU* 格物 AND *ZHI ZHI* 致知

This difference between Wang and Zhu accounts for the difference in emphasis in their views on self-cultivation. Both regard ethical failure as due to the obscuring effect of self-centeredness (*si* 私) and self-cultivation as directed to restoring the original state of the heart/mind. By contrast to Zhu, however, Wang puts much greater emphasis on directly eliminating the problematic elements of the heart/mind, and downplays the kind of inquiry highlighted by Zhu that is directed to regaining the heart/mind's grasp of pattern. This difference is reflected in their different interpretations of *ge wu* 格物 and *zhi zhi* 致知, two aspects of self-cultivation highlighted in the *Daxue*.

Zhu takes *ge* 格 to mean 'arrive at', *wu* 物 to refer to things and affairs, and *ge wu* 格物 to mean arriving at the pattern that resides in things and affairs. Wang, by contrast, takes *ge* to mean 'make correct' (*zheng* 正).²² He takes *wu* to refer to the affairs that are the objects of one's thoughts (*yi* 意); when one's thought is directed to serving parents, then serving parents is a *wu*.²³ Thus, for him, *ge wu* refers to the process of correcting the problematic activities of the heart/mind, and it follows from this interpretation that there is no thing (*wu*) outside the heart/mind for it to correct (*ge*).²⁴

To illustrate Wang's interpretation, consider the example of someone presiding at a judicial court. *Ge wu* involves the person's watching out for and correcting tendencies such as becoming angry or pleased by the demeanor of the accused, imposing heavier penalties because of dislike for the accused or being more lenient because of the beseeching by the accused, being influenced by lobbying, being casual and careless because one is pre-occupied with other affairs, and so forth, all this being forms of self-centeredness.²⁵ Wang criticizes Zhu's interpretation of *ge wu* on several occasions; it is misguided in that there is no pattern in things and affairs outside of the heart/mind for one to seek.²⁶ A student further adds that, if the heart/mind is already obscured, it would not be in a position to engage in the kind of inquiry that Zhu emphasizes; the important thing is to first remove the obscuration, just as a mirror covered by dust cannot accurately reflect without first wiping away the dust.²⁷ From Wang's perspective, Zhu is led to his interpretation of *ge wu* by treating the heart/mind and pattern as distinct and by separating knowledge and action.²⁸

As for *zhi zhi* 致知, Zhu takes *zhi* 致 to mean 'extend', *zhi* 知 to refer to one's knowledge of pattern, and *zhi zhi* 致知 to refer to the process of extending one's knowledge of pattern through inquiry into the pattern in things and affairs, the latter being the process of *ge wu*. By contrast, Wang takes *zhi zhi* to be the same process as *ge wu* and not a separate process.²⁹ According to Wang, *zhi* 致 means to 'reach out', *zhi* 知 refers to the truly good knowledge, and *zhi zhi* 致知 refers to the process of allowing one's truly good knowledge to reach out.³⁰ When a thought arises, the truly good knowledge can tell whether it is good or bad, and it can move one to advance what is good and eliminate what is bad, thereby preserving good and eliminating evil.³¹ This capability is exercised in the context of *ge wu*. In correcting what is problematic, it is the truly good knowledge that recognizes and corrects the problematic activities of the heart/mind, and this operation provides a sense in which the truly good knowledge

reaches out. Furthermore, after it has corrected the problematic activities, the truly good knowledge can then move one to do what is appropriate, and this provides yet another sense in which the truly good knowledge reaches out.

For Wang, *zhi zhi* is a matter of letting the truly good knowledge reach out in these two ways, so as to make things and affairs accord with pattern.³² It provides the basis for *ge wu* in that correcting the problematic activities of the heart/mind depends on the capability of the truly good knowledge to recognize and correct such problems.³³ In addition, as one practices *ge wu*, the problematic activities of the heart/mind are corrected and one's truly good knowledge reaches out further. As one keeps on working at this process, the reach of the truly good knowledge broadens over time, and one also comes to see more clearly the problematic activities of the heart/mind, thereby assisting in the practice of *ge wu*.³⁴ This integral relation between *ge wu* and *zhi zhi* shows that they are just different aspects of the same process.

IV. *GE WU* 格物, *ZHI ZHI* 致知, *CHENG YI* 誠意, *ZHENG XIN* 正心

Ge wu 格物, *zhi zhi* 致知, *cheng yi* 誠意, and *zheng xin* 正心 are presented in the *Daxue* as four aspects of the self-cultivation process. In making sense of these ideas, Wang devotes attention to the relation between the terms *xin* 心 (heart/mind), *yi* 意 (thoughts), *zhi* 知 (knowledge), and *wu* 物 (things). According to him³⁵:

“Thoughts (*yi*) are the emissions from the heart/mind, knowledge (*zhi*) is the original substance of thoughts, while things (*wu*) are that to which thoughts are directed.”

心之所發便是意 意之本體便是知 意之所在便是物

We have considered his view of the relation between thoughts (*yi*) and things (*wu*), and as we saw, he regards the truly good knowledge as the original substance of the heart/mind. The idea that knowledge is the original substance of thoughts, which are emissions from the heart/mind, probably derives from this view. That is, thoughts are

themselves responses of the truly good knowledge, which is the original substance of the heart/mind. This relation between thoughts and the truly good knowledge is conveyed elsewhere, as when he says that thoughts arise when the truly good knowledge is affected and responds, or that we first have knowledge and then have thoughts.³⁶ Elsewhere, he also notes that thoughts are the activation of knowledge, the latter being the original substance.³⁷

Thus, for Wang, there is an intimate connection between the heart/mind, thoughts, knowledge, and things, a point he sometimes puts by saying that they are ultimately one, though distinguished for the purpose of presenting the different aspects of self-cultivation.³⁸ For him, the four aspects of self-cultivation are also ultimately one affair.³⁹ We have already discussed the relation between *ge wu* and *zhi zhi*. On Wang's view, thoughts (*yi*) arise when the heart/mind, or the truly good knowledge which is the original substance of the heart/mind, is affected by specific situations. While the truly good knowledge is good, badness can arise because of the influence of self-centeredness. This results in things (*wu*), which have to do with the affairs to which thoughts are directed, being incorrect. But the truly good knowledge is never fully obscured, and it recognizes the problem and moves one to correct it. Correcting what is incorrect is the process of *ge wu*, and doing so involves letting the truly good knowledge reach out, which is the process of *zhi zhi*. As we noted earlier, the truly good knowledge reaches out in two senses – recognizing and correcting what is problematic, and further reaching out after what is problematic has been corrected. We need to mention *ge wu* in addition to *zhi zhi* because the reaching out of the truly good knowledge is not done in the abstract, but happens in the context of concrete affairs; that, according to Wang, is why the *Daxue* says that *zhi zhi* resides in *ge wu*.⁴⁰

Just as *zhi zhi* relates to *ge wu* in these two ways, *cheng yi* (making one's thoughts whole) also relates to *ge wu* and *zhi zhi* in two different ways. When the

truly good knowledge recognizes that a thought is good and yet cannot truly (*cheng* 誠) love it, or recognizes that it is bad and yet cannot truly (*cheng*) hate it, then one's thoughts are not yet whole (*cheng*). One needs to undertake *zhi zhi* in the sense of letting one's truly good knowledge reach out further to come to love what is good and hate what is bad. And even if the truly good knowledge does love what is good and hate what is bad, one's thoughts would not be whole if they do not actually move one to do good and remove evil; one still needs to take this step, which is *ge wu*.⁴¹ In so relating the process of *cheng yi* to *zhi zhi* and to *ge wu*, Wang is presenting the former as part of the same process as the latter – it is a matter of making one's thoughts whole by truly loving good and hating evil and by actually doing good and removing evil.

To further spell out this relation, consider one's having a thought (*yi*) of doing something problematic, a thought that has a certain thing (*wu*) as its object that is not correct. *Ge wu* involves correcting this thing which is problematic, but to do so, one needs to also have another thought (*yi*) of correcting that which is problematic. One needs to make this second thought whole so that one will actually devote oneself to correcting what is problematic, which constitutes *ge wu*. So, *cheng yi*, or making one's thoughts whole (in relation to the second thought), and *ge wu* (in relation to correcting the object of the first thought) are just different aspects of the same process. Furthermore, in this process, *zhi zhi* also takes place as one's truly good knowledge will now have reached out to correct what is problematic (namely, the object of the first thought), which in turn will enable the truly good knowledge to reach out further by actually moving one to do what is appropriate.⁴² On this account, *cheng yi*, or making the thoughts whole, is a matter of being truly devoted to the process of letting the truly good knowledge reach out.

When *cheng yi* is located in the process of *ge wu* and *zhi zhi* in this manner, it

can be described as the basis for the latter.⁴³ However, the *Daxue* also presents *cheng yi* as dependent on *ge wu* and *zhi zhi*, and Wang himself also presents the relation between them in this way, saying that *zhi zhi* is the basis for *cheng yi*, that one needs to engage in *zhi zhi* in order to *cheng yi*, and that one's thoughts will be whole (*yi cheng* 意誠) if one successfully engages in *ge wu* and *zhi zhi*.⁴⁴ When saying that one needs to engage in *zhi zhi* in order to *cheng yi*, he explains that this is because the thoughts that arise can be good or evil.⁴⁵ This suggests that, if we go back to the way we earlier related *cheng yi* to *ge wu*, he is referring here not to the second thought of correcting what is problematic, but to the initial thought that generated the problem in the first place. That is, while making whole the second thought (*cheng yi*) of correcting what is problematic enables one's truly good knowledge to reach out (*zhi zhi*) and correct the problematic object of the first thought (*ge wu*), the latter also enables one to make whole the first thought (*cheng yi*), which was initially problematic.

To illustrate this point, and drawing on an example that Wang uses to explain how *cheng yi* depends on *zhi zhi*, let us consider someone who has the thought of serving parents in a certain way but who does not fully devote himself to so acting.⁴⁶ That the person is not devoting himself as he should shows that this thought of serving parents is not yet whole; the thought is mixed with some additional problematic element that is preventing him from acting as appropriate or making him act with reservation. The truly good knowledge recognizes the presence of this problematic element, and it leads to the additional thought of correcting what is problematic. To have this second thought materialize in action, one needs to make it whole. As a result, one will correct the problematic element in the first thought, and this act of correcting the problematic element is the reaching out of the truly good knowledge. In this way, making the second thought whole (*cheng yi*) is the basis for

ge wu and *zhi zhi*. But having corrected the problematic element in the first thought, the first thought is now fully devoted to serving parents without being mixed with any problematic element, and so it has become whole as a result. In this way, *ge wu* and *zhi zhi* also provide the basis for making the first thought whole (*cheng yi*).

Furthermore, now that the first thought is whole, it will lead to one's actually serving parents in appropriate ways, which is also a matter of the truly good knowledge further reaching out; this is *zhi zhi* in the second sense described earlier, in which *zhi zhi* results from *ge wu*.

On this account, though the three items, *ge wu*, *zhi zhi*, and *cheng yi*, can be distinguished in the manner just described, they are intertwined aspects of one single process, rather than separate processes that can be undertaken independently of each other. This explains why Wang observes that the task of *cheng yi* is the same as that of *ge wu* and *zhi zhi* and does not go beyond the latter.⁴⁷ Turning to the relation between *cheng yi* (making one's thoughts whole) and *zheng xin* (rectifying the heart/mind), the heart/mind's being rectified involves the truly good knowledge being fully clear so that the responses of the heart/mind are all appropriate.⁴⁸ But there is nothing problematic in the original substance of the heart/mind, which is supremely good; what needs to be corrected has to do with the activation of the heart/mind, namely, the thoughts that arise from it. That is why rectification of the heart/mind (*zheng xin*) resides in making such thoughts whole (*cheng yi*).⁴⁹

V. THE FOUR SENTENCE TEACHING

The above discussion helps us make sense of a well-known saying of Wang's often referred to as the 'Four Sentence Teaching' (*si ju jiao* 四句教). That teaching is a subject of discussion between two students of Wang's, Qian Dehong 錢德洪 and Wang Ruzhong 王汝中 (or Wang Ji 王畿), who later consulted Wang regarding

their different interpretations of his teaching⁵⁰:

“In the substance of the heart/mind, there is no distinction between good and evil. When thoughts are activated, there is a distinction between good and evil. The truly good knowledge is that which knows good and knows evil. *Ge wu* involves doing good and removing evil.”

無善無惡是心之體 有善有惡是意之動 知善知惡是良知 為善去惡是格物
 These four sentences highlight respectively the heart/mind (*xin* 心), thoughts (*yi* 意), knowledge (*zhi* 知), and things (*wu* 物), mirroring the four aspects of self-cultivation we just considered. Before discussing the different interpretations by Qian Dehong and Wang Ruzhong, let us start by considering the first sentence.

The substance of the heart/mind is identified by Wang sometimes with nature and sometimes with the truly good knowledge.⁵¹ On certain occasions, he also remarks that the original substance of nature is without the distinction between good and evil.⁵² However, he also remarks on other occasions that the original substance of the heart/mind is supremely good (*zhi shan* 至善) or that nature is supremely good.⁵³ For him, nature is basically good, while badness is due to the heart/mind’s being obscured.⁵⁴ How, then, can we reconcile his view that nature is good with his observation that the substance of the heart/mind, which is the same as nature or the truly good knowledge, is without the distinction between good and evil?

There are two ways of interpreting the latter claim, both with some textual basis, that make it compatible with the former. First, in claiming that nature is good, Mencius and his followers are saying that the content of nature conforms to what, from the Confucian perspective, is good – for example, it moves people to be filial toward parents or respectful toward elder brothers. For the same reason, Wang would regard nature as good in that, in its original state, the heart/mind would always respond in a way that conforms to what, from the Confucian perspective, is good. But

the sense in which nature is good is different from the sense in which a particular response of the heart/mind is good. A particular response can be good in a sense that is contrasted with evil as there could be other responses that are not good. The original state of the heart/mind, however, is good in a sense not contrasted with evil as its responses are always good; in this sense, it is supremely good. Indeed, against the background that the original substance of the heart/mind is supremely good, whether a particular response is good or evil is itself a matter of whether that response conforms to or deviates from how the heart/mind would respond in its original state. Thus, this supremely good nature transcends the distinction between good and evil both because there is no evil in it and because it itself gives substance to that distinction.⁵⁵ In this way, the observations that nature is supremely good and that it is without the distinction between good and evil are not only not incompatible, but are actually two ways of making the same point.

That this way of reconciling the apparently conflicting observations partly captures Wang's views gains support from his comment that Gaozi's view that there is no goodness or badness in nature is acceptable in one sense but not in another.⁵⁶ For Wang, it is acceptable to say that nature is without goodness or badness in that it transcends the distinction between good and evil in the two senses just described. But this is not the point Gaozi is making with his claim. Instead, for Gaozi, nature is without goodness or badness in that there is nothing in nature that conforms to or goes against what he and those who share his views regard as good. For Gaozi, the content of nature has to do entirely with biological tendencies such as eating and having sex, which are neither good nor bad in themselves. The distinction between good and bad exists 'out there' independently of nature; to become good, one needs to learn what is good from the outside. For Wang, this is the sense in which to say that nature is without goodness or badness is unacceptable.

On this account, to say that the substance of the heart/mind is without the distinction between good and evil is to make the point that the content of the distinction between good and evil is given by the original substance of the heart/mind itself and so cannot be used to describe it – good or evil is a matter of conforming to or deviating from the responses of the heart/mind in its original state. As we saw earlier, this is the same point that Wang makes on an occasion on which he relates his two teachings, heart/mind is pattern and the unity of knowledge and action.⁵⁷ There, he observes that it is because the heart/mind responds in a filial way toward parents that there is the pattern of being filial; if the heart/mind had not so responded, there would not have been the pattern of being filial. Pattern is just a matter of how the heart/mind responds in its original state, and in this sense heart/mind is pattern.

Another way of understanding Wang's claim that the substance of the heart/mind is without the distinction between good and evil takes it to be about how the truly good knowledge operates in its original state. Namely, the truly good knowledge does not deliberately aim at doing good and removing evil; instead, it just spontaneously responds in a way that constitutes doing good and removing evil. Put differently, "doing good and removing evil" is a description of the operations of the truly good knowledge 'from the outside', but it is not a description of how the truly good knowledge conceptualizes its own operations 'from the inside'. This point Wang conveys metaphorically by saying that the original substance of the heart/mind is like the sun – the sun just shines upon everything but without aiming at doing so.⁵⁸ Also, the clarity of the eye can distinguish between beauty and ugliness without its having the thought of doing so.⁵⁹ Similarly, the substance of the heart/mind just responds without having any thought of doing good; to add such a thought is like adding gold dust to the eye thereby obstructing it.⁶⁰

Wang sometimes puts his point in terms of one's having a 'good thought' (*shan*

nian 善念), where the idea of a ‘good thought’ can itself be taken in two ways – as a thought that can be described from the outside as good, or as a thought that aims at doing good. For Wang, one should have good thoughts in the former but not the latter sense; to have a good thought in the latter sense on top of a good thought in the former sense is like adding a lamp to the light of the sun.⁶¹ Now, this might appear to suggest that one should aim at not having a good thought in the latter sense, a view that resembles the Buddhist idea of not thinking about good and not thinking about evil. But, according to Wang, even to have such an aim is itself to add something that should not be there. Not only does the truly good knowledge not think about doing good and removing evil, it also does not think about its maintaining a state of not thinking about doing good and removing evil.⁶²

On this second interpretation, the substance of the heart/mind is without the distinction between good and evil in that the heart/mind’s responses in its original state do not involve aiming at doing good and removing evil. Just as the first interpretation relates to Wang’s teaching that the heart/mind is pattern, the second interpretation relates to his teaching about the unity of knowledge and action. If the truly good knowledge does not aim at doing good and removing evil in its responses, then these responses are not themselves guided by judgements about good or evil. Put differently, the responses are not guided by knowledge in the sense of some prior grasp of pattern, and this is part of the substance of Wang’s teaching about the unity of knowledge and action. The linkage between the second interpretation and his teaching about the unity of knowledge and action is implicit in his elaboration on the idea that the distinction between good and evil is just a matter of one’s likes and dislikes.⁶³ According to him, the sage is without the distinction between good and evil in that he does not aim at doing good and removing evil, even though his actions does show a discrimination between good and evil. His responses are like one’s liking

beautiful colors and disliking bad odors – one just likes beautiful colors and dislike bad odors, without any thought that one should like beautiful colors or dislike bad odors. The same example, as we saw, is used by Wang to illustrate the idea of the unity of knowledge and action

We have sketched two ways of interpreting the idea that the substance of the heart/mind is without the distinction between good and evil – that the distinction is itself a matter of conformity or disconformity to the way the heart/mind responds in its original state, and that in these responses, the heart/mind does not aim at doing good and removing evil. Not only are these two interpretations not incompatible, but their respective linkage to Wang’s two teachings – that the heart/mind is pattern and that there is a unity between knowledge and action – shows that they are for Wang just different aspects of his conception of the way the heart/mind operates in its original state.

Against the background of this discussion, we can now turn to the other three sentences of the Four Sentence Teaching. There are two lines of thought we can follow in trying to make sense of these three sentences. On the first line of thought, the first sentence describes the original and ideal state of the heart/mind, while the next three sentences describe the situation of someone whose heart/mind has been obscured. For such a person, the thoughts which arise from the heart/mind can be good or evil, and his working toward restoring the original state of the heart/mind involves his having thoughts of doing good and removing evil. In these two senses, there is a distinction between good and evil in the thoughts of such a person, providing an interpretation of the second sentence. The third sentence makes the point that the truly good knowledge is that which can know what is good and what is evil, and the fourth sentence makes the point that the process of doing good and removing evil is the task of *ge wu*, interpreted in the manner we described earlier. While Qian

Dehong does not spell out his views in such detail, this line of thought probably captures his views as he is quite explicit that, unlike the first sentence which describes the original substance of the heart/mind, the last three sentences have to do with those whose heart/mind's have been obscured and who need to cultivate themselves to restore the original state of the heart/mind.

This interpretation of the last three sentences presents the picture of someone who needs to engage in a gradual self-cultivation process, aiming at doing good and removing evil, and constantly exerting effort in this direction. This picture fits in with various remarks of Wang's. For example, he notes that the beginning student needs to be fully aware and deliberative, exerting effort and devoting oneself to liking and doing good and to disliking and removing evil; it is only when one finally succeeds in restoring the original state of the heart/mind that one can do without deliberation and without this kind of aims.⁶⁴ The process is gradual and proceeds in stages, like one's walking stage by stage to one's destination, or like nourishing a plant starting with the sprout, then moving on to the trunk, the branches, the leaves, and eventually the fruits.⁶⁵

However, this interpretation of the last three sentences might seem incompatible with the first sentence. If the truly good knowledge operates as described in the first sentence, without aiming at doing good and removing evil, then since it is still the truly good knowledge that is at work in the self-cultivation process, it seems that self-cultivation should also not involve one's deliberation or one's aiming at doing good and removing evil. In Wang Ruzhong's words, if the substance of the heart/mind is without the distinction between good and evil, then the same should be true of thoughts, of knowledge, and of things. That is, if one has an evil thought, as soon as the truly good knowledge bears on it, the truly good knowledge will immediately recognize the problem and correct it. Occasional remarks of Wang

Yangming's seem to point in this direction, such as his observation that whatever problematic thought one might have, the moment the truly good knowledge is aware of (*jue* 覺) it, it will immediately dissipate.⁶⁶ But then, on this alternative account, it seems that self-cultivation should be a fairly instantaneous process, not the kind of slow and gradual process that Qian Dehong describes. This is likely the line of thought that lies behind Wang Ruzhong's position.

Note, though, that the description of the operation of the truly good knowledge just provided is a description of its operation in the original and ideal state. For someone whose heart/mind is obscured by self-centeredness, it is possible that the truly good knowledge needs to operate differently; people at an early stage of self-cultivation might need to be guided by knowledge in their efforts, even though such knowledge is not of the ideal kind. This possibility allows Wang to reconcile the views of Qian Dehong and Wang Ruzhou by describing their two views as complementary in that they are applicable to two different kinds of individuals. Wang Ruzhong's position describes those rare individuals who are of sharp intelligence; for such individuals, the moment they apprehend the original substance of the heart/mind, the ethical task is accomplished. Qian Dehong's position describes the majority of people dominated by habits; these individuals need to devote themselves to doing good and removing evil, until over time they eventually get to the point when the original substance of their heart/mind is completely clear and free of obscurity.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our discussion shows that Wang's views on self-cultivation are heavily influenced by his views about the original state of the heart/mind, as conveyed in his two teachings about the identity of heart/mind and pattern and about the unity of knowledge and action. These two teachings are intimately connected. The latter holds

that the responses of the heart/mind in its original state are not guided by any judgement about how to respond. The former draws out an implication of this view, namely, that pattern is revealed in the responses of the heart/mind in its original state rather than something independent of and grasped by the heart/mind when it responds. Wang's view of the original state of the heart/mind contrasts with Zhu Xi's, which does allow the heart/mind's grasp of pattern to play a guiding role when the heart/mind responds in its original state. As a result, Wang differs from Zhu by emphasizing direct attention to the heart/mind in the self-cultivation process while downplaying inquiry into things and affairs. Such difference is reflected in Wang's interpretation of *ge wu* and *zhi zhi* in terms of correcting the problematic activities of the heart/mind, unlike Zhu who interprets them to refer to investigating into, and expanding one's grasp of, pattern which resides in things and affairs.

His understanding of *ge wu* and *zhi zhi* allows Wang to interpret the four aspects of self-cultivation highlighted in the *Daxue*, also including *cheng yi* and *zheng xin*, as four aspects of one single process that focuses on making correct the activities of the heart/mind. And his views on the original state of the heart/mind also provide two senses in which he can describe the substance of the heart/mind as being without good and without evil, this being the first sentence of his Four Sentence Teaching. At the same time, his views on the original state of the heart/mind leave open a different picture of the operation of the truly good knowledge when the heart/mind has been obscured, one in which judgements about how one should respond do play a guiding role. This in turn makes possible two pictures of the self-cultivation process – while both focus on directly correcting the heart/mind's problematic activities, one presents the process as spontaneous and instantaneous while the other presents it as gradual and without effort.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This paper is based on research related to a book manuscript, tentatively titled *Zhu Xi and Later Confucian Thought*, which discusses the thinking of Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and Dai Zhen. For my interpretation of certain related ideas of Zhu Xi's, see my "Zhu Xi on the 'Internal' and the 'External': A Response to Chan Lee," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* vol. 37, no. 4 (December 2010).

² Wang Yangming *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄 no. 2, p. 29; passage and page numbers follow that in Chan Wing-tsit *Wang Yangming Chuanxilu Xiangzhu Jiping* 陳榮捷 王陽明傳習錄詳註集評 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局 1983).

³ E.g., *Chuanxilu* no. 3, p. 30; no. 33, p. 71; no. 94, p. 115.

⁴ *Chuanxilu* no. 321, p. 372.

⁵ E.g., *Chuanxilu* no. 33, p. 71; no. 81, p. 107; no. 94, p. 115; no. 122, p. 146.

⁶ *Chuanxilu* no. 8, p. 40; no. 118, p. 140.

⁷ *Chuanxilu* no. 8, p. 40; Wang Yangming *Daxuewen* 大學問 in *Yangming Quanshu* 陽明全書 (Sibubeiyao 四部備要 edition): 26.2b.

⁸ Wang Yangming *Wenlu* 文錄 in *Yangming Quanshu* 陽明全書 (Sibubeiyao 四部備要 edition): 4.2b.

⁹ *Chuanxilu* no. 277, p. 333.

¹⁰ E.g., *Chuanxilu* no. 32, p. 70.

¹¹ *Wenlu* 8.5b-6a.

¹² *Wenlu* 8.6a-6b; cf. 7.9b.

¹³ *Chuanxilu* no. 226, pp. 302-303; cf. Wang Yangming *Chuanxilu shiyi* 傳習錄拾遺 in Chan Wing-tsit *Wang Yangming Chuanxilu Xiangzhu Jiping* 陳榮捷 王陽明傳習錄詳註集評 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局 1983), no. 19, p. 400.

¹⁴ *Wenlu* 6.6a.

¹⁵ *Chuanxilu* no. 5, pp. 33-34.

¹⁶ *Chuanxilu* no. 5, pp. 33-34.

¹⁷ *Chuanxilu* no. 132, pp. 165-166.

¹⁸ *Chuanxilu* no. 5, pp. 33-34.

¹⁹ *Chuanxilu* no. 133, pp. 166-167; *Wenlu* 6.6a-b, 6.7a.

²⁰ E.g., *Wenlu* 8.6a-6b.

²¹ *Chuanxilu* no. 133, pp. 166-167.

²² *Chuanxilu* no. 86, p. 110; no. 137, pp. 176-177; *Daxuewen* 26.4b.

²³ *Chuanxilu* no. 6, pp. 36-37; no. 137, pp. 176-177; *Daxuewen* 26.4b.

²⁴ *Chuanxilu* no. 6, pp. 36-37; no. 7, p. 39; no. 318, p.370.

²⁵ *Chuanxilu* no. 218, p. 297.

²⁶ *Chuanxilu* no. 318, p. 370.

²⁷ *Chuanxilu* no. 62, p. 94.

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- ²⁸ *Chuanxilu* no. 135, pp. 171-172; no. 137, pp. 176-177.
- ²⁹ *Chuanxilu* no. 148, p. 207; cf. no. 118, p. 140.
- ³⁰ *Chuanxilu* no. 135, pp. 171-172.
- ³¹ *Chuanxilu* no. 71, p. 100; no. 206, p. 291.
- ³² *Chuanxilu* no. 135, pp. 171-172.
- ³³ *Chuanxilu* no. 239, p. 311.
- ³⁴ *Chuanxilu* no. 65, pp. 95-96; no. 225, p. 302; no. 239, p. 311.
- ³⁵ *Chuanxilu* no. 6, pp. 36-37.
- ³⁶ *Chuanxilu* no. 137, pp. 176-177.
- ³⁷ *Chuanxilu* no. 78, p. 106; Wang Yangming *Daxue gubenxu* in *Yangming Quanshu* 陽明全書 (Sibubeiyao 四部備要 edition): 7.12a.
- ³⁸ *Daxuewen* 26.3b; *Chuanxilu* no. 201, pp. 281-282.
- ³⁹ *Daxuewen* 26.3b.
- ⁴⁰ *Daxuewen* 26.4b; cf. *Daxue gubenxu*: 7.12a.
- ⁴¹ *Daxuewen* 26.4b.
- ⁴² *Chuanxilu* no. 201, pp. 281-282.
- ⁴³ *Chuanxilu* no. 129, p. 154.
- ⁴⁴ *Daxue gubenxu* 7.12a; *Daxuewen* 26.4a ; *Chuanxilu* no. 8, p. 40.
- ⁴⁵ *Daxuewen* 26.4a.
- ⁴⁶ *Chuanxilu* no. 138, pp. 180-181.
- ⁴⁷ *Chuanxilu* no. 88, p. 111; *Wenlu* 4.14b.
- ⁴⁸ *Chuanxilu* no. 187, p. 268.
- ⁴⁹ *Chuanxilu* no. 317, p. 369; *Daxuewen* 26.4a.
- ⁵⁰ *Chuanxilu* no. 315, pp. 359-360.
- ⁵¹ E.g., *Chuanxilu* no. 6, pp. 36-37; no. 8, p. 40; no. 81, p. 107; no. 117, pp. 137-138; no. 155, pp. 217-218.
- ⁵² *Chuanxilu* no. 308, pp. 352-353.
- ⁵³ E.g., *Chuanxilu* no. 2, p. 29; no. 91, p. 113; no. 92, p. 113; no. 228, pp. 304-305; *Daxuewen* 26.2b.
- ⁵⁴ *Chuanxilu* no. 76, p. 104.
- ⁵⁵ *Chuanxilu* no. 228, pp. 304-305.
- ⁵⁶ *Chuanxilu* no. 273, p. 330.
- ⁵⁷ *Chuanxilu* no. 133, pp. 166-167.
- ⁵⁸ *Chuanxilu* no. 282, p. 336.
- ⁵⁹ *Chuanxilu shiyi* no. 16, p. 399.
- ⁶⁰ *Chuanxilu* no. 335, p. 380.
- ⁶¹ *Chuanxilu* no. 53, p. 89; no. 237, p. 310.
- ⁶² *Chuanxilu* no. 162, p. 228.
- ⁶³ *Chuanxilu* no. 101, pp. 123-124.
- ⁶⁴ *Chuanxilu* no 39, pp. 75-76; no. 119, pp. 140-141; no. 145, pp. 202-203.
- ⁶⁵ *Chuanxilu* no. 30, p. 68; no 65, pp. 95-96; no. 115, p. 136; no. 225, p. 302; no. 243, pp. 313-314.
- ⁶⁶ *Chuanxilu* no. 209 p. 293; cf. no. 208, p. 293.