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ZHENZHI AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT IN WANG YANGMING AND STANLEY CAVELL¹

ABSTRACT

This article highlights sympathies between Wang Yangming's notion of *zhenzhi* (real knowing) and Stanley Cavell's concept of acknowledgment. I begin by noting a problem in interpreting Wang on the unity of knowing and acting, which leads to considering how our suffering pain figures in our "real knowing" of another's pain. I then turn to Cavell's description of a related problem in modern skepticism, where Cavell argues that knowing another's pain requires acknowledging it. Cavell's concept of acknowledgment answers to Wang's insistence that knowing and acting are one, and corrects Antonio Cua's very different appropriation of "acknowledgment" to explain Wang's doctrine.

I. INTRODUCTION

The distinction between *zhenzhi* (real knowing) and *changzhi* (ordinary knowing) in the thought of the Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529 CE) is central to his well-known teaching of the unity of knowing and acting. In the *Chuanxilu* and elsewhere, ordinary knowing is delineated most often not by its object of knowledge or the context of knowing but by what it fails at or falls short of—a necessary, affective responsiveness, something that either immediately yields to action or itself counts as action. But this active responsiveness is not to be understood as an ingredient that, added to ordinary knowing, yields real knowing; in other words, real knowing is not ordinary knowing *plus* something else. As Wang says, "Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know";² real knowing is a wholly distinct accomplishment.

While much interest in Wang Yangming revolves around his descriptions of how one comes to embody real knowing—through recovery of the original unity of knowing and acting by, specifically, a

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constant effort at eliminating the darkening influence of one's selfish desires, however we are to characterize that effort—I want to focus on Wang's suggestion (emphasized in Philip J. Ivanhoe's reading) that what stands in the way of real knowing is oneself, so that ordinary knowing is less a positive form of knowing than a form of self-deception, and its giving way to real knowing requires a kind of therapy on the self.³

This, as it happens, is language prevalent in American philosopher Stanley Cavell's discussion of the form of knowing appropriate to our engaged life with others—what he calls “acknowledging.” Cavell's concept of acknowledgment, as distinct from propositional knowing, likewise is internally related to the notion of (affective) responsiveness, or expressiveness, toward others. It is not propositional knowing *plus* affective response, a view that can make our life with others appear to be mere “behavior” added onto “cognition.” Instead, acknowledgment marks the recognition of a difference in one's attitude to the world and to others. As with Wang's notion of ordinary knowing, the *failure* of acknowledgment is not a product of ignorance but a form of self-deception, a kind of willed blindness. There is, however, a difference between these two pairs of knowing-distinctions, one which may nonetheless point to an affinity: whereas in Wang's thought the obscuring of our *liangzhi* (“good knowing” or innate knowledge of the good) can be caused by a too theoretical or intellectualist approach to self-cultivation, for Cavell the failure of acknowledgment is not the effect of a theoretical exuberance but more like the condition for the possibility of that exuberance we call philosophical skepticism. That is, for Cavell, skepticism about whether we can know with certainty the existence of the world or of other minds is merely one reflection of the general human failure to accept the world and to acknowledge others.

The present article is meant to observe and deepen these sympathies between Wang's and Cavell's pairs of knowing-distinctions. I begin by noting a problem in interpreting the central passage in Wang's conversations with his pupil Xu Ai on the unity of knowing and acting. This will lead to considering how our having or suffering pain figures in our “real knowing” of another's pain. To clarify that relation, I turn to Cavell's description of an imaginary scenario offered to address a related problem in modern skepticism, a scenario that would seem to satisfy the Skeptic's craving for certainty about what another person is feeling. That discussion culminates in Cavell's suggestion that what we want in knowing another's pain is captured not by the concept of certainty but by the concept of acknowledgment. I end by arguing that Cavell's concept of acknowledgment answers to Wang's insistence that knowing and acting are one, as well

as corrects Antonio Cua's very different appropriation of the concept of acknowledgment to explain Wang's doctrine.

II. WANG YANGMING AND ZHENZHI

What does Wang Yangming's doctrine of *zhi xing he yi*, the unity of knowing and acting, mean? Among English-speaking commentators of the past thirty years there is disagreement over whether Wang's doctrine is meant to pertain only to moral knowing, as Antonio Cua⁴ claims, or to knowing in all its manifestations, as Warren Frisina⁵ argues. There is also disagreement over to what extent Wang's distinction between real knowing and ordinary knowing should be identified with Gilbert Ryle's distinction, offered in the middle of the last century, between "knowing how" and "knowing that" (as discussed by Cua, Philip Ivanhoe,⁶ and Yang Xiaomei⁷). Behind both of these questions is the more pointed worry whether "the unity of knowing and acting" can really, when all is said and done, plausibly be maintained.

It is this last question that I wish to address here, with the modest goal of clarifying what is required to understand Wang's claim. My guiding thought in interpreting the claim is that Wang understood the doctrine of *zhi xing he yi*, first and foremost, pedagogically. That is not to say that the claim "knowing and acting are one" is not in some sense true, even literally true. But that a claim is true is not, by itself, reason enough to say it. Wang makes clear that his motive for stating what he understands as the truth is not to promote a doctrine but to aid in his disciples' moral cultivation. As he says at the end of the section of the *Chuanxilu* that we will examine shortly,

This is serious and practical business. What is the objective of desperately insisting on knowledge and action being two different things? And what is the objective of my insisting that they are one? What is the use of insisting on their being one or two unless one knows the basic purpose of the doctrine?⁸

Wang writes toward the end of his life, in a letter to Ku Tung-Chiao, "*Only because* later scholars have broken their task into two sections and have lost sight of the original substance of knowledge and action have I advocated the idea of their unity and simultaneous advance."⁹ To consider the meaning of Wang's doctrine "the unity of knowing and acting" is above all to consider how discovering its meaning—and that means overcoming the tendency (in Wang's time and ours) to misread it, that is, to read it doctrinally—can be a form of moral therapy, and can itself contribute to the reform of one's knowing/acting.

Here it is important to note that what Wang's doctrine claims the unity of is not our mistaken notions of "knowing" and "acting." This much seems clear from Wang's first words to Xu Ai early on in the *Chuanxilu*, in response to Xu's inquiries about the doctrine. Xu had offered a straightforward counterexample to the claim of the unity of knowing and acting—namely that people can fully know what they should do (that they should exhibit filial piety, for example) and still fail to act accordingly. Wang responds, "The knowledge and action you refer to are already separated by selfish desires and are no longer knowledge and action in their original substance."¹⁰ If we believe (falsely) that someone can have knowledge without completing that knowledge in action, we are already operating with mistaken notions of "knowing" and of "acting." Thus part of the pedagogical task of Wang's doctrine, and so part of the work of helping his students unite knowing and acting in their lives, is (odd as it sounds) to show what "knowing" (*zhi*) and "acting" (*xing*) mean. We are already some distance from their proper meaning when we speak of them as separate.

A second problem with Xu Ai's counterexample, as revealed by Wang's response, is that it assumes a false idea of how knowing *might* exist in unity with acting. Wang explains:

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 simply because they show them in words.¹¹

This would seem to go some way toward defeating a thought implied in Xu Ai's counterexample, that someone who declares "Parents should be served with filial piety" is, as it were, halfway to Wang's teaching, and need only put this "knowledge" into practice to "unite" knowing and acting in his life. Instead, Wang makes clear, the knowing that is to be identified with acting is not (as we now say) propositional; it is the false sense that one *knows* something in declaring "Parents should be served with filial piety" that can stand in the way of progress toward uniting knowing and acting. Wang's remark can give the mistaken impression, on the other hand, that he is advocating a kind of moral empiricism—specifically, that a prerequisite to my knowing some good *X* is that I first experience, i.e., do or perform, that good *X*—an interpretation that would cause problems for Wang's later emphasis on and transformation of Mengzi's notion of innate knowing of the good (*liangzhi*). But what the passage (as translated) says is not that *my* knowing of filial piety and brotherly love depends on my earlier practice of filial piety, but that *your saying that* I know filial piety (your bearing witness to my character, we might say) depends on

my having practiced filial piety. Only if I show filial piety is your claim that I know filial piety proper, not saying more than you know.

And yet Wang's next words seem to raise a difficulty for this interpretation as well as more broadly. He says, "Or take one's knowledge of pain. Only after one has experienced pain can one know pain. The same is true of cold or hunger. How can knowledge and action be separated?"¹² Here Wang's claim is not merely that the veracity of your saying that I know pain depends on my experience of pain, but that *I* know pain only after I have experienced it. What's more, he says not simply that I know *my* pain once I have experienced it, but that I know *pain*, know what pain is. Scholars have expressed various degrees of disappointment with this example, most often in noting that pain is an affection or reflexive response and not an action.¹³ But what these scholars overlook—perhaps because the obvious is easily overlooked—is that what we call pain, including the pain of cold and the pain of hunger, belongs not accidentally but essentially to the natural history of humans. My having experienced pain in no way distinguishes me from others, as my having practiced filial piety would. Pain—as Wang knows we must, in some sense, see—is universal to the human condition. If Wang's intent in this passage continues to be to "restore" "knowledge and action in their original substance,"¹⁴ then his purpose in stating the necessary commonplace that I know pain only after (or because) I have experienced it ("How can knowledge and action be separated?") must be in order to correct something false in my understanding of my relation to pain. What might that false understanding be? The most likely candidate, indeed the obvious candidate that is nevertheless easily overlooked, is my imagining that I can separate my experience of pain from my knowing what pain is. And how might I and others, caught up in our selfish desires, do that? I would suggest: by denying in our actions toward others the universality of pain; or, put more simply: by denying another's pain. The point of the example of pain, then, would be not that my experiencing pain shows the unity of knowing and acting, but that my responding to another's pain (real, imagined, or imminent) shows this. Only in my response do I show, or fail to show, what I know from my own (unexceptional) experience. And in either case—that is, whether I show what I know or fail to show it—I am, we might say, *implicated* by the other's pain.

III. STANLEY CAVELL AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It is at this point, in thinking about what my response to pain has to teach me about the unity of knowing and acting, that I want to shed light on Wang's doctrine by turning to the thought of Stanley Cavell.

I must begin with a striking contrast, however, in Cavell's starting point. For Cavell, whose philosophical lineage is tied to the later writings of Wittgenstein, problems of knowledge are cast as problems of, or in response to, the philosophical skepticism that began a century after Wang Yangming and half a world away, in the skeptical procedures of Descartes. In particular, and as one version of the so-called Problem of Other Minds that will be the focus of this discussion, the Skeptic says that another person—say, the next person you meet—could be in pain at that moment but not show it; in such a case, the Skeptic argues, that person knows, based on her feeling pain at that moment, that she is in pain, whereas, since you cannot have her pain, you cannot be certain that she is in pain. From this and related arguments (about the human capacity for feigning pain, for instance), the Skeptic draws the general conclusion that we can never know with certainty whether another person is in pain. The Skeptic's argument really amounts to a complaint, one could say, about the human condition as such: the Skeptic's apparent discovery is that we lack proper wiring for "real knowing" (wiring that, if we possessed it, would allow us to feel what another person feels). It is through such arguments that modern skepticism reveals itself to be not so much a school of thought as a voice of doubt that haunts the Western theorist of knowledge.

I want to outline Stanley Cavell's response to this Skeptic, most notably in Cavell's early article "Knowing and Acknowledging,"¹⁵ since it is crucial to understanding his interest in the notion of acknowledgment and its affinity with Wang Yangming's notion of *zhenzhi*. Cavell's engagement with skepticism was unique at the time it was written, in that Cavell denies that the Skeptic can be defeated by a simple appeal to what we ordinarily say—an approach that several philosophers in the last century, beginning with G. E. Moore¹⁶ and including such followers of Wittgenstein as Norman Malcolm,¹⁷ took to be definitive. That appeal to ordinary language is made, when directed at the Problem of Other Minds, in some such way as the following: "The Skeptic is wrong when he insists, on the way to his skeptical conclusion, that two people can't have the same pain. For clearly, we can and do speak of two people having the same pain. For example, they may each have the headache and sore throat that accompanies the swine flu." Cavell makes evident that this is not enough to defeat the Skeptic's challenge. To see why not, consider how we ordinarily talk about cars. If you and I each own 2003 Honda Civic LXs, then we can and do say that we both own the same car (the same descriptively, as we might put it). But when yours develops a flat tire on the highway or is hit by a rock that cracks the windshield, then it seems important (to me) that it is *your* 2003 Honda Civic LX, not

mine, that has a flat tire or a cracked windshield. It may be that pains, like cars, are such that it makes sense to say both that we have the same (when we do) and that nonetheless we do not have the same (the same numerically)—that is, if there are contexts in which it matters to distinguish, say, your swine flu headache from mine. But if it sometimes matters, and we do sometimes distinguish your pain from mine, then we are back to the Skeptic's challenge to our claim to know that another is in pain, since we cannot have the other's pain in that sense demanded by the Skeptic (the sense of numerically the same pain).

But Cavell goes further in his diagnosis of this mistaken appeal to ordinary speech. The fundamental error in this appeal, Cavell says, is that, by insisting that we can have the same pain (while failing to convince us that we can have it in the sense that seems required), this ordinary language respondent to the Skeptic perpetuates the idea that whether we have the same feeling is *relevant* to whether we can know what another is feeling. But if having the same feeling were relevant, then clearly the way that I can have the same feeling as you—by our both having the headache and sore throat that accompanies the swine flu, say—is insufficient to make me certain that I know what you are feeling at a given moment. Cavell's very different tack in responding to skepticism, differently inspired by Wittgenstein (or by a different reading of Wittgenstein) from Malcolm's, is to argue that the Skeptic is deceiving himself when he imagines that "feeling the same pain" is relevant to "knowing what another is feeling." To show this, Cavell sketches a scenario in which the Skeptic gets his wish—that is, in which someone is able to feel another's pain as the other feels it; and yet, as Cavell allows us to see, we would not want to say that this someone is knowing another's pain in the way that *we* want to know it.

Cavell's imagined scenario is derived from the 1941 Hollywood film *The Corsican Brothers*, itself based loosely on Alexandre Dumas's 1845 novella of the same name.¹⁸ We are to imagine two brothers, one of whom ("Second") suffers only and exactly whatever happens to his brother ("First"). The important feature here is that Second feels First's pain not out of sympathy, by seeing First suffer, but through an (unexplained) automatic mechanism, so that Second feels pain when First accidentally slices his finger in another room, or on another continent—that is, when First is no more in view than the knife that slipped. In addition, we are asked to imagine that Second suffers *only* if First does, so that if Second had sliced his own finger, or if First had been anesthetized, Second would in either case feel nothing. In short, let it be the case that First is Second's access to the feeling (touching) world.

What we have here is thus rightly described as a situation in which pain is felt by someone (Second) *because another feels it*. This answers to the Skeptic's observation or complaint that "any pain that I can possibly feel is still my own," since in this example Second has no pain of his own: every pain he feels is First's. (If there is a remedy for the pain, one applies it to First, even as one might comfort Second.) It also answers to our sense of what "having numerically the same pain" would mean if it meant anything; for here, the pain in First's body and the pain in Second's body are literally (and so numerically) the same pain. In effect, we have made the Skeptic's claim—that there is a kind of access to another human being which no human being can have—intelligible, by describing a case in which someone *could* have such access (to at least one other human being) if only he were wired like Second. *The Corsican Brothers* scenario is thus one in which our present, actual human condition is viewed as a constraint, as a falling short of the best case for knowing others. But even so, as Cavell argues, what we are imagining with this scenario does not satisfy our wish to know another's pain. The scenario still misses what the skeptic in us wants, and in doing so it demonstrates that nothing we can imagine *of this sort* will satisfy us.

To see why, first we must ask: does First (the one who has sliced his finger) know Second's pain? One might feel that he must know this if he knows how his brother is wired, since it guarantees that their pains are identical and simultaneous. But recall that First does not feel Second's pain as Second is said to feel First's; whatever pain First feels is *his*. And that now presents itself as a problem: First's pain, rather than serving as an indication of what Second is feeling, stands in the way of his considering what Second is feeling. As Cavell says, "First's knowledge of Second's pain—if based on his own pain—is somehow too intellectual to be called 'knowledge that Second is in pain.'"¹⁹ For First, "Knowing that Second is in pain" requires a deduction, albeit from his own condition. (He must think: since I am in pain, Second must also be in pain.) If I am Second, this will not strike me as having a regard for my being in pain. Can I be blamed for thinking, "First doesn't know what I'm suffering"? Perhaps someone will need to remind me that First is not uncaring (if he is not) but that he is, after all, *in pain* exactly and always whenever I am in pain. On the other hand, if First shows regard for Second's suffering *despite* his pain, he does so the way that any of us would. What one might have taken to be evidence for knowing another's feelings turns out to be an obstacle to what we want to call "knowing another's feelings."

But next we must ask: does Second know First's pain? We have imagined not only that Second feels the same pain as First but that the

pain he feels *is* First's, so that he knows First's pain directly, *by* feeling it. One may decide that this is a case of knowing in some sense, but one should also recognize that it is not what we mean by, or want from, "knowing another's pain." For if I am Second, then what I mean by "First is in pain" is indistinguishable from what I mean by "I am in pain." First's pain is no longer different enough for me to be able to identify it as *his*. I have lost the space between us in which I can answer to his pain; it filibusters my experience. What would count as "knowing another's pain" goes missing because First is not, or not sufficiently, an "other" to Second. Cavell says of Second that his knowledge is "'too immediate'; his 'having' First's pain is more like an effect of that pain than a response to it."²⁰

Such thinking is what leads Cavell to his Wang-like conclusion, that our knowledge of another is bound up necessarily with how we respond to him, or fail to, and that "knowing what another is feeling" means, not: feeling what he feels, but: *acting* toward him in a certain way—for example, in response to his expressions of pain. Notice that this does not defeat the skeptical conclusion in the way that the Skeptic pictured it being defeated. The other whose pain we would know may still suppress his expressions of pain; or he may express his pain to which we, occupied by what Wang calls our selfish desires, fail to attend. This happens frequently enough: people see but do not act. Wang says such people "simply do not yet know" what the presence of the other calls from them.²¹ Their knowledge is *changzhi*, a falling short of real knowing (*zhenzhi*). Cavell speaks of such people *forgoing* their knowledge of the other.

While this sketch of Cavell's analysis of the Skeptic's argument is all too brief, it is perhaps sufficient to shed light on what in the human condition drives the Skeptic of other minds to his confused questioning. If the demand to respond to what we know of others can at times, or as a timeless metaphysical fact, be burdensome to us, then the possibility that we might escape the demand, through the discovery that we can never be certain what another feels, begins to show its appeal. Cavell does not deny that appeal or the metaphysical facts that inspire it, including the deep fact of our human separateness. He simply shows that, when talking about our knowledge of others' pains, or of their thoughts and feelings generally, the problem is not that certainty is forever beyond our reach but that certainty is not enough. When I wonder whether my parents are cold or whether that child is in danger, my condition is captured not by the concept of certainty but by the concept of acknowledgment. And my relevant options are not: being certain that this person is in pain or else falling short of certainty, but rather: acknowledging this person's pain or else failing to acknowledge it (attending to her pain or else failing to attend to it). It

is important to stress that acknowledging as here described is not a lesser standard than propositional knowing. Consider the situation in which I am late for class and my students are all waiting. Can I know that I am late without acknowledging it? Certainly. Can I, on the other hand, acknowledge that I am late without knowing it? Clearly not. As Cavell puts it, “Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.)”²²

But does this “goes beyond” imply, contrary to my opening claim, that acknowledging just is ordinary or propositional knowing *plus* action? Perhaps this is where Cavell shows the articulation of his thinking to be shaped by the challenge of philosophical skepticism, much as Wang’s articulation of his thinking is shaped by the overly theoretical Confucianism of his day.²³ To that extent they seem to be aimed at different intellectual errors, medicines for distinct diseases. And yet, in the first half of the above parenthetical sentence, Cavell all but says that acknowledging is not the same *in kind* as propositional knowing (they are not part of the same “order of knowledge”); to that extent his distinction matches Wang’s contrast between *zhenzhi* and *changzhi*. Neither Cavell nor Wang denies that propositional knowing—for example, showing filial piety “in words”²⁴—may be a precondition for real knowing; but that is no more revealing than saying that talking is a precondition, or that having sight is a precondition for knowing the beautiful color. Perhaps the temptation to say that ordinary or propositional knowing is an element of real knowing stems from this thought (shared by Wang and Cavell): to unite knowing and acting, to acknowledge the other, what is needed is something, some ability, that I already possess. It demands only my present capacity for knowing/acting—though it may lie in me in some state of denial or repression or obscuration. And so I can fail to acknowledge, just as someone with a stuffy nose fails to know the bad odor.²⁵ Something in me keeps me from responding with sympathy (so that I respond instead with silence), or keeps me from responding with patient silence (so that I respond instead with distracted talk).²⁶ The manifestations of acknowledgment, and particularly of the avoidance of acknowledgment, illustrated in Cavell’s readings of *King Lear* and *Othello*, and less directly but no less significantly in his readings of *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Awful Truth*, among others,²⁷ underscore how the tragedy or dissolution of various crises of the soul (in *Lear*, *Othello*, *Leontes*, *Tracy*, *Jerry*) is linked to the failure or success of one’s realigning the self with one’s perception of, and one’s care and affection for, others. Cavell’s readings of

these works serve, in addition, as so many demonstrations of the place of acknowledgment and its avoidance in the long tradition of philosophical skepticism about other minds.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGING-THAT, ACKNOWLEDGING-AS, AND ACKNOWLEDGING YOU

I now turn to what this consideration of Cavell's notion of acknowledgment can reveal about Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting and about *zhenzhi* or "real knowing."

Perhaps the best way to bring this out is to compare Cavell's thought with Antonio Cua's reading of one of the remarks from the *Chuanxilu* that we examined earlier. Wang had said: "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."²⁸ Cua's initial reading of this passage seems to draw the contrast between "ordinary knowing" and "real knowing" in much the way Cavell does. Cua explains that "in the moral case mere knowledge by acquaintance is not enough. The sense of recognition involved is more a sense of *acknowledgment*. . . . There is no gap, properly speaking, between acknowledging [person] *A*, in the normative sense, as my father and acting toward *A* in the filial way."²⁹ As with Cavell, Cua seems to suggest that our knowledge of others, properly speaking, is always already wrapped up in our responsiveness to them. And I have argued for this interpretation of Wang's view. For Wang, to overlook or fail at the appropriate response, whether in philosophizing or in our day-to-day affairs, is to engage, like the Skeptic, in a form of self-deception. It is to be captive to a picture of knowing that abdicates our part in the world, our relation to others and our responsibility to them (specifically, in the Wang passage, to our parents and brothers).

But later in Cua's discussion it becomes clear that he has not united knowing and acting enough—I mean that he continues to be guided by notions of "knowing" and "acting" in moral contexts that in fact bring about their separation, exhibiting merely a more refined form of self-deception. Here is the relevant passage from Cua's book:

Having moral knowledge in the required sense involves not merely a recognition that such-and-such is a duty but also an *acknowledgment* or acceptance of the duty as a guide to actual conduct—that is, as having an actuating import in one's life. . . . If I acknowledge, for example, filial piety as my duty, this involves not merely a recognition of what constitutes acts of filial piety but also an endeavor to perform these acts.³⁰

Here the work of acknowledgment, which in the earlier passage seemed to require my response to another (to my father, say), consists of the effort to observe merely an antecedent commitment to *filial duty*. That is, Cua shifts the emphasis to my acknowledging *that* thus-and-such is my duty rather than—as Wang emphasizes in response to the scholars of his day—overcoming my self-deceiving view of actions as guided by duties that need to be first discussed and learned before being put into practice.³¹ To think of duties (to parents, to rulers, etc.) as what wait on my acknowledgment is to place one more obstacle before my learning how to respond here and now to another (to my father, say). It pictures the intellectual action as happening elsewhere than in “the effort of concrete practice,” and thus is, in Wang’s words, to “pursue shadows and echoes.”³² And it seems to identify real knowing as affective responsiveness *added to* ordinary knowing, rather than as something distinct enough to warrant Wang’s speaking of the ancients’ wish to “restore the original substance” of knowledge and action³³ and his claiming that ordinary knowing is not a species of knowing at all. (Here is one place where coming to see what “knowing” and “acting” mean is learning how to unite knowing and acting in one’s life.) That’s not to deny that having some general sense of filial duty can figure in educating me on how to remove my selfish desires and act appropriately toward my father. What it denies is that “a recognition of what constitutes acts of filial piety” as precursor to “an endeavor to perform these acts” figures in the lesson we are to draw from Wang’s doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting.

To see the extent of Cua’s confusion over the kind of acknowledgment that talk of the unity of knowing and acting should encourage, consider how he describes the change in seeing that it inspires. This is Cua commenting on what he labels Wang’s “aesthetic analogy,” that “true knowledge and action . . . are like loving beautiful colors”.³⁴

As soon as one sees an object as beautiful, one has already loved it in the sense that one has spontaneously responded to the object as a beautiful object. . . . As in the aesthetic case, when I am directly aware of, or recognize, a person *A* as my father or my brother, I may be said to have already “responded” to *A* in the way characteristic of a filial son or respectful brother; that is, I have already *acted* toward *A* in a filial or fraternal way.³⁵

Cua is here offering, as an instance of my overcoming the false separation of knowing and acting, the case of my “directly” seeing “a person *A* as my father or my brother,” borrowing (as he makes explicit) the locution of “seeing something as something” from Wittgenstein’s remarks on “aspect-seeing” late in his *Philosophical Investigations*.³⁶ Cua’s suggestion appears to be that such aspectual seeing—seeing this (a human being) as that (my father)—is a

realization of the unity of knowing and acting. And aspectual seeing is the concept of experience by which Cua explicates not only Wang's "aesthetic analogy" but Cua's initial (that is, his more Cavell-like) sense of "acknowledgment," a kind of "acknowledgment-as." Recall the passage cited earlier: "There is no gap, properly speaking, between acknowledging *A*, in the normative sense, as my father and acting toward *A* in the filial way."³⁷

What, in my view, is confused here is not the appeal to some concept that removes the sense of a "gap" between recognition and response (the absence of a gap is what "the unity of knowing and acting" implies and calls for) but Cua's conviction that the concept of seeing-as clarifies *how* to unite knowing and acting. The first indication that something is amiss is Cua's interpretive claim that "we may replace 'seeing beautiful colors' [in Wang's 'aesthetic analogy'] by 'seeing colors *as* beautiful.'"³⁸ This "way of making explicit the [conative] attitude" involved in "seeing beautiful colors" leads Cua immediately to draw the lesson of Wang's analogy by speaking of a case "when I am directly aware of . . . a person *A* as my father" and by speaking of "acknowledging *A* . . . as my father."³⁹ But there is a difference in kind between "seeing beautiful colors" and "seeing colors as beautiful." Specifically, the latter case implies that, as with any aspect-seeing experience, there is some (at least one) *other* way of seeing the colors in question (seeing them, for example, as pallid or lurid or garish). However uncertain we may be about the former possibility of "seeing beautiful colors" directly, or about ascribing to Wang "a sort of phenomenology of value perception,"⁴⁰ my interest is in the analogous cases of aspect-perception (namely "seeing a human being as my father" and "acknowledging a human being as my father") that Cua develops from his interpretive claim.⁴¹

Consider first what it means to fail to see a human being as my father. Is this what I do when I claim (as in Xu Ai's example) that I know my father should be served with filial piety but that I cannot put this into practice? If it is, the implication is that (again) there is some other way I am seeing this human being. But is that what either Xu Ai or Wang imagine—that my failure to act appropriately toward my father is the result of my seeing this human being as, say, my brother or ruler or neighbor, rather than as my father? Cua might reply that my failure is in seeing my father as no one in particular: I see him, at most, simply as a human being. But is that really coherent? Here I simply note that my father *is* a human being, and that it is consequently not clear how I could (claim to) see him *as* one. "One doesn't 'take' what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery."⁴² Of course, it is equally true that he *is* my father. Is it any more clear how

I could (claim to) see him *as* my father? Perhaps; if, that is, “seeing my father as my father” is a (not quite coherent or fully meant) description of a change in attitude from one in which I would habitually disown my knowledge of him, and so fail to respond to him appropriately, if at all.⁴³

But in that case, my problem was not that I had been seeing something else, some *other* aspect of my father. Rather, my problem was that I had been missing something, something Wang might call the harmony (*he*) between my feelings and my father, a recognition of my connection to him.⁴⁴ Cavell, in a section of *The Claim of Reason* that can be read as an extended meditation on the concept of acknowledgment, speaks in an analogous case of such a person “missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them, so to speak.”⁴⁵ Now it is true that to see an aspect of a thing is, similarly, to perceive “an internal relation between it and other objects.”⁴⁶ But to see an aspect of a thing is not, typically, to perceive a thing’s internal relation *to me*. (To see its relation to me, to be brought back to myself by what I see, is at best an extension of the notion of “noticing an aspect.”) I want to say: in the case of seeing my father, my brother, my ruler, my neighbor, or in general, another human being, what expresses the effort to unite knowing and acting in myself is not my trying to see this person in a new way (*as* my father, etc.) so much as my seeing what in me is blocking the recognition of my internal relation to him or her (Cavell)—that is, blocking my realizing a harmony between my feelings and him or her (Wang). If you wanted to maintain that this is no more than a difference in emphasis from Cua, my reply would be that it is the difference between being receptive to self-knowledge or self-revelation (Cavell’s picture)⁴⁷ versus aiming to make something happen (bringing about the “change of aspect” in Cua’s version). Such a difference can be all the difference between realizing a teaching in one’s life and failing to realize it.

A parallel set of concerns arises if we consider the differences between “acknowledging this human being as my father” (Cua) and “acknowledging my father” (Cavell). If we imagine the former voiced in the first person (“I acknowledge you as my father”), what it conveys is some sort of appeal to convention. The appeal might be filled out in various ways: as an appeal to a rule, or to a ritual understanding, or to a (possibly implicit) prior agreement about how things stand between us. While it is harder to imagine a context where we would say “I acknowledge you” (or “I acknowledge you, father”), the impulse or idea behind acknowledging *this person* (my father, say), as distinct from acknowledging him *as* my father, seems to be precisely what “the unity of knowing and acting” calls for:

namely that I not interpose a conventional *way* of seeing the other, that I leave myself open to receive what the other shows of himself and respond to *that*. This does not mean that I treat all persons equally or that I forgo my particular commitment, my internal relation, to this other—as a son, say. On the contrary: for me to acknowledge someone is always also to acknowledge my relation to him or her. (Only a son can adore his father in *this* way, can be embarrassed by or for him in *that* way, can lead him away from his wife’s deathbed in *that* way, etc.) Goneril’s and Regan’s opening speeches in *King Lear* present us with a picture of two daughters who acknowledge Lear *as* their father (“As much as child e’er loved, or father found”). But in Cordelia’s “I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less,” what we are given—and what Lear fails to acknowledge—is a daughter who acknowledges Lear, her father.⁴⁸

I have offered parallel critiques, it seems, of Cua’s reading of Wang’s doctrine and of the Skeptic who craves to “really know” another’s pain. Our knowing the needs of others with whom we are in relation, their pains and their joys, is not, as the Skeptic imagines, a matter of gaining access to some inner sensation that we lack, nor, as Cua imagines, of extending our present acknowledgment of rules or relations to their realization in performance. If I imagine that real knowing consists in adding something to or doing something with our ordinary knowing—that is, our false understanding of “knowing”—I am perpetuating the separation of knowing from acting. A reading of Cavell suggests that to really know my father, I must learn to acknowledge him. My aim here has been to show that this is Wang’s view—whatever the differences between how he and Cavell acknowledge their fathers—and that this view is revelatory of my relation to others—however little I have said here about how I learn to acknowledge others. But if I *can* do that, then knowing what my father is feeling—which is to say, responding to him appropriately—will take care of itself.

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ENDNOTES

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1. This is the original acknowledgment that appeared in the aforementioned issue of this journal: “A draft of this article was read at the 2009 International Symposium on Chinese Philosophy and Analytic Philosophy at East China Normal University in Shanghai on June 19, and at the 2009 Eastern Division Meeting of the American

- Philosophical Association in New York City, December 29. I wish to thank the participants at each of these gatherings for their questions and comments. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Editor-in-Chief, Chung-ying Cheng, for his helpful comments on an earlier draft; to the Managing Editor, Linyu Gu, for her careful guidance in preparing the final draft; and to Mathew Foust for organizing both the APA special session and this special issue of the Journal devoted to new comparisons of Chinese and American philosophies. I am especially grateful to Stephen Angle, not only for his comments on an earlier draft but also for introducing me to the thought of Wang Yangming at the NEH Summer Seminar ‘Traditions into Dialogue: Confucianism and Contemporary Virtue Ethics’ held at Wesleyan University in 2008.’
2. Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings of Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), no. 5, 10; citations from Chan’s translation of the *Chuanxilu* are given by passage number followed by page number.
 3. See Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 103, 179, note 55; Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 60–61.
 4. See A. S. Cua, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: A Study in Wang Yang-ming’s Moral Psychology* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982).
 5. See Warren Frisina, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
 6. See Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*.
 7. See Yang Xiaomei, “How to Make Sense of the Claim ‘True Knowledge Is What Constitutes Action’: A New Interpretation of Wang Yangming’s Doctrine of Unity of Knowledge and Action,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2009): 173–88.
 8. *Instructions for Practical Living*, no. 5, 11.
 9. *Ibid.*, no. 133, 93; emphasis added.
 10. *Ibid.*, no. 5, 10.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. This is where Antonio Cua introduces his distinction between “prospective” and “retrospective” moral knowledge, or between knowledge anterior to and knowledge posterior to action; see Cua, *Unity of Knowledge and Action*, 14–16. I mean to be introducing what will prove to be a contrasting significance in Wang’s remark, in preparation for stating, at the end of this article, my disagreement with Cua’s application of the notion of “acknowledgment” to Wang. For Cua’s appeal to the notion of acknowledgment, see Cua, *Unity of Knowledge and Action*, 11–17.
 14. *Instructions for Practical Living*, no. 5, 10.
 15. Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 238–66. Cavell’s notion of acknowledgment introduced in “Knowing and Acknowledging” guides his thinking about our response to Shakespearean tragedy and the conventions of theatre and the movies generally, as well as (and because these are illustrative of) the skeptical problem of others. See, for example, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* 267–353; “Sights and Sounds,” “Photograph and Screen,” and “Audience, Actor, and Star,” in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 16–29; and “Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance,” Part IV of *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 329–496.
 16. See Moore’s “A Defense of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World,” in G. E. Moore, *Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 1993), 106–33 and 147–70.
 17. See Norman Malcolm, “The Privacy of Experience,” in *Epistemology: New Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Avrum Stroll (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 129–58.
 18. See Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 251–53.
 19. *Ibid.*, 252.

20. *Ibid.*, 253. Again, if Second is able to sympathize with First's experience of pain—despite rather than because of his own experience of pain—then we would want to say that Second knows First's pain.
21. *Instructions for Practical Living*, no. 5, 10.
22. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 257.
23. See *Instructions for Practical Living*, no. 5, 11–12; no. 218, 197–98.
24. *Ibid.*, no. 5, 10.
25. *Ibid.*
26. If I am angry with someone who then falls and is injured, and I refuse to help or to call for help, I fail to acknowledge him. Still, you might say to me, "But you *really know* that person is in pain!"—as a way of insisting that I am not ignorant of his pain, that I am in fact ignoring his expressions of pain. Does this show that (Cavell's notion of) acknowledgment is distinct from (Wang's notion of) real knowing (*zhenzhi*)? No, for when you say "But you *really know* that person is in pain!" you're not saying that I have *zhenzhi*; someone with *zhenzhi* would not ignore that person's expressions of pain. What this shows is no more than that such uses of "really know" don't translate or carry the pedagogical force of Wang's notion of *zhenzhi*. (My thanks to the Editor for raising this point.)
27. For Cavell's article on *King Lear*, see Note 15. For his interpretation of *Othello*, see Part IV of *Claim of Reason* (mentioned in Note 15); a version of these pages appears as "Othello and the Stake of the Other," in *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 125–42. For *The Winter's Tale*, see "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses: Reading *The Winter's Tale*," in *Disowning Knowledge*, 193–221. For *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Awful Truth*, see *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 133–60 and 229–63.
28. *Instructions for Practical Living*, no. 5, 10.
29. Cua, *Unity of Knowledge and Action*, 11.
30. *Ibid.*, 12.
31. Cf. *Instructions for Practical Living*, no. 5, 11.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, no. 5, 10.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Cua, *Unity of Knowledge and Action*, 10–11.
36. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), Part II, section xi. For a recent assessment of Wittgenstein's remarks on the concept of aspect-seeing, see William Day and Victor J. Krebs, eds., *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
37. Cua, *Unity of Knowledge and Action*, 11.
38. *Ibid.*, 10.
39. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
40. *Ibid.*, 105, note 11.
41. More recently, Stephen Angle has adopted this same aspectual revision of Wang's analogy: "The idea . . . is that when we see a color *as beautiful*, we thereby love it." Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 119. Angle does not, however, follow Cua in extending the language of aspect-seeing to "seeing this person as my father," etc.
42. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 195c.
43. What of the case where I don't, at first, recognize that person *A* is my father—I see him at a distance, or I see him plainly enough but don't know, haven't been told, my relation to him: I am Telemachus. When *A* says, "I am the only Odysseus who will ever come back to you," and I fold him in my arms and weep, haven't I come to see *A* as my father and shown this knowledge in appropriate action? Might Wang call this Cua-like alternative a unity of knowing and acting? I think he could, but it is more important to notice that this sort of example is not Wang's concern. It is not, again, like Xu Ai's example of (ordinary) "knowing" how to serve one's father with

filial piety but finding that one cannot act appropriately. What prevented Telemachus from exhibiting the unity of knowing and acting was not the absence of appropriate action; it was the absence of his father. The missing fact (“A is my father”) is again no more than a precondition for, not an element of, real knowing (see the paragraph concluding Part III, above). (My thanks to the Editor for pressing the question raised here.)

44. For the role of harmony (*he*) in Wang Yangming’s thinking, see Angle, *Sagehood*, 69–74 and 117–31.
45. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 376.
46. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 212a.
47. Compare Cavell, “Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 128–29, and “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” 272–89. Harmony (*he*)—that is, the discovery of coherence (*li*) within ourselves—is the comparable self-revelatory aim in Wang; compare Angle, *Sagehood*, 49, 69–71, 117. (My thanks to the Editor for pressing this point of comparison.)
48. Lear’s “avoidance of love,” his “disowning knowledge” of Cordelia’s love (among others), is not proof against the role of acknowledgment in our knowing of others, but Lear’s all-too-human expression of that role: “the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated.” See Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 263–64. (My thanks to the Editor for raising this point.)