

Wang Yangming's Doctrine of the "Unity of Knowing and Acting" in the Light of Kant's Practical Philosophy

Ming-huei Lee*

Abstract

Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" (*zhi xing heyi* 知行合一) can be traced back to Mencius's theory of "original knowing" (*liangzhi* 良知). Similarly, Kant discussed the relationship of theory to practice on three different levels (morality, the law of the state, and international law) in his article, "On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice." Kant proposed the unity of theory and practice on the level of morality. So, this article uses Kant's related concepts of theory and practice to interpret Wang's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" with the aim of clarifying some misinterpretations of it. Thereby, I argue that, although Wang Yangming put forward the doctrine of "the unity of knowing and acting" at a different time than his doctrines of "heart-mind is principle" (*xin ji li* 心即理) and "the extension of original knowing" (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知), these three doctrines are logically interconnected.

Keywords: Wang Yangming, original knowing, unity of knowing and acting, Kant, theory and practice

* Ming-huei Lee is a Distinguished Research Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at the Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. E-mail: lmhuei@hotmail.com

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I. Wang Yangming's Doctrine of the "Unity of Knowing and Acting" against the Background of Intellectual History

The guiding principle of Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472-1529) philosophy is generally summarized in three doctrines: the "heart-mind is principle" (*xin ji li* 心即理), the "unity of knowing and acting" (*zhi xing heyi* 知行合一), and the "extension of original knowing" (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知). The doctrine of the "heart-mind is principle" was first put forward by Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139-1192).¹ But Wang Yangming's propounding of this doctrine was by no means a direct inheritance from Lu Jiuyuan. Instead, it was something he came to through enlightenment when he was demoted and exiled to Longchang 龍場, Guizhou 貴州, in 1508, at the age of 37, and he there repeatedly questioned Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) doctrine of "investigating things to extend knowledge."² The next year, he proposed the notion of the "unity of knowing and acting."³ As for the doctrine of the "extension of original knowing," according to the *Wang Yangming nianpu* 王陽明年譜 (Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming), it was formally put forth in 1521 (Y. Wang 2011, 3:1411-12). However, according to Chen Lai's 陳來 investigation, it was actually propounded by Wang Yangming in 1520 at the age of 49, when he resided in Ganzhou 贛州 (Chen 1991, 160-4). Though the three doctrines were put forth in different times, philosophically, they all can be traced

¹ Lu Jiuyuan wrote in his "Letter to Li Zai 李宰": "Heart-mind is the most noble and the greatest among the five faculties. . . . The four buddings are this heart-mind; what Heaven gives us is also this heart-mind. Every human being has this heart-mind; every heart-mind possesses the principle; heart-mind is principle" (see Lu 1980, 149).

² According to the *Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming*, during his stay in Longchang, "one midnight he was suddenly enlightened with respect to the doctrine of investigating things to extend knowledge. Half asleep, it was as if someone was talking about it; he cried out and jumped up unwittingly, startling all his protégés. He had since begun to understand the Way of sages—that is, that our nature as human beings is self-sufficient; and that seeking principle from external things as he did before is erroneous" (see Y. Wang 2011, 3:1354). Although the phrase "heart-mind is principle" does not appear here, as far as its substantial content is concerned, what he understood through the enlightenment is precisely the doctrine of "heart-mind is principle."

³ An entry of this year in the *Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming* reads, "The Teacher began to discuss the unity of knowing and acting in this year" (see Y. Wang 2011, 3:1355).

to Mencius and are theoretically consistent. This essay discusses mainly the philosophical significance of the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting," with attention to the other two only when necessary.

The philosophical roots of the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" are the notions of "original knowing" and "original ability" in *Mencius*. As Mencius said,

What a man is able to do without having to learn is his original ability (*liangneng* 良能); what he knows without having to reflect on it is his original knowing (*liangzhi* 良知). There are no young children who do not know love for their parents, and none of them when they grow up will not know respect for their elder brothers. Loving one's parents is humanity (*ren* 仁); respecting one's elders is righteousness (*yi* 義). What is left to be done is simply the extension of these to the whole world.⁴ (*Mencius* 7A.15, as translated in Lau 1984, 269)

Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763-1820), in his *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 (True Meanings of Mencius), provides an explanation of this passage:

Mencius said that original ability is what a man is able to do without having to learn, and that original knowing is what a man knows without having to reflect on it. He said that "there are no children who do not know love for their parents," yet without saying that there is none of them who is unable to love their parents. He said that "there are no children who will not know respect for their elder brothers when they grow up," yet without saying that there is none of them who are unable to respect their elder brothers. This is because knowing without having to reflect is the goodness of human nature, and everyone is like this. As for the ability to do without having to learn, only those who are born knowing their duties and who practice them with a natural ease possess it, and thus it cannot apply to everyone. . . . How can one turn knowing into ability? How can one turn full knowing into the full ability to do? There is no way to achieve this except by extending it

⁴ "人之所不學而能者，其良能也；所不慮而知者，其良知也。孩提之童，無不知愛其親者；及其長也，無不知敬其兄也。親親，仁也；敬長，義也。無他，達之天下也。" All translations of *Mencius* in this essay are C. D. Lau's, with minor modifications by myself. The translations of other Chinese texts are my own unless otherwise stated.

(the knowledge). The sages know very well the virtues of spirits; they emulate the nature of all things, and extend them to the whole world (Jiao 1987, 900).

Here Jiao Xun regards “original knowing” and “original ability” as two different things. He attributes the former to all people but the latter only to “those who are born knowing their duties and who practice them with a natural ease” (sages). Because Mencius only said that “there are no young children who do not know love for their parents, and none of them when they grow up will not know respect for their elder brothers,” without saying that “there are no young children who are not able to love their parents, and none of them when they grow up is not able to respect their elder brothers,” Jiao Xun believes that there is a distance from “knowing” to “ability,” and that one must rely on the teaching of sages to cross it.

But Jiao Xun’s interpretation does not hold up even as a matter of grammar. Mencius does not mention the term “sage” at all in the passage, whereas Jiao Xun says, “As for the ability without having to learn, only those who are born knowing their duties and who practice them with a natural ease possess it, and thus it cannot be applied to everyone.” According to him, “those who are born knowing their duties and who practice them with a natural ease” actually refers to sages; this sentence thus amounts to saying that only sages possess original ability. But Mencius says clearly, “What a man is able to do without having to learn is his original ability.” Here Mencius is talking about all people; his claim is not limited to sages only. Additionally, he further states, “There are no young children who do not know love for their parents, and none of them when they grow up will not know respect for their elder brothers.” Here the phrase “none of them . . . not” indicates that this is a universal affirmative proposition, which precisely contradicts Jiao Xun’s assertion. Finally, in Jiao Xun’s interpretation of the passage, the last two sentences—that is, the segment which starts with “There is no way to achieve this” and ends with “extend them to the whole world”—are his reformulation of the last sentence of Mencius’s text. But Jiao Xun completely ignores the grammar by taking “sages” as the subject of this sentence. Actually, the referent of this sentence is “love for parents and

respect for elders." What Mencius means by this is that the heart-mind to love parents and respect elders is able to be extended to the whole world, and its power and effect are universal.

The reason Jiao Xun misunderstood this passage is mainly because he did not understand that "original knowing" is "original ability." Zhao Qi 趙岐 (108?-201), however, did understand this; thus, in his *Mengzi zhu* 孟子注 (Annotations to *Mencius*), he notes that "knowing is actually also ability" (Zhao and Sun 1966, 13a:5b). The heart-mind "to love parents and respect elders" is what Mencius dubs "original heart-mind" (*benxin* 本心). From the perspective of its being the "principle of judgement" (*principium dijudicationis*) of morality, it is dubbed "original knowing." From the perspective of its being the "principle of execution" (*principium executionis*) of morality, it is dubbed "original ability." Thus, "original knowing" implies "original ability," and as such, saying "to know" already contains the meaning of "to be able to do." This is the origin of Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting."

Wang Ji 王畿 (1498-1583), one of Wang Yangming's disciples, concisely yet adeptly lays bare the theoretical connection between Mencius's doctrine of "original knowing" and "original ability" and Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting." According to the accounts in his "*Huayang Mingluntang huiyu*" 華陽明倫堂會語 (Dialogues at Minglun Hall in Huayang),

Disciples asked about the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting. The Teacher said, "There is only knowing in the world, because there is no knowing without acting. As for knowing and acting, one is original essence (*benti* 本體) whereas the other is effort (*gongfu* 工夫). For instance, seeing is knowing; yet seeing itself is acting. Hearing is knowing; yet hearing itself is acting. In sum, there is just this knowing, which on its own is able to exhaust everything. Mencius said, "There are no young children who do not know love for their parents, and none of them when they grow up will not know respect for their elder brothers." He stopped at saying only "knowing," because knowing something means being able to do it; thus, there is no need to say being able to love and respect. The original essence is united in the first place. It is because Confucians of later generations distinguished knowing and acting as two different things that the late Master Yangming had to

talk about their unity. Knowing does not mean understanding only, and acting does not mean practice only; one can only obtain verification through a single thought. (J. Wang 1977, 7:8).

In addition to the earlier quotation, Mencius on other occasions also repeatedly emphasizes the essential connection between “knowing” and “being able to.” For instance, in a conversation between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi which is recorded in *Mencius* 1A.7, Mencius attempts to persuade the latter to become a true King by tending to the needs of his people, while King Xuan doubts whether he has the ability to do so. Mencius uses as an example the fact that when King Xuan saw an ox passing by the court which was to be offered as sacrifice to consecrate a bell, he replaced it with a sheep, because he was not able to bear seeing it trembling with fear, to illustrate that King Xuan does have the heart-mind of compassion and the ability to extend this heart-mind to people as well. As Mencius points out, “Your failure to become a true King is due to a refusal to act, not to an inability to act.” He further explains,

If you say to someone, “I am unable to do it,” when the task is one of striding over the North Sea with Mount Tai under your arm, then this is a genuine case of inability to act. But if you say, “I am unable to do it,” when the task is one of massaging (*zhezhi* 折枝) the limbs of your elders, then this is a case of refusal to act, not of inability. Therefore, your failure to be a true King is not something like striding over the North Sea with Mountain Tai under your arm, but something like massaging the limbs of your elders. (*Mencius* 1A.7, as translated in Lau 1984, 17).

According to Zhao Qi’s *Annotations to Mencius*, *zhezhi* 折枝 means “massage” (Zhao and Sun 1966, 1a:2b). Offering a massage is an easy task. As Mencius points out, King Xuan of Qi has the ability to extend his heart-mind of compassion to his people, just as he has the ability to massage the limbs of his elders; if he says that “he is unable to do it,” it is merely an excuse, and shows “his refusal to act.” This is quite like the idea expressed in *Analects* 7.30, “I want humanity and then humanity arrives,”⁵ which means that original knowing in itself contains the power of self-realization. In this sense, original knowing is original ability.

5 “我欲仁，斯仁至矣。”

Another example is the conversation between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi recorded in *Mencius* 1B.5 (as translated in Lau 1984, 33-7). Mencius mentions the kingly governance of King Wen of Zhou, and King Xuan praises and admires it very much. Mencius then takes the opportunity to persuade King Xuan, "If you consider my words well spoken, then why do you not put them into practice?" King Xuan makes an excuse, saying, "I have a weakness: I am fond of money." Mencius retorts with the case of Gongliu's 公劉 fondness of money, saying, "You may be fond of money, but so long as you share this fondness with the people, how can it interfere with your becoming a true King?" Then King Xuan finds another excuse, saying, "I have a weakness: I am fond of women." Mencius retorts with the example of King Tai's fondness of women, "You may be fond of women, but so long as you share this fondness with the people, how can it interfere with your becoming a true King?" In Mencius's view, as long as King Xuan extends and expands his heart-mind "shared with the people" (the universal, benevolent heart-mind), he will be able to enact kingly governance. Taking fondness of money and women as excuses is an instance of refusal to act, not inability to act.

One more example is the conversation between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi recorded in *Mencius* 1B.3 (as translated in Lau 1984, 27-31). King Xuan consults Mencius about the way to deal with neighboring states, and Mencius replies, "Only a benevolent man can submit to a state smaller than his own. . . . Only an intelligent man can submit to a state bigger than his own." King Xuan does not want to put this advice in practice, and makes an excuse, saying, "I have a weakness: I am fond of fighting." Then Mencius takes as an example King Wen's settling all people under Heaven in peace through his rage, and persuades King Xuan to emulate it. According to Mencius, as long as King Xuan is able to turn personal fighting into grand fighting and to put the world at peace, he then can carry out the Way. Taking fondness of fighting as an excuse is refusal to act, not inability to act.

Thus, as recorded in *Mencius* 2A.6, Mencius says, "No one is devoid of a heart-mind sensitive to the suffering of others. Such a sensitive heart-mind was possessed by the Former Kings and this manifested itself in compassionate government. With such a sensitive heart-mind

behind compassionate government, it is as easy to rule the Empire as rolling it in one's palm" (as translated in Lau 1984, 67). By saying "rolling it in one's palm," he means to describe the ease of ruling the Empire. In the same chapter, after talking about the four buddings of compassion, shame, yielding and deference, and discrimination between right and wrong, he states explicitly, "Man has these four buddings just as he has four limbs. For a man possessing these four buddings to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple himself; for him to deny the potentialities of his lord is for him to cripple his lord." These documents all illustrate that what Mencius dubbed "original knowing" and "original ability" are by no means two different things, as "original knowing" contains "original ability." Therefore, there is no doubt that Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" is rooted in Mencius.

With regard to its immediate background in intellectual history, Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" arose in response to Zhu Xi's theory of "knowing prior to acting." As the previous quotation of Wang Ji states, "It is because Confucians of later generations distinguished knowing and acting as two different things that the late Master Yangming had to talk about the unity (of knowing and acting)." Here "the Confucians of later generations" mainly refers to Zhu Xi. In his "Reply to Wu Huishu 吳晦叔", Zhu Xi wrote: "When talking about the principle of knowing and acting in general, when we look at it from the perspective of one affair, it cannot be doubted that knowing is prior and acting is posterior" (Zhu 1981, 5.42:16a-17a). In his "Reply to Cheng Zhengsi 程正思", Zhu wrote, "With regard to the extension of knowing and putting it in practice, in terms of which is first and which later, the extension of knowing should indeed go first; in terms of which is weightier, acting should be weightier" (Zhu n.d., 6.50:27b). In the *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Classified Conversations of Master Zhu), Zhu stated, "Knowing and acting always need each other, just as one cannot walk with only eyes but no feet, and one cannot see with only feet but no eyes. In terms of which is first and which later, the extension of knowing should go first; in terms of which is weightier, acting is weightier" (Zhu 1986, 1:148). There are plenty of remarks like these made by him. But it is worth noting that Zhu Xi is not the only

person who proposed the notion of "knowing prior to acting." Needless to say, Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), who belongs to the same doctrinal system as Zhu Xi, also upheld the notion of "knowing prior to acting."⁶ Even Lu Jiuyuan and Hu Hong 胡宏 (1105-1161), who do not belong to the same doctrinal system as Zhu Xi, also made similar remarks. In fact, Hu Hong's disciples Wu Yi 吳翌 and Zhang Shi 張栻 (1133-1180) held also the notion of "knowing prior to acting," which was rooted in Hu Hong's theory that "one must know the essence of humanity before practicing it" (Hu 1986, 4:222). Although Zhu Xi upheld the notion of "knowing prior to acting," he did not agree with the theory of "knowing prior to acting" of Hu Hong's disciples, illustrating how this theory has different interpretations in different doctrinal systems.⁷ Lu Jiuyuan also espoused the theories of "elucidating first and practicing after" (Lu 1980, 160) and the "extension of knowing prior to putting it in practice" (Lu 1980, 421), which provoked questioning from Wang Yangming's followers (see Y. Wang 2011, 1:233-4).⁸ In contrast, it was Zhu Xi's disciple, Chen Chun 陳淳 (1159-1223), who regarded knowing and acting as one thing. As he remarks,

The extension of knowing and putting it in practice should be performed simultaneously; they are not two separate things—where the extension of knowing comes first and acting after. Instead, they are one united thing. If the acting is not effective, the acting itself is not to blame; it is because the one who knows is not genuine. Only when seeing goodness is truly like loving beautiful colors, and seeing badness truly is like hating bad odors, can one reach the pinnacle of knowing; and the effectiveness of acting lies right there. (Huang 1985-94b, 5:690)

From these intertwined stances we know that the true meaning of either the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" or the theory

⁶ Cheng Yi said, "In order to act, one must know first. . . . For instance, if someone wants to go to the capital, he must know which gate he should go out and which way he should take before he leaves. If he does not know this information, even if he has the intention to get there, how can he make it?" (see Cheng and Cheng 1981, 1:187).

⁷ For a detailed account and analysis regarding the debate over this issue between Zhu Xi and Hu Hong's disciples, see Mou 2003 (7:377-87).

⁸ For more information of Wang Yangming's criticism of Lu Jiuyuan on this issue, see Yang 1992 (182-7).

of “knowing prior to acting” cannot be determined literally; it can only be judged by the advocates’ particular doctrinal systems. Therefore, the meaning of Wang Yangming’s doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting” can only be construed through the fundamental difference between his philosophical system and Zhu Xi’s.

II. The Formal Implications of Wang Yangming’s Doctrine of the “Unity of Knowing and Acting”

Now let us start to discuss Wang Yangming’s doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting.” This theory can be found mainly in the dialogues between Wang Yangming and his disciple Xu Ai 徐愛 (1487-1517) as recorded in the first volume of the *Chuanxi lu* 傳習錄 (Instructions for Practical Living) and in the “Reply Letter to Gu Dongqiao 顧東橋” recorded in the second volume of the book. Because the material recorded in the first volume is relatively concentrated and complete, the entire text is provided below as a basis for discussion:

I (Xu Ai) did not understand the Teacher’s doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting and debated it back and forth with Huang Zongxian 黃宗賢 and Gu Weixian 顧惟賢 without coming to any conclusion. Therefore, I took the matter to the Teacher. The Teacher said, “Give an example and let me see.” I said, “For example, there are people who know that parents should be served with filial piety and elder brothers with respect but cannot put these things into practice. This shows that knowing and acting are clearly two different things.”

The Teacher said, “The knowing and acting you refer to are already separated by selfish desires and are no longer *knowing and acting in their original essence*. *There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know.* When sages and worthies taught people about knowing and acting, it was precisely because they wanted them to restore the original essence, and not simply to do this or that and be satisfied. Therefore, the *Great Learning* 大學 points to true knowing and acting for people to see, saying, they are ‘like loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors.’ Seeing beautiful colors appertains to knowing, while loving

beautiful colors appertains to acting. However, as soon as one sees that beautiful color, he has already loved it. It is not that he sees it first and then makes up his heart-mind to love it. Smelling a bad odor appertains to knowing, while hating a bad odor appertains to acting. However, as soon as one smells a bad odor, he has already hated it. It is not that he smells it first and then makes up his mind to hate it. A person with his nose stuffed up does not smell the bad odor even if he sees a malodorous object before him, and so he does not hate it. This amounts to not knowing bad odor. Suppose we say that someone knows filial piety and someone 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. 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 knowing and acting be separated? This is the original essence of knowing and acting, which have not been separated by selfish desires. In teaching people, the Sage insisted that only this can be called knowing. Otherwise, this is not yet knowing. How serious and practical business is this! What is the objective of desperately insisting on knowing and acting 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?"

I said, "In saying that knowing and acting are two different things, the ancients intended to have people distinguish and understand them, so that on the one hand they make an effort to know and, on the other, make an effort to act, and only then can the effort find any solution."

The Teacher said, "This is to lose sight of the basic purpose of the ancients. I have said that *knowing is the direction for acting and acting the effort of knowing*, and that *knowing is the beginning of acting and acting the completion of knowing*. If this is understood, then when only knowing is mentioned, acting is included, and when only acting is mentioned, knowing is included. The reason why the ancients talked about knowing and acting separately is that there are people in the world who are confused and act on impulse without any sense of deliberation or self-examination, and who thus only behave blindly and erroneously. Therefore, it is necessary to talk about knowing to them before their acting becomes correct. There are also those who

are intellectually vague and undisciplined and think in a vacuum. They are not at all willing to make the effort of concrete practice. They only pursue shadows and echoes, as it were. It is therefore necessary to talk about acting to them before their knowing becomes true. The ancient teachers could not help talking this way in order to restore balance and avoid any defect. If we understand this motive, then a single word (either knowing or acting) will do. But people today distinguish between knowing and acting and pursue them separately, believing that one must know before he can act. They will discuss and learn the business of knowing first, they say, and wait till they truly know before they put their knowledge into practice. Consequently, to the last day of life, they will never act and also will never know. This doctrine of knowing first and acting later is not a minor disease and it did not come about only yesterday. My present advocacy of the unity of knowing and acting is precisely the medicine for that disease. The doctrine is not my baseless imagination, for it is the original essence of knowing and acting that they are one. Now that we know this basic purpose, it will do no harm to talk about them separately, for they are only one. If the basic purpose is not understood, however, even if we say they are one, what is the use? It is just idle talk.”⁹ (Y. Wang 2011, 1:4-5, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 9-12. Emphases added.)

The quotation contains almost all the important points in Wang Yang-ming’s doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting”:

- (1) Knowing and acting in their original essence;
- (2) There have never been people who know but do not act; those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know;
- (3) Knowing is the direction for acting and acting the effort of knowing;
- (4) Knowing is the beginning of acting and acting the completion of knowing.

In his “Reply Letter to Gu Dongqiao,” Wang also remarks that “the extension of knowing necessarily consists in acting, and without acting

⁹ In this essay, I mainly adopt Wing-tsit Chan’s translation of Wang Yangming’s works, with minor modifications by myself. In *Chronicle of Wang Yangming’s Life*, the dialogue is dated 1512, the seventh year of the Zhengde reign period of Emperor Wuzong of the Ming dynasty (see Y. Wang 2011, 3:1362).

there can be no extension of knowing" (see Y. Wang 2011, 1:56, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 109)¹⁰, and that "true knowing is what constitutes acting, and unless it is acted on it cannot be called knowing" (see Y. Wang 2011, 1:47-48, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 93), which can be viewed as another expressive form of the second point. Additionally, in this letter, Wang Yangming also put forth another important point:

- (5) "Knowing in its genuine and earnest aspect is acting, and acting in its intelligent and discriminating aspect is knowing" (see Y. Wang 2011, 1:47, 1:232, 1:234, 3:1331, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 93).

We must put the five points together and consider them as a whole before completely grasping Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting."

First, we have to consider what the term "unity" (*heyi* 合一) in the "unity of knowing and acting" really means. Does it refer to conceptual "identity"? Judging by points 3 and 4, it obviously does not. Although Wang Yangming is opposed to "talking about knowing and acting as two different things" and "separating knowing and acting as two things to practice," he certainly does not mean that the concept "knowing" is identical to that of "acting"; otherwise, it would be difficult to understand points 3 and 4. According to point 3, there is a distinction between "knowing" and "acting" in terms of the internal and the external. "Direction" (*zhuyi* 主意) refers to internal intention (意圖), whereas "effort" (*gongfu* 功夫) refers to external action. As such, from "knowing" to "acting," there is a process of actualization from internal to external. According to point 4, there is a distinction between "knowing" and "acting" in terms of first and after, because from "beginning" to "completion," it forms a temporal order. That is, there is a period of time between "knowing" and "acting." Notice that if his points are construed literally, Wang Yangming would seem to have no reason to oppose the notion of "knowing prior to acting." However, judging by his repeated opposition to the notion of "knowing prior to acting," there is obviously a deeper reason for his opposition. This is

¹⁰ These are Gu Dongqiao's words originally, but they are obviously accepted by Wang Yangming.

why he says, “Now that we know the basic purpose, it will do no harm to talk about them separately, for they are only one. If the basic purpose is not understood, however, even if we say they are one, what is the use? It is no more than idle talk.” Clearly, this is not a debate at the literal level. To understand the crux of the debate, we have to grasp what he really means by “knowing” and “acting.”

Judging by point 2, Wang Yangming has special definitions for the concepts of “knowing” and “acting,” which are different from the common understanding of these terms. This “knowing” is what he dubs “true knowing” in his “Reply Letter to Gu Dongqiao,” and also the “knowing” in the “extension of knowing.” It is based on these special meanings of “knowing” and “acting” that he proposes the theory of the “unity of knowing and acting.” But the definition in point 2 is merely a formal exposition: it only points to the essential connection between “knowing” and “acting,” but does not explain what these two things themselves truly are. Even point 5 does not clarify what “knowing” and “acting” truly are; instead, it merely points out that they are two sides of the same coin and that “genuine and earnest” and “intelligent and discriminating” are respective descriptions of the two sides. Through these formal expositions, at least we can know that Wang Yangming affirms the essential connection between “knowing” and “acting,” just like the connection between “knowing” and “ability” in Mencius’s theory of original knowing.

In modern Western ethics, there is a saying, “Ought implies can,” which can be traced back to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). This I believe is the basic premise for all meaningful concepts of “moral responsibility,” because all moral requirements cannot go beyond the moral agent’s ability (such as “striding over North Sea with Mount Tai under one’s arm”); otherwise, they are unreasonable requirements. We cannot require a moral agent to take moral responsibility for such a task because of his inability to meet this sort of requirement; “responsibility” and “ability” must match each other in morality. In this sense, the affirmation of the essential connection between “knowing” and “acting” in morality can only be said to meet the basic ethical premise of “Ought implies can.” Wang Yangming says, “There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not

act simply do not yet know." As a matter of fact, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi both make similar remarks. For instance, Cheng Yi says, "If knowing is deep, certainly there will be acting; there is no person who knows but is unable to act. If someone claims to know but is unable to act, it is because his knowing is too shallow" (Cheng and Cheng 1981, 164). Zhu Xi also says, "I believe the reason some people claim to know but are unable to act is that they do not obtain the knowledge by themselves. How is it possible that this is merely a problem of inability to apply the knowledge? For the so-called 'knowing' is not true knowing. There have never been people who truly know but are unable to act" (Zhu n.d., 9.72:35). Since Zhu and Cheng disagree with Wang, these passages illustrate that we cannot grasp the complete meaning of Wang Yangming's notion of the "unity of knowing and acting" and the reason for his opposition to the theory of "knowing prior to acting" merely through the aforementioned points 2-5.

III. Kant's Discussion of "Theory" and "Practice" in Morals

I shall now briefly turn to a related question in Western philosophy, that is, the question of "theory" and "practice," because the question of "theory" and "practice" contains that of "knowing" and "acting." In his dialogue with Wang Yangming, Xu Ai points to a common phenomenon, "there are people who know that parents should be served with filial piety and elder brothers with respect but cannot put these things into practice. This shows that knowing and acting are clearly two different things." This represents ordinary people's understanding of "knowing" and "acting." Similarly, ordinary people also think that "theory" and "practice" are two different things and that something might be reasonable in theory although it is not necessarily practical. Kant published a treatise, "On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice," which focuses on this question. Some arguments in this article deserve our attention.

Kant starts this treatise by defining the two terms "theory" (*Theorie*) and "practice" (*Praxis*). As he wrote,

A sum of rules, even of practical rules, is called *theory* if those rules are thought of as principles in a certain generality, and here abstraction is made from a multitude of conditions that yet have a necessary influence on their application. Conversely, not every operating is called *practice*, but only that effecting of an end which is thought of as the observance of certain principles of procedure represented in their generality. (Kant n.d.-c, 275, as translated in Kant 1996a, 279)¹¹

According to this definition, any unconscious, unprincipled, and aimless action does not pertain to “practice,” and “theory” can be abstracted from practical rules which are regarded as principles. In this sense, there is an interrelation between “theory” and “practice”—that is, practice must take theory as its guide whereas theory must be able to be applied in practice. As Kant further points out, we might find that in some areas, a theory is separate from its practice, but we have no reason to deny the significance of theory itself merely because of this. For this is only because the theory is incomplete and flawed—for instance, when a mechanic finds that certain principles of mechanics do not work in practice, he should not deny the principles of mechanics because of this; they just need to complement it with the theory of friction. When an artillery soldier finds the mathematical theory of ballistics ineffective in practice, he should not deny the set of theories because of this; they just need to complement them with the theory of the resistance of air to make theory and practice consistent (Kant n.d.-c, 275-6, as translated in Kant 1996a, 279-80). These kinds of situations are mainly seen in mathematics and the empirical sciences, because the subjects of these studies either can be presented in intuition or are provided by human experiences. In philosophy, however, some subjects are products of pure thought; they either cannot be applied in practice at all, or their application is even detrimental to themselves. Under such circumstances, the proposition that “this may be true in theory, but not apply in practice” is comparatively more accurate (Kant n.d.-c, 276, as translated in Kant 1996a, 280).

¹¹ The English translations of Kant’s “On the Common Saying” and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* belong to Mary J. Gregor, with minor modifications by myself.

At this point, Kant propounds a perspective that is highly significant for the discussion in the present essay. He writes,

But in a theory that is based on the *concept of duty*, concern about the empty ideality of this concept quite disappears. For it would not be a duty to aim at a certain effect of our will if this effect were not also possible in experience (whether it be thought of as completed or as always approaching completion); and it is theory of this kind only that is at issue in the present treatise (Kant n.d.-c, 276-7, as translated in Kant 1996a, 280).

It is made quite clear here that Kant insists on the consistency of theory and practice in practical philosophy. According to Kant, in mathematics, the empirical sciences, and even theoretical philosophy, theory and practice can be separated; but in practical philosophy, they cannot be. In other words, in practical philosophy, the proposition that "this may be true in theory, but not apply in practice" has no significance. In this treatise, Kant discusses the consistency of theory and practice on three levels: morals, the law of state, and international law. The discussion in the present research is limited to the level of morals, so here I elaborate only on Kant's arguments concerning it. On the level of morals, Kant mainly targets and refutes the ideas of the German "popular philosopher" Christian Garve (1742-1798).

A basic premise in Kant's ethics is the distinction between morality and happiness. Kant defines "morals" as "the introduction to a science that teaches, not how we are to become happy, but how we are to become worthy of happiness" (Kant n.d.-c, 278, as translated in Kant 1996a, 281). In other words, morality is "being worthy of happiness" but is not happiness itself. According to Kant, morality represents absolute "good" (values), and it cannot be reduced to any component contained in the concept of "happiness." Therefore, he opposes any form of "eudaemonism" such as utilitarianism, hedonism, etc. As a matter of fact, Kant's distinction between morality and happiness is in essence quite similar to the Confucian distinction between righteousness and profit (Lee 2017, 149-97). However, in emphasizing the distinction, Kant specifically declares:

. . . the human being is not thereby required to *renounce* his natural end, happiness, when it is a matter of complying with his duty; for that he cannot do, just as no finite rational being whatever can; instead, he must *abstract* altogether from this consideration when the command of duty arises; he must on no account make it the *condition* of his compliance with the law prescribed to him by reason; indeed he must, as far as is possible for him, strive to become aware that no *incentive* derived from it gets mixed, unnoticed, into the determination of duty . . . (Kant n.d.-c, 278-79, as translated in Kant 1996a, 281-82).

What Kant means is that a human as a finite being actually on no account can renounce happiness, because this is a requirement of his natural life. But this fact by no means negates the purity of moral duty—that is, what makes moral duty a duty lies precisely in its having no admixture of other incentives.

It is on this point that Garve challenges Kant, in his attempt to demonstrate the inconsistency of theory and practice in morals. Garve comments:

For my own part, I confess that I very well conceive this division of ideas in my *head*, but that I do not find this division of wishes and strivings in my *heart*, and that it is even inconceivable to me how anyone can become aware of having detached himself altogether from his desire for happiness and hence aware of having performed his duty quite unselfishly (Kant n.d.-c, 284, as translated in Kant 1996a, 286).

As far as the theme of the present essay is concerned, it can be said that what Garve proposes is an example of to “know but not be able to act.” In the face of Garve’s challenge, although Kant admits that “no one can become aware with certainty of *having performed* his duty quite unselfishly” (Kant n.d.-c, 284, as translated in Kant 1996a, 286), which is not the crux of the issue here, he goes on to say:

But that the human being *ought to perform* his duty quite unselfishly and that he *must* altogether separate his craving for happiness from the concept of duty, in order to have this concept be quite pure: of that he is aware with the utmost clarity or, should he believe that he is not,

it can be required of him that he be so, as far as he can; for the true worth of morality is to be found precisely in this purity, and he must therefore also be capable of it. Perhaps no one has ever performed quite unselfishly (without admixture of other incentives) the duty he cognizes and also reveres; perhaps no one will ever succeed in doing so, however hard he tries. But insofar as, in examining himself most carefully, he can perceive not only no such cooperating motive but instead self-denial with respect to many motives opposing the idea of duty, he can become aware of a maxim of striving for such purity; that he is capable of, and that is also sufficient for his observance of duty. On the other hand, to make it his maxim to foster the influence of such motives, on the pretext that human nature does not admit of such purity (though this, again, he cannot assert with certainty) is the death of all morality. (Kant n.d.-c, 284-85, as translated in Kant 1996a, 286-87)

This statement can be said to be Kant's interpretation of the proposition of "Ought implies can" from his ethical standpoint. He here makes a precise and subtle discrimination to elucidate the consistency of theory and practice in morals. As he points out, our awareness of duty by no means can ensure with certainty that we will perform our duty unselfishly. He makes this very clear in a statement in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*,

It is indeed sometimes the case that with the keenest self-examination we find nothing besides the moral ground of duty that could have been powerful enough to move us to this or that good action and to so great a sacrifice; but from this it cannot be inferred with certainty that no covert impulse of self-love, under the mere pretense of that idea, was not actually the real determining cause of the will; for we like to flatter ourselves by falsely attributing to ourselves a nobler motive, whereas in fact we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives, since, when moral worth is at issue, what counts is not actions, which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see. (Kant n.d.-a, 407, as translated in Kant 1996a, 61-2)

Moral effort is endless, and there is always a possibility of moral degradation or self-deception. There is a comment in “Dayu mo” 大禹謨 (Counsels of the Great Yu) in the *Shangshu* 尚書 (Classic of History): “The human mind is prone to error, and the moral mind is subtle.” Confucius once said to himself: “How dare I claim to be a sage or a benevolent man?” (*Analects* 7.34). The Ming Confucian Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515-1588) also commented, “The real Confucius would inevitably sigh with relief at the last moment in his life” (Luo 1977, 185). All these remarks convey roughly the same meaning. If we talk about the consistency of theory and practice based on these remarks, it is obviously incongruous with empirical facts. But it is in a different sense that Kant affirms the consistency of theory and practice in morals. That is, in our awareness of duty, the requirement to “perform our duty unselfishly” necessarily contains the belief that “we are able to fulfill this requirement;” as long as our moral awareness is real and earnest, then the belief will inevitably also be real. In this way, there is a motivation contained in our moral awareness, impelling us to perform our duties. This is what Kant expresses elsewhere in the same treatise, “. . . the human being is aware that he can do this because he ought to. . .”¹² In the moral realm, we will not form an awareness of “ought” toward those things beyond the reach of our ability (for instance “striding over the North Sea with Mount Tai under one’s arm”). Conversely, when we form an awareness of duty toward something (such as showing filial piety to our parents, respecting our elders, and so on), we must affirm with certainty that we are able to perform this duty. This sort of “certainty” is an intention, a motivation, which can turn “ought to be” into “is.” In Kant’s ethics, this motivation is freedom of will; as such, moral consciousness necessarily presupposes consciousness of freedom. This is precisely what Confucius means by saying that “I want to be humane and then humanity arrives.”

¹² This statement is the origin of the proposition “Ought implies can.” See Kant (n.d.-c, 287, as translated in Kant 1996a, 289).

IV. Interpreting Wang Yangming's Doctrine of the "Unity of Knowing and Acting" with Kant's Theory

Now we can turn back to the main theme of this essay to see whether Kant's arguments can help us to interpret Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting." First, we have to determine in what theoretical context the doctrine should be placed in order to be understood. One thing that we can be sure about at this point is that this is not a question of theory and practice in epistemology because, as just mentioned in the previous section, theory and practice are not necessarily consistent for knowledge in general.¹⁵ It is only in "the theory based on the concept of duty"—that is, in practical philosophy—that Kant affirms the consistency of theory and practice. Similarly, the "knowing" as in the "unity of knowing and acting" also must not refer to general "knowledge" but what the Song Confucians dubbed "knowledge of virtue." As far as Wang Yangming's learning is concerned, this kind of "knowledge" is rooted in "original knowing." Another dialogue between Wang Yangming and Xu Ai recorded in the *Instructions for Practical Living*, volume 1, says:

Knowing is the original essence of the heart-mind. The heart-mind is naturally able to know. When it perceives the parents, it naturally knows to be filial. When it perceives the elder brothers, it naturally knows to be respectful. And when it perceives a child falling into a well, it naturally knows the feeling of compassion. This is original knowing (*liangzhi*) and need not be sought outside. If what emanates from original knowing is not obstructed by selfish ideas, the result will be like the saying "if a man gives full development to his feeling of compassion, his humanity will be more than he can ever put into practice." However, the ordinary man is not free from the obstruction of selfish ideas. He therefore requires the effort of the extension of knowledge and the investigation of things in order to overcome selfish ideas and restore principle. Then the original knowing of the heart-

¹⁵ Tu Wei-ming also insists that "the unity (*ho-i*) of knowing and acting so conceived should not be interpreted as a general statement about the relationship between theory and praxis, although it certainly is pregnant with such implications" (see Tu 1979, 147).

mind will no longer be obstructed but will be able to penetrate and operate everywhere. One's knowledge will then be extended. With knowledge extended, one's will becomes sincere. (Y. Wang 2011, 1:7, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 15)

The “knowing” that Wang Yangming talks about in his doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting” is the “knowing” in “knowing is the original essence of heart-mind,” in the “extension of knowing,” and in “original knowing.” In the *Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming*, the entry dated “the twelfth lunar month of the seventh year in the Zhengde reign” reads, “I (Xu Ai) and the Teacher took the same boat back to Yue 越 City (today's Shaoxing 紹興, Zhejiang Province), and we discussed the gist of the *Great Learning* . . . which is now recorded in the opening chapter of the *Instructions for Practical Living*” (Y. Wang 2011, 3:1362). Judging by this account, Wang Yangming's remark must have been made at this time. He was 41 years old then and had not yet formally propounded the doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting”; obviously, he had already come up with the main idea of the doctrine.

Wang Yangming also defines “acting” in a particular way that is quite different from the general understanding of this term. In the doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting,” the meaning of “acting” is narrower than generally understood. As mentioned above, Kant excludes all blind actions which are not guided by principle from the concept of “practice.” Similarly, Wang Yangming also excludes from the concept of “acting” those blind actions which are separated from the intelligence of original knowing. As he says,

Acting in its intelligent and discriminating aspect is knowing, and knowing in its genuine and earnest aspect is acting. Acting without discrimination and intelligence is blind action; it is a case of “learning without thought is labor lost.” Therefore, we must talk about “knowing” . . . (Y. Wang 2011, 1:232)

Wang Yangming dubs activities separated from original knowing (such as those taken purely out of physiological instincts) “blind actions,” which do not pertain to the “acting” in the doctrine of the “unity of

knowing and acting." It thus can be concluded that, when Wang Yangming discusses the theme of the "unity of knowing and acting" with Xu Ai (see the quotation at the beginning of Section II), the examples he uses to illustrate the doctrine—such as loving beautiful colors, hating bad odors, awareness of pain, cold, hunger, etc.—are merely analogues.

On the other hand, however, the meaning with which Wang Yangming endows "acting" is broader than commonly understood. There is a comment by him recorded in volume 2 of *Instructions for Practical Living*:

I (Huang Zhi 黃直) asked about the unity of knowing and acting. The Teacher said, "You need to understand the basic purpose of my doctrine. In their learning, people of today separate knowing and acting into two different things. Therefore, when an intention is aroused, although it is evil, they do not stop it because it has not been transformed into action. I advocate the unity of knowing and acting precisely because I want people to understand that *when an intention is aroused, it is already action*. If there is anything evil when the intention is aroused, one must overcome the evil intention. One must go to the root and go to the bottom and not allow that evil intention to lie latent in his mind. This is the basic purpose of my doctrine." (Y. Wang 2011, 1:109-10, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 201)

According to the proposition that "when an intention is aroused it is already action," an intention as the intrinsic ground for moral (or immoral) behavior already pertains to "acting." In this sense, "acting" as in Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" is actually equivalent to the term "deed" (*Tat*) as construed in Kant's book *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In this book, to explain why people should be responsible for "the propensity to evil," which he dubs "the radical evil," Kant provides a special exposition of the term "deed" (*Tat*),

Nothing is, however, morally (i.e., imputably) evil but that which is our own *deed* (*Tat*). . . . Now, the term "deed" can in general apply just as well to the use of freedom through which the supreme maxim (either in favor of, or against, the law) is adopted in the volition (*Willkür*), as

to the use by which the actions themselves (materially considered, i.e., as regards the objects of the volition) are performed in accordance with that maxim. The propensity to evil is a deed in the first meaning (*peccatum originarium*), and at the same time the formal ground of every deed contrary to law according to the second meaning, that resists the law materially and is called vice (*peccatum derivativum*), and the first indebtedness remains even though the second may be repeatedly avoided (because of incentives that are not part of the law). The former is an intelligible deed, cognizable through reason alone apart from any temporal condition; the latter is sensible, empirical, given in time (*factum phaenomenon*). (Kant n.d.-b, 31, as translated in Kant 1996b, 78-9)¹⁴

It is made very clear here that “acting” is related to the use of freedom. That is to say, it has moral significance, in the sense that one is able to take moral responsibility for it. Moreover, “acting” refers to both “event as external appearance” and “inner choice of volition,” and the latter is understood to be the intrinsic ground for the former. Our volition might choose an evil maxim but not put it into action. Even under such circumstances, we are still considered to commit a moral vice, which absolutely should not be absolved on the ground that the evil maxim has not yet been realized as an event in the external world. The “action” as in “when an intention is aroused it is already action” is of the same kind as what Kant dubs “deed in the first meaning” and “propensity to evil.”¹⁵ This kind of “action” itself already has moral significance, in the sense that one is able to take moral responsibility for it. It is based on this understanding that Wang Yangming demands, “If there is anything evil when the intention is aroused, one must overcome the evil intention. One must go to the root and go to the bottom and not allow that evil intention to lie latent in his mind.”

¹⁴ The English translation of this excerpt belongs to Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, with minor modifications by myself.

¹⁵ I believe it is quite improper for Kant to regard this kind of “deed” as “an intelligible deed, cognizable through reason alone apart from temporal condition,” for either the choice of volition or the propensity to evil pertains to the phenomenal world, but not to the intelligible world. Kant’s saying thus contains a conceptual slipperiness. For a detailed discussion of this point, see Lee 1994 (131-7).

Such an understanding of "acting" by Wang Yangming is actually consistent with his overarching view of it. In his discussion with Xu Ai (quoted at the beginning of Section II), he borrows the phrase "like loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors" from the *Great Learning* to illustrate "true knowing and acting." As he says there,

Seeing beautiful colors appertains to knowing, while loving beautiful colors appertains to acting. However, as soon as one sees that beautiful color, he has already loved it. It is not that he sees it first and then makes up his mind to love it. Smelling a bad odor appertains to knowing, while hating a bad odor appertains to acting. However, as soon as one smells a bad odor, he has already hated it. It is not that he smells it first and then makes up his mind to hate it. (Y. Wang 2011, 1:4, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 10)

In the *Great Learning*, the metaphors of "loving beautiful colors" and "hating bad odors" are used to explain "sincere intention," so they are both intended to explain the function of "intention," which has already been regarded by Wang Yangming as "acting." As one can see, Wang consistently ascribes the activities of volition and intention to "acting." What is conveyed in the statement by Wang Ji as quoted in Section I of the present essay is exactly this idea. As he argues there, "Knowing does not mean understanding only, and acting does not mean practice only; one can only obtain verification through a single thought."

From the above discussion we can see that "acting" in Wang Yangming's doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" has two meanings: one refers to concrete moral activities such as serving parents, governing people, studying, performing judicial duties, etc., and the other refers to the initiation of volition or intention. The two meanings of "acting" also endow the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" with two layers of meaning, a fact which has often been overlooked by scholars. There is a remark by Wang Yangming recorded in volume 2 of *Instructions for Practical Living*: "Original knowing is nothing but the heart-mind of right and wrong, and the heart-mind of right and wrong is nothing but to love (the good) and to hate (the evil). To love (the good) and to hate (the evil) covers all senses of right

and wrong and the sense of right and wrong covers all affairs and their variations” (Y. Wang 2011, 1:126, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 228). Affirming that the heart-mind of right and wrong is to love (the good) and to hate (the evil) from the perspective of original knowing is the first layer of meaning of the doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting,” which is also its fundamental meaning. Original knowing is able to know right and wrong, and this kind of “knowing” is by no means “knowledge” in the general sense, which might be pure cognition without any intention of moral action. The “knowing” of original knowing is different: the “knowing” itself possesses the power to require the realization of its objective, which expresses itself as the heart-mind to love (the good) and to hate (the evil). The “love and hate” of this sort are by no means sensible “love and hate” of common understanding, but instead “loving the good and hating the evil.” Thus, “knowing right and wrong” and “loving the good and hating the evil” are actually one thing. To put it another way, original knowing is at the same time the “principle of judgement” and the “principle of execution.” It is in this sense that we can say that “knowing” is “acting” and that they are two sides of the same thing.

Second, as far as the relationship between the “knowing” of original knowing and moral activities such as serving parents, governing people, studying, performing judicial duties, etc., is concerned, these activities cannot be separated from the intelligent responses of original knowing, and original knowing in itself also contains the power to bring about these activities. In light of this, the relationship between knowing and acting is that of first and after or that of internal and external, and thus it is not reckless to say that “knowing is prior to acting” in this sense. This is the second layer of meaning of the doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting.” The “unity” here only refers to an essentially inseparable relationship.

When Kant says that “one realizes that because he ought to do this, he is able to do it,” he simultaneously grasps the two layers of meaning of the doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting.” But his system of ethics is unable to support his moral insights. For, in his system of ethics, “will” as the moral subject is the maker of moral laws, but it is merely practical reason, and in itself lacks the power to realize these

moral laws; the power to do so lies instead in moral feelings on the sensible level. Thus, within the dichotomous framework of feeling versus reason, "will" is only the "principle of judgement" of morality, but not at the same time also the "principle of execution," as in Mencius's original knowing. Consequently, Kant's affirmation of freedom of the will inevitably proves to be in vain.¹⁶

If we do not distinguish the two meanings of "acting" and the two layers of meaning of the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting," it is difficult to understand Wang Yangming's explanation of the "unity of knowing and acting." For instance, among the five aforementioned points related to the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting," how can we reconcile points 3 and 4 with the others? Some interpretive controversies come precisely from this problem. Chen Lai's interpretation of the statement that "when an intention is aroused it is already action" is a good example. Chen says:

As we know, in the ethics of Neo-Confucianism, moral cultivation is divided into two parts: doing good and eliminating evil. From this perspective, the idea that "when an intention arises, it is already action" plays a positive and active role in rectifying the situation that "when an intention arises although it is evil, they do not stop it because it has not been transformed into action." If this "arisen intention," however, is a good one, not a bad one, is it right to say that "when a good intention arises, it is already an action of doing good?" If good stops only in the volition of people but is not put into social behavior, is it not precisely what Wang Yangming criticizes—that is, "knowing but not acting?" Clearly, the saying that "when an intention arises it is already action" only displays one aspect of the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting; it can only apply to "eliminating evil" but not to "doing good." Obviously, Wang Yangming's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting cannot be summarized as the saying that "when an intention arises it is already action." (Chen 1991, 106-7)

As a matter of fact, Chen Lai's restriction of the proposition that "when an intention arises it is already action" only to the aspect of "eliminating

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the problematics in Kant's ethics, see Lee 2018 (107-27).

evil” is superfluous. According to this proposition, although Wang Yangming might affirm the idea that “when a good intention arises, it is already action (of doing good),” he here talks about “action” in terms of what Kant dubs “deed in the first meaning.” Chen Lai is concerned that this might make people erroneously assume that only having a good intention is sufficient, and there is no need to put it in action; as a result, it might be reduced to “knowing but not acting.” At this moment, however, we should not forget point 2 as mentioned in the Section II—that is, “There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know.” If a good intention indeed arises from original knowing, it will naturally contain the power to turn itself into real action, and not stop at the level of volition or intention. If a good intention is merely a subjective expectation, and does not possess the power to objectify itself into real action, then in Wang Yangming’s view, it could not arise purely from original knowing, but must be obstructed by selfish desires. As such, it is not true “acting”; accordingly, the supposed “knowing” is also not true “knowing.” This is why Wang Yangming remarks in his *Daxue wen* 大學問 (Inquiry on the Great Learning), “When a volition arises, the original knowing of my heart-mind already knows it to be good. Suppose I do not sincerely love it but instead turn away from it. I would then be regarding good as evil and obscuring my original knowing which knows the good” (Y. Wang 2011, 2:1070, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 278). In this way, it is clear that the “acting” in “knowing but not acting” refers not to the initiation of volition or intention but to concrete moral action. As long as the two meanings of the term “acting” are elucidated clearly, the proposition that “when an intention arises it is already action” will naturally apply also to the aspect of “doing good.”

V. The Logical Connection of the Three Doctrines of the "Heart-mind is Principle," the "Unity of Knowing and Acting," and the "Extension of Original Knowing"

The above discussion already shows clearly the theoretical connection between the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" and that of the "extension of original knowing." From this we can see that what Wang Yangming dubs "the original essence of knowing and acting" is actually the essence of original knowing and the essence of the heart-mind. In response to Xu Ai's questions, Wang Yangming says, "Sages and worthies taught people about knowing and acting, precisely because they wanted to restore the original essence." Here "the original essence" refers precisely to original knowing, whereas "restore the original essence" is what Mencius dubs "going after his lost heart-mind" (*Mencius* 6A.11), which implies the theme of the "extension of original knowing." In his "Reply Letter to Gu Dongqiao," Wang Yangming writes:

What I mean by the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge is to extend the original knowing of my heart-mind to each and every thing. The original knowing of my heart-mind is the same as the Principles of Heaven. When the Principles of Heaven in the original knowing of my heart-mind are extended to all things, all things will conform to their principles. To extend the original knowing of my heart-mind is the matter of the extension of knowledge, and for all things to conform to their principles is the matter of the investigation of things. In these the heart-mind and principles are combined into one (Y. Wang 2011, 1:51, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 99).

This is the most explicit explanation of the doctrine of the "extension of knowing" by Wang Yangming himself. Wang uses *zhi* 至 ("utmost, extreme") to interpret *zhi* 致 ("to extend"),¹⁷ and thus takes *zhi* 致 to mean "to extend to the utmost." In this way, the "extension of original knowing" is just to objectify the Principles of Heaven contained in

¹⁷ In his *Inquiry for the Great Learning*, Wang Yangming remarks, "致 is equivalent to 至" (see Wang 2011, 2:1070).

original knowing and to extend them to all things. On the surface, *zhi* 致 is to extend forward whereas *fu* 復 is to go backward, and as such they are exactly opposed. But in fact, the extension of original knowing is its self-realization, which requires breaking through the obstruction of selfish desires and making the power of original knowing manifest itself completely. By removing the obstruction of selfish desires, the essence of original knowing can be restored. Therefore, “extension” (*zhi* 致) and “restoration” (*fu* 復) actually pertain to the same effort.¹⁸

From the last sentence in this quotation, it is clear that the doctrine of the “extension of knowing” presupposes the doctrine of “heart-mind is principle.” So we can conclude that the doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting” must also presuppose the doctrine of the “heart-mind is principle.” As a matter of fact, in his “Reply Letter to Gu Dongqiao,” Wang Yangming makes this point very clearly. He says:

For the principles of things are not external to our heart-mind. If one seeks the principles of things outside his heart-mind, there will not be any to be found. And if one neglects the principles of things and only seeks his heart-mind, what sort of a thing would the heart-mind be? The original essence of the heart-mind is nature, and nature is identical with principle. Consequently, as there is the heart-mind of filial piety toward parents, there is the principle of filial piety. If there is no heart-mind of filial piety, there will be no principle of filial piety. As there is the heart-mind of loyalty toward the ruler, there is the principle of loyalty. If there is no heart-mind of loyalty, there will be no principle of loyalty. Are principles external to my heart-mind? Hui'an 晦庵 (Zhu Xi) said, “Man’s object of learning is simply heart-mind and principles. Although the heart-mind is the master of the body, . . . actually it controls all principles in the world. And although principles are distributed throughout myriads of things, . . . actually they are not outside one’s heart-mind.” These are but the

¹⁸ Mou Zongsan also says, “The term ‘致’ (‘extension’) also contains the meaning of ‘復’ (‘restoration’). But restoration must be accomplished in the process of extension. Restoration is to restore its original condition, and connotes ‘going back.’ Restoration through going back, however, must be embodied in the process of extending forward; it is to restore actively and dynamically, not to restore passively and statically” (see Mou 2003, 8:188-9).

two aspects of concentration and diversification but (the way Zhu Xi put it) has inevitably opened the way to the defect among scholars of regarding the heart-mind and principles as two separate things. This is the reason why later generations have the trouble of only seeking their original heart-minds and consequently neglecting the principles of things. This is precisely because they do not realize that the heart-mind is identical with principle. The idea that if one seeks the principles of things outside the heart-mind there will be points at which the heart-mind is closed to the outside world and cannot penetrate it is the same as Gao Zi's 告子 doctrine that righteousness is external. This is the reason why Mencius said that Gao Zi did not understand the righteousness. The heart-mind is one, that is all. In terms of its total commiseration, it is called humanity. In terms of its attainment of what is proper, it is called righteousness. And in terms of its orderliness, it is called principle. If one should not seek humanity or righteousness outside the heart-mind, should one make an exception and seek principles outside the heart-mind? Knowing and acting have been separated because people seek principles outside the heart-mind. The doctrine of the unity of *knowing and acting of the Confucian school means seeking principles in our heart-mind*. Why do you doubt it? (Y. Wang 2011, 1:48, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 94-5. Emphasis added.)

This statement not only points to the theoretical connection between the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" and the doctrine of the "heart-mind is principle," but also lays bare the major reason for Wang Yangming's opposition to Zhu Xi's doctrine of "knowing prior to acting." Simply put, Zhu Xi's doctrinal system is a tripartite one composed of heart-mind (*xin* 心), human nature (*xing* 性), and feelings (*qing* 情). Whereas heart-mind and feelings pertain to vital force (*qi* 氣), human nature is principle. In this system, heart-mind is not the maker of principles; rather, it merely has cognitive "comprehension" of principles. If the heart-mind is not able to recognize principle through "awareness" (*zhijue* 知覺), it will not be able to control feelings in accordance with principle and to make principle exhibit itself in reality. So, for Zhu Xi, the doctrine of "knowing prior to acting" has a certain theoretical inevitability. But because the heart-mind pertains to vital force, it is by no means able to go beyond what is decided

by one's natural endowment, and whether the heart-mind is able to recognize principle through "awareness" is also decided by the purity or defilement of one's natural endowment. Accordingly, whether the heart-mind recognizes principle becomes a matter of pure chance, not completely controlled by the heart-mind itself, and as a result, whether principle is exhibited also becomes a matter of chance. Logically, in Zhu Xi's doctrinal framework, the ethical principle of "ought implies can" will inevitably prove to be false.¹⁹ In the theoretical framework of the "heart-mind is principle," on the contrary, the principles of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and comprehension arise from original knowing, which is both "the principle of judgement" and "the principle of execution." It not only "knows right and wrong" but also "loves the good and hates the evil," and contains in itself the power to make humanity, righteousness, propriety, and comprehension manifest in reality. In this sense, original knowing is original ability. Thus it is clear that the two layers of the meaning of the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" can be fully grounded only in the doctrinal framework of the "heart-mind is principle."

From the above discussion we can see that although Wang Yangming's three doctrines of the "heart-mind is principle," the "unity of knowing and acting," and the "extension of knowing" were not propounded at the same time, they are connected seamlessly to each other and constitute a theoretically unified whole. Chen Lai, however, believes that when Wang Yangming put forth the doctrine of the "extension of original knowing" in his later years, he had already abandoned the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting." Chen argues that

In his thought of the extension of original knowing, there is no notion that original knowing (knowing) and the extension of original knowing (acting) complement and permeate each other anymore. In his doctrine of the extension of original knowing, at least logically, original knowing is prior to the extension of knowing. Viewed from this perspective, the

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of the ethical problematics in Zhu Xi's theory of heart-mind and human nature, see Lee 2018 (107-48) and Lee 1993 (551-80).

thought of the extension of original knowing in Wang Yangming's later years does not emphasize the notion that there is acting in knowing; that there is knowing in acting; that knowing is acting; or that acting is knowing anymore (Chen 1991, 112).

This assertion obviously does not fit the facts. In his "Reply Letter to Gu Dongqiao," which was written in his later years, Wang Yangming not only repeatedly mentions the doctrine of the "unity of knowing and acting" (as indicated, for example, by the remarks just quoted); he even explicitly points to the theoretical connection between the doctrine of the "extension of original knowing" and the "unity of knowing and acting." In explaining the purpose of the "unity of learning and acting," for example, he says,

Therefore, if we realize that no learning can be considered learning if it is not carried into action, we know that the investigation of the principles of things to the utmost cannot be so considered if it is not carried into action. If we realize that the investigation of the principles of things to the utmost cannot be so considered if it is not carried into action, we know that knowing and acting are a unity and advance simultaneously, and cannot be separated. For the principle of each and every thing is not external our heart-mind. To insist on investigating all the principles in the world to the utmost is to regard the original knowing of our heart-mind as inadequate and to feel that it is necessary to seek extensively throughout the world in order to supplement and enhance it. This amounts to dividing heart-mind and principle into two. Although in the task of study, inquiry, thinking, sifting, and earnest practice, those who learn through hard work and practice with effort and difficulty have to exert a hundred times as much effort as others, when the task is fully extended to the point of fully developing one's nature and knowing Heaven, it is no more than extending the original knowing of our heart-mind to the utmost. (Y. Wang 2011, 1:52, as translated in Y. Wang 1963, 101-2)

Here Wang Yangming not only affirms the logical connection between the doctrines of the "unity of knowing and acting" and the "extension of original knowing," he also points out the logical connection between

the doctrines of the “unity of knowing and acting” and “heart-mind is principle.” These facts directly contradict Chen Lai’s aforementioned claim.

However, Chen Lai also notices that “after proposing the doctrine of the extension of original knowing in his later years, Wang Yangming not only did not abandon the doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting, he also often emphasized that the extension of original knowing itself embodies the unity of knowing and acting” (Chen 1991, 182). Perhaps realizing the that his earlier and later remarks contradict each other, Chen further explains, “The notion of the unity of knowing and acting in the sense of the extension of original knowing is not completely consistent with the one Wang had talked about in response to Xu Ai’s questions in 1512” (Chen 1991, 182).

According to Chen’s explanation, the “unity of knowing and acting” that Wang Yangming talked about in his early years in response to Xu Ai’s questions is an ontological unity, which emphasizes “the original unity in essence of knowing and acting.” In his later years, however, after Wang Yangming propounded the doctrine of the “extension of original knowing” and distinguished between “original knowing” and the “extension of original knowing,” he began to emphasize “the unity in effort of knowing and acting.” That is, he affirms that logically knowing is prior to acting on the one hand, and advocates that “if you know a thing, you must put it in practice” on the other (Chen 1991, 182-3). If we keep in mind the previous discussion of the two layers of meaning of the “unity of knowing and acting” in Section IV, we can understand why Chen Lai’s distinction does not stand up to scrutiny. Moreover, logically, unity in effort must presuppose unity in essence. Is it really the case that in his discussions with Xu Ai about the unity of knowing and acting, Wang Yangming did not address the meaning of effort at all, but only engaged in empty talk of theory? Does this really accord with Wang Yangming’s original intention in proposing the doctrine of the “unity of knowing and acting”? A more reasonable explanation might be that when he incorporated the notion of the “unity of knowing and acting” into his doctrine of the “extension of original knowing” in his later years, Wang Yangming intended to deepen his previous ideas, not to alter or deviate from them. In sum, although

Wang Yangming's three doctrines of the "unity of knowing and acting," the "heart-mind is principle," and the "extension of original knowing" were not propounded at the same time, they contain and complement each other in theory.

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