Wang Yangming on 'Unquestioning Obedience' and Epistemic Superiority

1. Introduction

This paper argues against the view that, in Confucianism, roles of authority entail an attitude and act of unquestioning obedience. It is widely known that Confucianism endorses a form of role-ethics, where roughly, the self can be understood as a web of role-relations (Rosemont Jr. and Ames 2016).[i] Each of these role-relations come with specific obligations that relations *owe* to each other (Nuyen 2007). Common examples of role-relations include father-son, ruler-subject, brother-brother, teacher-disciple etc. These role-relations can be understood as either linear or horizontal with regard to their authority structure. Given that most role-relations tend to be linear in nature, that is, at least one party in the relationship possesses a higher relative authority to another, the notion of 'authority' plays a central role in understanding Chinese ethics.

That the Confucian notion of authority entails an attitude and act of unquestioning obedience is not an uncommon view. This notion has commonly been applied in various contexts. In the context of political ideologies, for instance, some have argued that Confucianism is incompatible with democracies precisely because they differ in terms of whether the attitude and act of 'questioning' an authority is endorsed, permitted, or recommended.[ii] Others have argued that Confucianism's principle of unquestioning obedience

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can be fused into conceptions of democracies which end up producing 'Asian-democracies'. For instance, Clark Neher writes, "Confucian respect for superiors often manifests itself as unquestioning, even obsequious, behavior toward those in authority" (Neher 2001, 168). Alternatively, in the context of family life, Lucian Pye explains that "absolute obedience and unquestioning deference shall be shown to one's elders and more particularly to one's father" (Pye 1988, 138).

Arguably, there is some motivation for this view in Confucian texts. For instance, the *Liji* (Book of Rites) instructs, "In serving his master, (a learner) should have nothing to do with openly reproving him or with concealing (his faults); should in every possible way wait upon and serve him, without being tied to definite rules; should serve him laboriously till his death, and mourn for him in heart for three years."[iii] This is later referenced by Wang Yangming, who phrases it thus: "neither oppose your teacher nor cover up your teacher's faults" (MW 2, 280).[iv] Consequently, the transmission of this doctrine across Chinese intellectual history makes it unsurprising that many view the act and attitude of unquestioning obedience as one that is endorsed by Confucianism.

This view of Confucianism may have gained further popularity because of the ways in which 'Confucianism' has sometimes appeared in culture and politics over the years. In many cultural applications of Confucianism, Confucianism has been strongly tied to (and used to justify) practices which promote actions (or policies), and attitudes of unquestioning obedience to social, cultural and political authorities.[v] In this regard, it is therefore worth distinguishing *Cultural Confucianism* from *Philosophical Confucianism.* The focus of this paper is strictly on *Philosophical Confucianism*.[vi]

In recent years, some philosophers have argued that there is little (if any) textual support for the view that Classical Confucianism endorses the act and attitude of unquestioning

obedience. Instead, they argue for an alternate view: that Classical Confucianism discourages the act and attitude of unquestioning obedience. In fact, they contend that Classical Confucianism holds that under certain conditions, the act and attitude of questioning one's authority is precisely what is needed and recommended. For instance, Tan Sor-hoon (2010) convincingly argues from passages such as Analects 2.9, 9.3 and 13.15 that "Master Kong not only did not advocate unquestioning obedience to those in authority, but actually considered it very dangerous for rulers to desire and enjoy unquestioning obedience" (Tan 2010, 143).[vii] Similarly, David Elstein has argued that "deference to the master is not a defining feature of the *Analects*, where Kongzi's students frequently question, correct, and disagree with their master, often with his acceptance and approval" (Elstein 2009, 144).

Another line of argument against the view that Confucianism endorses the act and attitude of unquestioning obedience comes from analyses of the relationship between authority and autonomy in Confucianism. Justin Tiwald, for instance, has argued that in order for one to be a moral expert (in some sense, a moral authority), one would need to possess *deliberative autonomy*. Put differently, an important aim of the Confucian project is to develop individuals who are able to make knowledgeable moral deliberations "without taking her judgments or conclusions on the authority of someone else" (Tiwald 2012, 289). Relatedly, Aaron Stalnaker has argued that under the Confucian picture, *true authority* is a "necessary condition" for individuals to develop autonomy (Stalnaker 2020, 37-38). Under this picture, Classical Confucianism does not endorse the view that disciples should give up their own autonomy when interacting with authority structures.

In this essay, I provide additional support for the view that under certain conditions, the act and attitude of questioning one's authority is precisely what is needed and recommended, from the Neo-Confucian thinker, Wang Yangming (1472-1529). In Sections 2 and 3, I discuss Wang's view on the fallibility of authoritative texts and of sages respectively, which has

immediate implications for how Wang thinks learners (and disciples) should treat sages (and teachers). In the language of contemporary epistemology, these sections are concerned with disagreement among non-peers. The conceptualisation of peerhood here extends beyond familiar contemporary concerns with epistemic peerhood and includes notions of social authority structures.

In Sections 4 and 5, I draw some implications from Wang's philosophy for contemporary discussions of disagreement and epistemic inferiority, peerhood and superiority. Roughly, the question of concern here is this: what is the appropriate behavior and attitude Sally should adopt when she finds out that either an epistemic superior or an epistemic peer disagrees with her?[viii] On standard conciliationist accounts, Sally has an obligation to reduce her credence in her current belief(s), and/or conciliate *towards* those who disagree with her.[ix,x] However, steadfast accounts tend to disagree, instead, they recommend that Sally should remain steadfast in her beliefs.

In this paper, I will argue that Wang's views (sketched out in Sections 2 and 3) have novel implications for debates on disagreement in contemporary epistemology. I will argue that, according to Wang, there are instances where epistemic inferiors are encouraged to remain steadfast in the face of disagreement, and epistemic superiors are encouraged to conciliate towards epistemic inferiors. If this is correct, it provides support from Wang for the existing analysis on Classical Confucian texts: that the notion that Confucianism endorses an attitude and act of unquestioning obedience, as one might say, 'falls short of the mark'.

2. Wang Yangming on the Fallibility of Textual Authorities

In the Confucian tradition, the sages (and ancient texts) are often viewed as authorities (arguably, social and epistemic). In a somewhat exaggerated form, Bilfinger noted that "The Chinese find agreeable a mode of demonstration which to our ears, at least, is not very usual:

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it consists in not substantiating their instructions by arguments but by examples from kings and emperors."[xi] Consequently, throughout the history of Confucian writing, it is normal (even expected) for scholars to appeal to writings from authoritative texts in order to provide force and justification to their own writings.

This is very much the case in Wang's context as well. For instance, in Wang's day, the imperial civil service examinations consisted in studying and memorizing the ancient texts. The idea here is that authoritative texts provide wisdom that can instruct us on how to understand the world and live our lives. Wang Yangming was familiar with this, having passed and written letters about the civil service examinations. In this section, I will argue that Wang's view of authority is one that can be properly described as having a deep respect that is tampered by a cautious and critical attitude.

Before proceeding with the argument, it is important to clarify what I mean by authoritative texts. First, authoritative texts in Wang's context include two kinds of texts. First, the ancient texts themselves, such as the four books, namely: Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean, the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. These texts make up the traditional Confucian corpus and played a central role not only in the Confucian intellectual tradition, but also within the civil service examinations. Second, authoritative texts include commentaries and interpretations of ancient texts which were often given significant authoritative weight. For instance, Zhu Xi's commentaries played an influential role and was often cited as the *correct* interpretation of ancient texts, and therefore, to be taken as authoritative for beliefs and actions.

It is important to consider the role of commentaries as authoritative texts due to Wang's sceptical views about understanding the original meaning of ancient texts. Wang's scepticism can be attributed to two reasons: the problem of multiple interpretations and the principle of experiential hermeneutics.

First, consider the problem of multiple interpretations. In his letter to Lu Yuan-Ching, Wang writes,

> For people do not know that the teaching of the sages was originally so, but, through transmission, has lost its pristine purity. The teachings of former scholars became daily so fragmentary, also because later scholars kept on copying from one another and thereby accumulated many errors. (WWKC 5:200, 67)

Wang appears to make a distinction between the original meaning of ancient texts and the teaching of scholars who modified and (mis)understood the texts. Wang is therefore sensitive to the idea that we might not be able to access the original meaning of the ancient texts because we may not have access to the original teachings of the sages.[xii] Further Wang acknowledges that the ancient texts are often used by those who criticise him: "their sayings come originally from the general theories of former scholars, and so they do have their proofs…" (WWKC 5:200, 67). Of course, Wang still thinks that his critics are wrong; but what is important here is Wang's sensitivity to the fact that the ancient texts can be interpreted in various ways, and used to prove different theories.[xiii]

In this way, while ancient texts carry authorial weight, it is insufficient to *cite* ancient texts to prove a point, as each citation comes with an interpretation (and citations may not reflect the original meaning and teaching). It is, as we might say, theory-laden. Thus, while commentaries might not carry the same authorial weight as an ancient text might, an ancient text is always understood *as interpretation*, and therefore, the authoritative weight of interpretations depend on whether the interpretations correctly make sense of the ancient texts.[xiv] In sum, the first challenge that Wang raises for understanding ancient texts is that later authors often mistakenly transmit and interpret these texts, often to their own advantage.

Due to this, Wang poses a sceptical challenge to the authoritative uses of ancient texts. Given that we cannot be certain about the meaning of the ancient texts, any attempt to argue simplistically that our belief ought to conform to the teachings of the ancient texts is surely too naïve. Indeed, that ancient texts may be *used* by different commentators to support conflicting conclusions suggests that we are not entitled to argue simplistically that our views are correct by mere appeal to an ancient text. On this challenge, the argument (such as that raised by Bilfinger) that we ought to believe *x* simply because an ancient text teaches *x* is too simplistic.

A second challenge to understanding the ancient texts can be found in what we may call Wang's principle of *experiential hermeneutics*. In a letter to Huang Tsung-Hsien, Wang provides a very interesting insight. Wang begins the letter by quoting two passages from the *Mencius* which discusses issues of unrequited love and failure. After quoting these passages, Wang explains, "Unless we have personally experienced such things, we would not be able to realise the perennial truth and the earnest meaning of these words" (WWKC 4:176, 28). Put differently, the meaning of the ancient texts can only be truly understood if one has experienced similar circumstances that the text describes.[xv] That is, we may read the *Mencius'* discussion of unrequited love and of failure; but until and unless we ourselves have experienced unrequited love and failure, we cannot be said to truly understand the discussion in the *Mencius*. On this challenge, the fallibility of our understanding doesn't lie with the ancient texts (or our copies of the ancient texts), but in our *interpretation* of the ancient texts. Put differently, Wang raises a concern that our lack of experience hinders us from having an accurate understanding of the meaning of the ancient texts.

Having clarified Wang's scepticism regarding understanding the meaning of the ancient texts, we are now in a better position to understand Wang's nuanced approach to understanding the authoritative weight of ancient texts (and authoritative texts). On my view, Wang often demonstrated respect for ancient texts, especially the *Mencius*.[xvi] One of Wang's disciples,

Qian Dehong, explains that, whenever a new student was accepted by Wang, Wang would introduce him to "sagely learning and acquaint him with its proper path" by teaching him based on the *Mean* and *Great Learning* (QGL Introduction, 241). In a letter to Huang Mien-Chih, Wang writes, "The reading and studying of the classics and of history certainly belong to the realm of learning, and ought not to be neglected" (WWKC 5:203, 87). Additionally, commenting on the first emperor's burning of books, Wang insists that "it was improper to burn the Six Classics" (IPL 11, 275). Further, throughout Wang's writing, he often either explicitly made references to authoritative figures he respected, such as Confucius or Mencius, or he would cite them approvingly. Take Wang's use of the *Mencius* for instance. In several instances, Wang would repeat the *Mencius'* thought experiment of the child in the well, using it to demonstrate that human beings possess compassion (e.g., IPL 8, 272).

However, Wang never treated these texts as infallible. As noted above, Wang acknowledged that the same ancient texts might produce conflicting interpretations, and may be used by different interpreters to support conflicting conclusions. Wang is willing to criticise the interpretations of ancient texts (or even the ancient texts themselves) where he finds that they are wrong. For instance, Wang writes to Wang Shih Tan,

> You have good reasons, therefore, for your doubts. But pay attention, that your doubt may not resemble the action of a man who abstains from food after an experience of choking. When a gentleman has a theory which differs from those of the ancients, he should not consider it as definitive, but should first investigate it thoroughly, until he really finds it inadequate, before he makes his decision. Thus will he be able to discuss the question clearly and analyse it properly… (WWKC 4:172, 12)

Additionally, throughout his letters and writings, Wang disagreed with many respected interpreters, some of whom wrote texts that carried significant authorial weight in Wang's time. Most prominent among these is his disagreement with Zhu Xi, exemplified not only in his

letters, but in his *Questions on the* Great Learning. There are at least two reasons for Wang's scepticism about interpretations and commentaries.

In order to understand these two reasons, it is useful to outline Wang's view of *Liangzhi*.[xvii] Wang adopted and developed the term from *Mencius* 7A15. Wang uses the notion of *Liangzhi* to describe a faculty that is necessary for acquiring genuine knowledge. Importantly, it is a faculty that *everyone* possesses, regardless of whether they are virtuous or vicious. One's *Liangzhi* allows one to *know* whether an action or inclination is virtuous or vicious. This 'knowing' is, in a sense, intuitive and automatic.[xviii] However, one's *Liangzhi* can also be obscured by selfish desires. This is why, according to Wang, many people do not possess genuine knowledge and do not act virtuously, even though they possess *Liangzhi*. They possess *Liangzhi* and so possess the potential to know and act correctly, but because their *Liangzhi* is obscured by selfish desires, they neither possess genuine knowledge nor do they act virtuously. But even if it is obscured by selfish desires (as the sun may be obscured by the clouds), *Liangzhi* cannot be lost. Thus, even people who act viciously constantly have the potential to acquire genuine knowledge and practice virtuous action, if they are able to remove the selfish desires that obscures their *Liangzhi*.

For Wang, one implication of our possession of *Liangzhi* is that, on our own, we are able to acquire genuine knowledge. For this reason, Wang is often thought to be dismissive of other epistemic authorities. Instead of relying on authoritative texts and interpretations for genuine knowledge, we need only rely on our *Liangzhi*. Wang writes,

> Whenever a thought or idea arises, on its own, my [*Liangzhi*] knows. Is it good? Only my [*Liangzhi*] knows. Is it not good? Only my [*Liangzhi*] knows. It never has a need to rely on other people's opinions. (QGL 6, 248)

Due to this, Wang's attitude of questioning epistemic authorities and relying on one's *Liangzhi* is not merely incidental to his project – it is a key component of it. The way I truly know whether something is good or not good is to rely not merely on external epistemic authorities, but on my own *Liangzhi*. But Wang's view of *Liangzhi* not only provides us a reason to be confident about our own ability to acquire genuine knowledge, it also provides us reasons to be sceptical about relying on social or epistemic authorities. Wang provides at least two reasons for this.

First, many interpreters are driven by selfish ambition (which obscures their *Liangzhi*) and second, this leads them to complicate and obscure rather than simplify and clarify the ancient texts.[xix] Wang diagnoses the influx of commentaries and publications as due to many people, in his day, wanting to gain a reputation (something, he thinks, is motivated by selfish ambition). Consequently, Wang warns against publishing one's own theories and writing one's own commentaries (WWKC 5:203, 87). Of course, if this is the case, Wang would need to account for *his* commentary of the *Great Learning*. In this, he explains,

> I only did my explanation of the Old Text of the *Great Learning* because I had to do so, but even then I did not dare to say too much, fearing precisely that the weeds and ivy might obscure the tree and its branches. I amended my short foreword three times, and then sent the last copy to the engraver [1518]. Now I am sending you a copy of each, so that you will know that my earlier opinions should not be considered as definite theories. (WWKC 5:203, 87)

Wang concedes that his commentaries are not themselves to be taken as infallible. For Wang, the ultimate authority for knowledge does not lie outside the mind in such texts. Instead, for him, instead of turning outwards (or 'upwards' to textual authorities), we ought to turn inwards, to access our *Liangzhi*. In a famous poem, he writes,

> Everyone has within an unerring compass;
>
> The root and source of the myriad transformations lies in the mind.
>
> I laugh when I think that, earlier, I saw things the other way around;
>
> Following branches and leaves, I searched outside! (P, 181)

Consequently, Wang emphasizes the role of reflection when comparing interpretations and disagreements. When faced with disagreements, we ought to turn inward and reflect:

> We should rather reflect upon ourselves, to see whether what they say may be true, and whether there are yet things which they say, which we have not accepted. We ought to try hard to seek for the truth, and not always consider ourselves right and others wrong. On the other hand, if what they say is wrong, and we are right in our own convictions, we should the more put our principles into practice, and seek to be humble. (WWKC 5:200, 67)

Notice that Wang shifts the authority structure from an outward one – relying on texts – to an inward one – relying on the Patterning in one's mind, one's *Liangzhi*.

Additionally, consider Wang's advice when one doubts a theory advanced by the ancients, from his letter to Wang Shih Tan quoted above. If Wang thinks that we should have unquestioning obedience to the authorial weight of the ancients, we would expect him to advise Wang Shih Tan to give up his doubts in favor of the theories advanced by the ancients. Instead, Wang does not dismiss the doubts of the superior person. Instead, he advises the superior person to explore and investigate his doubts, until he is absolutely certain that he has legitimate grounds to cast doubt on the ancient doctrine, before disagreeing. Wang's aim is not to cultivate disciples who learn blindly or submit despite of their disagreements; instead, it is to teach his disciples to take seriously their doubts, even of authorities, and investigate them thoroughly. In fact, Wang leaves open the possibility that one may (legitimately) disagree with the ancients.

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After all, Wang's main project involves encouraging his disciples to investigate things through their *Liangzhi*, instead of accepting things merely on the basis of external authorities.

3. Wang Yangming on the Fallibility of Sages (and teachers)

Thus far, I have sketched Wang's views regarding an individual's obligation towards authoritative texts. Wang distinguishes between ancient texts and the interpretations of those texts. While the former bore immense authoritative (social and epistemic) weight, the latter also carried significant textual authority. However, Wang's scepticism regarding the interpretation of ancient texts and the reliability of those interpretations, in addition to his doctrine of *Liangzhi*, cast doubt on how authoritative such texts ought to be considered. In casting doubt on the *reliability* of these texts, Wang also casts doubt on their *authority*. It is worth remembering that these texts (the ancient texts and some commentaries) were *viewed* by many people in Wang's day (and many Confucian and Neo-Confucian scholars) as authoritative (in various senses, e.g., moral, epistemic, social). In casting doubt on their reliability and therefore their authority, Wang is essentially providing hermeneutical arguments in support of the view that we have good reason to challenge what many around him take to be a prominent source of authority. While Wang demonstrated a deep respect for the ancient texts and some interpretations of them, he emphasized the limited role that learning these texts has for one's development in knowledge.

Wang, however, goes further. He argues that the reason why authoritative texts are not infallible is because the authors themselves are fallible. Here, Wang does not only argue that the *interpreters* of ancient texts are fallible, he boldly argues that the *authors* of ancient texts, the sages themselves, are fallible. Wang explains that even "great worthies" commit mistakes. What makes them "great," however, is not that they have never made mistakes, but that they are willing and able to correct their mistakes and rectify themselves (MW 1, 279). In fact, Wang even lists sages such as Yao, Shun, King Tang and Kongzi as great worthies who were willing

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to admit their faults and therefore correct their faults (MW 4, 282). Unsurprisingly, even though he was a teacher, and wrote important commentaries, Wang concedes that he himself had shortcomings. In fact, he constantly encouraged his disciples to point out his faults, so that he might learn to correct himself (MW 2, 280). Wang calls this "encouraging goodness through reproof," that is, reproof (and one's willingness to admit and correct one's faults) invites rectification, which is part of the path of moral self-cultivation. The fallibility of the great worthies is important for Wang, since ultimately, moral cultivation does not require the following of external sources such as modelling oneself after the sages, but an inward turn to one's *Liangzhi*. If the great worthies were, in fact, infallible, one might theoretically cultivate one's virtue simply by modelling the sages instead of tapping on one's *Liangzhi*.

As a result of this, however, Wang challenges received notions of authority. According to Wang's teachings, the sages are not infallible; popular and authoritative interpretations of ancient texts are not infallible either, and Wang himself is not infallible. Wang also encourages disagreeing with interpretations that were wrong, and even urged his disciples to reproof their teacher. Consequently, obedience – either to important texts or one's teacher – *ought* never to be unquestioning. One ought to evaluate all things through one's *Liangzhi*. In fact, Wang's view that the sages are sages *precisely because* they are willing to admit and rectify their faults casts doubt on the notion of the infallible sage; and the consequent encouragement to his disciples to reprove him for his rectification challenges the notion that disciples ought only to be passive learners, and to submit even when they disagree. Due to this, Wang presents us a different picture of what a good disciple ought to be like: a good disciple is one who is willing to reproof his teacher when it is warranted, and to question the correctness of interpretations of ancient texts. Instead of encouraging the act and attitude of unquestioning obedience, Wang clearly promotes the opposite.

4. The Benefits of Disagreement with Superiors

Thus far, I have argued that Wang Yangming holds that, when one disagrees with an authority, one ought not blindly accept the view endorsed by that authority. This lends support to the view that philosophical Confucianism does not promote unquestioning obedience. It is important to note that the view that the questioning of authority is not only permitted but, in the correct context, encouraged, is not (co)incidental to Wang, but derivative from his philosophy. Crucially, the analysis above provides several interesting implications regarding notions of social, political and epistemic superiority.

In this section, I want to argue that, on Wang's views, disagreement with superiors is recommended.[xx] There are two upshots to this discussion. First, I demonstrate how my interpretation of Wang stands in conflict with more general attributions of 'Authoritarianism' in Confucianism (broadly). Second, it sets the stage for our discussion in the next section. That is, if disagreement is beneficial, how might we understand Wang's views on the obligations that epistemic superiors and inferiors have in the context of superior/inferior disagreement.

According to the common criticisms of Confucianism as being authoritarian and promoting unquestioning obedience, one might be tempted to think that a Confucian would view disagreement against one's superiors as something bad (not understanding one's 'role') and that inferiors should never disagree with superiors, but always conciliate *towards* them.

Further, one might be tempted to think that for the Confucian, a social superior just is an epistemic superior.[xxi] For instance, within the context of a father-son relationship, due to the social role-relations between father-son, the father is not only a social superior but also consequently an epistemic superior. That is, *precisely because* the father stands in position of social authority towards his son, it follows that his son *ought* to obey his father unquestioningly (I take 'epistemic' superiority broadly, to include both 'knowledge' and 'moral knowledge').

In fact, if the view that Confucianism endorses unquestioning obedience is correct, and if one should never question the view of, or disagree with, her social superior, then it would seem to follow that social authority grants epistemic authority.[xxii]

If this is the case, it may explain the discomfort that many feel with regards to this aspect of Confucianism. After all, one may be reasonably sceptical about the entailment relationship between a social superior (or peer) and an epistemic superior (or peer). Consider a simple case of a father and son who disagree on a particular view about the composition of the *Analects*, for instance. Let us further assume that, on standard accounts of epistemic superiority and peerhood, the son is superior – he is, for instance, a world renowned historian and interpreter of the *Analects*, while the father has never even read the *Analects*. If, following the disagreement, Confucianism recommends that the son ought to give up his beliefs simply because he is a social inferior, we might reasonably think that there is something wrong with this picture. However, I hope to have demonstrated that this is not the case on a Wang-ian account.

While it might seem obvious that, upon finding out that your *social* superior disagrees with you, you are not epistemically obligated to conciliate towards her, the case is less straightforward when it comes to *epistemic* superiors. How should I respond when I find out that an epistemic superior with regards to *x* disagrees with me?[xxiii] Contemporary epistemologists endorse several different views as appropriate responses to such disagreements. On one view (preemptive View), one ought always to conciliate towards one's epistemic superior. That is, in finding out that epistemic superior A disagrees with me with regards to x, I ought to adopt (or at least, conciliate towards) epistemic superior A's position with regards to x (e.g., Zagzebski 2013). [xxiv, xxv] On another view (modified preemptive View), in finding out that epistemic superior A disagrees with me with regards to x, *in some cases*, I am obligated to conciliate towards epistemic superior A's position, while in other cases, I am

not (e.g., Frances 2010, 2012).[xxvi] On yet another view (total evidence view), in finding out that epistemic superior A disagrees with me with regards to x, I ought to include this new piece of information in my total evidence supporting my view with regards to x (e.g., Lackey 2018).[xxvii] The authoritarian interpretation of Confucianism would lean towards accepting the preemptive View; however, given Wang's sceptical doubts regarding authorities sketched out above, the Wang-ian view would, at least *prima facie*, appear to favor either the modified preemptive view or the total evidence view.

Wang affirms the benefits of disagreement with social (and epistemic) superiors. For instance, a disciple may be said to be both a social and epistemic inferior to her teacher. Nevertheless, when the disciple disagrees with her teacher, the disciple is *expected* to voice out her disagreement. Wang makes it clear, for instance, that epistemic and moral disagreements with one's superior is beneficial.[xxviii] Through his doctrine of "encouraging goodness through reproof," Wang makes it clear, for instance, that a disciple ought to correct her teacher. Such disagreement might be said to be practical moral disagreement and is beneficial for both the disciple and the teacher since it allows the teacher to cultivate (rectify) her own moral virtues. Additionally, as sketched out above, when Wang Shih Tan finds himself disagreeing with textual authorities, instead of recommending that his disciple defer his beliefs to the authorities, Wang instead advises his disciple to investigate his doubts, and if he finds that his disagreement is founded on legitimate grounds, then he is justified in disagreeing with the textual authorities. In this way, whether one disagrees with a social or epistemic authority, Wang never recommends that we ignore our doubts, or simplistically defer to the authority; instead, he consistently recommends that we express our disagreements. On this reading, disagreement with authorities is viewed as beneficial.

Given this, in the next section, I want to consider Wang's views concerning the obligations that epistemic superiors and inferiors have towards their beliefs, when they find that they disagree with each other.

5. Epistemic Inferiority, Peerhood and Superiority

Much contemporary literature on disagreement-obligations today focus on *peer* disagreement, rather than disagreements between epistemic superiors or inferiors. The underlying intuition here is that, if you're an epistemic superior, and you find that an epistemic inferior disagrees with you with regards to *x*, it seems clear that you don't have an obligation to revise your belief in *x*. For instance, perhaps you are a world renowned expert in some area in philosophy, and in this area, you think *p*; and you find out that your five year old daughter disagrees with you, she thinks *-p*. In this case, you seem to have little reason to reconsider or revise your belief – you're probably not mistaken (Frances 2010, 427). But assume you find out that other experts in said area of philosophy disagree with you – this seems to cause a larger problem for you, you may begin to worry that you might be wrong, or at least, less 'correct' than you initially thought. In cases of *peer* disagreement, one seems to have *more* obligations to reconsider or revise their beliefs than in cases of *superior* disagreement.

As Bryan Frances (2010) has argued, questions about cases of disagreement among epistemic superiors/inferiors are particularly important because they are of practical import. For many of the views that we hold, many of us would probably agree that there are epistemic superiors who disagree with us. Due to this, we have reason to think that this question is a highly relevant one, at least, for those who are concerned about being epistemically responsible.

In cases of epistemic superior/inferior disagreement, what *obligations* does each party have? Here's one proposal, which is often associated with the preemptive view: in such cases,

epistemic superiors ought to remain steadfast in their beliefs, while epistemic inferiors ought to conciliate towards (or defer to) the beliefs of their epistemic superiors. The case above of disagreement with your five year old daughter seems to support such intuitions.[xxix] However, here's another proposal, which is often associated with the total evidence view: in such cases, epistemic superiors ought to include this datum (that an epistemic inferior disagrees with them) in their assessment of their own beliefs; and epistemic inferiors similarly ought to include this datum (that an epistemic superior disagrees with them) in their assessments of their own beliefs.

Where does Wang stand in this debate? I will argue that Wang rejects the preemptive view in support of the total evidence view. Given the benefits of disagreement, our immediate response (regardless of our social or epistemic relative position, that is, regardless of whether we are a social or epistemic superior, peer or inferior) should be to take the disagreement seriously.[xxx] In cases of disagreement, Wang endorses at least three principles.

Principle of Inferior Potentiality: Epistemic inferiors have the potential to form true beliefs and make new discoveries.

Principle of Superior Fallibility: Epistemic superiors, even very intelligent ones, are fallible.

Principle of Superior Humility: A *junzi* will always seek self-improvement and so will welcome and take seriously disagreements.

The first principle is due to Wang's belief that one's interlocutor possesses the *potential* to be correct. This is because everyone possesses *Liangzhi*, and therefore, everyone has the potential to be correct, and to distinguish right from wrong.[xxxi] The second principle is due to his belief that even epistemic superiors (such as authoritative texts, sages and teachers) have the potential

to be wrong. In fact, Wang even presents an argument to convince his disciples of *their* fallibility: that they have changed their minds in the past (WWKC 5:200, 68)! Finally, for Wang, epistemic superiors *tend* also to be moral superiors – in the sense that they *care* about improvement and rectification, and are not obscured by pride or selfish ambition. Due to this, the third principle arises: because of the first two principles, an epistemic superior would *want* to revise or at least reconsider her beliefs in light of any disagreements. While this does not imply that we should ascribe to all our interlocutors equal weight, it does suggest that we should give *some* weight to our interlocutor regardless of whether we regard her as a peer or not. In this, Wang's view is much closer to the total evidence view.

A related and interesting question is how Wang views *recognised* epistemic superiority and peerhood. Due to Wang's theory of knowledge, one's possession of genuine knowledge is dependent on one's *Liangzhi* not being obscured by selfish desires or ambitions.[xxxii] In this way, if one suspects that her interlocutor is motivated by selfishness (their *Liangzhi* is obscured), one has reason to doubt that her interlocutor has access to genuine knowledge – and relatedly, would have reason to doubt (or not recognise) that one's interlocutor is an epistemic superior (or even peer). That Wang *applied* this view in cases of disagreement is evident – he sometimes employs the strategy of rejecting an opponent's view *on the basis that* they are motivated by selfishness (e.g., WWKC 6:213-214, 103-104). Due to Wang's epistemology, we should not simply dismiss such moves as *ad hominem*. The principle here is one of epistemic credibility: we have reason to doubt an interlocutor's epistemic credibility if they are motivated by selfishness.

Admittedly, this principle may, *prima facie*, appear rather unintuitive. Many experts are motivated by various reasons (which Wang may consider selfish), but why should their motivation to, for instance, excel in their field, give us reason to doubt their epistemic credentials or statuses? While I do not have space in this paper to provide a more developed

analysis of this principle, I want to at least raise the possibility that this principle is not, in all cases, implausible.

Consider the case of moral knowledge. Suppose you are (crudely) a strong moral internalist – you believe that moral commitments are sufficient for motivating action. Suppose you think that Peter is a world-leading expert and proponent of the view that honesty is, in all cases, a virtue. Suppose you also find out that Peter is a compulsive liar. Given your strong moral internalism, you may have reason to doubt that Peter is an expert on the view that honesty is, in all cases, a virtue. The idea here is that in some cases of moral expertise, we may have some reason for thinking that one's epistemic status as a moral expert is highly related to one's moral actions.[xxxiii] In such cases, one's epistemic superiority with regards to some moral knowledge may need to take into consideration one's moral behavior regarding said moral knowledge. Wang's principle here is not, I think, completely implausible.

6. Concluding Remarks

This essay aims to argue that on Wang Yangming's view, unquestioning obedience is not merely *not* required of social or epistemic 'inferiors', but that it is also generally discouraged. I have argued that the act and attitude of unquestioning obedience runs contrary to Wang's project. If correct, this not only supports the view that Philosophical Confucianism does not encourage unquestioning obedience, it also has important implications for the application of Wang's views to spheres such as politics, parenting, education and business. Because, at the heart of Wang's project is the idea that one ought to always improve, cultivate virtues, and rectify wrongdoings, it is therefore unsurprising that criticism and disagreements are promoted. This is further emphasized due to the view that those in higher social positions should strive towards humility and those in lower social positions are not necessarily moral or epistemic inferiors. The latter can be attributed to the optimistic view of human nature promoted by Wang, where, for instance, he thinks that all humans have the potential for *Liangzhi*.

This, I have hoped to demonstrate, allows us to formulate a novel account of disagreement and peerhood that, challenges some contemporary views regarding Epistemic Superiority. For instance, Wang's endorsement of principles of inferior potentiality, superior fallibility and superior humility challenges the preemptive view and supports the total evidence view. Finally, Wang's account suggests a relationship between one's moral behavior and one's epistemic status – a view that, I think, warrants further work.

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Notes

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[i] Unsurprisingly, scholars differ in their understanding of what exactly role-ethics consists in (e.g., whether it entails metaphysical commitments), the scope of role-ethics (e.g., does it extend to Heaven?), and whether there is a consistent role-ethical view endorsed by *Confucians* (for a helpful discussion, see (Ramsey 2016)). For purposes of this paper, I am proposing a minimal claim that, I think, is relatively uncontroversial: that Confucians view humans as standing in some *role-relation* to each other, and that each role-relation comes with some role-obligations.

[ii] See (Tan 2010) and (Shin 2011) for helpful discussions on the relationship between Confucianism and Democracies more broadly.

[iii] Tan Gong 1.2 (Legge 1885).

[iv] Throughout the paper, for Wang's letters, I will rely on Julia Ching's translation in (Ching 1972). I follow Ching by citing her reference to WWKC (Wang Wen-ch'eng kung ch'iian-shu, SPTK edition), followed by the page number in the translation by (Ching 1972). I will cite passages from the *Instructions for Practical Living* (hereafter, *IPL*) by the section number of Chan's editions (Chan 1963), followed by the page number in the translation by (Tiwald and Van Norden 2014). I will cite passages from *Questions on the* Great Learning (hereafter, *QGL*) by the section number of Ivanhoe's edition (Ivanhoe 2009), followed by the page number in the translation by (Tiwald and Van Norden 2014). I will cite passages from (Tiwald and Van Norden 2014)'s selection of *Miscellaneous Writings* (hereafter, *MW*) by the section number of Tiwald and Van Norden's edition (Tiwald and Van Norden 2014), followed by the page number in the same translation. I will cite passages from (Ivanhoe 2009)'s selection of *Poetry* (hereafter, *P*) by the page number in the same translation.

[v] For a helpful discussion, see (Møllgaard 2018).

[vi] More precisely, this paper focuses on the question of Wang Yangming's views on authorities, rather than how Confucians and Wang Yangming may have been *used* to justified authoritarian agendas.

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vii Relatedly, several philosophers have argued that there are specific conditions under which resentment against an authority can be said to justified (e.g. Ing 2016, Ing 2017, Sung 2020, Ooi 2021).

viii I will introduce the more technical aspects of the debate in Section 3.

ix Of course, many will argue that whether the party who disagrees with me is an epistemic *peer* or an epistemic *superior* has tremendous import on my obligation. I take up this question again in Section 3.

x It is also worth noting that there are stronger and weaker conciliationist accounts and steadfast accounts.

xi Bilfinger, cited in Harbsmeier (1998, 267).

xii It must be observed, however, that Wang often explained ancient texts, such as the *Mencius*, and concluded that 'this is what Mencius meant when he said…' Wang's positive programme (which I will explain later) provides an explanation for this: because we are able to *know* in the same way as the sages such as Mencius (due to our *Liangzhi*), we would presumably be able to understand their meaning. However, apart from *Liangzhi*, we will not be able to understand the ancient texts. Consequently, Wang's scepticism here is not a global scepticism against accessing the meaning of ancient texts, but a scepticism about our ability to know the meaning of ancient texts apart from *Liangzhi*.

xiii This sensitivity is expressed by one of his disciples, Zheng Zhaoshuo, who asked Wang, "Yesterday, when I thought about Zhu Xi's views concerning getting a handle on things from your teachings, I seemed to get the general idea. But Zhu Xi's views are supported by the line from the *Documents* about being 'refined and unified,' the line from the *Analects* about 'pursuing an expansive study of culture and restraining oneself with the rituals,' and the line from the *Mengzi* that says 'to fathom one's mind is to know one's nature'" (IPL 6, 269).

xiv The obvious question here is: how do we know which interpretation correctly makes sense of ancient texts? While it is not central to the argument of this paper to answer this, suffice it to argue that for Wang, one's *Liangzhi* (and thus, reflection) will be able to guide one towards the Pattern (which, presumably, the sages of the ancient texts understood).

xv Arguably, one may make a connection between certain interpretations of Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting with the principle here that experience is required for understanding. This depends very much on the interpretation of 'unity of knowing and acting' that one adopts (for a helpful discussion, see Lederman *forthcoming*). However, this connection is not necessary for my argument, and so I will not discuss this further here.

xvi At first glance, this claim may appear surprising: surely, compared to many other Confucian and Neo-Confucian thinkers, Wang does not appear to show the same kind of respect or reverence for ancient texts. However, this

should not amount to the conclusion that he is completely disrespectful or dismissive of ancient texts either. But, on my reading, his respect is more nuanced. For instance, there are some texts, such as the *Mencius*, that he appears to show more respect for. Additionally, while he may think of previous thinkers as 'passing shadows', he still thinks of them as 'sages' – after all, many of them possessed and have extended their *Liangzhi*. I therefore want to resist the conclusion that Wang had *no* respect at all for ancient texts.

xvii In the literature, there is significant disagreement on how to interpret and conceptualise *Liangzhi* (for helpful discussions, see (Ivanhoe 1990, Huang 2006, Chang 2016, Angle and Tiwald 2017, Lederman *forthcoming*). While I employ a specific reading of *Liangzhi* in this paper (in line with the generally received view), even if one disagrees with my characterisation of *Liangzhi*, much of the argument I develop in the rest of the paper may be cashed out on other conceptions of *Liangzhi* as well.

xviii Wang writes, "Once one is able to be at peace, then whenever a thought arises or an affair affects one, one's [*Liangzhi*] will spontaneously inquire and explore as to whether or not this is the ultimate good, and so, one will be able to 'ponder'" (QGL 4, 245-246).

xix Ivanhoe provides a helpful explanation of the role of simplification and complication in Wang's discussion of interpretations (Ivanhoe 1990).

xx In this paper, my focus is on Wang's presentation of disagreement about beliefs or practices (often in the context of, but not limited to, the student-teacher relationship), where the disagreeing party is sincerely concerned about her own (or her teacher's) moral and intellectual development. Wang does not think that blind or insincere disagreement is beneficial. While much of what is said here may be extended to other superior-inferior relationships, such a discussion exceeds the scope of this paper.

xxi For a helpful discussion on this issue in early Confucianism, see (Stalnaker 2020, 248-264).

xxii There is a sense, though, that this view is not as uncommon or implausible to some as might first appear. Consider how many parents tend to view themselves as epistemic superiors *because* they are social superiors (clearly, not all parents do; but many do).

xxiii I leave the exact conception of epistemic superiority vague for now, but shall return to it later on.

xxiv Thomas Kelly argues that "It is uncontroversial that there are some circumstances in which one should give considerable weight to the judgements of another party in deciding what to believe about a given question" (Kelly 2005, 173). According to Kelly, this occurs when one party has some form of epistemic advantage over another. Kelly lists two classes of advantage: superior familiarity with the evidence, and superior epistemic virtues. In these circumstances, he argues, "some measure of deference seems clearly appropriate" (Kelly 2005, 174).

xxv A similar kind of argument can be found in the literature on disagreements with experts. For instance, Michael Huemer argues that, assuming your goal is to attain true belief, accepting the conclusions of experts based on their authority is often a superior strategy (Huemer 2005).

xxvi Bryan Frances, for instance, argues that while conciliating towards recognised epistemic superiors may often appear intuitive, there are important cases where one is not required to conciliate towards a recognised epistemic superior, even when one finds out that the epistemic superior disagrees with her. Instead, Frances proposes the Disagreement Principle, which limits the instances where one ought to conciliate with one's epistemic superior: "I should withhold my belief (or at least significantly reduce my confidence level) upon learning of peers or superiors who disagree with me if and only if that discovery gives me evidence EX that is (a) significant for me, (b) new for me, and that (c) strongly suggests that either (1) I made an error in reasoning, (2) one of my starting points is faulty, or (3) there is some other evidence EY that (3a) I do not have or have not adequately appreciated, (3b) goes against P, and (3c) goes quite strongly against P" (Frances 2012, 17; see also Frances 2010). Maura Priest makes a similar observation in (Priest 2016, 276).

xxvii Recently, Sofia Ellinor Bokros has defended a weighted deference model: "one could take a weighted linear average of the credence in p one would adopt were one completely certain of A's superiority and the credence in *p* one would think to be correct in the event that A is not epistemically superior, i.e. one's own prior credence in *p*. In effect, this would amount to *partial epistemic* deference, where one's degree of deference is proportional to how probable one judges it to be that A is epistemically superior" (Bokros 2021, 12064).

xxviii In contemporary literature, there is debate about whether the benefits of disagreement are continuous across all domains of knowledge – relative to *subject fields* and *kinds of beliefs*. For instance, see (Vavova 2014, Lougheed 2018, Dormandy 2020).

xxix Maura Priest describes such an intuition: "If A claims p and find out that (1) B claims not-p and (2) B has less evidence, it seems that (2) nullifies the impact of (1). A can account for the disagreement via B's evidence paucity and remain steadfast in her belief. The case is similar with cognitive inferiors. Maybe A is an expert on the subject and B a novice, or perhaps B is just plain stupid. In either case, it seems A has little reason to alter her belief" (Priest 2016, 264).

xxx Wang writes, "We ought to try hard to seek for the truth, and not always consider ourselves right and others wrong" (WWKC 5:200, 67).

xxxi *Ibid*. See Li (2017) for a helpful discussion on Wang's endorsement of moral potentiality. Whether one prefers thinks that Wang endorses the view that "All the people on the street are *potentially* sages," or the view that "There

is a sage in everyone's chest," what is important to the argument above is Wang's view that *everyone* has the potential to be moral, and therefore, the potential to distinguish right from wrong.

[xxxii] See Lederman (forthcoming) for a helpful discussion on the conditions for genuine knowledge.

[xxxiii] While I do not have the space to extend this discussion here, it is worth considering whether this aspect of Wang's view is motivated by his doctrine of the 'unity' of knowledge and action. See Lederman (*forthcoming*) for a helpful discussion.