

# Analysis of the Relationship between Yangming's "Philosophy of the Mind" and Moral Education

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## ABSTRACT

According to the article, Moral education contains four main aspects, namely Moral Knowledge, Moral emotion, Moral consciousness and Moral behavior. Yangming psychology and Moral education have something in common. Overall, their corresponding relationship is as follows: Moral Knowledge is similar to Investigation of Things. Moral Emotion is similar to Mind is Principle, Moral Consciousness is similar to Extension of Innate Knowledge, Moral Behavior is similar to Knowledge as Action.

**Keywords:** Wang Yangming; heart study; moral education; relationship

## 1. INTRODUCTION

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is subject to the development and prosperity of Chinese culture." Wang Yangming's "Philosophy of the Mind," which emerged from his enlightenment in Longchang Town, Guizhou, represents a valuable legacy of excellent Chinese traditional culture. For at least eight times, General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of "knowledge as action" at important meetings. In his speech at the symposium for teachers and students at Peking University in 2018, he also highlighted that students must "unit knowledge and action, striving to become ideal, knowledge, and talented practitioners who can make a career in the new era."<sup>[1]</sup> However, research on the relationship between Wang Yangming's "Philosophy of the Mind" and moral education remains obviously insufficient in the academic circle.

## 2. THE CONCEPT AND DIMENSION OF MORAL EDUCATION

Moral education implies internalizing morality into personal character. As perceptions of morality vary among people, the content of moral education also differs in arrangements and preferences. Different views exist, ranging from behaviorism, intellectualism, and

emotionalism to volitionalism. This paper, in a combination of the perspectives of Socrates, Hume, Dewey, Huang Xiangyang, Gao Desheng, and other scholars and in line with the development trend of education, concludes moral education as four interrelated aspects, namely moral knowledge, moral emotion, moral consciousness, and moral behavior.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 3. ANALYSIS OF THE MORAL EDUCATION FACTOR IN WANG YANGMING'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE MIND

Wang Shouren, known as Yangming, was born in Yuyao City, Zhejiang, in the eighth year of Chenghua (1472) of Emperor Xianzong of the Ming Dynasty and died in the seventh year of Jiajing (1529) of Emperor Shizong of Ming Dynasty. Declaring himself Yangming, he was the most influential philosopher of the Ming Dynasty, and the main representative of the "Philosophy of the Mind" movement of the Ming Dynasty. His doctrine and thoughts were full of innovation and vitality. And his philosophy brimmed with courageous and vigorous energy instead of the stereotyped style of traditional philosophy, making it appealing and attractive. Wang Yangming drew on Mencius' theory of "Conscience" and Lu Jiuyuan's view of "Heart-mind Theory" to create the "Philosophy of the Mind" with his own characteristics. From the perspective of moral education, the ideas of Chen Lai, Feng Youlan, Suzuki

Teitaro Daisetz, and other experts studying Yangming are summarized to reach that Yangming's thoughts concentrate on four propositions, namely "investigation of things," "mind is the principle," "extension of innate knowledge," and "knowledge as action."

### **(1) Investigation of Things**

Unlike Lu Jiuyuan, who followed *Mencius* as the basis for his basic thought, the concepts and structure of Yangming's philosophy as a whole are more closely related to *The Great Learning*, which is one of the manifestations of Yangming's influence under Song thought and Zhu Xi. It is known in terms of methodology that Zhu Xi's philosophy attaches special importance to the so-called "investigation of things" and "acquisition of knowledge" in *The Great Learning*. Throughout four consecutive dynasties from Song and Yuan, the diversified interpretation of "investigation of things" and "acquisition of knowledge" by many Confucian scholars promoted the academic prosperity of that period, contributing to further development of the tradition of the classical interpretation of Confucianism. Growing up in such an academic atmosphere, Yangming was influenced by the basic concepts of *The Great Learning* both in the way and scope of his thinking.

In fact, the main topic that plagued Yangming's thinking in his early years was the question of "acquisition of knowledge" in *The Great Learning*. His *Interpretation of the Great Learning* and *The Questions of the Great Learning* not only fully express his own basic ideas, but also represent a new and important direction of interpretation of *The Great Learning* after Zhu Xi's *Chapter and Verse of the Great Learning* and *The Great Learning or Questions*, thus endowing the Philosophy of the Mind with a certain form of classical interpretation.

Specifically, Yang Ming emphasizes: "The reason why doubts came for my view of investigation of things is that people believe it's internal but not external... It must be considered hollow and dull, unable to cover all the changes in physical and human affairs. If this is the case, anyone who knows a little bit of exegesis and the concepts of the philosophers would understand that it is wrong, let alone a wise man like you. The investigation of things I have said includes all the nine points of Zhu Xi. However, mine has a core, whose role is different from Zhu Xi's. This is exactly the difference in a hair's breadth. But as one false step will make a great difference, it must be discerned."

It can thus be seen that Wang Yangming supported the learning of classical history and the study of rituals, and he even believed that the entire scope of Zhu Xi's philosophical theory of investigating things, such as reading, lecturing, adapting, and probing, was included in the scope of his theory of investigating things, and that the difference between his and Zhu Xi's theory did not lie in the distinction in scope. In other words, the peculiarity

of his theory is that he emphasized that these activities serve a clear purpose and that there is a specific commander, the "mind." These activities are recognized only as a means to achieve the purpose, whose meaning is not independent. While the mind stands for "absolute perfection." This was why he insisted that his theory of investigating things was "in need" with "different purposes," even if its scope was no different from Zhu Xi's.

From the standpoint of moral education in this research, Yangming's "investigation of things" can be understood as the study and analysis of moral knowledge led by the highest moral consciousness in one's mind. This idea mainly corresponds to the moral knowledge of moral education.

### **(2) Mind is Principle**

The relationship between "mind" and "principle" is one of the fundamental philosophical problems of the entire system of Neo-Confucianism. As far as the tradition of Philosophy of the Mind is concerned, the relationship between mind and principle symbolizes the core of the whole system. It is no exaggeration to say that "mind is the principle" or "no principle outside the mind" serves as the first principle of Yangming's ethics, embodying the ethical philosophy of the mind since Mencius.

As is well-known, Mencius believed that "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and intelligence are rooted in mind," where "mind" in Mencius represents the "original mind." The basic idea of Mencius' ethical philosophy is that moral principles originate from the original mind. Although the concept of the original mind had never been discussed by Mencius in detail, it is reasonable to assume that it refers to the "four initiators" or the mind of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and intelligence. In terms of "four initiators," the original mind implies the meaning of moral consciousness (moral emotion also included). While considering benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and intelligence as moral laws, the original mind equals principle, from which the moral laws form. That's the reason why the "mind is the principle" proposed by Lu Jiuyuan accords with the internal logic of Mencius. Be it "mind is principle" by Lu Jiuyuan or "no principle outside the mind" by Wang Yangming, the minds here were both derived from Mencius' concept of the original mind. Yangming sometimes even used "mind-body" and the "essence of the mind" to illustrate this concept. Such a concept, excluding sensibility, is obviously a concept related to rationality. And this rationality establishes itself as a concept close to what Kant called "pure practical rationality"<sup>[3]</sup> by focusing on the moral realm. In other words, the original mind resembles the concept of "moral subject" in Kant's ethics. "Mind" not that strict is also used to express the concept of "original mind" in the

Philosophy of the Mind. In this sense, such a moral subject should be clearly affirmed as the basis, and the entire Philosophy of the Mind is to convey the concept of the moral subject.<sup>[4]</sup>

From the perspective of moral education, our "mind" refers to the moral subject, corresponding to practical rationality, which itself emphasizes the responsibility of realizing absolute perfection. While "principle" represents moral laws, mainly discussing "certain principle" instead of "inevitable principle." The meaning of "mind is the principle" is that the moral subject strives to conform to the requirements of moral laws in subjective feelings. This idea mainly corresponds to the moral emotion of moral education.

### **(3) Extension of Innate Knowledge**

"The concept of acquiring knowledge originated from *The Great Learning*, and the concept of conscience from *Mencius*. At the time of its formation, Yangming's philosophy distinctly followed the tradition of Heart-mind Theory since Lu Jiuyuan in the Song Dynasty to form its basic ideological direction. And its structure started from the ideological materials and theoretical categories provided by *the Great Learning* from the very beginning.<sup>1</sup>" The "Acquisition of Conscience" proposed after Pinghao indicated that Yangming reached a form of combining the ideas of *Mencius* and *the Great Learning*. The "Acquisition of Conscience" stood for the final form of Yangming's philosophical development, exerting significant influence on the development of the whole philosophical trend in the middle and late Ming dynasty. With the introduction of "conscience,"<sup>5</sup> such a generalized proposition as "mind is the principle" could be replaced by "conscience is the principle of heaven." At this point, Yangming's opponents could hardly criticize this proposition head-on but could only supplement it, thus consolidating the position of Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind.<sup>[5]</sup>

Yangming once quoted Cheng Hao's words: "Although what I have learned is from others, the principle of heaven is a concept I comprehend by myself." Conscience is the principle of heaven, and those who recognize it are the ones boasting conscience themselves. (Volume VI, *With Ma Zixin, Complete Works*. p.118). In the Confucian tradition, the concept of the "principle of heaven" in the *Book of Music* exerted the most influence, referring to the rule of life as opposed to "love and desire." The understanding of Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao on the principle of heaven was more ontological, but the meaning of the principle of heaven as a moral law still remained the basic application of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty. Yangming took conscience as the criterion of right and wrong, based on which conscience existed as the principle and even the

principle of heaven. It was said by Yangming that "The right and wrong known by a

man is his original rule of heaven" (Volume II, *Instructions for Practical Living*, Volume III, *Completed Works*. p.81), and "the rule of heaven" means the principle of heaven, indicating that conscience is both a prior and universal moral law. The principle or rule of heaven, in other words, signifies "way." Therefore, Yangming also concluded that "Conscience is the Way" (*Letter for Lu Yuanjing*, Volume II, *Completed Works*. p.63). Yangming once said that "What heaven endows is nature, heaven means nature; what develops from nature is the way, nature means way; what cultivates the way is education, way means education... The way is conscience. Conscience is complete that both right and wrong remain unchanged. And conscience is still your teacher" (Volume II, *Instructions for Practical Living*, Volume III, *Completed Works*. p.78). According to these statements, conscience is the way of heaven, and conscience is the principle of heaven, both of which refer to the universal moral principles of human society, not to the universal laws of existence and movement of the universe.

However, on the other hand, since conscience is "knowledge," its operation or expression as a moral law is inseparable from "consciousness." And it was because conscience has the character of "knowledge," Yangming tended to emphasize that conscience is "the explicit spiritual awareness of the principle of heaven." He said that "As conscience is the explicit spiritual awareness of the principle of heaven, conscience equals the principle of heaven... There is no one who does not know right from wrong, good from evil, and conscience" (*Reply to Ouyang Chongyi*, Volume II, *Complete Works*. p.64). Regarding conscience as the explicit spiritual awareness of the principle of heaven doesn't mean that the principle of heaven can be perceived. On the other hand, if the conscience is only limited to perception, it is nothing but just the "spirit of the mind." The addition of a restriction before "the explicit spiritual awareness" indicates that this spiritual awareness does not refer to the perception of cognitive meaning but implies its own normative meaning, such as the intuition to be filial to one's father. Yangming often used the term "explicit awareness," for example, "Conscience only belongs to an explicit natural awareness of the principle of heaven" (*Reply to Nie Wenwei II*, Volume II, *Complete Works*. p.69), and "The explicit awareness of the heart is the natural conscience." (*Reply to Gu Dongqiao*, Volume II, *Complete Works*. p.55). The word "explicit" here is in its moral sense, indicating that conscience, as the consciousness motivated by the mind, distinguishes right from wrong. In *Reply to Luo Qinshun* and *Letter for Gu Dongqiao*, Yangming also underscores the concept of explicit awareness. It is clear that for Yangming that the principle of heaven represented a combination of conscience and

spiritual awareness, and that only when both functioned could it be called the true principle of heaven.<sup>[6]</sup>

From the standpoint of moral education, "acquisition of conscience" can be explained as the development of inner moral consciousness to the extent that it completely and thoroughly conforms to the universal moral laws of human society. This idea mainly corresponds to the moral consciousness of moral education.

**(4) Knowledge as Action**

In the third year of Zhengde, when Yangming was relegated to Longchang Town in Guizhou, he "lived in poverty and hardship" and "stimulated his spirit," and finally "found himself enlightened in the middle of the night."<sup>8</sup> Afterward, Yang Ming "experienced and explored throughout summer and winter," confirmed with the six scriptures and four books with his memory, and finally determined the falsehood of the investigation of things of Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, thus setting the tone of his life's learning.

When it came to the fourth year of Zhengde, Yangming lectured at Guiyang Academy in Guizhou. It was recorded in the *Chronicle* that "In this year, Yangming began to discuss knowledge as action. When asked about the differences and similarities between Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan by Xishu, Yangming told the student about his own realization instead of Zhu and Lu's studies, leaving Xishu suspicious. The next day when Xishu came back, Yangming cited the essence of knowledge and action and quoted the five scriptures and classical books to enlighten Xishu. Repeating like this for a few days, Xishu came to understand" (Volume XXXII, *Complete Works*. p.446). Hereby, Yangming began to use the authority of the classics to propagate the doctrine of knowledge as action since the time when he was in Guiyang. And the "essence of knowledge and action" that he explained to Xishu was one of the basic concepts that Yangming used to expound knowledge as action.

The fact faced by Yangming was that people refused to act in accordance with the prevailing moral laws and even acted against them. This phenomenon was, of course, common in the field of ethics. Yangming blamed this phenomenon on the misguided view of knowledge and action of Song Confucianism and thus criticized the disconnection between knowledge and action under the doctrine of knowledge as action, hoping to remedy the misconduct. In fact, for Song Confucianism, the action was a more important category, at least theoretically. But in Zhu Xi's philosophy, the importance of "knowledge" is indeed highlighted in general, emphasizing that the understanding of moral laws by rationality is the prerequisite for ethical practice. Concerning Yangming's philosophy, given the presupposition of the concept of conscience, the "knowledge" that guides ethical behavior is inherent to the mind. Therefore, more emphasis is placed on action. It can thus be seen that the solution of

the concept of knowledge and action in Yangming's philosophy is intrinsically and logically related to the psychological concept, so Yangming also said that with a separated mind, knowledge and action are divided; while with an integrated mind, knowledge, and action are unified. In this way, what is emphasized in the basic spirit of Yangming's view of knowledge and action is action rather than knowledge.<sup>[7]</sup>

From the perspective of moral education, "knowledge as action" can be interpreted as the unity of moral cognition and moral practice, with moral practice as the standard in more cases. This idea mainly corresponds to the moral behavior of moral education.<sup>[8]</sup>

**4. CONCLUSION**

The connotation of moral education is widely discussed in modern education. But on the whole, it mainly includes four interrelated aspects: moral knowledge, moral emotion, moral consciousness, and moral behavior. The moral education factors in Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind stand for four propositions, "investigation of things," "mind is the principle," "extension of innate knowledge," and "knowledge as action." Through analysis, it is found that moral education and the moral education factors of Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind can learn from and integrate with each other. Specifically speaking, moral knowledge and "investigation of things" share something in common; moral emotion has the same core meaning as "mind is the principle;" moral consciousness is highly similar to "extension of innate knowledge;" and moral behavior emphasizes the same essence as "knowledge as action." The corresponding list is as follows:

**Table1.** Relationship between Yangming's "Philosophy of the Mind" and Moral Education

Moral Knowledge	Investigation of Things
Moral Emotion	Mind is Principle
Moral Consciousness	Extension of Innate Knowledge
Moral Behavior	Knowledge as Action

It is suggested that teachers, in their future teaching work, can actively draw on the moral education factors of Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind and earnestly absorb the outstanding achievements of traditional culture, thus continuously promoting the high-quality development of education in China.

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