

The Discussion on the Division between Text and Tianli from the Perspective of Yangming Philosophy

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Abstract: In the history of Chinese philosophy, the interpretation and realization of Heavenly Principles (Tianli) have always served as both the lofty starting point and the ultimate goal. Interpreting texts and comprehending the wisdom of ancient sages became a primary task for many scholars. However, this very act of "seeking knowledge" was precisely the kind of "dichotomization" that Wang Yangming staunchly opposed. Within the context of Wang Yangming's philosophy, the relationship between "texts" and "principles" is clearly defined—whether principles are guided by texts or texts are interpreted through principles. Wang Yangming provided his own intellectual approach to this question.

1. Introduction

The purpose of "writing books" lies in the articulation of the author's ideas, simultaneously serving as a fundamental channel for transmitting human thought. As Wang Yangming expounded, "Later writings are merely imitations and copies of what the sages have drawn, with presumptuous analysis and additions to showcase one's skill—the further they go, the more they deviate from the truth." [1] In the process of transmission and interpretation, the meaning of texts inevitably encounters hermeneutic phenomena such as "distortion", "overinterpretation", and "semantic deviation". Wang Yangming sought to employ the "heart-mind-nature of human" to undertake the task of meaning attribution: only "meaning" confirmed through the original mind—encompassing both the composition and interpretation of texts—aligns with the "Heavenly Principles" (Tianli). This paper aims to, within the theoretical framework of Wang Yangming: First, by analyzing the relationship between the reading object (text) and the "divine principle", the meaning of the text can be clarified. Then, the relationship between the reader and the text is examined, and the limitations of the individual are analyzed. Next, this article, from the theoretical perspective of Wang Yangming, explores the importance of "innate nature" in reading and advocates that only through "innate nature" can the true value of the text be understood and developed. This study finally clearly indicates that Wang Yangming's viewpoints on texts or reading have greater significance.

2. The Relationship between Text and Tianli

The primary relationship between texts and principles lies in "conveying the Dao". Zhou Dunyi asserted, "Writing is that by which the Dao is conveyed." [2] Cao Rui elaborated on Zhou Dunyi's view: "'Writing' refers to written characters. 'Dao' refers to the principle. 'Convey' adopts the meaning of a vehicle. Writing conveys the Dao just as a vehicle carries goods." [2] Zhou Dunyi intended to express the interdependent relationship between writing and the Dao. Writing, like a cart carrying goods, bears the "Dao". Thus, the Dao resides within writing and manifests itself through it. Therefore, the extent to which a text "conveys the Dao" depends on the author's level of cultivation, spiritual attainment, and knowledge reserve. It is noteworthy that Zhu Xi argued that not all texts serve as vessels for the "Dao". For instance, travel writings lack the connotation of the Heavenly Principle. Zhu Xi believed that "when principle is refined, the writing will naturally be classical and substantial." [3] Elucidating the meaning of the text and words is an important task for the author. Although Wang Yangming's philosophical approach differed from Zhu Xi's, he also agreed that an excessive pursuit of rhetorical form would harm the representation of principle. The fundamental reason for "flourishing form and declining substance" lies in scholars showing off their talent. "Emphasizing fundamentals and upholding substance" and "returning to simplicity and authenticity" should be the purpose of studying texts. "Fundamentals", "substance", "simplicity", and "authenticity" all point to "principle" or the "Heavenly Principle". When Xu Ai asked Wang Yangming about the relationship between the "Spring and Autumn Annals" and the "Zuo Zhuan", and why few records exist from before the era of Yao and Shun, they stated: "When the sages composed the classics, it was solely to eliminate human desires and preserve the Heavenly Principle." [1] The classical texts thus carry the Dao that the ancient sages wished to express, serving the function of "conveying the Dao". Ideas such as "emphasizing fundamentals and upholding substance" and "returning to simplicity and authenticity" are all preserved within these texts, enabling later generations to learn them through reading.

The second dimension of the relationship between writing and Dao lies in "transmitting Dao". If the first dimension involves the objectification of the author and the subject, then the second dimension focuses on the functional role of the text itself. When readers interact with the text, the "Dao" contained within it will be understood and internalized by them. Ancient sages compiled the "Six Classics" to expound on the existence of moral principles. The "principles" contained in these texts were set by the ancient sages, but the interpretation of their meanings inevitably involves ambiguity and controversy. Wang Yangming thinks that the mind of man and the principles are an inseparable whole. When the sages record them in words, it is like depicting a portrait to capture the spirit—they merely provide the general outline of the form, so that people can explore the true essence based on this. As for the spirituality of life, the individual's temperament, speech, smile and behavior—these cannot be fully transmitted. From the ontological perspective of his school of mind philosophy (which holds that "the mind is fundamental"), Wang Yangming believed that the ancient sages could not fully clarify the ontological meaning of "Dao". Moreover, overly complex language may also hinder human understanding. Therefore, sages could only adopt a concise and clear writing style to ensure that literary techniques do not overshadow the essence of "Dao". Confucius proposed that he "transmitted rather than created, and trusted and loved the ancients." [4] Only by ensuring the clarity and purity of this source could later scholars be guided toward correct understanding when engaging with the texts.

This point is echoed in Wang Yangming's discussion with Xu Ai regarding Confucius's attitude. Wang Yangming interpreted Confucius's "trust and love for antiquity" and his editing of the classics (such as the "deletion" or compilation of documents) as actions born of necessity. He explained, "From Fu Xi's drawing of the hexagrams down to King Wen and the Duke of Zhou, during this

period, various interpretations of the 'Yi', such as the 'Lianshan' and 'Guicang', proliferated in great confusion—so much so that the Dao of the 'Yi' fell into disarray."^[1] Therefore, Wang Yangming told Xu Ai that if the Dao were universally understood by all under heaven, there would be "no need for transmission" of the Six Classics. Wang Yangming located this origin within the individual's own "original substance of the mind". He argued that scholars must first engage in the "work of illumination". The "principles" contained within books and the "principles" inherent in all things must be reflected by the subject's mind, which should be like a "clear mirror".

3. The limitation of the Subject's Interpretative Ability

From the perspective of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, the interpretation paths of the text can be divided into the Confucianist path led by Zhu Xi and the Neo-Confucianist path led by Wang Yangming. They respectively used "investigating things to acquire knowledge" and "intentional construction" to understand and interpret the text.

Zhu Xi believed that readers should conform to the meaning of the text, advocating a path of infinitely approaching the "absolute": the text is the subject, and in the process of reading, the reader moves closer to the "Dao" or "meaning". He states, "The words of the sages contain layer upon layer of meaning; one must delve deeply into them to see."^[5] Only through continuous and careful reading can one intimately grasp the meaning the sages intended to convey. Zhu Xi strove to recover the original intent of the sages. However, a drawback of this approach is that the original meaning, being neither fixed nor entirely transparent, remains perpetually deferred in the process of interpretation. While the original intent appears solid, stable, and substantial, it is, in fact, hidden within the text, fraught with ambiguity and deviation. Zhu Xi's proposition could lead to a deficiency in the reader's agency, causing them to become overly engrossed in scrutinizing the text in pursuit of an elusive original meaning.

In contrast, Wang Yangming's approach advocates that the text should serve as the manifestation of the subject's meaning, which stands in direct opposition to Zhu Xi's proposition. From Wang Yangming's perspective, the reader is the subject, and the meaning of the text must be comprehended through the subject's "innate knowledge" to grasp its true essence. It is worth noting that Wang Yangming's method of textual interpretation differs from both sophistic interpretations and those that solely pursue logical consistency. His philosophical principle insists that "learning must have a foundation; one must exert effort from this foundation and gradually 'advance step by step, filling the hollows'."^[1]

Wang Yangming broadly categorized people into two types: the ordinary person and the sage. He believed that ordinary people should not imitate the methods of the sages. For ordinary people to understand principle, they must "advance step by step, filling the hollows", and cannot "seek to exhaust all understanding at the initial stage". If one does not first clarify and cultivate the original mind, it is impossible to recognize the principle within the text. Failure to clarify the original mind would lead to problems like the one Lu Cheng encountered—"knowledge failing to grow". Wang Yangming believed that Zhu Xi's approach to textual interpretation risked leading later Confucians, who had not yet grasped the principle, to "blindly imitate the sages" like the proverbial "Dong Shi copying Xi Shi's frown", becoming mired in "lower learning" while neglecting "higher attainment".

People universally encounter various "limitations" when reading, and these limitations become obstacles to understanding the true meaning of the text. For ordinary people, they are essentially limited beings. Firstly, ordinary people are prone to being disturbed by their own desires. Wang Yangming believed that although the human mind is inherently endowed with internal knowledge and the principles of heaven are clear and bright, it is often obscured by "private desires". During the reading process, if one is driven by intense selfish desires, it will be impossible to clearly

understand the "divine principles" contained in the text. Secondly, ordinary people are often troubled by "fixed ideas". Compared with selfish desires, this more subtle and widespread obstacle is "fixed ideas" (also known as "habitual tendencies"). These refer to the rigid and dogmatic thinking patterns and knowledge systems that are formed during an individual's growth process through cultural influence and learning. When a person's mind is filled with ready-made knowledge and dogmas obtained from elsewhere, they will use their existing "fixed ideas" to adjust and even distort the text. This kind of reading actually entangles "ideas" with "words", not only failing to obtain true knowledge but also reinforcing existing biases and further blurring the original mind. This is the fundamental reason for "damaging meaning with words and damaging intention with meaning". Thirdly, ordinary readers are also bound by the text itself and lose their ability to reflect. Language and words, as a symbolic system, inherently have ambiguity and limitations.

The loss of reflectivity exacerbates the process of theoretical alienation. Consequently, Wang Yangming's philosophical theories, such as "nothing exists outside the mind" and "preserving the Heavenly Principle and eliminating human desires", have been criticized for undergoing such alienation, becoming political tools for suppressing women and enforcing monarchical authority. Li Zhi thus argued, "All take right and wrong according to Confucius as right and wrong, hence they have never truly had right and wrong." [6] Interpreting texts to pursue the value principles and true intellectual significance of Confucius and even the ancient sages is exceedingly difficult, rendering them unable to recognize their own existence and meaning. Individuals lacking reflectivity will inevitably tend toward rigid learning, regardless of the philosophical stance they adopt. Wang Yangming naturally foresaw this possibility, which is why he consistently emphasized the cultivation of the original mind and the training of critical and reflective reading. There is no distinction between internal and external pursuit in learning; it must proceed from the original mind. "The words 'right and wrong' represent a great standard, but their subtle application lies with the individual." [7] "Right and wrong" are inherent functions of innate knowledge and manifestations of the original mind's capacity for introspection and reflection.

4. "Interpretation of Text" and "Philosophical Position"

As a new Confucianism of the Ming Dynasty, the "newness" of Wang Yangming's School lay in its aim to reform the rigid intellectual tendencies of Zhu Xi's Learning, striving to overcome its inherent problems. Confucian scholars following Zhu Xi's approach began with the investigation of things and the study of texts to exhaust principle. However, what constitutes truth, or the criteria for judging truth and the extent to which it is grasped, proved difficult to ascertain. Consequently, scholars inevitably lingered in the stage of seeking knowledge first and acting later. "Later Confucians, however, only grasped the lower part of the sage's teaching. They fragmented and lost the true meaning, degenerating into memorization, literary composition, utilitarianism, and exegesis, ultimately failing to avoid becoming heterodox. These four types of people toil laboriously their whole lives, yet gain not the slightest benefit for their mind and heart." [1] Confucius, Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming all opposed focusing merely on the formal aspects of writing, which lacked substance. However, Wang Yangming did not entirely negate the value of "writing". In his Final Conclusions on Zhu Xi's Later Years, he stated, "The meaning of the text can then be explained to convey the correct idea, allowing one to relax and savor it." [7] Furthermore, regarding his own School of Mind standpoint, he said, "Although writing cannot be abolished, nurturing the fundamental origin and discerning the distinction between Heavenly Principle and human desires—this is a matter that must not be interrupted for a single moment in the daily movement and tranquility of life." [7] Only by maintaining a clear and unwavering stance of the School of Mind and preserving the original mind can one naturally avoid "chasing after things". In Wang

Yangming's philosophy, "the original heart" refers to an internal, a priori moral judgment and the intuitive ability to perceive truth. Applying this core idea to reading forms the most distinctive part of his view on reading: the crux of reading does not lie in exhaustively seeking external knowledge from the text, but in using one's own clarified "original mind" to activate, and illuminate the text.

Wang Yangming's philosophy establishes the "primordial mind" as the fundamental criterion for judgment. In the activity of reading, this translates into a cardinal principle: the primordial mind (or innate knowledge) serves as the supreme and ultimate standard for evaluating the content of a text. Be it the words of a sage or an ordinary individual, all must be weighed on the scale of one's own innate knowledge. Reading thus ceases to be a one-way process of reception and reverence; instead, it becomes an equal, trans-temporal dialogue between the reader, through their primordial mind, and the author of the text—even if that author is a sage. If the words of the text resonate with the reader's innate knowledge, they are joyfully accepted and cherished as treasures. If they conflict, the reader dares to harbor doubts and refuses to follow blindly. This approach to reading elevates the reader's subjectivity and dignity to an unprecedented level.

Secondly, the "primordial mind" serves as the foundation for individual understanding. According to Wang Yangming's logic, understanding is possible precisely because the "Heavenly Principle" conveyed by the text and the reader's inner "primordial mind" are fundamentally one and the same. "The mind is principle" means that the truths expounded by the sages in the classics are not externally imposed upon us but are inherently complete within our own minds. The process of reading is, in essence, a process of "awakening" and "verification". The words in the text act like a flint striking the spark of truth that already exists within the reader's primordial mind. This is an internal, experiential "true knowledge", rather than a superficial, rote "surface knowledge".

Finally, the "mind" is the source of individual creativity. Relying on the primordial mind in reading not only enables accurate comprehension of the text's original meaning but also allows for the creative development of the text's value. This is because "innate knowledge" is dynamic and creative. Wang Yangming's own academic journey is a perfect example of this. When he was young, he deeply studied Zhu Xi's works and failed in his attempt to discover the path of "the Dao" from the outside, because he found that this principle-based path of external exploration was not feasible. Later, in the hardships of Longchang, he abandoned all external dependencies—including the rigid interpretation of classics—and returned to his true self, eventually suddenly comprehending the meaning of "exploring things and expanding knowledge". This represents a creative transformation and a transcendence of Zhu Xi's teachings. His interpretation of classics was entirely based on inner understanding, and was an hermeneutics from the perspective of "Mind School". This reading method made the text serve itself, the current life and practice, thus restoring the spirit of the classics to vitality in the new historical context. If the key role of "the true self" is absent, reading will lose direction and become a simple accumulation of knowledge. Only by "returning to the inner self and seeking in the innermost part" and using inner wisdom to interpret the text can books and words become a path to truth.

5. Interpretation and Action

Wang Yangming dissolved the binary opposition between theory and practice, steadfastly directing the endpoint of hermeneutic activity toward lived practice. This represents the thorough application of his philosophy of the "unity of knowledge and action" within hermeneutics. As Chen Lai points out, "Yangming believed that 'learning' does not refer to aimless study; learning means preserving the Heavenly Principle. Thus, learning is merely one method of moral practice." [8] "Learning" itself is a human activity, and interpreting books and classics is likewise a human activity. the scholarly approach of Wang's School advocates acting within interpretation and

unifying interpretation through action, thereby achieving the integration of interpretation and behavior.

Wang Yangming believed: "When studying classics, the fundamental purpose is to expand our inherent knowledge and only select the content that is beneficial to our learning." [9] Huang Zongxi commented that "When Wang Yangming talked about 'expanding' things and affairs, the word 'expand' precisely means 'action', thereby filling the void of abstract inquiry principles." [10] Therefore, the relationship between interpretation and action unfolds in two dimensions. The first dimension refers to interpreting the text and studying the books themselves as human activities at this level. The second dimension involves applying one's inherent principles in the process of text interpretation-by interpreting the text using one's inherent knowledge. This process itself is also an action. The first dimension represents the unity at the level of daily actions, while the second dimension marks the unity at the philosophical level. The unity in daily actions is obtained through empirical reflection, while the unity in philosophical depth is a conclusion drawn from ontological and practical reflection.

Wang Yangming's philosophy opposes dichotomizing "knowledge" and "action", as well as "elementary learning" and "higher understanding", treating them as separate "two segments". In Wang Yangming's view, ontology and practical cultivation are continuous, just as interpretation and action are integrated. In other words, ontology is practical cultivation, for without practical effort, the original substance would become obscured and meaningless. Similarly, interpreting texts and studying books would be futile if divorced from clarifying the mind and extending innate knowledge. Even theoretically, Wang Yangming rejected any fixed sequence between them, asserting that there is no precedence. "'Text' in its subtle, imperceptible aspect is called 'principle'—they are one and the same." [1] Thus, Wang's philosophy establishes an integrated framework of "pattern-practice-principle" or "pattern-extension-mind", which is not a static structure but a dynamically ascending one.

6. Conclusion

In terms of textual function, texts carry methods of seeking principle that sages and earlier worthies sought to express. To comprehend the principles within the texts, one must proceed from the mind. From the perspective of the reader, on the one hand, the reader needs to interpret the text with an attitude of seeking truth; on the other hand, the reader also needs to reflect on their own existence and the self-awareness of human existence. Fundamentally, Wang Yangming regarded interpretation and action, as well as explicating classics and understanding principles, as inseparable from moral practice. He aimed to overcome the shortcomings of Zhu Xi's Learning and construct an "applied philosophy" centered on the unity of knowledge and action. However, as Lü Nan pointed out regarding his standpoints: "People's natural endowments vary in quality, their efforts differ in maturity, and their learning diverges in depth. Thus, they cannot be uniformly addressed with this approach." [11] Methods of learning should "teach according to individual aptitude". Wang Yangming's approach, which starts from the original mind, risks falling into pan-moralism.

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