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Jen as Unity in the Philosophy of Wang Yang-ming

MANUEL B. DY

Wang Yang-ming, whose real name is Wang Shou-jen, is considered to be the first Chinese philosopher to emphasize the unity of knowledge and action. A sixteenth century Neo-Confucian philosopher, born in 1472 and died in 1529, Wang Yang-ming dominated the intellectual and moral climate of China during his lifetime and for the next century and a half. His influence extended to the Yomeigaku school in Japan from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and to modern Chinese thinkers like Sun Yat-Sen (1866-1925), T'an Szu-t'ung (1865-1898), and Hsiung Shihli (1885-). Lately, contemporary thinkers have discovered a close affinity of his thought with existential phenomenology.

Wang Yang-ming's life itself offers a very interesting example of the unity of knowledge and action. A government official in the judiciary, scholar, military officer skilled in archery, a teacher who taught not a few disciples in the countryside, he served his country faithfully at a time of moral decay, economic crisis, political chaos and intermittent war with barbarians. Twice or thrice he was accused of treason, punished, exiled but recalled in order to lead the suppression of a barbarian attack in some remote province. Wang was no ivory tower philosopher but a self-cultivated scholar very much involved in the daily affairs of the day:

Wang Yang-ming's philosophy offers a very typical example of a characteristic of Chinese philosophy, creative conservatism. One thinker comments on another preceding him and comes up with his own philosophy. This is shown in his own concept of *Jen*.

THE UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

"Knowledge is the direction for action, and action the effort of knowledge."¹ "Knowledge is the beginning of action, and action, the completion of knowledge."² "Knowledge in its genuine and earnest aspect is action, and action in its intelligent and discriminating aspect is knowledge."³

In all the above sayings of Wang Yang-ming, the central idea is that knowledge and action are one; they are not different in nature from each other. Knowledge involves praxis, and praxis, knowledge. Knowledge is the purpose and beginning of praxis, while praxis is the effort and accomplishment of knowledge. Or, knowledge is a clear and distinct discernment of praxis, while praxis is a sincere and concrete attitude of knowledge. In any case, for Wang, man's innate knowledge of the good has to be extended to praxis, otherwise, it cannot be really called innate knowledge of the good; and man's action to be truly self-cultivating must be led by the innate knowledge of the good.⁴

"Action is the home in which thought dwells."⁵ But mind is the spirit of action. The unity of knowledge and action brings to the fore twin tendencies of Chinese humanistic thinking, namely: (a) that performance is the evidence or natural result of knowledge if knowledge is sincere; and (b) that actually only those who have experience, or who do, or who can act, or have power to act can truly claim to know.⁶ The two can by no means be separated; they interpenetrate.

The problem then as to which is primary, action or knowledge, seems irrelevant. The problem betrays a presupposition that knowledge and action are separated. If one truly knows, he

1. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions for Practical Living*, trans. and ed. by Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), sec. 5.

2. *Ibid.*, secs. 26, 5.

3. *Ibid.*, sec. 133.

4. Hiroyuki Iki, "Wang Yang-ming's Doctrine of Innate Knowledge of the Good," *Philosophy East and West*, XXI (1961), p. 32.

5. Hwa-yol Jung, "Jen: An Existential and Phenomenological Problem of Intersubjectivity," *Philosophy East and West*, XVI (1966), pp. 173-174.

6. David S. Nivison, "The Problem of 'Knowledge' and 'Action' in Chinese Thought Since Wang Yang-ming," in Arthur F. Wright, *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 141.

naturally acts when the circumstances dictate; and only when he acts does he truly know.

But now, this idea of the unity of knowledge and action is still an abstraction. It still has to be discovered in life itself. According to Wang, the unity of knowledge and action is embodied in the man of humanity, in jen (仁).

THE CONCEPT OF JEN

Jen is a difficult concept to translate. It has been translated as "benevolence," "love," "altruism," "kindness," "charity," "compassion," "magnanimity," "perfect virtue," "goodness," "humanity," "hominity," and "man-to-manness."⁷ Actually, the Chinese character of jen, 仁, is a composite of two Chinese characters, 人, meaning "man," and 二 (pronounced erh), meaning "two" or "many." Literally, then, it means two men, or something interpersonal. While before, *jen* was a particular virtue, the kindness of a ruler to his people, in the Confucian tradition it has come to designate the primary virtue, the virtue of all virtues, embracing all forms of goodness in man. Confucius once spoke of a thread that runs through all his teachings, namely, conscientiousness (*chung* 忠), the positive golden rule, and altruism (*shu* 恕), the negative golden rule.⁸ These two are synthesized in a single concept, *jen*.⁹ After Confucius, Mencius put *jen* and *i* (righteousness 義) together to attach equal importance to both nature and function. It is not that *jen* is internal and righteousness external; both form one root of moral life.¹⁰ *Jen* is the universal virtue that embraces all relations but righteousness is the particular virtue that makes distinctions in personal relationships. Throughout the ages, the concept *jen* evolved and developed to mean love, consciousness, impartiality and unity with the universe. But in general, *jen* is essentially social and active, dealing with what and how man to be truly man must do

7. Wing-tsit Chan, "The Evolution of the Confucian Concept Jen," *Philosophy East and West*, IV (1955), p. 295.

8. Confucius, *Analects*, 4:15.

9. Hwa-yol Jung, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-183.

10. *Mencius*, 3A:5.

or act. In the Confucian tradition, only the man who loves is truly man, and thus, *jen* is "humanity" or "the man of humanity."¹¹ In the words of the existentialist Karl Jaspers, *jen* is "humanity and morality in one."¹²

Wang quotes a passage from the *Doctrine of the Mean* which says, "Humanity and wisdom are the character of (human) nature, and they are the way in which the internal and external are united."¹³ As regards the text of the *Great Learning* which says, "the way to manifest the clear character consists in loving the people," he opposes Ch'eng I and Chu Hsi who changed the phrase "loving the people" (*ch'in-min* 親民) to "renovating the people" (*hsin-min* 新民).¹⁴

For Wang, the steps in *The Great Learning*, the extension of knowledge and the investigation of things, as well as the sincerity of the will and the rectification of the mind, bring out the unity of knowledge and action. But the various steps from the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge to the bringing of peace to the world (as found in the *Great Learning*) are nothing but manifesting the clear character. The clear character is for him the character of the innate mind.¹⁵ The mind, however, is also the Way (*tao* 道).¹⁶ The Way is also called by Wang "Heaven" (*t'ien* 天).¹⁷ The Way or Heaven must be searched for in one's own mind, and only then will the Way be found anywhere and anytime.¹⁸ The Way is also nature and destiny, complete in itself.¹⁹ As nature, it is something conferred on man by Heaven,

11. Wing-tsit Chan, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-319.

12. Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 59.

13. *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 25. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 174.

14. Cheng I and Chu Hsi were Wang's rivals who emphasized the investigation of things interpreted as the inductive and deductive study of principles inherent in everything. Their school as such is called the Rationalistic School or the Ch'eng-Chu School, Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 1, 201.

15. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 89.

16. *Ibid.*, sec. 66.

17. *Ibid.*, sec. 66.

18. *Ibid.*, sec. 66.

19. *Ibid.*, sec. 127.

and when man acts in accord with nature, he is following the Way. Innate knowledge is identical with the Way.²⁰ When man cultivates and learns the Way, his innate knowledge, he is educating himself. The cultivation of the Way, however, is done through *jen*.²¹

Thus, for Wang, manifesting the clear character which is manifesting the clear character of the innate mind (by extending one's knowledge and investigating things, making the will sincere and rectifying the mind) consists in loving the people, in *jen*.²²

Like a true Confucianist, Wang conceives of *jen* as a natural universal principle that grows from within. Like Mencius, Wang does not consider Mo Tzu's doctrine of universal love as one of *jen*. Mo Tzu propagated the doctrine of loving everyone equally. For Wang, this is contrary to the Principle of Nature. *Jen* is the principle of unceasing production and reproduction, of growth and regeneration in the universe.²³ But there is order or gradation in production and reproduction. Because there is order, there is a starting point. When there is a starting point, there is growth, and the growth is unceasing.²⁴

Take a tree, for instance. A tree begins by putting forth shoot, then root, then trunk, branches, leaves. If there is no sprout, there would be no trunk, branches and leaves. The tree can sprout because there is the root beneath.

Likewise, the love between the father and son and between elder and younger brothers is the starting point of the human mind's spirit of life. From here it is extended to the humanness of all people and love for all things.²⁵ Filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of the practice of *jen*.²⁶

Mo Tzu's doctrine obviously has no starting point. It makes no distinction in human relationships and regards one's own

20. *Ibid.*, sec. 164.

21. *Ibid.*, sec. 127. *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 20.

22. *Ibid.*, sec. 89.

23. *Ibid.*, secs. 93, 122.

24. *Ibid.*, sec. 93.

25. *Ibid.*, sec. 93.

26. *Ibid.*, secs. 190, 273.

father, son, brother as being the same as a stranger.²⁷ There is no order in human relationships.

Going back to the analogy of the tree, "if the tree is to grow, the many branches must be trimmed when it is young. Likewise, if *jen* is to become eminent, the love of external things must be eliminated when the student first begins to learn."²⁸ *Jen* demands that one does not run after exalted positions,²⁹ that one's mind be broad and impartial and identified with the Principle of Nature, wiping out selfish desires,³⁰ and that he share the good with others.³¹

A man of *jen* must involve himself with others. To discard human relations is to build up a mind of selfishness.³² *Jen* is the natural principle that is refined and clear without any selfish attachment. For Wang, the man who detaches himself from others is an unworthy man, a man without *jen*. *Jen* stresses the responsibility of man towards his fellowman. To be a man of humanity is to be self-effacing, to be a non-ego. The man of *jen* is naturally humble. And, "humility is the foundation of all virtues, while pride is the chief of all vices."³³

To be selfless is to be one with all things.³⁴ The man of humanity regards Heaven and Earth and all things as one body.³⁵

FORMING ONE BODY WITH ALL THINGS

Jen for Wang is not only a personal virtue to be realized by man but a metaphysical principle as well. It is a principle of regeneration,³⁶ the way in which the whole universe works because of the presence of the man of humanity. When the Way is

27. *Ibid.*, sec. 93.

28. *Ibid.*, sec. 115.

29. *Ibid.*, sec. 303.

30. *Ibid.*, sec. 76.

31. *Ibid.*, sec. 303.

32. *Ibid.*, sec. 94.

33. *Ibid.*, sec. 340.

34. *Ibid.*, sec. 285.

35. "Inquiry on the Great Learning," in Wing-tsit Chan's *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 659.

36. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 122.

cultivated through *jen*, the original substance of the mind is restored and equilibrium and harmony exist. When equilibrium and harmony exist in the mind of man, proper order prevails in the universe and all things attain their full growth and development — there comes about the full development of nature and the fulfillment of destiny.³⁷

Jen is manifesting one's clear character, and

To manifest the clear character is to bring about the substance of the state of forming one body with Heaven, Earth and the myriad things, whereas loving the people is to put into universal operation the function of the state of forming one body. Hence, manifesting the clear character consists in loving the people, and loving the people is the way to manifest the clear character.³⁸

So, the man of humanity forms one body with all things. But since there are principles in this union, there exists necessarily some relative importance in man's love for being. The man of humanity loves both animals and men but he tolerates butchering animals in order to feed men. And given the choice between parents and strangers and with only meager food in hand to survive, he prefers to save his parents first rather than a stranger.³⁹

Similarly, in the *Great Learning*, Wang finds a natural order in the exercise of *jen*. Righteousness is this order, and following this order is propriety. Understanding this order is wisdom. And following it from beginning to end is faithfulness.⁴⁰

In any case, the man of humanity regards all things as one body, as his body.⁴¹ It is as if "the whole universe is inside my room!"⁴²

But how is this possible? How can the human mind [of the man of *jen*] and things form one body when the bodies of men are different from each other and differ also from those of animals and plants?

According to Wang, this can be answered from the point of

37. *Ibid.*, sec. 127.

38. Wang Yang-ming, "Inquiry on the Great Learning," in Wing-tsit Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 660.

39. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 276.

40. *Ibid.*, sec. 276.

41. *Ibid.*, sec. 285.

42. Lu Ta-lin (1044–90), *K'o-chi Ming*, quoted by Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 285.

view of the "subtle incipient force of their mutual influence and response."⁴³ Because "man is the mind of Heaven and Earth"⁴⁴ and man becomes mind by the clear intelligence of his innate knowledge, the whole universe is filled with this clear intelligence. Men are separated only by their physical forms and bodies, but my clear intelligence is the master of heaven and earth and spiritual beings. If heaven is deprived of my clear intelligence, who is going to look into its height? If earth is deprived of my clear intelligence, who is going to look into its depth? If spiritual beings are deprived of my clear intelligence, who is going to distinguish their good and evil fortune or the calamities and blessings that they will bring? Separated from my clear intelligence, there will be no heaven, earth, spiritual beings, or myriad things, and separated from these, there will not be my clear intelligence. Thus, they are all permeated with one material force. How can they be separated?⁴⁵

It is clear from the passage above that Wang considers man the mind of the world. Without man there would be no world to speak of, and vice versa, man exists because there is a world to be mindful of. True, the world may have physically existed from great antiquity, but "why should it be that if my clear intelligence is gone, they will cease to exist?"⁴⁶ And Wang answers this question in a rhetorical manner, "Consider the dead man. His spirit has drifted away and dispersed. Where are his heaven and earth and myriad things?"⁴⁷

The man of *jen*, then, treats all things as if they were his own body. Concretely, this means that the suffering and bitterness of the great masses are the disease and pain of his own body. He shares with all men a universal sense of right and wrong, shares their likes and dislikes, regards other people as his own person. Like the ancient sage-emperors, he himself feels the good that others do and senses that he himself has fallen into evil when he sees others do evil. He regards other people's hunger and misery as his own; and when one person's condition is not so well adjusted, he feels as if he himself had pushed the other into a ditch. He does not do these things purposely to win the praise of others but because he has devoted his effort to extending his

43. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 337.

44. *Book of Rites*, "The Evolution of Rites," ch. 7.

45. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 337.

46. *Ibid.*, sec. 337.

47. *Ibid.*, sec. 337.

innate knowledge of the good.⁴⁸ For the man of *jen*, there is no distinction between self and other, or between self and things. Like the body of a person which does not distinguish the functions of the eyes, ears, limbs, the man of humanity regards all things as part of himself.⁴⁹

THE SUPERIOR MAN

The man of humanity merely extends his knowledge of the good and in doing so, he forms one body with all men and nature. In this sense, he also fits the description of the superior man in Wang's teachings.

In the countless changes in his dealings with others, the superior man acts if it is proper to act, stops if it is proper to stop, lives if it is proper to live and dies if it is proper to die. In all his considerations and adjustments he does nothing but extend his innate knowledge to the utmost . . .⁵⁰

By extending his innate knowledge to the utmost, the superior man has only himself to trust. He studies for his own sake⁵¹ and does not worry about being deceived by others or being criticized or praised by them. Neither will he deceive his own innate knowledge at any time.⁵² Since he knows the Principle of Nature and finds identification with it through *jen*, he does not have to know all the names and varieties of ceremonies and music. With his innate knowledge extended to the utmost, the superior man knows how to deduce all measures, regulations and details from it.⁵³ His learning does not concern itself with any specific skill but in recovering that which is common to man's original mind.⁵⁴

Of course, the superior man does not shy away from practical affairs and from discussions. "However, whenever he is engaged in practical affairs or discussion, he insists on the task of knowledge and action combined. The aim is precisely to extend the

48. *Ibid.*, sec. 179.

49. *Ibid.*, sec. 142.

50. *Ibid.*, sec. 170.

51. Confucius, *Analects*, 14:15.

52. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 171.

53. *Ibid.*, sec. 227.

54. *Ibid.*, sec. 142.

innate knowledge of his original mind. He is unlike those who devote themselves to merely talking and hearing as though that were knowledge, and divide knowledge and action into two separate things as though they really could be itemized and take place one after the other."⁵⁵

Lest we get the impression that Wang's "superior man" is an extraordinary man, it is essential to stress that for Wang, this ability to regard the world as one's own body, to extend one's innate knowledge of the good, is something natural to the human mind.⁵⁶ Wang's "superior man" is a common man who lives in the everyday world and not a superman.⁵⁷ But because he brings out his own humanity, truthful to his nature, he becomes in a way extraordinary in the ordinary. He is not one who consciously and deliberately strives for an unrealizable human ideal, for an "impossible dream" but, rather, one who spontaneously

55. *Ibid.*, sec. 140.

56. Although the innate knowledge of good is inherent in the human mind, whether that of the sage or of the stupid person, not all men, however, are sages or superior men. Sagehood is not quantitative but qualitative. But like the different pieces of gold that differ only in weight but are still gold, the cultivation of *jen* or the extension of innate knowledge admits of three different degrees: (1) The *sage* is one who can exert his mind to the utmost. He is gifted with this ability and has developed fully his nature. He is absolutely sincere and knows the transforming and nourishing process of heaven. He is like an adult who is able to run back and forth, for thousands of *li* (one third of a mile). The sage's mind is comparable to the sun in a clear sky. (2) The *worthy* can preserve his innate mind but he is not yet able to exert it to the utmost. He knows where the mandate of heaven is to be found but his mind is still separated from heaven, and so he needs additional effort. He has already the singleminded determination to do good, and this he knows through study. He is like a child being taught how to walk and stride in a vestibule. His mind is like the sun with the floating clouds. (3) The *student* is faced with the great difficulty of not realizing and not recovering his lost original mind. He has to learn through hard work and cannot afford to allow double-mindedness to disturb his task of personal cultivation. He is like an infant allowed to stand against the wall and learning to stand and take a step. His mind is like the sun on a dismal day.

All three are the same in that they can distinguish between black and white, between evil and good. This shows that the sunlight, the original mind, has not entirely disappeared. See secs. 99, 107, 134, 192, 289 of *Instructions*.

57. Wang Yang-ming, *Instructions*, sec. 142.

and naturally affirms the very structure of his own being. "The making of a great man is thus more than an event in history and a drama in society. It is fundamentally the act of a silent 'yes' to humanity."⁵⁸

58. Wei-ming Tu, "The Neo-Confucian Concept of Man," *Philosophy East and West*, XXI, 1 (January, 1971), p. 87.