

# Coming to Terms with Wang Yangming's Strong Ethical Nativism: On Wang's Claim That "Establishing Sincerity" (*Licheng* 立誠) Can Help Us Fully Grasp Everything that Matters Ethically

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## Abstract

In this paper, I take up one of Wang Yangming's most audacious philosophical claims, which is that an achievement that is entirely concerned with correcting one's own inner states, called "establishing sincerity" (*licheng* 立誠), can help one to fully grasp all ethically pertinent matters. I begin with a reconstruction of what Wang means by "establishing sincerity" and then turn to two sets of controversies regarding his audacious claim. The first has to do with how we should understand the proposal that establishing sincerity positions a person to fully grasp all ethically significant concerns, and to what extent it makes room for investigation of external facts. The second has to do with whether we can preserve Wang's core account of virtuous moral agency without his strong ethical nativism, according to which we achieve virtuous outcomes by relying primarily on well-formed inborn capacities rather than acquired knowledge. I consider some arguments and interpretations of Wang's thought that might allow us to bypass his "implausibly" nativist presuppositions, and conclude that they do not succeed. Even if we cannot accept his strong ethical nativism, however, there is a range of important ethical norms for which Wang's prescriptions are powerful and prudent.

**Keywords:** Wang Yangming, ethical nativism, sincerity (*cheng* 誠), moral failure

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## I. Introduction

Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) is one of East Asia’s most interesting and compelling moral thinkers and also one its most implausible. His recorded works are focused like no other philosopher’s on the actual craft of ethical self-improvement, shunning much of the digressive intellectual spectacle and showy system-building that have tempted moral philosophers everywhere. He seemed to be most concerned with the acquisition of a kind of robust virtue that can withstand enormous social and political pressure, and the example of his own life suggests that he actually instantiated much of the moral courage and intellectual independence that he esteemed. He is remembered above all for calling people to heed an internal, autonomous source of ethical knowledge evocatively described as *liangzhi* 良知 (“good knowledge” or “pure knowing”), a phrase now popularly understood as “conscience.” His influence on the historical trajectory of East Asian philosophy was profound, as Confucianism’s most daring and pluralistic period of speculation—the rich and exciting “Late Ming period”—saw an upswell of independent-minded thinkers that primarily took their inspiration from Wang, a philosophical movement that counted among its famous adherents philosophers who argued for greater education and equality for women and daring reforms to political institutions.<sup>1</sup>

But much of Wang’s considerable achievements in moral philosophy seems to have been built on a fiction about our own innate capacity for moral understanding and virtue. Much of the work of acquiring the virtues is described by Wang in terms of discovering, uncovering, and reliably accessing well formed (perhaps fully formed) inborn capacities of moral judgment and motivation, sources that he thought we should regard as basically infallible and ineradicable (Ivanhoe 2002, 49–51). In accounting for moral failure—explaining how or why people fail to do

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<sup>1</sup> For a notable institutional reformer who took inspiration from Wang, Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, see Huang (1993), Huang (2011), and Zhao (2022). For two philosophical descendants of Wang who argued for women’s education, Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 and Li Zhi 李贄, see Angle and Tiwald (2017, 172–79) and Tiwald and Van Norden (2014, 297–304). For discussion of the remarkable independence of thought witnessed in the Late Ming followers of Wang, see Lin (2005), Peng (2003), and Peng (2022).

what's ethically good or required—he often described it as a result of the interference of selfish or self-centered thoughts and desires, rather than as a failure to acquire ethical knowledge or understanding. Wang himself embraced the seemingly implausible implications of this view, suggesting that the primary work of ethical cultivation really did consist in fixing one's inner states and undermining the pernicious influence of selfishness or self-centeredness.

Let us use the phrase *strong ethical nativism* to refer to Wang's views about our innate capacities for virtue. This essay is my attempt to come to terms with Wang's ethical nativism, both by exploring how controversial or implausible the implications of his views really are, and also by asking whether there are more plausible, explicitly revisionary readings of Wang that might nevertheless preserve his most valuable insights. My focus will be on one of his starkest claims for the controversial picture of cultivation that he articulates and defends—namely, that an achievement entirely concerned with correcting one's own inner states, called “establishing sincerity” (*licheng* 立誠), can help one to fully grasp or fully fulfill (*jin* 盡) all ethically or morally significant concerns.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will present Wang's statement and a brief analysis of it, describe a weaker (and thus more plausible) reading of it defended by Chen Lai 陳來, and then explain why I think a stronger (and thus less plausible) reading is required to capture Wang's distinctive views about moral agency. I will then conclude with some speculation about ways that Wang's nativism could be revised and reframed so as to help us preserve something of his core and most valuable insights into the true sources of virtue and causes of moral failure. Understandably, many of Wang's admirers seek to downplay or bracket the parts of his ethical thought that strike them as incredible. I can think of no better tribute to a philosopher such as Wang than to face them squarely and figure out how, given a more realistic understanding of our innate capacities, we should proceed.

<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this essay, the terms “ethical” and “moral” are interchangeable, as are their grammatical variants.

## II. Wang on the Benefits of Establishing Sincerity

“Sincerity” is my translation of *cheng* 誠, an important term of art in post-classical Confucianism, the precise meaning of which is heavily disputed both by the later Confucian philosophers themselves and by scholars of Chinese philosophy in the present day (An 2005). For our immediate purposes, what matters most about sincerity is that it describes, at minimum, a psychological state or disposition that is necessary for complete or sagely virtue (Fuji 2011, 14-7). Someone who is sincere about caring for others will either be completely benevolent or be much closer to realizing complete benevolence than someone who is less-than-sincere about caring for others. Wang often describes less-than-sincere states in terms of internal psychological divisions. If one both cares and doesn’t care about others, or knows and yet denies that one should help a person in need, one is insincerely benevolent. For Wang, our innate goodness guarantees that whenever we do wrong, we will *know* (in some attenuated sense of “know”) that we have done wrong, and these promptings of conscience are ineradicable (see Wang’s “To My Younger Brothers” [*Ji zhu di* 寄諸弟] in Wang 1992, vol. 1, 172; Ivanhoe 2009, 120; and Lederman 2022, 181). We can be wholeheartedly and thus sincerely good but not wholeheartedly or sincerely bad. Like other major Confucians from the Neo-Confucian era, Wang often understood less-than-sincere states in terms of self-deception (Chen 2006, 118-21; Lederman 2022, 196-203; Lederman 2023, 162-71; Zheng 2020, 37-50). To establish sincerity is thus, for Wang, to be sincerely and wholeheartedly good, without deceiving oneself about the thoughts, feelings, and inclinations that arise when one does wrong.

According to Wang, “establishing sincerity” (*licheng* 立誠) is the principal work of ethical self-improvement. Furthermore, by his own lights, it is not the sort of thing that consists in discovering new facts or considerations external to one’s own heart and mind. The task of establishing sincerity in oneself is primarily concerned with learning to discern and correct one’s own bad or selfish inner states and dispositions. This doesn’t normally require investigation of external matters. Not surprisingly, it was precisely because establishing sincerity required so little discovery of the larger world that many of his interlocutors found

it an implausible means of acquiring virtue. A recorded discussion between Wang and his student Lin Yuanxu 林元敘<sup>3</sup> makes this clear.

[Lin said,] “Heaven and earth are vast. The stars adorn them, the sun and moon illuminate them, and the four seasons proceed through them. You can’t exhaustively account for these things by referencing what’s similar [to things already familiar to oneself]. The world of human and non-human things is rich and abundant, among which many plants proliferate, animals flock, and barbarian tribes claim dominion. You can’t fully grasp them by referencing what’s similar [to things already familiar to oneself] . . . Now when you speak of ‘establishing sincerity,’ can one fully grasp all of these things by establishing sincerity?”

Wang Yangming said, “Yes, one can fully grasp all of these things by establishing sincerity. . . .” (“Parting Words for Lin Dianqing [Yuanxu]” [Zeng Lin Dianqing guixing xu 贈林典卿歸省序] in Wang 1992, vol. 1, 235)<sup>4</sup>

For quick reference, let us call Wang’s answer that “one can fully grasp all of these things by establishing sincerity” (*licheng jin zhi yi* 立誠盡之矣) his *audacious claim*. The character that I am translating as “fully grasp” is *jin* 盡, a versatile term that is often usefully translated as “exhaust” or “fathom.” Here, I think the primary aim of the student’s question is to point out that by most common-sense understandings of good ethical decision-making, we should take account of features of the larger world before proceeding to behave in ways that will affect it, and yet there is little in the activity of establishing sincerity that guarantees any responsiveness to those features. “Fully grasp” comes close enough to capturing the worry that motivates the question. Perhaps some Anglophone readers will think that a full grasp of external considerations requires something like a deliberate and self-consciously epistemic investigation or research project (imagine someone going out and reading a great deal about the orbits of heavenly bodies, the social behavior of birds, the customs of other cultures, etc.). If so, then to that

<sup>3</sup> Style name Dianqing 典卿, one of Wang Yangming’s students from his time in Nanjing. For a summary of Wang’s relationship with Lin, see Israel (2019, 330–31).

<sup>4</sup> 「天地之大也，而星辰麗焉，日月明焉，四時行焉；引類而言之，不可窮也。人物之富也，而草木蕃焉，禽獸羣焉，國夷狄分焉；引類而言之，不可盡也。 . . . 而曰立誠，立誠盡之矣乎？」陽明子曰：「立誠盡之矣. . .」

extent my choice of words is misleading. In Wang's moral epistemology, there is plenty of room for implicit or non-conscious ways of taking features of the larger world into account. I have in mind a thin sense of "grasp," according to which an archer can grasp the effects of gravity on her arrow simply by well-honed habit and intuition, or an experienced farmer can grasp an imminent change in the weather by an ache in her knee.

In the longer record of the dialogue, Wang Yangming goes on to explain that everything external to us has a pattern (*li* 理). Sincerity is what substantiates or makes concretely real (*shi* 實) the pattern in them. And he assumes (as Confucians of his era often do) that the patterns in all things are fundamentally unified, so that by manifesting our patterns through sincerity, we contribute to a process in which all others are manifested through sincerity. If there are important facts or considerations about the way that birds flock or the distinctive conventions and habits of the barbarian tribes, we don't need to discover them. The profound unity and harmony between the pattern in ourselves and the pattern in these other things will ensure that the relevant considerations are taken into account. Furthermore, pushing oneself to think, feel, or behave in ways that are insincere will interfere with the proper expression of the pattern in us. That, at least, is how Wang justifies his audacious claim to Lin Yuanxu (Wang 1992, vol. 1, 235).

If we take this passage on its own terms, it might be tempting to conclude that Wang thinks we can just intuit the relevant facts about the larger world without conducting investigations of it. Presumably, most of us can't make good ethical decisions without knowing something about how the natural world works—e.g., which sorts of resources one can expect the land to provide and which to acquire, save, or use sparingly in our service to others. And insofar as we interact with people from other cultures (the "barbarians" mentioned by Lin), presumably we have to know something about their cultural values and practices as well. Does our shared, innate pattern guarantee that we just know such things without investigating them, or that we can in some other way (some way other than by knowing) take them into account?

### III. Chen Lai's Weaker Interpretation of "One Can Fully Grasp All These Things by Establishing Sincerity" (立誠盡之)

In his influential book on Wang Yangming, Chen Lai proposes a more charitable reading of Wang on this issue. Roughly, Chen thinks that for Wang in his most clear-headed moments, "establishing sincerity" is important in the sense that it establishes a necessary foundation for ethical self-improvement, not that it suffices by itself to bring about self-improvement. Having established sincerity, there is still other work to do, an important part of which Wang describes as "extending knowledge." Chen cites the following remarks from Wang's "Letter to Wang Tianyu":

The sage is simply sincere and that is all. The learning of the superior person is to rectify things [*gewu* 格物] by means of making the personal life sincere. Extending knowledge [*zhizhi* 致知] is the work [*gong* 功] of establishing sincerity. We can liken it to planting a plant: sincerity is the root of the plant; rectifying things and extending knowledge are like bolstering the plant by firming up the soil around it and watering it. Some of those who discuss rectifying things and extending knowledge in later [less enlightened] times differ from this way of thinking about them. They don't plant the root but only firm up soil and add water to some spot; they wear out their energy and strength, and I don't know what they will achieve in the end. ("Letter to Wang Tianyu" [*Shu Wang Tianyu juan* 書王天字卷] in Wang 1992, vol. 1, 271)

Chen Lai explains that this passage represents a departure from what I am calling the audacious claim, but a welcome one. The audacious claim seems to suggest that we can fully exhaust the patterns in other things by means of establishing sincerity alone—in short, that establishing sincerity is sufficient to do so. But the "Letter to Wang Tianyu" suggests, more plausibly, that establishing sincerity is only a necessary condition for fully grasping the patterns in other things, albeit one that plays a foundational role.

... establishing sincerity is admittedly an important part of cultivation, but if one takes it as the sole aim, one will encounter the question

of whether establishing sincerity itself can exhaust the pattern of all things. Yangming clearly affirmed this and in doing so he seems to have been excessively dogmatic. But according to the “Letter to Tianyu,” the function of establishing sincerity is primarily to establish a foundation. And it’s not the case that just through establishing sincerity itself one can at the same time understand the patterns of all. Therefore it is just in the sense that establishing sincerity is a root or foundation that “one can fully grasp all of these things by establishing sincerity.” (Chen 2006, 118)

As Chen reads Wang Yangming in his more careful moments, establishing sincerity isn’t sufficient to achieve a complete grasp of everything that matters ethically in any given situation. It falls short in two respects. First, establishing sincerity only enables us to grasp patterns (*li* 理), which on Chen’s interpretation are just ethical patterns, not ordinary, empirical facts (Chen 2006, 24–5). Presumably, there are other (non-ethical) facts about the world that have yet to be grasped. Second, it also denies that *all* of the ethical patterns can be grasped without further investigation. So on Chen’s account, establishing sincerity leaves further work to do—both in discovering non-ethical facts and in grasping other ethical patterns. Nevertheless, establishing sincerity is necessary for that further work. Indeed, it is a “root” or “foundation” for that further work, so that all of that further work will figuratively build on or be an outgrowth of one’s sincere state of heart-and-mind.

#### **IV. A Stronger Interpretation of “One Can Fully Grasp All These Things by Establishing Sincerity” (立誠盡之)**

Let us take as Chen’s core insight that Wang (at least in his more careful moments) only sees establishing sincerity as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for grasping everything that matters ethically, so that Wang allows that there can be more investigative work to do. So described, his interpretation has some promise. There is other textual evidence to suggest that Wang allowed and explicitly endorsed the view that there is, after establishing sincerity, further work to



do.<sup>5</sup> And other careful secondary scholarship on Wang's *liangzhi* ("pure knowing" or "good knowledge") has called attention to the ways in which, for Wang, empirical or experiential knowledge can enrich the otherwise the non-experiential knowledge issued by *liangzhi*.<sup>6</sup>

Still, I worry that this minimal interpretation fails to capture what is most radical and controversial about Wang's view. As I read Wang, our innate capacities and dispositions play a significant role not just in establishing a foundation, but in guiding subsequent inquiry too, so the subsequent inquiry, done properly, will be constrained by our inborn nature in significant ways. Furthermore, Wang himself frequently speaks as though the further investigative work (the work that follows establishing sincerity) is somehow trivial or insignificant in comparison with the vantage point afforded by the sincere mind. So, to better capture the audacity of Wang's claims about the fundamental importance of establishing sincerity, we need to say more about how sincerity is established and the guiding role it plays in further investigative work.

A helpful discussion is prompted by a question from Xu Ai 徐愛, who presses Wang on Wang's claim that the "highest good can only be found in one's own heart-mind." Xu explains his concern about this statement: "If one seeks for the highest good only in the heart-mind, I fear that one will not fully grasp the patterns of all the world's affairs."<sup>7</sup> When asked to give examples of the sorts of external "affairs" (*shi* 事) that he has in mind, Xu gestures at the many complexities of serving parents filially, serving one's ruler loyally, governing the people benevolently, and so on. Surely, there is much to be learned about how to do those things.

Wang's answer is revealing. On the one hand, he concedes that there is indeed work that comes after establishing a sincere heart-mind, but

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Wang's "Second Letter to Wang Chunfu (Wang Dao)" (*Yu Wang Chunfu er* 與王純甫二) in Wang (1992, vol. 1, 155-6) and Ching (1972, 29-31); "Parting Words for Zheng Defu" (*Zeng Zheng Defu guixing xu* 贈鄭德夫歸省序) in Wang (1992, vol. 1, 238-9); and Wang's *A Record of Practice* (*Chuan xilu* 傳習錄), section 25, in Wang (1992, vol. 1) and Wang (1963).

<sup>6</sup> On this issue, see especially Zheng (2022, 140-78).

<sup>7</sup> 至善只求諸心。恐於天下事理，有不能盡。 *A Record of Practice* (*Chuan xilu* 傳習錄), section 3; translation slightly modified from Ivanhoe (2009, 137).

also uses language to suggest that the work that comes after is relatively minor or trivial. Once one's heart-mind is sincerely filial toward one's parents, the finer points of properly serving them are just the "detailed expressions of the sincere heart-mind" (心發出來的條件). Furthermore, he suggests, it is the sincere heart-mind itself that does the real work finding those detailed expressions.

If this heart-mind is completely free of human desire and is pure Heavenly Pattern, then one has a heart-mind that is sincere in its filial piety toward one's parents. In winter, it will naturally think about one's parents being cold and explore ways to provide them with warmth; in summer, it will naturally think about one's parents being hot and explore ways to provide them with cool comfort. These are all just the detailed expressions of a sincerely filial heart-mind. But one first must have this sincerely filial heart-mind; only then will one have these detailed expressions. If we compare [the expression of filial piety] to a tree, then the sincerely filial heart-mind corresponds to the roots and the detailed expressions are the branches and leaves. One cannot first go looking for branches and leaves and only then plant the roots. The *Book of Rites* says, "A filial son, cherishing profound love [for his parents], will always have a harmonious air about him. One with a harmonious air about him will always have a pleasant countenance. One with a pleasant countenance will always be compliant and accommodating."<sup>8</sup> One must have profound love as the root, then naturally one will be like this. (*A Record of Practice*, section 3; translation slightly modified from Ivanhoe 2009, 138-9)

As I read this passage, it agrees with Chen Lai's key insight that establishing sincerity is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for a complete grasp of the relevant ethical considerations. As Wang says, "one first must have this sincerely filial heart-mind; only then will one have [the relevant] detailed expressions."<sup>9</sup> However, Wang's answer clearly implies that the search for "detailed expressions" must be regulated in various ways by the sincere heart-mind. First, it has to be *prompted*

<sup>8</sup> *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), ch. 24 "The Meaning of Sacrifices" (*Jiyi* 祭義); c.f., Legge (1967, vol. 2, 215).

<sup>9</sup> 須有這誠孝的心，然後有這條件發出來。

by the sincerely virtuous heart-mind. Second, the inclination to go seeking detailed expressions *has to come naturally* or spontaneously. “In winter, [the sincerely filial heart-mind] will naturally (*ziran* 自然) think about one’s parents being cold and explore ways to provide them with warmth.” This then suggests that the “further investigative work” must meet two requirements in order for its findings to count as the proper expressions of a sincere heart-mind.

*Requirements of the “further investigative work” that comes after establishing sincerity:*

- (1) The further investigative work must be prompted by one’s sincere interest in knowing more.
- (2) The further investigative work must come naturally or spontaneously.

I find these two criteria helpful when thinking about what it would be like to live out Wang’s ideal of moral agency as he characterizes it. However, it seems to me that these two criteria alone fall short of capturing a certain strong impression that Wang wants to convey to his skeptical students and interlocutors—namely, that even though we must sometimes investigate “detailed expressions” in order to complete our ethical tasks, it’s still really our sincerity of mind (or heart-mind) that is overwhelmingly responsible for executing the whole task properly, not our investigative abilities or intellectual discernment or luck in stumbling across the right ideas and methods. This then suggests a third requirement of the “further investigative work”:

*Requirements of the “further investigative work” that comes after establishing sincerity:*

- (3) It should be the heart-mind’s sincerity and not the further investigative work that is primarily responsible for completing a task virtuously.

This third requirement is more ambiguous, but it is clearly important to Wang, as he often makes claims to this effect, sometimes stated in much stronger language than I have used here. For example, in another

dialogue, Wang's student Zheng Zhaoshuo 鄭朝朔 presses a similar objection to Xu Ai's, and suggests that the search for the proper means of expressing one's filial concern requires certain kinds of scholarly exertions that he describes as "the effort of inquiry, study, thought, and discrimination" (學問思辨之功).<sup>10</sup> Wang's reply clearly means to downplay the importance of those exertions:

What you describe are simply the various details about how to provide warmth or cool comfort to [one's parents] or the proper way to serve or nurture [them]; such things can be explored and fully grasped in a day or two. What need is there for inquiry, study, thought, and discrimination? It is just that if one wants this heart-mind to be [in the state where] the purity of Heavenly Pattern is fully attained when one provides warmth or cool comfort [to one's parents] or when one is serving or nurturing [them], one must engage in inquiry, study, thought, and discrimination or one will commit a minute error in the beginning that leads to a major mistake in the end. . . . If the highest good only meant getting the details of behavior correct, then an actor who was able to perform correctly the various details of behavior concerning how to provide warmth or cool comfort [to one's parents] or the proper way to serve or nurture [them] could be said to have attained the highest good. (*A Record of Practice*, section 4; translation slightly modified from Ivanhoe 2009, 140)

Wang also offers a vivid metaphor to illustrate the special efficaciousness of establishing sincerity:

Recently, whenever I discussed learning with friends, I spoke only of two words: establishing sincerity [*licheng*]. As in killing a person, the knife ought to be placed on the throat, so in learning, efforts should be made to enter the fine points of the heart-mind. Then would our learning become earnest and solid, and radiate brightness. And even if selfish desires sprout up, they will disappear in the same way as a few flakes of snow melt upon a fiercely burning stove. ("Fifth Letter to Huang Zongxian [Huang Wan]" [*Yu Huang Zongxian wu* 與黃宗賢五])

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<sup>10</sup> The student's choice of words makes clear reference to the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), c.f. Legge (1967, vol. 2, 318).

in Wang 1992, vol. 1, 151-2; translation slightly modified from Ching 1972, 28)

Let me suggest a few ways of spelling out the idea that when people serve their parents virtuously by investigating how to keep them warm in the winter, it is the sincerity of their heart-mind and not their investigative diligence that is primarily responsible (that is, let me suggest ways of spelling out the point behind my third requirement). First, the sincerity of a person's heart-mind is what *earns moral credit* for being so diligent, not the person's scholarly diligence or something of that sort. As Wang explains in his answer to Zheng Zhaoshuo, sincerity makes the difference between someone who really does attain the highest good and a mere actor who is just playing the part of a filial child. There isn't nearly as much goodness in just playing the part. And by extension, there isn't nearly as much goodness in figuring out how to comfort one's parents out of a desire to be a good and diligent student. Secondly, sincerity *primes us to improvise well* when improvisation is required. Wang frequently observes that the ethical world is too complex and variable to allow us to apply simple rules in a methodical manner. Often, we need to reconsider well-worn habits and rules, and without a sincere ethical drive, we won't improvise well ("Letter in Reply to Gu Dongjiao" [*Da Gu Dongjiao shu* 答顧東橋書] in *A Record of Practice*, section 139). This is another respect in which following a script, as an actor would, falls well short of true virtue. Thirdly, establishing sincerity describes the *hardest* or *most challenging work* of virtuously attending to one's parents' comfort and warmth. As Wang suggests to Zheng, it doesn't require a great display of scholarly prowess to figure out how to keep one's parents warm—one should be able to figure it out in a day or two. Unifying one's heart-mind around virtuous aims is much more difficult. Fourthly, of the various things that a person must do to serve one's parents filially, establishing sincerity has the *most explanatory power*. As Wang's vivid metaphor implies, establishing sincerity does most of the work of becoming virtuous, just as stabbing someone in the throat does most of the work of killing him.

To speak a little more impressionistically about the point that Wang seems to be driving at, Wang's responses to interlocutors skeptical about

the efficacy of establishing sincerity seem to allow that investigative work can and should occur, but he insists that the investigative work should be so suffused with a sincere moral drive that it affects the very “feeling tone” or phenomenology of the things one encounters. Something about establishing sincerity alters the immediate experience of encountering ethical good or bad qualities at a visceral level (Zheng 2022, 155-64). Furthermore, once one’s heart-mind is completely suffused with a sincere moral drive, the actual investigative work is much more easily accomplished. Wang makes this point by comparing the discernment of ethical qualities to the discernment of flavors and sights.

[Master Yangming] said: “One simply must work at establishing one’s sincerity and that is all. Only concern yourself with whether your heart-mind can be as sincere and earnest with respect to the Way as your mouth is with respect to flavors or your eyes are with respect to colors, and then what concern will you have about failing to distinguish between what’s sweet or bitter or what’s beautiful or ugly?”

[Zheng Defu] replied: “That being so, is there then no use at all for what’s recorded in the Five Classics and passed down in the Four Books?”

[Master Yangming] said: “Who would say that there is no use at all? These texts are where sweetness, bitterness, beauty, and ugliness reside. But if you were to seek these qualities in the texts without a sincere heart-mind then all you’re doing is talking about the flavors and colors; how could you thereby grasp what is truly sweet, bitter, beautiful, or ugly.” (“Parting Words for Zheng Defu” [*Zeng Zheng Defu guixing xu* 贈鄭德夫歸省序] in Wang 1992, vol. 1, 238-9)

I have said quite a lot about the many ways in which the further investigative work is regulated by and subordinate to the sincere heart-mind which Wang regards as foundational. Let me try offering an analogy to bring these various points together. Perhaps the work of investigating external matters is subordinate to establishing a sincere heart-mind in ways analogous to how various aspects of learning to ride a bicycle are subordinate to learning to balance on a moving bicycle. Imagine

someone who has never even tried to ride a bicycle, and yet wants to know how much to peddle on an upslope, how far to lean as she turns, and so on. There's a relatively obvious sense in which attempts to answer these questions will fail unless and until she learns the more basic skill of maintaining balance while the bike moves. And that is because the other questions are subordinate in important ways to the question of maintaining balance—how much to peddle uphill depends on how much speed one must have in order to easily keep the bicycle upright, and how much to lean when turning depends critically on balance too. Having a feel for balancing a moving bicycle is also necessary to make impromptu adjustments if one hits a patch of loose gravel or ice.<sup>11</sup> One might be tempted to say that it is better to just learn to balance on a moving bicycle first and then wait for questions about peddling and turning to arise naturally, much as Wang recommends that ethical novices should focus on establishing sincere filial piety and then wait for questions about the particulars to arise naturally. And there is a sense in which a would-be bicycle rider needs the experience of maintaining her balance while peddling and turning in order to count as understanding what good peddling and turning is, much as one needs the sincere moral drive to appreciate true “sweetness” and “beauty” in the classics. For practical purposes, specifying how much to lean without the experience is just “talking about” leaning and not actually knowing it for oneself. Generally speaking, all of this is because maintaining balance is a central or defining factor of good peddling and leaning in the first place, and maintaining good balance pervades almost everything else that one must do while riding a bicycle.

My three proposed additional requirements suggest a stronger reading of Wang's claim that “one can fully grasp” everything that matters ethically by “establishing sincerity.” The weaker reading simply says that establishing sincerity is necessary but not sufficient to grasp it all, and that one can engage in further investigative work to do so. The stronger reading says that at least three more things are necessary

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Philip J. Ivanhoe for reminding me of the importance of sincerity for improvising a solution in non-standard situations, and for suggesting this clever way of integrating that point into this metaphor.

as well: the further investigative work must be prompted by a sincere interest in doing it, must come naturally, and must have little or perhaps no real responsibility for one's virtuous performance (in comparison with having a sincere heart-mind).

This reading is stronger in the sense that it imposes more success criteria on ideal moral agency as Wang envisions it, but it is also stronger in the sense that matters most for sizing up Wang's strong ethical nativism, because it introduces more ways in which our innate dispositions and capacities must aid and constrain or set limits to proper investigations of the larger world. By analogy, we must depend on innate capacities not just for correctly balancing the bicycle, but also for prompting us to investigate different speeds and different degrees of lean as we encounter obstacles, and for recognizing the right amount in each case. The more our innate dispositions must aid and constrain our investigations of the larger world, the more Wang's ideals seem to require some sort of faith, hope, or evidence that we really do have well-formed moral aptitudes by nature. That is, the stronger reading reintroduces more general worries about the basic plausibility of Wang's ethical nativism. That is the issue to which I turn next.

## **V. How Problematic Is Wang's Strong Ethical Nativism?**

Wang Yangming's account of virtuous agency is justified in part by some controversial views about human nature. On his account, all of us have well-developed faculties and dispositions for virtue, so that the principal explanation for our regular failure to be virtuous comes not from a lack of inborn ability to know or be motivated by our knowledge of virtue but instead by the interference of selfishness or self-centeredness (*si* 私).<sup>12</sup> Like many readers nowadays, I think this view is very far-fetched. And yet, there is much in Wang's picture of moral agency to recommend it, particularly to people who are drawn to sophisticated accounts of virtuous moral agency as wholehearted, almost effortless, and automatic

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<sup>12</sup> For example, see *A Record of Practice* (sections 161, 180, and 273).



skill-like performances. I also find Wang's account attractive because he is so adamant that agents maintain a certain unbroken adherence to their own consciences or inner moral voices, which may in fact be necessary for the great feats of moral courage that he esteems ("moral courage" understood as a reliable tendency to do what one knows to be right in the face of danger or immense social pressure). Scholars of Wang have suggested to me in passing that there could be ways of separating some of the more implausible parts of Wang's philosophical worldview—including his strong ethical nativism—from other appealing ideas in his moral psychology or moral epistemology. I will now face this suggestion squarely, focusing in particular on whether we can provide reasonable grounds for Wang's account of good moral agency without presupposing his strong ethical nativism.

Let me start by establishing some meaningful parameters. There are many claims that could potentially be taken for an essential or indispensable part of Wang's account of good moral agency, including claims about the innateness of the faculties of knowledge or sources of motivation that he thinks good moral agents must draw upon. If Wang's account of good moral agency is so rigid as to require that our knowledge and motivation be from innate capacities, then of course it won't be possible to separate it from his ethical nativism without compromising his account. But I think I am not alone in finding Wang's account most appealing insofar as it captures the organic unity of explicit and implicit (conscious and non-conscious) thoughts, feelings, and desires necessary for a kind of wholehearted virtue. I also take seriously his nearly lifelong advocacy for a kind of moral self-reliance and autonomy of judgment, insofar as he insisted (again and again) that one shouldn't brook any self-deception, doubleness of mind, or even the adoption of core moral convictions that one learned from books or some external authority rather than on one's own reliable epistemic processes and aptitudes. Wang writes for scholar-officials whose primary public duty is to speak truth to power under political and social circumstances that make it quite dangerous and risky to do so (monarchies supported by hierarchical and centralized state bureaucracies), and he inspired a way of philosophizing that brought about tremendous gains for Confucian moral and political thought

in the late Ming, in which philosophers who followed Wang faced political persecution and public condemnation to defend more freedom of expression among the literati class, more institutional checks and balances in government, and women's education, among other just causes. What I regard as Wang's core account of good moral agency, then, will consist of (1) whatever claims and assumptions are necessary to provide the independence of judgment that Wang encouraged and (2) the organic picture of virtuous human action in which thoughts, feelings, and desires are highly integrated in the ways that he envisioned—the picture of moral agency as a highly skilled performance of virtuous tasks from a wholehearted state of heart-mind.

We can start by adding some specificity to the debate. Consider how well our innate ethical aptitudes prepare us to deal appropriately with people from cultures with very different practices and priorities. When someone from another culture has manifest values that we find immediately repugnant, is it enough just to eliminate selfish thoughts and desires and then proceed as our inborn ethical predispositions incline us to proceed? I doubt it. I think we are innately predisposed to reach the conclusion that such people are to be condemned or ignored, and to reach it swiftly. Furthermore, we just don't know enough about such people (what they care about, what sorts of words or treatment they regard as respectful) to interact with the minimum decorum necessary for peace and civility.

However, there is a response available to defenders of Wang, which I will call *virtuous ambivalence*. It concedes that our innate tendencies don't equip us to respond adeptly to people from very different cultures, but it also says we are, under normal circumstances, innately predisposed to find evidence of our common humanity with other people, even those with very different priorities and practices. This is especially the case when we reject the sort of selfishness or self-centeredness that Wang sees as the source of so much moral failure. So perhaps the better description of our native ethical aptitudes is to say that we are innately predisposed to be ambivalent. Just as it is sometimes filial to be uncertain about how to keep one's parents warm in the winter, so too might it sometimes be virtuous to be ambivalent about how to interact with people whose values strike us as strange

or perverse. In both cases, the virtuous course of action would be to investigate further rather than reach a swift decision. So, one might think, virtuous ambivalence could provide enough of a foothold on which to build a more thoroughly cosmopolitan worldview. Over some months or years, perhaps, we could become genuinely interested in understanding cultures that initially strike us as strange or perverse, and cultivate the kinds of compassion and curiosity that make us sincere cosmopolitans.<sup>13</sup>

At minimum, the argument from virtuous ambivalence makes some controversial assumptions about our innate ethical capacities and dispositions. There is a considerable burden of proof to be carried by those who would insist that, merely by getting rid of selfish or self-centered thoughts and inclinations, we will always (or typically) respond to such people with virtuous ambivalence rather than disgust or contempt. But that is just the beginning of what defenders of Wang's ethical nativism would need to show. Recall that if we want to preserve Wang's core account of good moral agency, we need our innate material not only to predispose us to have the right initial response, but to play a multifaceted role in the subsequent investigations too (after selfish thoughts and desires have been eliminated). For each step, the subsequent step must come naturally or spontaneously, and the sincere interest that leads to the next step must in turn stand in a network of relations similar to those that enable someone who is good at balancing on a moving bicycle to naturally grasp how much to lean on a sharp turn or how much to peddle on an incline. It would be incredible if we were naturally primed to move from virtuous ambivalence to wholehearted cosmopolitanism in this manner alone.

There are many other sorts of cases in which we lack sufficient inborn equipment to carry out virtuous action in accordance with Wang's model. Here are two more of note: cases that require the study of complex matters of public policy, and cases of diplomacy with morally abhorrent state actors. Crafting good public policy sometimes

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<sup>13</sup> My thanks to Stephen C. Angle and Harvey Lederman for offering a succinct version of this objection when I presented this paper in 2022. Virtuous ambivalence is surely under-theorized by Wang, but for purposes of this argument, let us imagine a version of Wang that pays more attention to cases where it is warranted.

requires that a policymaker go deep into the finer points of the tax code to look for loopholes or reward mechanisms that could become perverse incentives when the new policy is implemented. Sometimes, good diplomacy requires that the diplomat swallow, ignore, or suppress her strongest and most sincere ethical impulses, as when a special envoy explores potential compromises with a genocidal dictator for the sake of ending a genocide. In both of these sorts of cases, we often simply cannot rely on our inborn ethical tendencies and abilities to guide our investigations in the wholehearted manner that Wang presupposes. Fortunately, there are people who find it in themselves to commit to studying tax policy, or to negotiating with brutal dictators. But given our natural tendencies to get bored or discouraged by thousands of pages of tax policy, or to be indignant about and want retribution against people who orchestrate mass murder, the investigations usually required of virtuous agents in these areas will often fall well short of the requirements of Wang's core account. Sometimes, the next step will be difficult and agonizing. Sometimes, a sincere moral interest will not be enough to recognize immediately the sweetness and beauty in the next virtuous step.

There are at least two tempting responses to my line of argument. One is to bite the bullet and say, out of fidelity to Wang's core vision, that his ideal of moral agency is more important or valuable than whatever goods might be derived from negotiating with terrible state actors or becoming more cosmopolitan people, etc. Maybe we are better off steering our lives as Wang recommends that we do, even if that means sacrificing some other goods. I do not have the space to consider this argumentative strategy thoroughly, so I will just say that it strikes me as unpromising. I concede that Wang's picture of good moral agency is attractive, but not attractive enough to sacrifice the virtuousness of certain policy wonks, diplomats, or cosmopolitans. Moreover, I think (*pace* Wang) that a deep but somewhat reluctant commitment to understanding the practices and priorities of people from other cultures is virtuous for that reason, despite being less than wholehearted or sincere.

A second response poses a deeper challenge to my reading of Wang. It is to say that much of Wang's attempt to downplay the importance of the "further investigative work" is motivated not by the belief that it is

it be regulated by and subordinate to a sincere moral interest of some kind, but rather by the conviction that successfully executing the further investigative work is much less important than the intrinsic value of establishing sincerity. For example, Wang maintains that when a heart-mind is sincere, that is sufficient for it to be virtuous (see Lederman 2022, 187-8; and Lederman 2023, 157). Perhaps Wang means to suggest that having a virtuous heart-mind is already a great achievement in its own right, and that the successful execution of virtuous behavior pales in comparison. Imagine that a filial child notices that a deep chill has set in one evening, and thus goes about investigating ways of ensuring that her parents will have a bed warm and comfortable enough for sound and healthy sleep. For various reasons beyond her control, her investigations are unsuccessful, and she discovers the wrong means of warming the bed, so that her parents spend the night sleepless and shivering. Still, it doesn't seem far-fetched to say that she nevertheless had a virtuous heart-mind, and for certain important evaluative purposes, that may be enough.

I will briefly sketch two rejoinders to this way of framing Wang's view about the importance of establishing sincerity. First, I read Wang Yangming as helping himself to various arguments for the view that establishing sincerity does the primary work of ethical cultivation. One of those arguments may well be that establishing sincerity is sufficient to have a virtuous heart-mind, which is of intrinsic value independently of subsequent behavior. However, that cannot be the only argument for this claim. He also goes to great lengths to establish that there are important connections between one's sincerely virtuous state of mind and subsequent investigation into the details of carrying out virtuous inclinations. As we saw in sections III and IV, in multiple passages he develops a metaphor to describe the relation between those two things, which is the relation between the roots and branches (and leaves) of a tree. His interest in establishing sincerity wasn't motivated by his commitment to planting the roots alone, but also by his interest in the natural psychological and epistemic connections between roots and branches. Much of his general critique of overly scholastic and fragmentary models of ethical education is driven by his conviction that the finer points of virtuous behavior are more naturally and fully

grasped by a heart-mind that is sincere (Wang 1992, vol. 1, 238-9; Wang, *A Record of Practice*, sections 3-4).<sup>14</sup> Second, in the interest of determining how plausible Wang's views are, I don't find much comfort in the thought that establishing sincerity is sufficient to make my heart-mind virtuous in the thin sense presupposed by this objection. If virtues are to be an important part of the good life, they should come equipped with more than sincerely good thoughts and inclinations. They should include sophisticated abilities to respond to challenges that people can reasonably expect to encounter in the course of living their lives, even if they don't equip us to deal successfully with every contingency and outcome. However, I admit that this second response raises some deep and contentious issues in normative ethics, issues too difficult and wide-ranging to settle here.

For these reasons, I am not sanguine about the proposal that we can simply subtract the strong ethical nativism from Wang's worldview and somehow leave his picture of virtuous moral agency untouched. However, I do think that there is a certain way of revising his view which, when properly confined to the right spheres of life, really does stand to make a contribution to the status quo in twenty-first-century moral philosophy and moral psychology. The primary motivation for this revision is to do justice to Wang's important insight that, in many cases, when we control for the parts of moral education and the formation of moral character that happen relatively easily or automatically, many if not most instances of moral failure will be due to selfishness and a kind of self-deception rather than a failure to conduct further investigations into the issue. Consider two different ways of attempting to dissuade a typical undergraduate student from plagiarizing a term paper. One approach would be to point out the reasons in virtue of which plagiarizing is wrong—it is unfair to the other students, gives future employers or graduate admissions committees false information about the students' abilities, uses the true author and her hard work as a means to the student's own ends, and so on. Another approach is just to ask the would-be plagiarizer

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<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Harvey Lederman and Cheng Chung-yi 鄭宗義 for helpful discussion on this point.

what really motivates their desire to plagiarize the term paper—is it a virtuous motive or a self-serving one? In thinking about my own routine moral failures or near misses, I have found it a useful heuristic to ask how I would feel if I knew that someone else proposed to behave as I do, for the reasons I give. A course of action that I can rationalize when my own interests are at stake will look obviously wrong when I imagine others giving the same rationale for themselves, and I can then see that my rationalization was selfish or self-centered. Furthermore, I often find that a part of me knew that it was self-centered all along, in subtle ways that I can discover in my own (often defensive and overheated) feelings and behavior. In many ordinary instances of moral failure, there is indeed a sense in which some parts of our minds and hearts already know that our behavior is wrong, and that further theorizing or justification won't correct the behavior as successfully as learning to recognize and undercut the operations of one's own cunningly self-serving mind. In such instances, giving the moral agent more justifications just gives them a bit more cognitive discomfort to rationalize or ignore, but it doesn't make them any more inclined to do what's obviously right. For a wide range of cases of moral failure, teaching people to recognize and undercut their self-serving cognitive biases and motivated reasoning is more effective than giving them more justifications and guidelines for virtuous behavior. In those cases, I suggest, people will be better served by following Wang's model.

To be sure, it's not the case that undergraduate students know solely by innate capacities the wrongness of plagiarizing coursework. But they acquire this knowledge relatively easily, just by growing up in a culture values a certain minimum of honesty and fairness, and doesn't require that they familiarize themselves with theories of justice, read histories or Confucian classics, or hear a knock-down, drag-out argument against cheating on schoolwork. This knowledge is not innate, but it bears many of the hallmarks of second nature or acquired nature, and it is pre-theoretical and largely independent of the scholarly study of a moral tradition.<sup>15</sup> In this very circumscribed sense, Wang is correct that

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<sup>15</sup> This attempt to salvage Wang's view of moral agency is similar to a strategy suggested by Philip J. Ivanhoe (2011, 281n13).

selfishness better explains people's moral failure than failure to read more moral philosophy or investigate the workings of the larger world. So for a range of ordinary ethical purposes, Wang is right to object to more scholastic approaches to ethical cultivation and to encourage us to focus instead on undercutting self-deception and establishing sincerity.

To conclude, I have attempted to defend a strong but subtle reading of Wang Yangming's audacious claim that establishing sincerity does the principal work of grasping everything that matters ethically. This strong reading has been my point of entry into a more consequential debate about the prospect of salvaging Wang's appealing account of virtuous moral agency from his implausible ethical nativism, a debate that has loomed large (even if mostly in the subtext or footnotes) in much of the recent literature on Wang. In the final analysis, I don't think that we can salvage Wang's account of moral agency without presupposing an implausibly well-developed and sophisticated set of innate moral faculties and dispositions. But I have gestured at a variant reading of Wang (an explicitly revisionary one) that preserves something of his core vision.



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