Wang Yangming, Moral Promise, and Environmental Ethics

By

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Abstract

The intentions of this essay are to articulate how the Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming’s philosophy is relevant for environmental ethics and what the global repercussions of this philosophy might involve. Our emphasis will be upon Yangming’s insistence that every human being (1) forms “one body with the universe” in the sense of being primordially orientated towards the enrichment of the environment and in the sense of possessing a felt sensitivity to whether or not the environment is flourishing, and (2) possesses an innate sense of good which can be disturbed by an immersion in theoretical reflection. The latter implies a sense of moral promise and connection which is both common and cross cultural. None the less, I will also discuss how the latter way of thinking allows for a kind of cultural pluralism.

Introduction

The following analysis intends to clarify how the philosophy of Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming is relevant for the philosophical field of environmental ethics. I will discuss Yangming’s metaphysics, his opinion that we form “one body (yi ti) with the universe,” what this oneness ultimately is, and how it is accomplished. In so doing I will place special emphasis upon Yangming’s suggestion that authentic moral knowledge and activity are the spontaneous result of a “purified” attunement between human and world, and not the result of either human selfish desire or reflection upon or emulation of “external” authority (including texts). It is Yangming’s opinion that the human being, via an unobstructed liangzhi (“innate knowing”) is innately able to sense whether or not a given entity – of any ontic type - is flourishing, and may feel compelled to remedy a situation where flourishing is threatened. While the above will offer a Yangming like environmental ethics, the second section will discuss how Yangming’s thoughts are significant for our current environmental crisis. Here I will focus on how Yangming’s thoughts are both global in “actuality” and global in regards to “practice.”
Wang Yangming’s Neo-Confucian metaphysics is best approached in regards to the difference between principle (Li) and the material moment of individuation (qi, also associated with ether). Principle is the creative source of everything in the universe, and is often considered in its purest form as “Mind.” As principle per se contains within itself all possible patterns and possibilities – it is the key organizer – material reality is that which, in its singularity or individuality, expresses one of an infinity of possible patterns. Each material manifestation lies in explicit relationship with every other. In all arising from mind they in a sense interpenetrate. Ivanhoe put this nicely: “At the deepest level all things contain within them the Li of the universe. However, actual things and events manifest their own particular and characteristic sets of “patterns” or “principles” because they are composed of a combination of Li and ether.”

For the Chinese, qi is dynamic and pluralistic depending on the being. The occasional Western description of matter as inert stuff which is given movement and life through form is bypassed for an image of matter which, while dynamic and subtle, actualizes itself according to varying Li.

Human beings are such that our qi allows for both conscious awareness and a sensitivity of all other principles. In fact, for Yangming, our mind is a reflection of world-mind and contains the Li of the universe. When our liangzhi (“innate knowing”) is functioning properly, the subject will intuitively grasp whether or not a given state of affairs is functioning correctly or not, and spontaneously act so as to either increase flourishing or correct what might be unhealthy. The entire universe is my body, all “Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures.” The latter include humans, other animal species, plants, inanimate objects (stones), and artifacts (tiles). It is worth quoting the following famous comment from Yangming, as we will be referring to it throughout the essay:

“This is why, when they see a child [about] to fall into a well, they cannot avoid having a sense of alarm and concern for the child. This is because their benevolence forms one body with the child. Someone might object that this response is because the child belongs to the same species. But when they hear the anguished cries or see the frightened appearance of birds or beasts, they cannot avoid a sense of being unable to bear it. This is because their benevolence forms one body with birds and beasts. Someone might object that this response is because birds and beasts are sentient creatures. But when they see grass or trees uprooted and torn apart, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of sympathy and distress. This is because their benevolence forms one body with grass and trees. Someone might object that this response is because grass and trees have life and vitality. But when they see tiles and stones broken and

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destroyed, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of concern and regret. This is because their benevolence forms one body with tiles and stones.”

Every human, Yangming notes, is familiar with not only this connection, but the concern which arises when we recognize the hindrance of the self-actualization of an entity.

To speak more about the Neo-Confucian perspective on reality, I note that each individual entity is able to function in the way that it does because of the kinds of relationships which are formed with other entities. Given that this interconnection is global, or complete, it is fair to say that a certain event at a certain place and time is in some sense interconnected with all other events. Beyond events, while there are particular condensations of qi in the shape of individuals, the latter is (a) often described in terms of a community (“community of organs”) and (b) is always involved in some kind of immediate, engaged, and transactional relationship with the remainder of reality. Hence there is a “continuity,” and “wholeness”:

“Since nothing is outside of this continuum, the chain of being is never broken. A linkage will always be found between any given pair of things in the universe. We may have to probe deeply to find some of the linkages, but they are there to be discovered.”

The universe as a whole does not manifest purely repetitious cycles, but rather exhibits general patterns which are ripe with potential and oriented towards a more enriched complexity. It is Yangming’s conjecture that in being aware of the tendency of principle, the human being’s responsibility – and eventual joy – involves furthering principle.

A fracture in this great continuity not only influences everything per se, but inhibits the overall tendency towards development. On this, Tu Weiming notes

“They were acutely aware that the world we live in. . .is laden with disruptive forces including humanly caused calamities and natural catastrophes. . .[but] it was not naïve romanticism that prompted them to assert that harmony is a defining characteristic of the organismic process. They believe that it is an accurate description of what the cosmos really is and how it actually works.”

That is:

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“Chinese thinkers discovered that its enduring pattern is union rather than disunion, integration rather than disintegration, and synthesis rather than separation.”

To be sure, while this harmony can withstand and involves a certain amount of “natural violence,” human destructiveness and selfishness appears to not contribute to the stability and flourishing of the world. In that sense, we can be quite the anomaly. It is fascinating to note that the very being that is so completely interconnected with the universe is also that being who is able to cause such disequilibrium.

Remaining focused on the human individual; our sensitivity to other beings becomes increasingly severed, obstructed, or “blocked” the more the subject identifies with the material dimension of selfish desire (si yu). The selfish desires the subject is to avoid include a rather broad variety. One is not only to avoid the “common” sort of desires that plague us – greed and jealousy, for example – rather one is to avoid grounding decisions upon any sort of attachment. Included in the latter category is the desire or attachment to becoming a good person; as Phillip Ivanhoe writes,

“The action itself may be morally impeccable, but if it is motivated by personal desire, it can become a source of wickedness. Of course, even among personal desires some are better or worse. Nevertheless, acting out of any personal desire defiles the innate purity of the mind.”

As David Tien writes,

“[si] does not mean what we usually mean by ‘selfish or self-centered,’ which is to privilege one’s own good at the expense of others. Rather, Wang’s si means to make oneself the center of one’s world. In this sense of self-centered, one could at the same time, be self-centered but not selfish. One could be performing great acts of altruism, and placing the needs of others well above one’s own needs, while at the same time being unable to empathize with others in any meaningful sense.”

In general if the attachment or desire for good is any way rooted in our daily bodily desires or drives, our investment in said desire will thwart the function of our qi. It is worth noting that the sorts of obscurations which might inhibit the function of human qi are multiple and vary from individual to individual.

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4 Wei-ming, “Continuity of Being,” 72.
5 Yangming, “Readings,” 147.
6 Ivanhoe, Ethics, 73.
In a related fashion Yangming is extremely suspicious with regard to the more worldly, “external” forms of traditional Confucian ethics. This is for three reasons. First, there is the common complaint that the individual looks to Confucian manuals, teachers, etc., so as to achieve the correct reputation for the sake of power and/or wealth. Yangming certainly saw the necessity of a beneficial teacher, but the purpose of the instructor is meant more to galvanize our own return to innate knowing. Second, making decisions based on historically sedimented truths smothers what should be a more spontaneous comportment to a broad variety of others and a broad variety of situations. Third and to be discussed in greater detail below, Yangming believes that a situation gains ethical focus through the subject’s moral orientation (“innate knowing”). He is utterly dedicated to the fact that the most meticulous set of rules and regulations will never surpass the orientation, thus knowledge; we gain in direct moral experience associated with “innate knowing.” In fact that moral instruction gained from the external will only be grasped in a piecemeal, disjointed sense. The relevant actions, techniques, and even norms are motivated from out of the proper subjective perspective. Hence to look for order and guidance among the varying practical techniques of a given time and place is to look in the wrong place. One might think that this is only ignorance, and not desire, but the very wanting which is directed towards the world exhibits craving.

On these thoughts Yangming states:

It is only because the people of later ages don’t understand that the highest good is within their own heart-minds and instead use their selfish cunning to grope and search for it outside their own heart-minds that they mistakenly believe that each affair and everything its own fixed principle. In this way, the proper standard for right and wrong becomes obscured; they [become preoccupied with] disconnected fragments and isolated shards, human desires run amok, and Heavenly principle is lost.

With these last thoughts in mind, as I stated earlier the Neo-Confucians comprehend phenomena as radically interdependent. Desire and attachment lead to a static fixation upon the object or idea, which in turn blocks a more dynamic engagement with the world: “if such a fixation is prolonged, the mind is gradually ‘materialized’ (wu-hua) by the inertia of the thing. When this occurs, Heavenly

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8 But what about the knowledge we utilize in order to understand that something might be suffering? In the case of the environment doesn’t this involve something like the natural sciences? I will be as bold as to respond that nonetheless the basic sense that something isn’t flourishing is given in a more intuitive manner. To be sure, there are always examples to the contrary, but what often leads people to go to the doctor is that they don’t feel well. I agree with Yangming that suffering is first and foremost expressed to us by way of the appearance of a thing in a given context. The phenomenological implications of this should be pursued further.

9 Yangming, Readings, 164.
principle becomes functionally neutralized.” In fact “inertia” in all of its forms inhibits the overall order and fruitful interplay of the universe. *Our* more receptive exposure to and productive interaction with the other is simultaneously part of our own self “development” and the dynamic movement of the universe.

What then does Yangming suggest? How do we ‘get to’ the moral experience of which he speaks? What is first required is a *faith* in innate moral knowledge and the power of *liangzhi*. Yong suggests that Wang purposes a “normative rather than descriptive metaphysics . . . One cannot have such a faith in human perfectibility unless one also believes in the original goodness of human heart/mind.” This faith is given further support by the presence of a teacher who appears to enact the very practice we are currently considering.

In order to retrieve “deep “experience with others it is necessary to approach every situation in the practical dimension unhindered or unfocused by selfish desire. Such will allow the naturally heightened sensitivity and compassion I possess (*liangzhi*), as human to function unopposed by the latter desires and distractions. The process of self-correction which allows for *liangzhi* to shine is understood as *ge wu*, “rectification of [thoughts] of things.” While *liangzhi* is always “shining” one must work to overcome certain habits and attachments which impede its activity. One rectifies through the very activity of selfless interaction. In turn selfless interaction is an activity which involves the continual overcoming of arising obstructions.

Throughout our life, every situation is an opportunity to respond to the world sans the motivation of our desires. While the technique of “sitting,” a form of meditation, was utilized so as to prepare the individual for moral encounter by calming and clearing the mind and body, Yangming ultimately advocated detached, calm and collected comportment in the world of action. To overcome the general propensity for selfishness is not the same thing as *zhi liangzhi* (“extending one’s *liangzhi*”). It is only within the nexus of action that our particular limitations can reveal themselves and be rectified. Indeed, Yangming see the difficulties of life as a kind of blessing; they are a rich opportunity for improvement.

A mind unobstructed will function in an unalloyed manner. What is this like? I will immediately experience the suffering of those before me if for some reason their principle is inhibited. As Confucian philosophy is by nature always fascinated by the dimension of concrete action, Yangming must be implying, amongst other things, that the way in which reality presents itself is immediately discerned as flourishing or

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suffering by an unblocked mind. Pushing the letter of the text, if mind contains all principle, then the associative contrast between the expressive actions of the given and what is innate in my mind as ‘rule’ would lead me to respond with concern – to take what is present as suffering. The latter requires no book knowledge. Following the moment of recognition, I will experience a compulsion to correct the matter at hand. In being properly motivated my response will be fluid and automatic, one’s action will be an extension of a self-correcting situation. None of the latter is able to arise if obstructed by ‘self’. According to Ivanhoe,

> “Perfectly cultivated moral individuals act only in accordance with principle, motivated only by the mind’s pure knowing. While they are the physical causes of the actions that they take, the moral cause is principle, not desire. In an important sense, their actions belong more to principle than to themselves. The more advanced their spiritual development, the weaker their senses of acting for themselves. It becomes increasingly difficult for them even to describe their actions, because any sense of the acts belonging to the agent can compromise its moral status.”

On this same topic, David Tien writes, “Selflessness is simply the converse of self-centeredness. When one is acting selflessly in this sense, one is not thinking about oneself at all. One is completely unselfconsciousness and wholly unaware of any sense of personal agency.” Here I note Yangming’s conviction that I will experience the other’s suffering as my own (wisdom) – I will experience this version of unity – and act accordingly. In fact I will act as if the other is really just an extension of my own body. These latter ideas fall under what Yangming entitles the unity of knowledge and action. For Yangming if one genuinely knows the suffering of the other, then the action to overturn this suffering will naturally arise. So as to avoid misunderstanding, it is important to recognize that, while desire should not be that which focuses and underscores our practical activity, a properly motivated response to the world is certainly one that involves a rich affective dimension.

How does practical knowledge or know how figure into the latter? Is it possible to be more specific about the specific experience associated with being ‘one body’? In order to answer these questions I will turn to Yangming’s famous example about filial piety. Rather than being a moral orientation that is gained from ‘external’ instruction, the general orientation towards filial piety arises as the appropriate subjective response to a situation. This is the ‘root’ of moral activity. The ‘branches’

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12 Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*, 73. Further, to the response of “how is this strange experience possible” I simply direct the reader to any of a number of different experiences which we thought were impossible until we indeed had the experience ourselves. Nonetheless, faith is important, and faith in a teacher who appears to demonstrate the life we are considering. Also, one cannot forget the basic kinds of experiences we all have which might motivate a deeper relation with the world – the awareness of suffering in an animal and the way that makes us feel, the disappointment in a plant which isn’t flourishing, etc.

arise when I begin to discern the particular steps I must take in order to be properly filial in this moment, i.e., blankets:

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 sincere, filial heart-mind. But one must first have this sincere, filial heart-mind; only then will one have branches and leaves. One cannot first go looking for branches and leaves and only then plant the roots.  

While authentic moral orientation is ‘internal,’ ‘external’ knowledge as found in the world can certainly be employed once we have a proper moral bearing. Nonetheless it is important to remember Yangming’s thesis that the particular course of actions, intentions, etc., can all be tainted if the impetus behind these actions isn’t ‘pure.’ On this, Yong Huang writes,

“…the actual knowledge about ways to serve our parents for example, ways to keep our parents warm in the winter and cool in the summer, is not innate in us. It is something we have to learn. …The only thing that he [Yangming] wants to emphasize which seems to me correct and important, is that our search for such knowledge should be guided by our innate moral knowledge so that we can ensure that such nonmoral knowledge will not be put to immoral use.”

How does this above relate more specifically to the natural environment? First, Yangming clarifies a moral orientation which is quite simply sensitive to the overall health and flourishing of the environment. One might say that there is something immediately wrong about the presence of a stretch of land which is the result of clear-cutting; we are struck by what appears to be a lack of flourishing. While our initial experience might motivate a whole series of ‘external’ techniques for correcting the problem (i.e., biological and chemical analysis), it seems justified to say that much of our concern for the environment begins with basic perceptual experiences of unease. Second, I am under the impression that while Yangming is obviously aware that each of these entities will receive different forms of aid, and that the human is a special individual because of his participation in liangzhi, he nonetheless resists the belief in more or less degrees of connection and response. In Yangming’s view the human is fundamentally interconnected with the rest of the whole, and it is completely appropriate that our response to such connections would be replete with concern. To what degree that would allow for harm to other living things appears negotiable. Third, it is worth noting that for Yangming this deep relationship also includes artifacts; their unnecessary destruction motivates the experience of regret. Yangming

14 Yangming, Readings, 139.
15 Huang, “Neo-Confucian Conception of Wisdom,” 396.
offers us a philosophy which attempts to be responsive to the entire horizon of experience. Artifacts too have their place in the world, and form a link in the overall chain of being. I would like to also suggest that their unnecessary construction could also lead to regret, pending built-space somehow acts as a weak link in the chain. With this last thought on artifact in mind it would appear that there would be room for the possibility of environmental restoration in Yangming’s eyes – the strengthening of the chain.

II.

There are more contemporary and global repercussions of Yangming’s ideas which are worth taking a few moments to address. I will discuss these under the headings of “global in actuality” and “global in practice.”

In regards to “global in actuality,” each human is originally and actually intertwined with the environment and plays an essential role in contributing to its health. Yangming’s metaphysics positions humans as not only interlocked with the rest of the natural world, but as involved in the very continuity, dynamism, and development intrinsic to the natural environment. Mentioned earlier, hatred, unnecessary destruction, and selfishness are signs of an inertia, something which is contrary to nature’s – and hence our own – general orientation. Yangming reinvigorates a fundamentally relational sense of person whereby ‘success’ is measured in terms of selfless modes of interaction, these selfless modes of interaction beginning with an already concrete connection.\(^\text{16}\)

Of course the above definition of the human person is to be supplemented with an awareness of liangzhi. Given the sweeping and confusing nature of the current environmental crisis it is good to continually assure the human individual of Yangming’s insistence on and trust in both the innateness of the moral good and the capacity for radical sympathetic and empathetic sensitivity to alterity. This involves a trust and faith in not only Yangming’s metaphysical system, but in oneself as the source of moral orientation, as the one who is in possession of such a wonderful sensitivity. Similar to the Chan/Zen Buddhist adage “true person of no rank” liangzhi is within all human beings (global in actuality), no matter what the dominant culture or philosophy may be. While innate knowing has a kind of developmental history in that one can become more and more adept at responding harmoniously via felt

\(^{16}\text{This is in reference to the Chinese term ren which implies something like “humanity” and is associated with personhood. However, in the Confucian tradition achieving ren is an accomplishment which can only come about through productive, harmonious relationships with others. The Neo-Confucians expand this term – or come to discover its “true” meaning - to include relationships with all things, not just other humans.}\)
sensitivity – usually by becoming more and more selfless – the capacity for and implicit awareness of Sagehood is within us all.

The above ideas also help us to see how Yangming’s ideas are global in practice. Here the importance lies in how Yangming’s theories allow for immediate action, wherever one might dwell or find oneself. The overwhelming nature of the current environmental crisis could lead us to inertia, or to avoid these issues altogether. Being reminded of our inherent moral capacity enables us to avoid becoming crippled or overcome by the sometimes astonishingly confusing and complex environmental problems and the equally complex environmental theories which are utilized to solve certain problems. Viewed through such an complicated and potentially over cognized lens, environmental dilemmas also run the risk of becoming something distant or abstract. Hence approaching the environmental dilemma from the standpoint of our own moral promise has a way of reducing the confusing nature of the problem to something more personal, local, and approachable. An immediate benefit of this approach lies in the fact that it avoids a more pragmatic point of view whereby we attempt to reconcile as many theories as possible in order to reach some kind of conclusion. Put in Yangming’s terms, we are to avoid negotiation about how to resolve the tension amongst several “external” theories and “simply” turn to nature itself, wherever we might be, unimpeded.

Related to this last issue, Yangming notes that Ming China required a fundamental sea change. One issue which required rectification is that of an emphasis upon moral behavior as guided by textual analysis and textual authority. As one might expect Yangming thought this to be looking to the external for what should be found in the internal. Seeking for things in the external is not only confusing for Yangming, but ultimately a product of desire. While Yangming believed there are certain texts that are more authentic – closer to the source – than others, the historical promulgation of texts and the lessons involved have only ended up making humanity worse: “The reason the world is not well ordered is simply because [superfluous] writing has increased so dramatically while actual practice has declined.” 17

Perhaps a worthwhile endeavor would be to step back from rational analysis so as to participate in a different sort of activity or cultivation. For if a proper moral comportment cannot ultimately be taught or internalized via the written text or comments of others, but only reached by way of the development of a particular kind of cognitive ‘posture,’ then no amount of reading, debating, or listening will bring

17 Yangming, Readings, 152.
about the desired result.\textsuperscript{18} On this general theme Charles Brown writes, “The existential philosophers remind us that the replacement of one conceptual system for another is not enough unless there occurs within it a corresponding shift or lifestyle change that actually ushers in a new mode of being for humanity. Such thinking [also] reinforces the claim of radicality within the projects of Radical Ecology.”\textsuperscript{19} Even those who espouse the sort of approach we are discussing here truly only show us the path which we must in many ways walk ourselves.\textsuperscript{20}

The above being said, it is also possible to see how Yangming’s philosophy is global in practice through a sort of acceptance of cultural pluralism; such is globally inclusive. Yangming views proper moral activity in terms of an agent’s direct response to a particular situation. Therefore it appears warranted to suggest that he is discussing a place specific moral orientation. While there may be the great chain of Being, its expressions of pain always reveal themselves in a certain time and place. More importantly, however, I recall an earlier remark asserting Yangming’s insistence that the particular set of skills, practices, etc. which are utilized to rectify a felt dissonance are secondary to the founding moment of moral concern (liangzhi). It appears warranted to assume that a wide variety of cultural forms of correcting environmental ills and our relationship with such would be called upon. The way in which the human population might contribute to the flourishing of nature is by no means limited to a single path.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This essay explored two related interests. First I attempted to summarize those components of Wang Yangming’s philosophy which are relevant for environmental ethics. In truth the latter endeavor would require an exhaustive study of his entire philosophy as his philosophical orientation is radically inclusive of the whole environment (including, I might add, “outer” space). Here obviously the focus is on the massive issue of Liangzhi and how this concerns “being one with universe.” Second, I attempted to shed light on some of the contemporary relevance of Yangming’s thought for environmental ethics and how such is global in orientation. In my opinion the main contemporary relevance of Yangming’s beliefs and style of

\textsuperscript{18} I am reminded of Arne Naess’ comment that the extension of “intrinsic value” only genuinely occurs when we identify with beings. Identification for Naess certainly involves the kind of deep sensitivity we have been discussing. Granting intrinsic value isn’t the result of stacking well-made arguments, but is rather motivated out of the experience of identification.


\textsuperscript{20} As an important aside, it is my belief that Yangming’s approach is not, as “Chinese”, closed off to us. Western thinkers from Leopold to Naess have advocated an image of nature as communal and oriented towards enrichment. Leopold and by way of extension Callicott are as Western as it gets. (They both also suggest something like a natural or instinctual extension of moral sentiments to all species whom we understand as being in community with us.) A Virginian has just as much of a capacity to “get” to where Yangming is as somebody from China.
thinking is that he suggests a return to a more basic and fundamental moral orientation – even if such turns out to be difficult to enact – in a time where ethical situations and theories have become more and more complicated. Complication per se is not problematic, but the current environmental crisis sometimes appears to be so hopeless and/or confusing, again at the situational and theoretical level, that it is understandable why many simply step back as overwhelmed. The external is confusing. Yangming helps us to regain our center in reminding us of a more original or primordial relationship/concern with nature. Finally, (a) Yangming’s thought is global in actuality because each human being is endowed with this sensitivity, (b) global in practice because this sensitivity unfolds, or can unfold, in all places (hence revealing a simultaneous link to the local), (c) globally inclusive of a variety of cultural techniques, and (d) effective in coping with the complexity of environmental theories, the latter complexity caused due to the global level of opinion.