

On Yang-ming's *Four Sentences*

A Way to True Conscience

认知与践履——从“四句教”看阳明学的致良知工夫

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Abstract

Ben-ti (本体) and *Kung-fu* (功夫) are two basic concepts in *Li-xue* (理学), *Ben-ti* refers to the *a priori* of the moral practice while *Kung-fu* means the effective way to access to *Ben-ti*. Therefore, through further clarification of *Ben-ti* and *Kung-fu* we are able to penetrate into the core of *Li-xue* and grasp its meaning and structure. Moreover, *Kung-fu* is the central issue of Yang-ming's practical philosophy. It is, as a matter of fact, the root of his discussions about morality. Yang-ming asserted in his late years that "the ontological *Xin-ti* (心体) is neither good nor evil; it is the function of *Yi* (意 volition) that makes good or bad intentions. Conscience (良知) is able to distinguish the right from wrong, while the elimination of moral badness and the conducting of moral action depend on the sound reasoning." Such phrasing is called by later scholars Yang-ming's "*Four Sentences*," which is the whole point of his philosophy. This teaching has very much to do with the core concepts of his moral system such as *Ben-ti*, *Kung-fu*, *Xin-ti* (心体), and *Xing-ti* (性体). Different approaches of understanding towards this teaching lead to different schools of the post Yang-ming's philosophy. In view of the importance of this teaching, the author therefore wants to elucidate the structure and meaning of this teaching by examining into *Four Sentences*. In so doing we hope to better understand how Yang-ming reached his *Zhi-liang-zhi* (*Conscience Making* 致良知).

Keywords

Conscience (良知), *Ben-ti* (本体), *Kung-fu* (工夫), *Xin-ti* (心体), *Xing-ti* (性体)

Yang-ming's understanding towards his teaching changed as his thought evolved over time. As his disciple Qian Xu-shan (钱绪山 1469–1575) summarized:¹

"The Mentor's teaching changes as his thought varies over time: when he was young, he bestowed much of his energy in the arts of expression in literature. Later on, he was drawn to the Buddhism's and Taoism's philosophy. He was forced to move to remote province (Gui-zhou 贵州) at a period of time and there he was inspired to understand the Saints' teachings—he reached the truth not

1 钱德洪:《刻文录序说》,《王阳明全集》卷四十一。

effortlessly, but through all hardships and difficulties he has overcome in years. When he was in Gui-yang (贵阳), he taught his disciples that knowledge and practice are in one. Later, he taught that sitting in meditation is of vital importance. After he moved to Jiang-you (江右), he began to emphasize “*Zhi-liang-zhi* (*Conscience Making* 致良知)” which points to *Ben-ti* directly. His disciples were inspired to what extent by such teaching accordingly. We can see that Yang-ming’s teaching also changed at different stages of his thought.”

Qian Xu-shan’s summary about Yang-ming’s teaching and thought is generally acceptable. However, we should remember this is not tantamount to saying that these different stages of Yang-ming’s teaching and thought are fixed have nothing in common.² For instance, the late stage of Yang-ming put into fusion the unity of knowledge and practice with meditation, along which the *Four Sentences* best demonstrated the core meaning and the order of “*Zhi-liang-zhi* (*Conscience Making*).”

The teaching of *Four Sentences* was demonstrated by Yang-ming under the request of his disciples Wang Long-xi (王龙溪 1498–1553) and Qian Xu-shan (钱绪山) before he was ordered to command an army against the rebellious group of Si-zhou and Tian-zhou (思、田). This lecture given by Yang-ming is known as “*Tian-quan Testimony* (天泉证道).” There exists small difference in different versions of the story about this lecture. Qian Xu-shan (钱德洪) mentioned this lecture in *Chuan-xi-lu* (传习录), whose record was slightly different from that of *Chronicle of Yang-ming*. A variety of the story can also be found in *A Record For Tian-quan Testimony* (天泉证道记) edited by Wang Long-shi’s disciples. According to these records, we can make sure that *Tian-quan Testimony* was Yang-ming’s response for the polemics between Wang Long-xi and Qian Xu-shan. Their approaches towards *Ben-ti* and *Kung-fu* were best exemplified in these disputes. In fact, Yang-ming has reached a middle way between the two positions. He deems that one does not necessarily go against the other; instead, they can supplement each other in order to form a larger picture of the whole issue.³ Thus, the author will explore the meaning of *Four Sentences* and *Kung-fu* in the following discussions.

The first sentence “The ontological *Xin-ti* is neither good nor bad,” would come first and seems most difficult to understand. There are also many disputes over its true meaning. In order to understand this sentence we must come to term with “the ontological *Xin-ti*.” One interpretation is that *Xin-ti* has no empirical contents by which the worldly good and bad are known to us. The ultimate goodness of *Xin-ti* cannot be compared to that of its empirical counterpart (*Xi-xin* or the dispositional mind 习心). Such goodness is on another level and transcendent. The dispositional mind is involving on the practical level, which directs *Yi* (volition 意) towards the worldly good or evil. This dispositional character points to the second sentence “It is the function of *Yi* under the sway of dispositional mind that results in the judgments of the worldly good and bad.” Although *Yi* can be directed towards the good or bad, the transcendent mind is unhurt by this volition. *Xin-ti* follows its own course and remains its purity for the highest good which is intact and shines through eternity—an eternity to which man can nevertheless ascend.

Thus, the transcendent mind (*Xin-ti* 心体) is a metaphysical concept whereas *Yi* (volition 意), *Zhi*

2 陈来:《有无之境—王阳明哲学的精神》, p326–327。

3 陈来:《有无之境—王阳明哲学的精神》, p194–200。

(knowledge 知) and *Wu* (external things 物) belong to the empirical realm. *Yi* (volition) is known as the general presentation of the concrete ideas occurring to the transcendent mind. In other words, the transcendent mind receives external things and the synthesis of the two makes possible the occurring ideas. Our awareness and everything formed in our thought is not possible without the synthesis of the functional mind and external things. Man is a living creature whose existence consists of *Xing* (man's nature 性) and *Qi* (properties empirically acquired 气). *Qi* is taken by *Xing-ti* and the two work together to form certain awareness of being good or bad in our actual living. Man is not necessarily morally bad only because of these acquired properties. For *Li-xue*, such acquired properties prevent man to what extent from recovering his uncontaminated nature. Hence, man's existence is not possible without these properties. The latter are not all morally bad. All men are under the influences of these properties. However, one becomes a certain person because some specific properties are at work in him. Different properties acquired in man thus determine his moral possibility. As Cheng Yi-chuan (程伊川) said, "One's personality is morally good when *Qi* acquired becomes transparent. It turns to be the opposite when *Qi* becomes murky. Those who get the most transparent *Qi* could become Saints, while others who get the murkiest *Qi* would become the ignorant."⁴ Following Yi-chuan's comment, we realize that *Qi* is the prerequisite for the recovery of man's nature. *Li-xue* tends to think that *Qi* has different attributes, some of which are clear, others are not. Elsewhere he pointed out that *Mencius* (孟子) acclaimed that man is morally good by nature, which opposed to *Xun-zi* (荀子) and *Yang-zhu* (杨朱). It is because of *Mencius's* insistence on man's innate virtue that makes him a distinguished thinker. Man's nature is superior to anything else morally speaking. It deteriorates when dispositional character involves. Dispositional character is originated from *Qi*. The latter can be clear, transparent, or just the opposite. Those who possess clear and transparent *Qi* become the sages while those possessing the opposite become the ignorant.

A list of these attributes can be made according to certain criteria such as righteousness, sturdiness, temperance, purity, and magnitude. With different attributes men's characters and destinies vary. *Qi* under some circumstances can prevent man from recovering his nature. The degree of difficulty in the recovery of man's nature depends on what properties of *Qi* one possesses, which determines one's superiority or inferiority in cleverness and moral excellence. Yang-ming thus argued: "A man spontaneously intuiting his essence is hardly found in the world. Even *Yan-zi* (颜子) and *Cheng Ming-dao* (程明道) would not say they could do so. How can we expect that the ordinary people can do that likewise? The dispositional mind (*Xi-xin* 习心) can be purified and becomes moral by accessing to his true conscience, which entails actual practice in *Kung-fu*. Thinking in a vacuum alone does not make a difference. Sheer speculation at best amounts to emptiness, which is not a small problem. We must alert on this."⁵ Since a man spontaneously intuiting his essence is hardly found, it is much plausible to act according to *Four Sentences*. The teaching in the latter corresponds to those mentioned by Qian-xu-shan in his emphasis of *Kung-fu* in the access to *Xin-ti*. Qian Xu-shan said, "*Xin-ti* has no empirical contents in its essence. It has not yet been made worldly good or bad. But the dispositional mind lives itself into all kinds of deliberations in the world and thus

4 《二程遗书》卷二十二上。

5 《传习录》下。

needs purification. To correct these deliberations and access to the true conscience is called the refinement of the dispositional mind (格致诚正). This is what *Kung-fu* is made for. Without such refinement, *Kung-fu* is meaningless.”⁶

Man has dispositional mind because of *Qi* he has received. This dispositional mind shadows *Xin-ti* whose nature is emanating without hindrance. Judgments of the worldly good and bad arise in this mind. This is what the second of *Four Sentences* has meant: “It is the function of *Yi* (volition) under the sway of dispositional mind that results in the judgments of the worldly good and bad.” Conscience is the *a priori* of morality. It can make moral judgments and fulfill its own purpose all by itself alone. That’s why we have to examine our mind thoroughly via the refinement of it and rid of shadows that hinder the transparent mind so as to access to *Ben-ti*.

Xin-ti is a metaphysical concept, which fits our understanding of *Four Sentences*. But this conclusion seems otherwise when we look closer into some obvious ambiguity in that teaching. If *Xin-ti* is neither good nor bad, then how is it possible that *Yi* can be good or bad? If the latter is good or bad not out of *Xin-ti*, then out of where? Be it from *Xin-ti*, but *Xin-ti* is in itself colorless, *Yi* cannot derive the good or bad from that colorless *Xin-ti*. The former must be out of else where. Hence, we have two different things: *Xin-ti* and *Yi*. A split between *Xin-ti* and *Yi* therefore becomes inevitable, which apparently contradicts Yang-ming’s teaching. Moreover, if *Xin-ti* is the true Conscience, then why in the third sentence did Yang-ming raise another conscience capable of judging the right from wrong? This usage of the second conscience seems redundant, however. In the beginning of *Four Sentences*, we find that “*Xin-ti* is neither good nor bad.” This *Xin-ti* is not ascribed to the ontological realm according to its literal meaning. Why is here a discrepancy?

The discrepancy in Yang-ming’s interpretation of *Xin-ti* leads to different lines of interpretation towards his *Ben-ti* and *Kung-fu* by many researchers at later time. *Xin-ti* can be interpreted metaphysically, which has more profound meaning. For instance, in *Chuan-xi-lu* he said, “The ontological *Xin-ti* is the ultimate truth, which is One. Nothing is to be gained other than itself.” We see elsewhere in the same book: “*Xin-ti* is the nature of man, which is truth. As one investigates into it thoroughly, he realizes he can access to that ultimate truth. *Benvolence* (仁) and *Justice* (义) are of man’s nature, too. To know the truth is to access to that nature and therefore to *Benvolence* and *Justice*.”

Another phrase out of the same source says that “the ultimate good lies in the ontological *Xin-ti*. One becomes evil when he deviates from it. In the ontological mind (*Xin-ti*), there is nothing like the good and bad one comes to term within his dispositional mind.”

The above mentioned *Xin-ti* refers to the ontological mind, which is the basis of the actual mind. It is man’s nature and ultimate truth—the highest good innately given.

In *Chuan-xi-lu*, Yang-ming’s *Xin-ti* sometimes refers to the modes of mind such as:

“Pleasure is a mode of mind, which is different from and yet consists of the external stimulation.”

Yang-ming also talked about *Xin-ti* from the epistemic point of view: *Xin-ti* is the working of the functional mind with stimulation from external things. He illustrated that “the functional mind is empty when it stands alone and modified when receiving images from outside.”

6 《传习录》下。

Also in the same book he said: “In the functional mind itself there is nothing less and nothing more. It is what it is, just like the sun shining through all things. In emanating things shone are irrelevant to the sun as the maker of light by itself.”

Therefore, it seems reasonable to put together the metaphysical *Xin-ti* and the empirical *Xin-ti* into forming a whole of *Xin-ti*. In so doing, we may avoid the incoherence in the definitions of the concept. The phrase “the ontological *Xin-ti* is neither good nor bad” refers to the metaphysical part of the mind. *Ti* (体) means modes pertaining to the ontological mind. *Ti* is meant by traditional Chinese philosophy “modes, phases,” rather than the ontological mind in the context of western philosophy. In *Chronicle of Yang-ming*, the author said that the conscience is empty, and it takes in things from outside. Nothing can be retarding the conscience’s pure inclusiveness. This holds true for the ontological mind, too. The transparent mind receives things effortlessly. *Xin-ti* can be understood from both ends. It is the ontological mind metaphysically speaking on the one hand and on the other hand the functional mind in association with external things empirically speaking. Thus, *Xin-ti* and *Xing-ti* becomes One. There is no longer a split between the two.

Hence, it seems another problem emerging here: if *Xin-ti* is neither good nor bad, then *Yi* (volition), *Zhi* (knowledge), and *Wu* (external things) would be the same. Why is there anything good or bad when *Xin-ti* is absolutely empty in itself, especially given the inclusion of *Ti* (modes effected) in *Xin*. Wang Long-xi therefore argued:

“*Xin* and *Ti* are in One. *Yi* (Volition), *Zhi* (knowledge), *Wu* (external things) and *Xin* go hand in hand. If you can understand that *Xin*, *Yi*, *Zhi* and *Wu* are all neither good nor bad, you would realize that the inclusive *Xin* becomes profound when it no longer attaches to its contents, and unwilled will makes right, while effortless knowing reaches insight and emptiness achieves.”⁷ Such an elucidation is from Wang’s famous “*Four Themes of Nothingness*.”

From *Kung-fu*’s point of view, *Xin*, *Yi*, *Zhi*, *Wu* are neither good nor bad. *Kung-fu* is taken to set one free from the dispositional mind and achieve the truth. The mind is able to intuit the ultimate truth when it is detached from its dispositional character. Conscience always knows what to do when it is transparent. Wang Long-xi’s approach (*Four Themes of Nothingness*) is preferable to people whose ontological mind is more transparent and clear because their conscience is far less hindered by the dispositional character of their mind. *Kung-fu* is to keep polishing one’s conscience. It is even harder for the ignorant to uproot such dispositional character because there is much more unclean *Qi* attached to them.

To sum up, Yang-ming’s *Zhi-liang-zhi* includes all these two approaches as above mentioned. Both intuiting *Ben-ti* as *Kung-fu* and refining oneself into *Ben-ti* through actual moral practice as *Kung-fu* are *Zhi-liang-zhi*. The post Yang-ming’s philosophy was much influenced along this line of thought and so was the study of *Kung-fu*. A way up from *Kung-fu* as moral refinement of one’s character plus a way down from *Kung-fu* as intuiting the ontological mind would help clarify the structure and the true meaning of *Li-xue* (理学), which worth our attention in the study of Yang-ming’s philosophy.

7 《传习录》下。

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