My "Investigation of Things"

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1. Introduction

I have studied three periods of Chinese philosophy: early, mid-imperial, and modern. In the course of these studies, I have learned a great deal from some of my teachers and colleagues, and from many of my former students. Scholarship is often a social enterprise, and for me, that has generally been a happy form of production.

I have been asked to say something about my findings that I hope will be of help to others. These include positive contributions of Chinese philosophy in replying to human questions. I will deal with several legacies of Confucianism that endure under the umbrella topic of the nature of the human mind, in relation to conduct. One reason is to pave the way for clarity about what the term *Confucianism* means in an era when it is used to refer to a significant social force. There are two main contenders in the quest for meaning. We must continue to alert our audiences to the difference between State Confucianism and Philosophical Confucianism. The former stresses loyalty to the center and the center's control of thought. The latter, heavily influenced by the teaching of Mencius, provides the basis for concerns with human compassion and care, including for suffering, extending from the infant/caregiver bond ultimately to large scale altruism.

2. Clustering, or the Fact-Value Fusion

2.1. Approaches to Knowledge

There is an approach to dealing with knowledge that has been mainstream in the Western tradition. Platonists focused on intuition of first principles as the highest form of knowledge. This was probably first inspired by geometry (two things equal to the same thing are equal to each other). In cosmology as in morality, other knowledge could be deduced from those. But the intuitive knowledge did not have to entail some consequence for action to be worthy of knowing. This is one origin of the Classical Rationalist approach to knowledge. It is based on the assumption that the mind (Reason) is in essence non-material, pure, and illuminated (the "light" metaphor) by absolute truths. In contrast, the sensations and emotions are bodily, impure, and (except for Plato's *Symposium*) are obstructions to the acquisition of knowledge. The reasoning mind is metaphysically separate from the mind that experiences feeling and energy to strive. Reason can act alone, and, with the will, command action. The legacy endured through Descartes and was contested by the British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

In the empiricist line, David Hume was among the modern precursors of those who rejected any isolation of the mental faculties from each other. For him, passions alone motivate action; many rationalists considered that to be the role of reason or cognition. In the twentieth century, logical positivists and emotive philosophers, such as Charles Stevenson, distinguished between factual and emotive meaning. But the separation of the three mental functions continued even in psychology circles. Its rejection did not achieve academic or public prominence until 1968, when the standard *Handbook in Social Psychology* wrote:

> Philosophers at diverse times and places have arrived at the same conclusion, that there are basically three existential stances that man can take with respect to the human condition: knowing, feeling, and acting. . . . Within the scientific study of attitudes, the trilogy came early and stayed late. . . . The question arises of how closely the cognitive, affective, and conative components are related. If all three give approximately the same result, one should perhaps apply Occam's razor to reduce the redundant

> conceptual baggage. . . . The results indicate that the three components are quite highly intercorrelated.[1]

We must remember that the Chinese did not have a counterpart to our traditional view of the mind as composed of three separate "faculties," as they used to be called, with Reason in charge. We cannot assume the same view of the mind in China as in the West. Otherwise, each approach will seem incoherent to the other.

Here is the perspective that has endured in Confucianism since early China. I first discussed in detail the clustering of the cognitive, emotional, and motivational mental features in my 1977 book, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China*. Knowledge is a cluster of features that in the rationalistic Western tradition had often been kept distinct or separated. The first is moral knowing, as a cognitive function about what is correct or incorrect in terms of general moral principles. There are three frequently used terms to describe the mind's evaluative cognitive functions. One is *yi* 義, the sense that discriminates what is proper/improper and required as a duty. Sometimes in the early period it was written as 宜. A second is *zhi* 知 or moral knowing, especially knowing that comes from serious practice, that is, practice in following the ritual rules, so that actions smoothly fit properly the situations. Both of these aspects of knowing and evaluating incorporate elements of disposition and intention that often generate emotionally motivated beginnings of action. This combination is easily seen in the third term, *shi fei zhi xin* 是非之心. The term refers both to discriminating the right and wrong, a cognitive act, and the approval or disapproval of it, an emotional matter that generates *an intention to act* or *motivates* action. In other words, the mind evaluates the situation and commands proper action accordingly. I call this "an evaluating mind." This means that the early Confucian thinkers do not deal with cognitive knowing independent of evaluation.

Thus, the most striking feature of Confucianism in the early period is that the mind's main function is normative evaluation. It is not grasping nature's mathematical principles or observations about causal laws in the natural world. Instead, it is knowing Nature's ethical qualities, such as

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1 Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 3 (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1968), 155–156.

relationships and hierarchy, for the sake of guiding human conduct. In my first book, *The Concept of Man in Early China,* I contrasted this with the main early Greek view of the mind:

> In China, truth and falsity in the Greek sense have rarely been important considerations in a philosopher's acceptance of a given belief or proposition; these are Western concerns. The consideration important to the Chinese is the behavioral implications of the belief or proposition in question. What effect does adherence to the belief have on people. For the Greeks, study was valued both for its own sake and as a guide to action (after all, Plato did write the *Republic,* and Socrates did maintain that "he who knows the good does the good."); but bliss lay primarily in study for its own sake.[2]

Traditional Western epistemology was interested in such questions as: What is knowledge? What is its origin? What is the standard of truth and falsity? Confucian thinkers of the Song-Ming periods also dealt with the first two of these issues. The first of their two epistemological concerns was encouraging a combination of knowing and caring. This would become the basis for a rich theory of empathy. More of this below.

However, there was also a second motivation for the Neo-Confucians, which led them to create a kind of political epistemology. Their main interest was in the groups that can be served by the search for intuitive truths, either by the people in general or by the elite teachers who claim to know them. These truths would be described as *tian li* 天理 in the Cheng-Zhu school and as *liangzhi* 良知 in the Wang Yangming one. These intuitive truths concerned a combination of facts and values about the natural and human social worlds and could describe both the natural processes of change and the moral duties that follow from knowing them. This relative disinterest in objective inquiry was not congenial to the rise of modern science through empirical research. Instead, the early Confucians believed that the key to understanding nature is to understand the mind, which possesses (although not necessarily clearly) those principles found in nature. The ancient justification for this perspective was the

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[2] Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), 55.

Mencian statement, "A man who knows his own nature will know heaven"[3] (*Mencius* 7A:1), i.e., the natural processes. But their approach had positive consequences for Confucian ethics, noting the links of facts and values.

According to Confucian scholars, they have knowledge of these principles prior to the common people because they know how to clarify their minds, to rectify them, to reveal the insights, and practice the relevant moral conduct. This serves to elevate their positions as teachers, as officials, and, in the modern age, as members of political parties. In the twentieth century, this approach to knowing describes philosophers such as Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, Xiong Shili 熊十力, He Lin 賀麟, and also political figures such as Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (Sun Zhongshan), Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石, and Chen Lifu 陳立夫.[4] In the twentieth century, even in the Maoist period, the rulers combined Leninism with the enduring (Confucian) idea of the elite transforming the people through education. By teaching the people to rectify their minds, they could transform China into a strong and wealthy state faster than just by taking gradual economic reform steps. The life goal or commitment for a Confucian was to become a Sage, who can transform the people through education. This political epistemology was adopted by both Philosophical Confucians and those in favor of autocratic or State Confucianism.

2.2. Moral Knowing and Moral Emotions

In the Neo-Confucian period, the link between knowing and value matters is revealed when Confucian scholars spoke of knowing the constant principle (*li* 理), or pattern or category, to which something belongs. To know something would lead automatically to awareness of what value would be involved with respect to it. For example, in knowing plants, a person would know about the constant principle of the production and reproduction of life without end (*sheng sheng bu yi* 生生不已) and the duty (*yi* 義) to nurture plants with water and food. Thus the psychological clustering of the three mental acts transfers to a fact-value fusion in a discussion about the actual world we live in.

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3 D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (New York: Penguin, 1970), 282.

4 Discussed in Donald J. Munro, *The Imperial Style of Inquiry in Twentieth-Century China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), chap. 2.

Another term for knowing, emphasized in the Song by Zhu Xi, is *ti* 體, which literally means body, and in the context of knowing, means to embody. I would call it empathic knowing, directing one's feelings onto an object that one tries to know. The claim here is that a person should care for that which is known. The cognitive part includes awareness that something may be separate from my knowing or caring. Another metaphor, the mind as an outward projecting light source, shows that it can unite the self and externals, the objects, and their principles. This is the investigation of things (*ge wu* 格物).

> Someone asked, "In the statement of Zhang Zai, 'If there is one thing which I have not embodied, then my mind has something outside of itself,' what is the meaning of 'to embody'?" The answer was "It means for the mind to have something outside of its self." Selfishness separates. It (*ti* 體) means to put our minds into things and to investigate their principles, just as in the investigation of things and extending knowledge.[5]

Elsewhere Zhu says, "To embody humaneness is similar to embodying a thing. Man stays within humaneness as its framework"[6] and "Embodiment is like humaneness [caring] permeating [lit., embodying] affairs" (*ti you ren ti* 體猶仁體).[7]

Moral emotions convey both knowledge of the constant principles or customary rules, and also emotional approval or disapproval of them. The *Mencius* says that "Reason and righteousness please my heart in the same way that meat pleases my palate"[8] (6A:7). Among the Neo-Confucian writers, Wang Yangming clarified the matter as follows, in words that may seem simplistic to Westerners because they do not address the complexity of right and wrong:

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5 Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi quan shu* (Taipei: Guang xue she, 1977; hereafter cited as ZZQS), 44.12b (2:993). See also, Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yu lei da quan* (Kyoto: Chubun shoten, 1973; hereafter cited as ZZYLDQ), 98.13b, sec. 63 (7:5214) [98:11b; 6:4059]. Translations from the Classical Chinese are mine unless otherwise noted.

6 Zhu, ZZYLDQ, 68.25a, sec. 118 (5:3583) [68.20a; 5:3775].

7 Zhu, ZZQS, 44.12b (2:993); also in ZZYLDQ 98.13b, sec. 63 (7:5214) [98.11b; 6:4059].

8 Lau, *Mencius*, 164.

> Innate knowledge is nothing but the sense of right and wrong, and the sense of right and wrong is nothing but to love [the right] and hate [the wrong]. To love [the right] and hate [the wrong] covers all senses of right and wrong, and the sense of right and wrong covers all affairs and their variations.[9]

Among the other emotions identified in the pre-Qin works that may be involved in a cluster, several endure today in discussions of ethics. Their content has been fleshed out as a result of scientific experiments. In the case of the cluster of respect (or pride; *rong* 榮) and shame (*xiuchi* 羞恥, *xiukui* 羞愧), Daniel M. T. Fessler has done important work. One of his key findings is that shame occurs when an individual is violating a rule, is aware of the violations, and is aware that others know of the violation.[10] Unlike guilt, which can be felt even if no one other than the person feeling guilty, is aware of an infraction, shame requires that others know about it. Today we know that shame and pride are often related to the value of loyalty to superiors and arise in hierarchical relationships. Respect and shame, as concurrently social emotions and moral categories, can be used as control mechanisms for enforcing social duties. In China respect and shame both have external and internal manifestations. The external form is titles, banners, stone markers, and special privileges. The internal form is an inner moral compass, described variously in the early texts. *The Book of Rites* (*Li ji* 禮記) says that even in a famine, a self-respecting person will refuse to eat when the food is offered with a rude shout of "Hey, Come here and eat."[11] These emotions play a role in model emulation, as revealed in the positive and negative character traits (to be honored/shamed) of models.

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9 Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yangming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 3:238, 228.

10 Daniel M. T. Fessler, "Toward an Understanding of the Universality of Second Order Emotions," in *Biocultural Approaches to the Emotions*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, prepublication draft), 21, 94.

11 *Li ji zheng yi*, chap. 62 (Tangong xia).

2.3. Intentions to Act or Motivation

The third element in the clusters, often linked by Confucians to the evaluating mind, is adding the beginnings of action to the cluster of knowledge and emotion. The subjective impulse, when unobstructed, will gather force to proceed from the heart outward and develop into behavior. This is summed up in the *Great Learning* by saying that when kings wish to order well their own states and families, they need to rectify their own minds and be sincere in their thoughts.[12] And in the *Doctrine of the Mean,* it says that when there is sincerity *cheng* 誠 within, it will be expressed externally (*zheng* 徵).[13] This perspective remained among the great thinkers of the Song-Ming period. For example, Cheng Yi said, "When knowing is deep, then action in accord with it will necessarily be perfect. There is no such thing as knowing what should be done and not being able to do it. Knowing and not being able to act is only a sign that the knowing does not go deep."[14] Depending on the context, Cheng Yi would also assert that knowing is intuitively grasping the principle of something, how it coheres with the order of things.[15]

In China, the emulation of moral models is the earliest and most enduring procedure for learning to practice desirable behavior. Thereby it is gradually internalized, so in time it emerges spontaneously. This is rectifying the mind (*zheng xin* 正心) so that the intention to act follows. The Cheng-Zhu school referred to it as the beginning of action (*yi fa* 已發). As is well known, the early texts speak of the ruler as the supreme model. The *Great Learning* states, "When the ruler, as a father, a son, and a brother is a model, then the people imitate him."[16] This is another claim that some Westerners might question, because it does not address the need for limits on the ruler's power, or the division of powers.

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12 See: James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics, vol. 1, The Great Learning* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 357–358.

13 See: James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics, vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Mean* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 419.

14 Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao, *Yishu*, *Er cheng quan shu*, *Si bu bei yao* (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 15.16b.

15 I use the word "coheres" thanks to Brook Ziporyn and Stephen Angle.

16 Quoting the *Book of Poetry*. See: Legge, *The Great Learning*, 372.