

## WANG YANGMING ON THE UNITY OF KNOWING AND ACTING

### Introduction

“Neo-Confucianism” is a general term used to refer to the renaissance of Confucianism during the Song dynasty following a long period in which Buddhism and Daoism had dominated the philosophical world of the Chinese and also to the various philosophical schools of thought that developed as a result of that renaissance. Neo-Confucianism had its roots in the late Tang, came to maturity in the Northern and Southern Song periods, and continued to develop in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. As a whole, Neo-Confucianism can best be understood as an intellectual reaction to the challenges of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy in which avowedly Confucian scholars incorporated Buddhist and Daoist concepts in order to produce a more sophisticated new Confucian metaphysics.

As Neo-Confucianism developed, two trends of thought emerged out of the Southern Song philosopher and official Zhu Xi’s synthesis of the “learning of Principle” and the “learning of the Mind and Heart.” Both trends agreed that all the myriad things of the universe are manifestations of a single “Principle” (*li*) and that this Principle is the essence of morality. By understanding the Principle that underlies the universe (just as Buddhists understood all things in the universe as manifestations of the single Buddha spirit), then, men may understand the moral principles that they must put into practice in order to achieve an ordered family, good government, and peace under heaven. The two trends of thought differed, however, on the way in which human beings are to understand Principle.

The thinking surrounding the “learning of the Mind and Heart” is most often identified with the Ming general and statesman Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Wang argued that inasmuch as every living thing is a manifestation of Principle, then one need not look outside oneself in order to understand Principle (and therefore morality): one should consult one’s own heart (or mind), wherein Principle surely lay. Since Principle is the basis of human nature, then it follows that anyone who understands his or her true nature understands the Principle of the universe. In the short passage below Xu Ai, a student of Wang Yangming, relates Wang’s teaching regarding knowledge and action.

### Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete document follows this section)

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### Wang Yangming on the Unity of Knowing and Acting

The Teacher said, “... There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know. When sages and worthies taught people about knowing and acting, it was precisely because they wanted them to restore this original substance, and not just to have them behave like that and be satisfied.”

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on  
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**Questions:**

1. Here Wang Yangming teaches that there is no true knowledge without action. What would education look like if this principle were applied?
2. How might a group of Confucian scholars behave if they were to take Wang Yangming's teaching seriously? What might the results be? Please think about this both from the point of view of a member of such a group of officials, and from the point of view of an emperor.

**Complete Document**

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**Wang Yangming on the Unity of Knowing and Acting**

The following is recorded in *Instructions for Practical Living* by Wang's disciple Xu Ai.

I [Xu Ai] did not understand the Teacher's doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting and debated over it back and forth with Huang Zongxian and Gu Weixian without coming to any conclusion. Therefore I took the matter to the Teacher. The Teacher said, "Give an example and let me see." I said, "For example, there are people who know that parents should be served with filiality and elder brothers treated with respect, but they cannot put these things into practice. This shows that knowing and acting are clearly two different things."

The Teacher said, "The knowing and acting you refer to are already separated by selfish desires and are no longer knowing and acting in their original substance. There have never been people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know. When sages and worthies taught people about knowing and acting, it was precisely because they wanted them to restore this original substance, and not just to have them behave like that and be satisfied."