

Nondualism

An Interreligious Exploration

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Chapter 13

A Ru (Confucian) Theology of Nondualism in Light of Kongzi and Wang Yangming

Bin Song

The Chinese Ru tradition in its Song through Ming period (960–1127 CE)¹ developed a robust metaphysical ethics rooted in ancient Ru teaching, celebrated as a unifying nondualism. To provide contemporary comparativists with an entryway to Ru nondualism, this chapter has three aims. First, I will introduce Kongzi's (551–479 BCE, also named Confucius) teaching of Oneness, as well as its early interpretations in Ru classics. Second, I will provide a critical exegesis of Wang Yangming's (1472–1529 CE) “four-sentence teaching” (四句教, abbreviated as WFS afterwards), which epitomizes the endeavor of Song through Ming Ruism to interpret Kongzi's original teaching of Oneness. Third, I'll construct a new Ru theology of nondualism to invite comparative insights from readers of this book.

KONGZI'S TEACHING OF ONENESS AND ITS EARLY INTERPRETATIONS

The nondualism of Kongzi's thought was demonstrated by his endeavor to “run through” or bind his being with one singular principle, leading to the so-called teaching of “Oneness to run through all (一以貫之)” (*Analects* 4.15, 15.3).² In the *Analects*, the unifying Oneness is parsed as the virtues of *zhong* (忠, dedication) and *shu* (恕, empathy). Kongzi exhorted his disciples to practice empathy consistently throughout their lives. There are three interrelated aspects of *shu*: negatively, “do not do to others what you do not desire

to be done" (*Analects* 12.2, 15.24). Positively, "help others to establish what you desire to establish yourself" (*Analects* 6.30). Transformatively, "treat the wrongdoing of others with justice" (*Analects* 14.30), which advocates neither to retaliate nor condone wrongdoings since these two alternatives cannot morally transform the wrongdoer with love and justice. Nevertheless, Kongzi didn't explain the virtue of *zhong* as clearly as *shu*, although we can surmise that *zhong* implies a method of finding one's genuine "self" (己).³ Without clarifying what one ought to genuinely desire and how the moral standard of right and wrong can be fairly set, the three aspects of *shu* cannot be effectively implemented.

There are three sets of Ru classics compiled around the same period as the *Analects* to develop Kongzi's teaching of Oneness. First, the *Great Learning* pinpoints the singular principle of Kongzi's teaching as "self-cultivation" and elaborates eight steps and three phases of it to "learn to be great." The first five steps are handling things (格物), attaining knowledge (致知), authenticating intentions (誠意), rectifying the heartmind (正心), and cultivating one's person (修身), which all aim to "manifest the bright virtues" of each individual. Then, an individual relies upon the bright virtues as a standard to influence others in his or her family and country to achieve those virtues as well. These two steps of moral influence dovetail with Kongzi's teaching of *shu* and are renamed "the way of measuring using a standard" (絜矩之道). They lie in the second phase of "loving and renewing the people." Eventually, a Ru would aim to "bring peace to all under heaven," with peace here construed not merely politically as without wars, or economically as co-prosperity, but also spiritually as everyone rediscovering their bright virtues so as to remain joyful and content toward themselves amid nurturing human relationships. Since such a lofty goal of self-cultivation applies to "all under heaven," a Ru would be dedicated to the daily renewal of personhood such that "if one has cultivated something new for one day, they shall try to renew themselves for one more day after another, and then, after another."⁴

Second, although the *Great Learning* delineates a pathway for an individual to manifest his or her "bright virtues" and makes the interpretation of Kongzi's teaching of Oneness decidedly practical, it does not clarify what these virtues are and why humans desire them. The thought of Mengzi (372–289 BCE) perfects the interpretation.

In a thought experiment,⁵ Mengzi imagines every human spontaneously having a feeling of alarm and fright when seeing a baby about to fall into a well. If one does not act upon the feeling, one will accordingly have another feeling of shame and disgust. If one succeeds in acting upon it and saves the baby, others will look at them with a feeling of respect and deference. Together, these spontaneous reactions indicate the ubiquity of the moral sense

of right and wrong. In Mengzi's view, these "four incipient sprouts" of moral feelings manifest four cardinal virtues (viz., humaneness, righteousness, ritual-propriety, and wisdom) which define the good aspect of human nature distinguishing humans from non-human beings.

But why should we desire these virtues after all? Mengzi answers that humans desire virtues just like we crave the reinvigorating cosmic vital-energies (氣) which we breathe in during a sound sleep or a deep meditation. When the cultivation of cosmic vital-energies leads to ecstasy, one can feel pervaded by "oceanic vital-energy" (浩然之氣),⁶ in unity with all under heaven. In other words, the spontaneous affective reactions to distressed beings manifest the fundamental ontological bond between humanity and the entire universe, which bond can be nurtured consciously by individuals via the program of self-cultivation and social activism prescribed by the *Great Learning*.

Third, the *Centrality and Commonality* and the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change* elaborate how human nature is ontologically bound to the universe. The former says that before any feeling is aroused, individuals need to dedicate themselves, regardless of whether they are under others' watch or alone, to nurturing their root of being endowed by the ever creating *Tian* (天, the universe or heaven).⁷ The latter says that the most generic trait of *Tian* is that the universe constantly creates and recreates itself in a process of "birth birth" (生生) via the interaction of *yin* and *yang* vital-energies, and the cardinal virtue of humaneness is to manifest this cosmic power of birth birth in a uniquely human way.⁸ Notably, it is the former text which uses "nondualist (不貳)"⁹ to describe the all-encompassing creative power of *Tian*.

These classical Ru texts following Kongzi's teaching of Oneness adumbrate a system of nondualist metaphysical ethics. This system concerns itself with questions such as how to explain the overall order and existence of the universe using one singular principle, how to demarcate the role of human from non-human beings in manifesting the principle, and how to distinguish humans' moral obligations towards good and evil without compromising the ultimate commitment to cosmic unity and all-encompassing humane love. These questions will be continually pondered by later nondualist thinkers in the Ru tradition, among whom Wang Yangming is an exemplar.

WANG YANGMING'S FOUR-SENTENCE TEACHING (WFS)

Exegesis

The full form of WFS (four sentence teaching) is: “The fundamental state of heartmind is neither good nor evil. There are good and evil when intentions are aroused. Conscientious knowing knows good and evil. Doing good and eliminating evil is rectifying things.”¹⁰ Wang claimed that the WFS exhausted the import of Oneness taught by ancient Ru sages; hence, it was his highest intellectual accomplishment. A notable connection between WFS and Kongzi’s teaching of Oneness is its syntax, which rests on the spiritual inner work of self-cultivation suggested by the *Great Learning*. Below, I provide an explanation of the WFS.

The term *xinti* (心體) in the first sentence resonates with Mengzi’s contemplative practice of “oceanic vital-energy,” which is conducive to a unitary feeling with the universe and signifies the ontological bond of humanity with *Tian*. The fundamental state of human existence is neither good nor evil because *Tian* has the mysterious power to make everything be and become together in the broadest cosmic scale. From the perspective of *Tian*, any created thing is *ipso facto* good since it manifests *Tian*’s sublime creativity *by default*. This sort of “goodness,” characterized by Wang also as “utterly good (至善),” has no dialectical relationship with “evil,” and is thus *nondualist* par excellence.¹¹ More importantly, if the fundamental state of heartmind endowed by *Tian* is well maintained, the way one does good and eliminates evil in the human world would be just as spontaneous and non-contrived as how *Tian*’s creativity proceeds in the cosmic realm. Such naturally flowing moral activity appears to be “as if there is neither good nor evil.”¹² WFS highlights this ideal state of morality to prevent humans from being absorbed in dualistic or oppositional moralities, in which they may fight each other using one limited perspective on goodness against another. Clearly, the nondualist commitment to cosmic unity and all-inclusive humane love registers prominently in the first sentence.

Wang construes the *yi* (意) in the second WFS as “the arousal of heartmind,”¹³ viz., the affective reaction of heartmind to external things, such as the feelings of love towards benefits and of hate towards harms. Therefore, I translate it as *intention*. One’s intentions toward concrete things could be good and evil because it is not the case that every intention complies with the utter goodness of *Tian*’s all-encompassing and spontaneous creativity, and thus responds to things appropriately so as to create evolving harmonies in the human world. Instead, our “habitual dispositions (習氣)”¹⁴ and “selfish desires (私慾)”¹⁵ obscure the original *good* state of heartmind and force

us to intend benefits and avoid harms not according to the cosmic principle of *Tian*'s creativity, but per our possessive, divisive, and combative needs. Our perception and pursuit of good and evil would consequently lose the nondualist nature of the fundamental state of heartmind and inevitably lead to disharmonies in society.

However, despite the potential for intentions to go astray from the fundamental state of heartmind, there always remains a consciousness integral to the state, which can pull back the strayed intentions and reorient them toward the right path. Wang terms this consciousness “conscientious knowing” (良知, *liangzhi*), and believes it has an innate epistemic ability to know morality as stated in the third WFS. Since *liangzhi* belongs to the fundamental state of heartmind continuous with *Tian*'s creativity, moral judgements made by *liangzhi* are also spontaneous and natural. As Wang says, “The heartmind can naturally know, . . . as one naturally knows to be commiserate with a baby about to fall into a well. This is what I mean by ‘conscientious knowing.’”¹⁶

Since the *liangzhi* spontaneously and perfectly knows good and evil, one just needs to maintain it while rectifying things, per the injunction of *liangzhi*. I'll highlight one major point of the fourth WFS for our later discussion: Wang's construal of *gewu* (格物, “handling things”) in the *Great Learning* as employing one's innate conscientious knowing to “rectify things”¹⁷ represents a major departure of Wang from his predecessor Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE). Zhu Xi understands *gewu* as “investigating things,” and envisions Ru self-cultivation as starting from a thorough investigation of one thing after another accumulatively.¹⁸ Only after one correctly understands how things fit and co-thrive together in evolving situations, viz., after “attaining the knowledge” of the values of things, one shall line up their intentions with the genuine value of things to rectify their own heartmind. Notably, Zhu Xi's approach to self-cultivation is intellectually and externally oriented, while Wang's is intuitively and internally anchored.

CRITIQUES

WFS generated vociferous debates among later Ru scholars, and new versions of the “four-sentence teaching” are continually created to perfect the interpretation of Kongzi's teaching of Oneness.¹⁹ Before presenting my own “five-sentence teaching,” I'll offer several critiques of WFS.

First, WFS implies that evil in the human world originates from habitual dispositions and selfish desires, and this evil origin diverges from the fundamental state of heartmind rooted in the utterly good *Tian*. However, isn't it the case that all human dispositions and desires are just as equal manifestations of *Tian*'s creativity as anything else? How can the utterly good *Tian* generate

evil dispositions and desires? WFS fails to answer these questions *and* creates a problem of evil analogous to Christian theodicy, which undermines the nondualist nature of WFS.

Second, WFS asserts that *liangzhi* spontaneously makes perfect moral judgements, and no other knowledge of external things is needed except the innate conscientious awareness of them.²⁰ This implies the unity of knowledge and action, since the perfect moral awareness of *liangzhi* demands immediate action, making the intellectual “investigation of things” advocated by Zhu Xi obsolete. However, in my view, traditional Ru virtues provide lasting moral guidance, but they are not “principles” as unalterable ready-to-use formulas. They are instead fundamental “metaphors and images (象),” the universal implication of which needs human intelligence to parse and human actions to embody in varying contexts. For instance, although the feeling of commiseration towards a baby about to fall into a well may be deemed undoubtedly good, we are still not sure whether it is unambiguously good in particular situations. For instance, what if the baby was suffering from a fatal illness that would produce a painful, drawn-out death?

Moreover, even if the feeling itself is unambiguously good at one moment, we still need empirical knowledge to tackle technical issues such as how to save the baby and how to prevent the recurrence of such a tragedy. In the face of all the ambiguities and complexities of morality, we need to investigate whether and how we should act spontaneously. More importantly, we need the courage to shoulder any mistake we may make regarding either the motive or the course of our moral pursuits, and relentlessly correct it in our future actions, as demanded by the spirit of daily renewal in the *Great Learning*. Since humans often fail to appropriately address moral ambiguity due to a lack of knowledge, WFS risks moral perfectionism and can expectedly lead to the disunity of knowledge and action.

Third, the problems of evil and moral perfectionism in WFS are connected to a deeper one: it fails to distinguish metaphysical from ethical goodness. WFS asserts that once selfish desires are eliminated and *liangzhi* is recovered, every human deed will then be spontaneously and utterly good, since each and every thing seen from the perspective of *Tian* is good. However, how does WFS account for simple facts such as the need to weed our gardens?²¹ If humans have to constantly eliminate harmful beings, are humans good at all? WFS fails to address these questions as well.²² A more convincing Ru theology of nondualism should distinguish the cosmic from human perspective on good and evil. It would then conceptualize the human pursuit of morality as an endless process of trial and error toward a sublime, not-fully-realizable metaphysical ideal. In the following, my endeavor to construct such a theology in light of Ru classics and WFS will be presented.

FIVE NEW SENTENCES FOR RU NONDUALISM

“The reality of *Tian* is utterly good with no evil. The fundamental state of heartmind tends towards good while evil exists. There are good and evil when intentions are aroused. Knowing good and evil is attaining awareness. Doing good and eliminating evil is handling things.” These are my five new sentences to present a contemporary Ru theology of nondualism which interprets Kongzi’s teaching of Oneness. I will use figure 13.1: A Chart of the Oneness that Runs Through Ruism (Confucianism) to illustrate the theology.

As the *Great Learning* indicates, the central concern of Kongzi’s teaching of Oneness is how to perfect human relationships so as to sustain human civilization. Therefore, the reading of the chart starts from the bottom. With some of the involved concepts explained above, my presentation of the chart will focus on the systematic interconnection of these concepts.

How can we make human relationships lovely and renewable? It is through the method of “empathy” in the *Analects* or “the way of measuring” in the *Great Learning*. This method includes its negative, positive, and

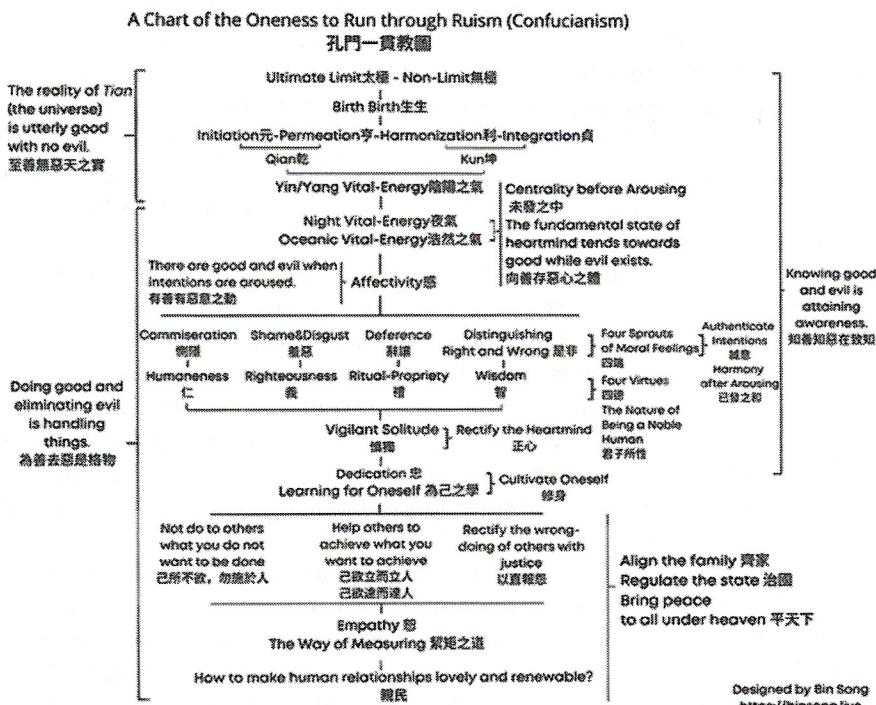


Figure 13.1. A Chart of the Oneness that Runs Through Ruism (Confucianism). Source: Bin Song

transformative aspects as expounded above, which extends what an individual genuinely desires and sincerely thinks of as right to others within his or her family, state, and eventually, to all under heaven.

However, without a further clarification of what one ought to genuinely desire for themselves, there is no way to effectively apply any of the three aspects of empathy or the method of measuring. We therefore need to pursue another endeavor named “dedication” and “learning for oneself” in the *Analects* to “cultivate oneself.” One’s genuine self shall behave in the same way no matter if he or she is alone or with others. The search for such an enduring and essential self is conducted via a method that the *Centrality and Commonality* calls “vigilant solitude,” which “rectifies the heartmind.” At this step, the program of self-cultivation elaborated by the *Great Learning* turns to its internal and spiritual dimension, with “spiritual” here referring to both the mental and psychological state of personhood and the connection of an individual to something larger than themselves.

According to the *Mengzi*, rectifying the heartmind entails rediscovering the nature of a noble human (君子所性). Such a nature refers to the four virtues which enable a person to live steadfastly through the uncertainties and vicissitude of human life. These four virtues are humaneness, righteousness, ritual-propriety and wisdom. Humaneness means universal love, righteousness refers to the right way to love in particular situations, ritual-propriety demands the appropriateness of behaviors to manifest humaneness and righteousness, while wisdom includes all knowledge necessary for the execution of the mentioned virtues. These four virtues systemize the teaching of virtue ethics in classical Ru texts. Since *Mengzi*, all proposed Ru virtues have been practiced under the normativity of these cardinal virtues.²³

Furthermore, *Mengzi* argues that these virtues are indicated by four incipient sprouts of moral feelings, and the spontaneity of these feelings speaks to the fact that human nature does have its innately good aspect. Since the *Great Learning* teaches that the rectification of heartmind is predicated upon the authentication of intentions, to rediscover the four incipient sprouts of moral feelings is to authenticate our intentions. In other words, when a baby is about to fall into a well, the affective and intentional reaction to “love” the baby and “hate” its distress provides a primary model for all human intentions that need to be justified on firm moral ground.

Nonetheless, embedding sprouts of moral feelings and their corresponding virtues within the good human nature still constrains Ru discourse in the realm of ethics. Consequently, the practice of these virtues does empower individuals to live a good life and sustain varying components of civilization. But where do these virtues ultimately come from? And how can we comprehend the “goodness” that the authentic self genuinely desires, not

only ethically but also metaphysically? Following the sequence of terms in the *Great Learning*, I describe the elevation of the Ru theology of nondualism from ethics to metaphysics as a process of “attaining awareness” that knows good and evil. For the sake of convenience, I will present the upper part of the chart in a top-down order, since Ru metaphysical discourse starts from the ultimate creative origin of the universe, *Taiji-Wuji*, the Ultimate Limit with No Limit.

With *Tian* designating the all-encompassing cosmic field within which every possible cosmic event transpires, Ultimate Limit is a phrase used by the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change* to refer to the non-theistic, ultimate creative act of *Tian* which creates everything from nothing. The ultimate creative act conditions everything without itself being conditioned, and therefore, Ultimate Limit is also named as Non-Limit by later Ruists such as Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073 CE). As noted above, Ultimate Limit constantly creates without ceasing in a process of “birth birth.” Contemplated holistically, the process of birth birth has four generic traits: initiation, permeation, harmonization, and integration. “Initiation” implies that without *Tian*, there would be nothing in the world, so *Tian* is the greatest initiator. *Tian*’s creativity permeates all things in the world since *Tian* gives rise to everything. While endowing each changing being with a determinate nature, *Tian*’s all-encompassing creativity makes it possible for humans to perceive all cosmic beings as an integrated whole, since all beings change, interact, and co-exist in the eternal cosmic scene of *Tian* comprising all possible temporal modes of past, present and future.

The supreme creativity of *Tian* is an ideal of harmonization because first, *Tian* is not a deity, and thus, *Tian* has no intention or plan prior to the actual act of creation. The harmonization of *Tian* is achieved constantly, instantaneously, and spontaneously, which is far superior to human pursuits of harmonization because the latter always involve ready-to-fail intentions, plans, and strivings. Second, *Tian* harmonizes all created beings because it allows the co-existence and co-becoming of all beings in the broadest scale of eternity. No human harmonization efforts can reach this far and succeed this completely, because humans, as finite beings, are merely able to manage the co-thriving of things involved in a certain context and to a certain extent, with many consequences of their efforts impossible to foresee and control.

Among these four generic traits of *Tian*’s creativity, the former two refer more to its proactive aspect since they initiate and permeate, whereas the latter two refer to the receptive one since they impart a unique nature to each co-changing cosmic being. Per the symbology of the *Classic of Change*, the former two pertain to the *Qian* (乾, vigor or heaven) aspect of *Tian*, while the latter two to the *Kun* (坤, yielding or earth). The *Qian* and *Kun* aspects of *Tian* co-generate the yin/yang vital-energies, the interaction of which

generates everything in the universe. From Ultimate Limit on the top to yin/yang vital-energies, I use a vertical bracket to demarcate the realm of *Tian*, viz., the whole universe. Every other term underneath will then belong to the human world.

While being peacefully and efficiently breathed in and out during our sleep, the yin/yang vital-energies replenish our body in the form of “night vital-energy.” The diligent cultivation of these translucent and delicate energies leads to an ecstatic experience described by Mengzi as “oceanic vital-energy.” At this moment, the yin/yang aspects of vital-energies essential to life are utterly balanced. Via their permeation of heaven and earth, we feel united with the entire universe. The *Centrality and Commonality* implies that this mystical feeling of unity signifies the ontological bond of humanity and *Tian*, viz., the fundamental state of heartmind. Accordingly, the contemplative practice of oceanic vital-energy leads the heartmind to the state of centrality before it is aroused by any external thing.

While achieving such a state of centrality, we would react to external things in the way that Mengzi depicts the four sprouts of moral feelings. This process is named “affectivity” by the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change*. Since they motivate us to realize the cosmic harmony of *Tian* in the human world, the incipient moral feelings (such as the one of commiseration toward a falling baby) can also be deemed as generating the state of “harmony” after the heartmind gets aroused per the *Centrality and Commonality*. Each of these feelings implies an authentic intention of the heartmind towards external things, and from here, we hearken back to the lower part of the chart. In the final analysis, the authenticity of intentions rests upon whether they manifest the metaphysical harmony of *Tian* appropriately in the human, ethical world.

With major terms of the chart understood as such, I’ll now reiterate the five new sentences to reinterpret Kongzi’s teaching of Oneness. In light of the above critiques of WFS, my new sentences are committed to processual nondualism, which continues the basic metaphysical framework of the analyzed lineage of Ru thought.

First, the reality of *Tian* is utterly good with no evil. From the perspective of *Tian*, everything in the universe manifests the spontaneous and all-encompassing harmonization of *Tian*, and hence, is metaphysically utterly good without any evil.

Second, the fundamental state of heartmind tends towards good, even as evil exists. This state derives from the ontological bond of humanity with *Tian*, and it can be vividly experienced when oceanic vital-energies are cultivated. “Good” is here understood both metaphysically and ethically, which means that human beings fundamentally desire to manifest the life-giving creativity of *Tian* in the human world. Nevertheless, evil always remains, with “evil” here understood in an exclusively ethical manner. As discussed

by my above construal of *Tian*'s creativity as the supreme ideal of human creativity, the life-affirming human endeavor of harmonization, which aims at the co-thriving of human and non-human beings in a civilization, can only be achieved within a certain context and to a certain extent. Since no one can achieve the infinite and all-encompassing harmonization of the cosmic creativity of *Tian*, evil always remains within human nature. Even the mystical experience of union with the universe via the contemplative practice of oceanic vital-energies cannot perfect human nature to its impeccable extent, since such an experience can only happen to a Ru practitioner momentarily. During the ecstatic moment itself, the potential to depart the mystical state and commit wrongdoings in the mundane world always remains.

This new distinction of metaphysical from ethical good, which does not exist in WFS, does not create a dualistic worldview because the metaphysical good of the universe consists in its all-encompassing, constant creativity, whereas the ethical good of humans (to which an evil potential is integral) manifests the metaphysical good in a process. In other words, the metaphysical good of the universe is manifested precisely by humans continually overcoming evil and creating good. Instead of positing good and evil in polar opposition to each other, my second sentence contrasts *ethical* good and evil while commanding a ceaseless process toward metaphysical goodness. Hence, it is committed to a Ru theology of processual nondualism.

Third, there are good and evil when intentions are aroused. Here, good and evil are defined in a straightforwardly human-centered, and thus, ethical perspective. There is always a mixture of good and evil within any intention toward things if the intention is evaluated by how much it contributes to the co-thriving of beings in society. As analyzed above, even the feeling of commiseration toward a falling baby is not unambiguously good. What humans ought to do concerning the rampant ambiguities of life is, as the *Great Learning* instructs, to gradually cultivate and expand our capacity for good so as to create more harmony in evolving situations.

Fourth, knowing good and evil is attaining awareness. To be fully aware of our living conditions replete with ambiguities, we shall try to know all possible forms of good and evil in both metaphysical and ethical terms. This “knowing” is surely not merely about intellectual investigation. Instead, it designates an integrative and endless learning process which addresses all conceivable human conditions such as our intellect, emotion, will, praxis, history, society, environment, etc. My interpretation of *zhizhi* in the *Great Learning* as “attaining awareness” follows the basic lineage of thought after Zhu Xi and denies the moral perfectionism of Wang Yangming, although it does incorporate Wang’s alleged commitment to the union of knowledge and practice. The vertical bracket of “attaining awareness” starts from “rectify

the heartmind,” which aims to discover the genuine self of a noble human and ends with Ultimate Limit. In a word, my fourth sentence speaks to the grounding effort of “authentic intentions” upon a comprehensive awareness of the living conditions of humanity rooted in the cosmic *Tian*.

Finally, doing good and eliminating evil is handling things. While knowing good and evil in the integrative process of “learning for oneself,” one needs to pursue good, toward being better, and eliminate evil, toward being less evil, in an endless process of trial and error.

This process denotes what humans are constantly preoccupied with. Hence, its bracket includes everything in the human realm. My translation of *gewu* as “handling things” has considered Zhu Xi’s “investigation of things” as well as Wang Yangming’s “rectifying things.” It indicates that the praxis of handling things is not only the origin of the full awareness of human conditions discussed in the fourth sentence, but also one major goal of Ru self-cultivation.

CONCLUSION

My construction above demonstrates the distinctive traits of Ru nondualism. I tentatively enumerate several of them as follows to conclude this chapter. First, Ru nondualism is a metaphysical-ethical theology which descriptively explains the order and existence of everything in the universe using one singular principle, viz., the creativity of *Tian*. In so doing, it normatively exhorts the realization of the all-encompassing harmonization of *Tian* within the human world in a distinctly humane way. It is processual-ontological par excellence and attends to both the dynamic nature of cosmic change and human self-cultivation, as well as to the generic ontological traits of such processes. Ethics, cosmology, and ontology are “run through” together in a vertical continuum, as indicated by figure 13.1. For each segment of such a continuum, the process of change and transformation to overcome nonbeing toward being, or to eliminate evil toward good, remains a constant.

Second, in such an anthro-cosmological continuum, good and evil are not in opposition to each other in a polarized manner. Instead, metaphysically, the utterly good *Tian* contains no evil, whereas ethically, evil is always intertwined with good. It depends upon human efforts to realize more good while eliminating more evil so as to manifest *Tian*’s utter goodness concretely in the human world. In a comparative perspective, it is the processual-ontological and nontheistic conception of ultimate reality (viz., *Tian*’s creativity) that equips Ruisim with conceptual tools to deal with the problem of evil prevalent in major world religions.

Third, humans’ endless ethical pursuit to do good and eliminate evil implies that ethical deeds add value to the non-human, natural world so as

to manifest *Tian*'s creativity in a distinctly human way. Ru nondualism is committed to humanism, which stands prominently in comparison to other ancient Chinese spiritual traditions such as Daoism.

Fourth, Chinese Buddhism, particularly its Chan lineage, was once an eminent interlocutor that provided Song through Ming Ruism with nondualist inspirations. But metaphysically, Buddhism does not entertain any idea similar to the “chain of being” that partitions reality into distinctive ontological layers. Ethically, neither does Buddhism seek an individual’s “genuine self” anchored in the ontological traits of the existing universe. In comparison, Ru nondualism safeguards the concept and value of “self.” A Ru committed to learning for him or herself autonomously expresses virtue in reciprocal and evolving relationships in order to fulfill their cosmic purpose of living as a noble human. Neither individualism nor communitarianism is capable of adequately characterizing this Ru conception of self, which instead aims to accomplish a harmonization of both “individuality” and “relationship.”

DISCUSSION

Response by Anthony Watson

Bin Song's essay “A Ru (Confucian) Theology of Nondualism in Light of Kongzi and Wang Yangming” provides critical insight into ways in which Confucian (Kongzi) theology (properly called Ruism, as explained by Song in his first footnote) might be applied to nondualist theology. His essay is rooted in the Ruist idea of Oneness, which Song associates with empathy and dedication, which implies a model of self-cultivation for “all under heaven.” From this conception, a nondualist theology emerges, outlined by Song in his own paper.

The paper provides a number of challenging concepts, the first of which is his consideration of Oneness as a universal value. I wonder if, like many other universal claims, an application of the model to all under heaven could lead to compulsion? While evidently Ruism is a moral system based on truth and a faith that people will be guided by empathy, could such a model be used to compel others against their will?

This idea of universality also challenges me to think further about the role of women in the Ruist system as described by Song. The foremost question that arises is the historical use of Ruism as a cultural system. Are non-Ruists ascribed the same roles? How does the concept of “all under heaven” apply here and is it possible or desirable to compel others to adhere to these values? The concept of *Tian* addresses these questions in a metaphysical way but leaves open questions of how such concepts would be applied in practice.

Ruism, like any system with claims of universality, also wrestles with questions of good and evil. Bin acknowledges this problem and then attempts to reformulate a Ruist theology that treats “the human pursuit of morality as an endless process of trial and error,” moving towards a state in which “*Tian* is utterly good with no evil,” selfish desires are eliminated, and “every human deed will then be spontaneously good.”

Even if these assumptions hold true, however, I wonder if this assertion leads to the desired result. Rightly guided actions in the present may well be moral, but does acting morally in the present shield us from unintended consequences in the future? As the future is always unknowable, how are we to determine a moral course of action?

Finally, how is morality determined in a complex world replete with differing cultural values? Christian theologians and canonists in the Middle Ages wrestled with questions of reconciling Christian values with natural law as they came into increasing contact with people holding different cultural and religious values than their own.²⁴ A Viking or Mongol view of morality is different from a Ruist or Christian perspective. I therefore worry that the central concern of Ruism is the perfection of human relationships “so as to sustain human civilization.” This social ethic sets up a dichotomy of civilized Ruists versus uncivilized Others that restates dualism in another way.

So ultimately we are back to a question of universal values. Song makes steps toward addressing this problem in his conclusion, where he acknowledges that good and evil exist as potential outcomes in the face of human intention. He states that the goal of eliminating “evil toward good” remains a constant. Certainly, the potential exists for an individual practicing Ruism to work toward the good; the open question remains as to whether Ruism, captive as it is to universal claims alongside other universal value systems, can be sufficiently dialogical when faced with differing values. As with other value systems, the Ruist pursuit of good must grapple with different cultural values. It must leave claims of universality behind in the process. In so doing, it gains a more dialogical, robust, and nondual orientation.

Response to Watson by Bin Song

At first, I need to clarify the structural nature of the Ru theology of nondualism, which I construct in the third section of the paper. My essay does not state that Ruism begins with “the human pursuit of morality as an endless process of trial and error” and concludes that, eventually, “every human deed will then be spontaneously good.” Instead, the order of the steps of self-cultivation should be reversed. In other words, in the constructed Ru nondualist theology, “*Tian* is utterly good with no evil” is taken to be an ideal of human action, the evil potential of which can never be eliminated.²⁵

Although humans strive to be as spontaneous and perfect as *Tian*, this ideal can never be fully realized in the human realm. Therefore, the result of such striving is that the human pursuit of morality is an endless process of trial and error. In light of my critique of Wang Yangming's moral perfectionism in the second section of the paper, we can discern that Ru self-cultivation necessitates an unending process of investigation, rectification, and self-renewal, none of which ever provides absolute certainty or reasons of discontinuing self-perfection. Hence, I have challenged Wang's moral perfectionism with my own corrective.

All other questions of Anthony's set doubt upon the legitimacy and feasibility of universalist ethics. It seems that most of these questions do not pertain to the presented Ru theology of nondualism *per se*, but they can be asked of *any* universalist value system. If these questions are primarily about the general nature of ethical universalism, then, a philosophical commitment to the fallibility of ethical argumentation safeguards the viability of universalist ethics. In other words, different ethical worldviews need to first clarify to what extent values can be deemed universal, and then draw upon all available methods of ethical argumentation (such as collecting evidence, checking coherence, scrutinizing practicality, etc.) to discern which ethical discourse will best promote those universal values. During the process, the nature and scope of the ethical context may change due to new objective circumstances or shifting ethical emphases. As with any other philosophical argument, once this change happens all the conclusions of previous ethical considerations must be reconsidered and, if necessary, rectified. The emerging results of such a process would still make universal value claims, but these claims are always fallible, processual, and open to enrichment and revision.

For instance, the whole human species can be tentatively taken as one among many contexts within which to define and refine universalist ethics. The Ru ethic of humaneness, the Christian ethic of agape, and the Buddhist ethic of compassion can all converse with each other about whether any of these values (i.e., humaneness, agape, and compassion) are genuinely universal for the co-flourishing of humanity, as well as whether any of these spiritual value systems can effectively promote the universal well-being of the human species. Once the living conditions of humanity change, with the environmental crisis as an example, the conversations need to be relaunched and reconsidered. However, the dynamic and interpenetrating nature of this ethical conversation does not preclude the possibility that all three ethical worldviews can claim to be universal, and they can be practiced together in varying circumstances.

Of course, ethics is not just a matter of discursive argumentation. The cultivation and transformation of the human self via the method of ethical

persuasion is equally important. So, how can we avoid “compulsion” when we have to urge anyone to do anything? First, it is not the case that compulsion should be avoided at all costs, because the system of law and punishment rests upon the necessity of coercion to deter human behaviors commonly judged wrong. Second, one meaning of being a Ru (儒) is to remain “soft (柔),” which implies primarily relying on “influence” rather than “compulsion” to transform other people’s moral states. Using the Ru theology of nondualism in figure 13.1 of my paper, this soft approach of ethical persuasion requires one to be dedicated (忠) to cultivating one’s own virtues first, and then, to employ the so-called “way of measuring” or “empathy” to influence other human fellows so they morally cultivate themselves as well, without demanding any successful results of such influencing. One component of this way of measuring is to “not do to others what you do not want to be done.” Hence, a central commitment of Ru nondualist ethics is to be simultaneously universalist and to avoid inappropriate compulsion in the process of ethical persuasion.

NOTES

1. “Ru (儒)” means a civilized human. It had been the original name of the tradition before the misnomer “Confucianism” was created by observing outsiders in the colonial eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this chapter, “Confucianism” will be written as “Ruism” or the “Ru tradition,” and “Confucian” or “Confucianist” will be written as “Ru” or “Ruist.” When used as a noun, the plural of “Ru” or “Ruist” is “Ru” or “Ruists.” The Ru tradition in the concerned period is also termed Neo-Confucianism in Western scholarship.

2. Passage numbering of the *Analects* follows Edward Slingerland, *Confucius Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2003). I modified the translation.

3. See *Analects* 14.24.

4. Wing-Tsit Chan, trans., “The Great Learning,” in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 87. I modified the translation.

5. *Mengzi* 2A, see Bryan W. Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 46–47.

6. Van Norden, *Mengzi* 2A, 38–39.

7. Chan, “Centrality and Commonality,” in *A Source Book*, 98.

8. Chan, “The Philosophy of Change,” in *A Source Book*, 266.

9. Chan, “Centrality and Commonality,” 109.

10. Wang Yangming, *Complete Works of Wang Shouren* 王陽明全集 (Shanghai: Shang Hai Gu Ji Chu Ban She, 1992), 112. The translation of Wang’s words is my

own. A detailed analysis of the formation of WFS refers to Chen Lai, *The State of Being and Non-being: The spirit of Wang Yangming's Philosophy* 有无之境: 王阳明哲学的精神 (Bei Jing: Ren Min Chu Ban She, 1991), 193–202. Albeit not having thematized nondualism, these English works furnish insightful interpretations of WFS: Tu Wei-ming, “An Inquiry into Wang Yang-ming’s Four-Sentence Teaching,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 7, no.2 (October 1974): 32–48; and Chung-ying Cheng, “Consistency and Meaning of the Four-Sentence Teaching in ‘Ming Ju Hsüeh An,’” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July 1979): 275–294.

11. Wang, *Complete Works*, 29. 119.
12. Wang, *Complete Works*, 29.
13. Wang, *Complete Works*, 6.
14. Wang, *Complete Works*, 984.
15. Wang, *Complete Works*, 2.
16. Wang, *Complete Works*, 2.
17. Wang, *Complete Works*, 6.
18. Zhu Xi’s interpretation of *gewu* refers to Zhu Xi, *The Complete Works of Master Zhu* 朱子全書, vol. 6 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2002), 13–28.
19. A recent summary of these new versions can refer to Cao Weijia, “An Initial Discussion on the Structure of Wang Yangming’s Four Sentence Teaching 阳明四句教格局刍议,” *Theory Horizon* 理论界, No. 8 (2019): 22–27.
20. Wang, *Complete Works*, 71. Please also refer to my analysis of the latent anti-intellectualism of Wang Yangming’s moral philosophy in Bin Song, “Donald Trump, Mao Zedong and Religious Anti-Intellectualism,” in *Dead Precedents: Trump’s Parallel Lives*, ed. Michael Harvey (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2022), 94–110.
21. Wang discussed this issue in Wang, *Complete Works*, 29.
22. That Wang Yangming fails to distinguish metaphysical from ethical good is also noticed by Qian Mu, *Essays on Chinese Intellectual History* 中國學術思想史論叢 (Taipei: Dong Da Tu Shu Gong Si, 1979), 133–140.
23. About the system of Ru virtues from ancient China to the Han dynasty, please refer to Bin Song, “Contemporary Business Practices of the Ru (Confucian) Ethic of ‘Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues (三綱五常)’ in Asia and Beyond,” *Religions* 12, no. 10 (2021): 895. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100895>.
24. James Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers, and Infidels*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979).
25. My comparison of moral ideals in the *Gospel of John* and the *Mengzi* elaborates my argument here. See Bin Song, “Ideal and Reality: An Interreligious Reading of the *Gospel of John* and the *Mengzi*,” in *Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, edited by Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), pp. 302–307.

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