Philosophy and Psychopathy: Wang Yangming's Theory of Oneness as Case Study

DAVID W. TIEN

Pre-publication Draft dated June 2015

(For inclusion in Philip Ivanhoe, Owen Flanagan, and Victoria Harrison, *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundary of Self* (Columbia University Press). This chapter was pulled from the volume just before it went to the printers because a feminist academic was offended by (her perception of) my past.)

Empirical studies in recent years have demonstrated that philosophers of ethics are no more ethical in their behavior than philosophers in other fields, nor does their classroom instruction result in an improvement in moral attitudes among their students. While many philosophers dismiss these findings as irrelevant, I shall argue that they lead to a dilemma of sorts for modern, professional philosophers.

The dilemma begins with the question, "Does effective moral reasoning require relevant emotional engagement?"

If the answer is, "Yes," then the empirical evidence appears to demonstrate that professional philosophers are doing a poor job of moral reasoning. If the answer is,

"No," then—based on the latest research findings on psychopathy—psychopaths are at no disadvantage in doing moral philosophy. And if moral philosophy requires "a reflective distance from practice" (Rini 2012), then psychopathy might actually provide an advantage in the practice of moral philosophy. This negative option may not strike philosophers as a problem, so part of the aim of this paper is to explain why moral philosophers should worry about this result.

After reviewing the latest research findings on psychopathy, I turn to the case of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) and present how he attacked non-practical and non-emotional approaches to moral theorizing. Through an analysis of his philosophy of oneness, I shall elucidate why he thought such approaches were not just practically useless but were in fact fatal to society and ethical life.

"Knowledge and Action" in Modern, Professional Philosophy

"Once we start talking about the practical applications of philosophy in real world, day-to-day life… we cease doing philosophy." As a graduate student, I heard this statement uttered by a prominent philosophy professor of an Ivy League university. And I heard some variant of this several times each year during guest lectures and seminars at my university. While that particular philosopher did not work in ethics, one would think that surely professors of *moral* philosophy ought to care about whether their work makes any difference in the moral behavior and attitudes of people in the "real world."[1]

In a recent study on the moral behavior of ethicists, Joshua Rust and Eric Schwitzgebel marshall empirical evidence showing that ethicists, despite expressing more stringent normative attitudes on some issues, do not behave much differently morally from other non-ethics professors (see also Schwitzgebel and Cushman, forthcoming). And on some measures, ethics professors appear to behave worse (Rust and Schwitzgebel 2014). In addition, a recent study has shown that university ethics instruction has almost no influence on student attitudes (Schwitzgebel 2013). What could explain this apparent "motivational inertness" of professional ethics study? In an insightful blog post entitled, "On Whether the Job of an Ethicist Is Only to Theorize about Morality, Not to Be Moral," Schwitzgebel writes "Ethicists sometimes react to my work by saying, 'My job is to *theorize* about ethics, not to live the moral life.'" (Schwitzgebel 2012).

In one of the comments to this post, later cited by Schwitzgebel as exemplary of the attitudes of professional ethicists towards his findings (Schwitzgebel 2013), Regina Rini expresses something like a moral externalist view of the problem, writing:

In fact, the task of moral philosophy is marked by a reflective distance from practice… In order to question and probe the received moral positions of one's own culture, one needs to be able to detach philosophizing from action. In a sense, one needs to be able to take one's ethical views "offline" in order to subject them to reflective scrutiny.

If that's right, then a gap between theory and practice may very well be a psychological prerequisite of doing moral philosophy. The moral philosopher's behavior goes on auto-pilot, defaulting to conventional standards, and so can be minimally distinguished

from the behavior of others, even while the moral philosopher's theory may widely diverge. (Rini 2012)

Her view—and the view, it seems, of many professional philosophers in modern universities, including both moral internalists and externalists—is that the activity of philosophy properly conducted *requires* a detachment from practice and action, "defaulting to conventional standards."

Similarly, Schwitzgebel in a much earlier post muses that there are at least two types of ethical reflection that are often conflated. One is "the kind of ethical reflection that leads to moral improvement." This kind of reflection is "*emotionally engaged* with the affected parties—reflection that involves empathy, sympathy, trying to see things from the other's perspective, keying into one's feelings of shame, disgust, and visceral approval" (Schwitzgebel 2006; italics in original). The other kind of ethical reflection is "philosophical reflection (as actually practiced by philosophers)," which is typically "cooler," more detached, abstract, and theoretical. Contra Rini and others, Schwitzgebel wonders whether this philosophical reflection (vs. emotionally engaged reflection) may actually "conceal and rationalize immoral desires that we might discover if we reflected with more (or more explicit) emotional engagement" (Schwitzgebel 2006). So what roles should the emotions and motivations play in the modern practice of moral philosophy?

Psychopathy, Philosophy, and the Moral/Conventional Distinction

Enter the psychopath. In the mind of the average person, the term "psychopath" tends to be associated with serial killers like Ted Bundy or violent villains like Batman's

nemesis, The Joker. But clinical psychopathy is much more inclusive than that. In fact, if professional philosophers are a representative cross-section of the general population (admittedly, they are surely not), based on estimated attendance figures of 2000 registrants, the Eastern APA Convention would be hosting at least 20 philosophers each year who are suffering from clinical levels of psychopathy. And these philosophers might very well be among the top practitioners of the profession. Psychopathy expert and Canadian psychologist Robert Hare estimates that one percent of the general population suffers from psychopathy, and one study in *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* found that 4 percent of a sample of 203 corporate professionals met a clinical threshold for psychopathy (Babiak, Neumann, and Hare 2010).

In this section, I first briefly summarize the state of the research on psychopathic moral reasoning as it relates to the question at hand, address the objection that psychopaths are poor at moral reasoning, and then draw their connection to the practice of professional philosophy.

Psychopathy is a disorder characterized by pathological lying, manipulativeness, Machiavellianism, a grandiose sense of self-worth, superficial charm, callousness and a lack of empathy, a lack of remorse or guilt, failure to accept responsibility for one's own actions, emotional shallowness, proneness to boredom, a parasitic lifestyle, a lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility, poor behavioral controls, early behavioral problems, juvenile delinquency, criminal versatility, many short-term relationships, and promiscuous sexual behavior (Hare 2003; Hare and Neumann 2006).

Clinical psychopathy encompasses a variety of negative tendencies besides physical violence and crime.[2]

Early observations in psychopathic moral reasoning contended that at the heart of psychopathy lies a deficit not in their knowledge of right and wrong, but in emotional processing and behavioral control (Cleckley 1941). Subsequent research confirmed the hypothesis that individuals with psychopathy understand right and wrong but that this knowledge does not guide their conduct. Studies among females with psychopathy can accurately identify moral norms but they nonetheless fail to utilize this knowledge when doing so would compete with immediate, personal goals (Simon et al., 1951). Studies among psychopathic males have yielded even more startling results, for example, that psychopathic male participants performed better than controls on Kohlberg's Moral Judgment scale, which challenges respondents to freely justify their judgments in various moral dilemmas (Link et al., 1977). These studies supported the view that psychopathy is characterized, not by moral knowledge deficits, but perhaps only by emotional or motivational abnormalities (Aharoni et al., 2012).

Until very recently, the prevailing view of psychopathic moral reasoning departed from these early findings and contended that psychopathic individuals cannot properly distinguish between moral wrongs and other types of wrongs (Blair 2007). On this view, psychopaths are able to spot transgressions and to identify acts as impermissible, but they cannot tell which acts are morally wrong as opposed to only wrong conventionally. This view drew from observations of behaviorally disordered children, who have been shown to judge particular moral violations as less wrong than that of

healthy controls (Nucci & Herman 1982). In Blair's view, it is precisely because psychopathic individuals lack a normal emotional appraisal of harmful acts that they fail to distinguish moral wrongs from conventional wrongs (Aharoni et al., 2012). Philosophers went on to interpret Blair's result as evidence that psychopathic individuals appear to lack distinctively moral knowledge (Nichols 2002; Levy 2007).

The view developed by Blair and picked up by philosophers was built on the basis of a key distinction between moral and conventional wrongs. Prototypical examples of moral wrongs include those killing or injuring other people, stealing their property, or breaking promises. Prototypical examples of conventional wrongs include wearing gender-inappropriate clothing (e.g. men wearing dresses), licking one's plate at the dinner table, and talking in a classroom when one has not been called on by the teacher. Philosophers approaching this issue have tried to specify the features that a rule must have if it is to count as moral or conventional, though no consensus has emerged (Kelly et al., 2007). Starting in the mid-1970s, a number of psychologists, following the lead of Elliott Turiel, offered characterizations of the distinction between moral and conventional rules and have gone on to argue that the distinction is both psychologically real and psychologically important (Turiel 1979; Turiel 1983; Nucci 2001). Moral and conventional types of acts were distinguished along four dimensions: whether the wrongness of the act is judged as (1) independent of permission by relevant authorities, (2) involving a violation of physical welfare, rights, or standards of fairness, (3) temporally and geographically universal, and (4) serious. Blair built his theory of psychopathic moral reasoning on this moral/conventional distinction.

Challenging this predominant view, Daniel Kelly and Stephen Stich compiled a growing body of evidence indicating that the conclusions the moral/conventional model was designed to explain are themselves problematic and question whether these dimensions are definitional of moral classification (Kelly and Stich 2008). A major part of their critique of the conclusions drawn from moral/conventional task studies is that these studies have focused on an overly narrow range of rules and transgressions. Another major critique is that Turiel and Blair's moral/conventional distinction is begging the question. But even if the moral/conventional distinction were to hold up to their attacks on the theory, the distinction suffers further from empirical problems.

A relatively recent study by Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong, and Kiehl directly challenges the empirical validity of the Blair study. Aharon and colleagues argue that Blair's studies do not present direct evidence that psychopathic individuals fail to distinguish moral from conventional transgressions and that this premise in the Blair study was only inferred from the psychopathic subjects' tendencies to categorize all transgressions as morally wrong, including the conventional transgressions (Aharoni et al., 2012). In these earlier studies, psychopathic participants did not rate both sets of acts as highly permissible. Instead, they rated all acts as markedly impermissible, as if both "moral" and "conventional" transgressions were considered morally wrong (Blair, 1995; Blair et al., 1995). Blair and colleagues originally explained this counter-intuitive effect as a product of social desirability factors. Because psychopathic individuals, particularly incarcerated ones, tend to be concerned with impression management, and because they could not distinguish between the moral and conventional acts, these participants

must have hedged their bets by over-rating all acts as wrong and authority independent. Others have cast doubts that failures in the classic moral-conventional task necessarily represent failures in moral understanding (Maibom 2008). So Aharoni and colleagues sought to test the hypothesis that psychopathic individuals' true deficits in moral judgment would be apparent if only the social incentives to over-classify transgressions as moral were removed.

The findings by Aharoni and colleagues show at least three reasons to conclude that, contrary to Blair's findings, psychopathic performance as a whole was in fact on par with average performance of the entire sample. First, all subjects performed at levels significantly greater than chance regardless of psychopathy level and method of measurement. Second, the null effect was independent of statistical method (e.g., linear regression, curvilinear regression, t-test). Third, the institutional sample size used by Aharoni and colleagues—which was substantially larger than the previous studies of this kind, including the ones by Blair and colleagues (Blair, 1995; Blair et al., 1995)—should have been large enough to detect true correlations between psychopathy total score and task accuracy, and yet no such effect was observed (Aharoni et al., 2012).

Thus, Aharoni and colleagues conclude that an inability to distinguish moral from conventional wrongs—a lack of distinctively moral knowledge—is not an adequate explanation for the psychopathic individuals' lack of concern for others. If transgressive attitudes and behavior by psychopathic individuals do not result from a basic failure to understand moral wrongfulness, then the causes of their transgressions must lie elsewhere (Maibom 2008).

Indeed, when scholars theorize that psychopathic individuals understand moral norms but don't care about them, this suggests that the explanations for their antisocial behavior might be better sourced in emotional or motivational processes (Aharoni et al., 2012). We can now arrive at the philosophy/psychopathy dilemma for professional moral philosophy.

The Philosophy/Psychopathy Dilemma and Wang Yangming on Applying Oneness

Is it—as Regina Rini and many other philosophers would have it—better while doing philosophy for moral philosophers to detach themselves from emotional commitments, bracket action and practice, and take their personal, ethical views "offline"? Or, to put it more simply:

Does effective moral reasoning require relevant emotional engagement?

If "Yes"

If the answer is "yes," then one should be considerably dismayed by the Rust and Schwitzgebel findings that ethics professors do not behave much better morally, and in some cases, actually behave worse, than non-ethics professors. The evidence points to the poor performance of professional philosophers in understanding ethics.

A great tradition of thought, dominant in a major part of the world for almost two and a half millennia, would agree with this assessment. To elucidate this, I take as case study the eminent Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming, though similar themes and views are repeated throughout the history of East Asian philosophy.

Wang is one of the most influential thinkers in East Asia in the past millennium. In addition to being a great philosopher and teacher of ethics, Wang was a renowned military general and political leader who survived multiple unjust exiles and corporal punishments. He achieved monumental successes in key military campaigns and directly improved the lives of many thousands through his active leadership in public affairs and civil works.[3]

Not only was Wang exceptionally active in public life, in his philosophical teachings as well, he employed an "expedient means" style of pedagogical method, in which he tailored the content of his lessons to the specific needs of the individual student (CXL, Preface; see Ivanhoe 2000 and 2002, and Tien forthcoming). This has sometimes resulted in extreme prescriptions, injunctions, or declarations for "shock value" to galvanize his target audience into action or to engender a desired emotional response.

To make sense of Wang's teachings that appear more extreme, a useful heuristic is first to attempt to ascertain the desired action or emotion he is aiming to produce in his audience. Xu Ai 徐愛 (1487-1518), Wang's student and the main editor of Wang's most influential work wrote, "Because the original teaching had disappeared, I was shocked and hesitant when I first heard the Master's instructions and did not know where to start. Later on, as I heard him more, I gradually realized that his teachings are to be applied to one's life and to be concretely carried out…" (CXL Vol. 1, Sec. 14).

Why this emphasis on application and action? One of the key themes in Wang's philosophy is the "Unity of Knowledge and Action" (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一) (Tien 2004).

In explaining his doctrine of *zhixing heyi*, Wang draws on a distinction, illustrated in a captivating way by his predecessor Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), between "real knowledge" (*zhen zhi* 真知 and "ordinary knowledge" (*changzhi* 常知):

Real knowledge is different from *ordinary knowledge.* I was once with a farmer who had been mauled by a tiger, when someone happened to mention that a tiger was mauling people in the area. [Naturally], everyone was alarmed. But this one farmer had on his face an expression that differed from the rest. Everyone, even a child, knows tigers maul people, but they do not posses *real knowledge.* It is only *real knowledge* if it is like that of the farmer. When people continue to do what they know they should not do, this is because they do not *really know* it is wrong. If they *really knew*, they would not do it. (Cited in Ivanhoe 2000).

Clearly, Wang is a strong motivation internalist when it comes to moral knowledge. Wang would have argued that psychopaths lack "moral knowledge," even while they can have perfect "ordinary knowledge" of the moral case. Moreover, he would probably have viewed modern professional philosophers who fail to apply what they write about and teach as also deficient in real knowledge of moral norms.

This wasn't just a theoretical distinction or preference for Wang. He saw the hypocrisy of the pedantic scholarship of his time as one of the root causes of the immorality and decay of society and the kingdom. He repeatedly called for a wholesale rejection of this attitude toward moral theorizing and education. Echoing the ancient text of Mencius,

Wang feared the slippery slope resulting from permitting the wrong kind of moral learning to flourish:

If the doctrine of "pulling up the root and stopping up the source" does not clearly prevail in the world, people who study to become sages will be increasingly numerous and their task increasingly difficult. They will then degenerate into animals and barbarians and still think this degeneration is the way to study to become a sage… (CXL Vol. 2, Sec. 142)[4]

What is the harmful kind of moral learning that Wang is attacking here? The context of late imperial China was that these scholar-officials who comprised the social and political elite of China had to pass difficult written exams, taken under arduous circumstances, and against incredible odds (Elman 2000). While the content of the exam material was primarily the Confucian Classics and the commentaries of another great Neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200)—full of rich ethical theory and real world application—many students focused on mere memorization and recitation of the texts, trying to perfect the stylized type of prose required in the imperial exams, and concentrating their attention on textual criticism of the Classics and commentaries, rather than on the practical application of the philosophies and lessons contained within. Many of the great Neo-Confucian philosophers believed this focus was the problem.

One of the most salient, recurring themes in the Neo-Confucian tradition is the lament against moral theorizing devoid of appropriate emotional or motivational response,

against abstract moral philosophizing without real world application, against knowledge without action. How would this kind of abstract, non-practical moral learning lead to ethical degeneration?

Thus the practice of mere textual criticism developed and those teaching it were made famous. The practice of memorization and recitation developed and those advocating it were regarded as extensively learned. The writing of flowery compositions developed and those indulging in it were regarded as admirable. Thus with great confusion and tremendous cacophony, they set themselves up and competed with one another, and no one knew how many schools there were. Among tens of thousands of approaches and thousands of perspectives, no one knew which to follow. It was as if the students of the world found themselves in a theater where a hundred plays were being presented. Actors cheered, jeered, hopped, and skipped. They emulated one another in novelty and in ingenuity. They forced smiles to please the audience and competed in appearing clever. All this rivalry appeared on all sides. The audience looked to the left and to the right and could not cope with the situation. Their ears and eyes became obscured and dizzy and their spirits dazed and confused. They drifted day and night and remained for a long time in this condition, as if they were insane and had lost their minds, and none had the self-awareness and understanding to return to their heritage of Confucian learning. Rulers of the time were also fooled and confounded by those teachings and devoted their whole lives to empty theorizing without understanding what they meant. Occasionally some rulers realized the emptiness, falsehood, fragmentariness, and unnaturalness of this learning, and heroically roused themselves to great effort, which

they wished to demonstrate in concrete action. But the most they could do was no more than to attain money, power, victory, and profit. (CXL Vol. 2, Sec. 143)

Not only did Wang consider mere theorizing without proper emotional engagement or practical action useless, it was downright dangerous.

Could the same argument be turned against Wang Yangming and Neo-Confucian philosophy? Specialists in Neo-Confucian philosophy often regret that Neo-Confucian metaphysical commitments get in the way of more widespread appeal of this tradition of thought (Tien 2010). For example, Wang's outstanding essay, "Inquiry on *The Great Learning*," opens with this famous passage on the concept of oneness:[5]

The great man regards Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the Middle Kingdom as one person… That the great man can regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body is not because he deliberately seeks to do so, but because it is natural to the benevolent nature of his mind that he do so. Forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things is not true only of the great man. Even the mind of the minor man is no different. Only he himself makes it minor. Thus when he sees a child about to fall into a well, he cannot help but feel frightened and sympathetic. This shows that his humanity forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when he observes the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, he cannot help feeling unable to bear their suffering. This shows that his humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and

animals are sentient beings as he is. But when he sees plants broken and destroyed, he cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that his humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as he is. Yet, even when he tiles and stones shattered and crushed, he cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that his humanity forms one body with tiles and stones. This means that even the mind of the minor man contains the benevolence that forms one body with all. (WWCGQS 26:1b)

What is a modern thinker to make of this? First, let's examine Wang's metaphysical claim about the tiles and stones.

In his analysis of this important passage, Bryan Van Norden explains the interpretive challenge of the passage among modern Wang scholars. He sees great difficulty in Wang's assertion of the natural "concern and regret" we must feel when we "tiles and stones shattered and crushed":

This claim is important for Wang's argument, because he takes this reaction to be evidence for the conclusion that our minds are ultimately "one Substance" with everything in the universe, not merely with members of our species, or other sentient creatures, or other living things. We can perhaps motivate Wang's intuition by considering how we might react if we saw that someone had spray painted graffiti on Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. The defacement of this scenic beauty would probably provoke sadness in those of us with an eye for natural beauty. However, it is certainly not obvious that everyone manifests even sporadic concern for "tiles and stones," which is what he needs for his conclusion. (Van Norden 2014)

Granted, Wang and other pre-modern thinkers have wildly different metaphysical views from contemporary philosophers. However, what Wang is advocating in his opening passage is not as far-fetched as some academics make it out to be. It is relatively easy to follow Wang's reasoning up to the part on feeling regret for broken tiles and stones. Notice that in each step of the sequence, the intensity of emotion is reduced, from "frightened and sympathetic" (怵惕惻隱 chuti cheyin), to "unable to bear their suffering" (不忍 buren), to "pity" (憫恤 minxu), and finally, to "regret" (顧惜 guxi). The feeling of alarm and fright human beings experience upon seeing a child drowning is much stronger and more intense than the feeling they get upon seeing a shattered non-living object.

Staying with this theme of oneness, here's a second observation about Wang Yangming's philosophy as expressed in that famous opening passage of the "Inquiry on *The Great Learning*." While statements such as, "The great man regards Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the Middle Kingdom as one person," (WWCGQS 26:1b) may at first appear to be describing his "heroic" metaphysics, in fact, Wang is just as concerned about real world practice in the daily lives of average elites (Ivanhoe 2002). He applies his teaching of the "unity of knowledge and action" to oneness metaphysics. Examining this can illuminate Wang's theory of oneness and the multi-layered applications he had in mind.

Returning to his essay on "Pulling Up the Root and Stopping Up the Source," arguing against the slippery slope of impractical learning, Wang begins with the same thesis:

The mind of a sage regards Heaven, Earth, and all things as one body. He looks upon all people of the world, whether inside or outside his family, whether far or near, and if they have blood and breath, he sees them as his brothers and children. He wants to secure, preserve, educate, and nourish all of them, so as to fulfill his desire of forming one body with all things. (CXL Vol 2., Sec. 142)

But then he goes on to describe what the pay off is in terms of real life application and results:

People differed in capacity. Some excelled in ceremonies and music; others in government and education; and still others in public works and agriculture. Thus, in accordance with their moral achievements, they were sent to school further to refine their abilities. When their virtue recommended them to government positions, they were enabled to serve in their positions throughout life without change. Those who employed them desired only to be united with them in one mind and one character to bring peace to the people. They considered whether the individual's ability was suitable, and did not regard a high or low position as important or unimportant, desired only to be united with their superiors in one mind and one character to bring peace to the people. If their ability matched their position, they served throughout life in busy and heavy work without regarding it as toilsome, and felt at ease with lowly work and odd jobs without regarding them as mean. At that time people were harmonious and contented. They regarded one another as belonging to one family. (CXL Vol 2., Sec. 142)

And then Wang elaborates further how this less metaphysical sense of oneness makes a difference in everyday life and can be applied by the various members of society, not just philosophers, religious teachers, or intellectuals:

Those with inferior ability were contented with their positions as farmers, artisans, or merchants, all diligent in their various occupations, so as mutually to sustain and support the life of one another without any desire for exalted position or strife for external things. Those with special ability… came forward and served with their ability, treating their work as their own family concern, some attending to the provision of clothing and food, some arranging for mutual help, and some providing utensils, planning and working together to fulfill their desires of serving their parents above and supporting their wives and children below. Their only concern was that those responsible for certain work might not be diligent in it and become a heavy burden to them.

Thus Qi worked hard in agriculture and did not feel ashamed that he was not a teacher but regarded Xie's expert teaching as his own. Kui took charge of music and was not ashamed that he was not brilliant in ceremonies but regarded Boyi's understanding of ceremonies as his own. For the learning of their mind was pure and clear and had what was requisite to preserve the benevolence that makes them and all things form one body. Consequently their spirit ran through and permeated all and their will prevailed and reached everywhere. There was no distinction between the self and the other, or between the self and things. It is like the body of a person. The eyes see, the ears hear, the hands hold, and the feet walk, all fulfilling the function of the body. The eyes are

not ashamed of their not being able to hear. When the ears hear something, the eyes will direct they attention to it. The feet are not ashamed that they will not be able to grasp. When a hand feels for something, the feet will move forward. For the original *qi* (psycho-physical substance) feels and is present in the entire body. (CXL Vol. 2, Sec. 142)

For Wang, oneness was not just a metaphysical theory. The practical applications of metaphysical oneness were equally, if not more, important. The "real world," daily life applications of the oneness theme are more practical and relevant than his heroic metaphysics might at first suggest. Wang's application of his oneness theory of "no distinction between the self and the other, or between the self and things" is that individuals should view themselves as part of a family team, content and proud to fulfill one's respective role in society and to appreciate and regard as one's "own" the abilities, accomplishments, and understanding of the other members of the family team.

Thus, for Wang, to arrive at a true understanding of moral principles requires one's emotional engagement. Not only does it require emotional engagement, if done correctly, it also leads necessarily to practical application in the real world. Wang believed that armchair moral theorizing was not only not useful, it was downright dangerous to the moral fabric of society. This kind of armchair theorizing would take scholar-officials—the leaders of society—down the slippery slope to ruin. It would obfuscate the true heritage of Confucian learning, which was aimed at practical moral cultivation and "concrete action" in the real world. If the scholar-officials become "fooled and confounded" and "devote their whole lives to empty theorizing without

understanding," then they would lead astray the kings and emperors, leading ultimately to "falsehoods, fragmentariness, and unnaturalness." Wang believed this would then lead to the leadership's abandonment of moral cultivation and to the single-minded While it may be difficult for many modern of this learning, and heroically minded focus on the "attainment of money, power, victory, and profit" (CXL Vol. 2, Sec. 143). While it may be difficult for modern philosophers to see how an intense focus on theoretical problems far removed from everyday situations—such as the beloved trolley problems—could lead to the moral dissolution of a society, one hopes that the recent research by Schwitzgebel, Cushion, Rust, and others on the moral behavior of ethics professors could help serve as a wake up call to a profession that professes to specialize in teaching and research on ethics.

If "No"

Now let's revisit the philosophy/psychopathy dilemma.

If we agree with Rini, then the answer to the question should be something like, "No, effective moral reasoning in the professional practice of philosophy is best done while bracketing, detaching, and taking 'offline' our emotions. We need to philosophize without emotional engagement."

But if this were true, then psychopaths would have a natural advantage in doing moral philosophy because psychopaths really do understand that hurting others is morally wrong, despite the absence of motivation to do right. Shaun Nichols adduces research

showing that psychopaths are commonly regarded as rational individuals who really make moral judgments but are not motivated by them (Nichols 2002). And if psychopathic individuals can perform just as well, or better, than the controls in moral reasoning, then maybe it is to their advantage to be free of emotional hindrances.

In a relatively recent article, Blair presents evidence that the profound empathic dysfunction reported in the clinical description of psychopathy (Hare 1991) does not involve an impairment in the psychopathic individuals' abilities to represent the mental states of others, i.e., their thoughts, desires, beliefs, intentions, and knowledge, or what Blair refers to as the "Theory of Mind." Theory of Mind allows the attribution of mental states to self and others to explain and predict behavior. The evidence shows that individuals with psychopathy are unimpaired on measures of Theory of Mind. Indeed, there are no indications that any populations who show heightened levels of antisocial behavior are associated with Theory of Mind impairment (Blair 2007).

So while psychopathic individuals—especially those prone to boredom, impulsivity, irresponsibility—may not have the patience to discover the intrinsic pleasures of doing philosophy or the persistence required to get tenure as a professional philosopher, the psychopathic individual would theoretically make a lean, mean philosophizing machine with no messy, affective responses getting in the way of "cool," abstract, emotionless theorizing.

Some philosophers may have no problems with this. Their response might be, "So what?" After all, psychopaths probably don't care if we label them psychopaths, as long as we stay out of their way. And of course that road is open to them.

Wang's response would no doubt be that this road is really the slippery slope to degeneration to the level of "animals and barbarians." For much of imperial Chinese history—the time in which Wang was writing—scholar-officials were not only philosophers but also comprised most of the political leadership. The prerequisite for serving in the upper levels of government was high scholarly achievement and the passing of incredibly difficult imperial examinations (Elman 2000). So for much of the medieval and early modern Chinese periods, the intellectual elite were directly involved in setting the policies, governance, and even—as Neo-Confucians strongly believed—the moral tone of Chinese society. If the intellectuals were to go astray, losing themselves in "empty theorizing," they would take the imperial court and the governed masses down with them.

Conclusion

In sum, in response to the question, "Does effective moral reasoning require relevant emotional engagement?", if the answer is, "Yes," then professional philosophers appear to be doing a poor job of it, and if the answer is, "No," then psychopathic individuals would be at no disadvantage in conducting moral philosophy, and on the view that moral philosophy requires reflective distance from practice, psychopaths would be at an advantage in doing moral philosophy. This is the philosophy/psychopathy dilemma briefly stated. Some philosophers may not care that this aspect of psychopathy is

conducive to practicing moral philosophy. To explain why this response is dangerous, I explored Wang Yangming's philosophical approach and his theory of oneness.

Outside the scope of this paper include the question of how this relates to the moral internalism/externalism debates. There have also been fascinating findings in the latest neuroimaging research in both institutionalized and community samples implicating amygdala dysfunction in the etiology of psychopathic traits. A recent study by Marsh and Cardinale has found that reduced amygdala responsiveness disrupts processing of fear-relevant stimuli like fearful facial expressions (March and Cardinale 2014). Another tantalizing topic outside the scope of this paper is how these findings could further inform our understanding of psychopathic moral reasoning. [6]

ENDNOTES

[1] On the importance of emotions in philosophical reasoning, see for instance Hadot 1995 and Solomon 2003.

[2] Even among experts, there is still much confusion about the definition of psychopathy, especially in relation to sociopathy and the DSM-IV's antisocial personality disorder construct (Hare 1996). I chose to focus on psychopathy rather than sociopathy in this paper because the former has been studied more extensively and more literature exists on psychopathy currently.

[3] A superb introduction to Wang's philosophy is Ivanhoe 2009 and Ivanhoe 2002.

[4] Wang's use of *baben saiyuan* 拔本塞源 draws from the *Mengzi* 孟子 1:1.

[5] For my earlier, more detailed analysis of Wang's theory of oneness, see Tien 2012.

[6] For their instructive comments on earlier drafts, I'd like to thank the attendees of the "International Conference on Oneness in Philosophy and Religion," held at the City University of Hong Kong on April 25-27, 2015. I'd especially like to extend my appreciation and gratitude to the organizers, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Owen Flanagan, and Victoria Harrison, as well as the Eirik Harris for their individual feedback on the paper.

REFERENCES

CXL: *Chuan Xi Lu*. In *Wang Yangming Quanji*《王陽明全集》*, 2 volumes.* Wu Guang 吳光, Qian Ming 錢明, et. al., eds. (*Shanghai guji chubanshe* 上海古籍出版社, 1992).

Aharoni, Eyal; Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter; and Kiehl, Kent A. 2012. "Can Psychopathic Offenders Discern Moral Wrongs? A New Look at the Moral/Conventional Distinction." In *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 121.2: 484-497.

Babiak, Paul; Neumann, Craig; and Hare, Robert D. 2010. "Corporate psychopathy: Talking the walk." In *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*. 28.2: 174-193 (March/April 2010).

Blair, R. James R. 2007. "Empathic dysfunction in psychopathic individuals." New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 3-16.

Blair, R. James R. 1995. "A cognitive developmental approach to mortality: investigating the psychopath." In *Cognition*. October 1995. 57(1): 1-29.

Blair, R.J.R.; Jones, L.; Clark, F.; Smith, M. 1995. "Is the psychopath 'morally insane'?" *Personality and Individual Differences*. 19(5): 741–752.

Cleckley Hervey M. 1941. *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Reinterpret the So-Called Psychopathic Personality*. St. Louis: Mosby.

Elman, Benjamin A. 2000. *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China.* University of California Press.

Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault.* Wiley-Blackwell.

Hare, Robert D. 2012. "Comments by Dr. Robert Hare" http://www.hare.org/comments/comment2.html

Hare, Robert D. 2003. *Manual for the Revised Psychopathy Checklist* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON, Canada: Multi-Health Systems.

Hare, Robert D. 1996. "Psychopathy and Antisocial Personality Disorder: A Case of Diagnostic Confusion." In *Psychiatric Times.* 13.2 (1 February 1996).

Hare, Robert D. 1991. *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised*. Toronto, ON, Canada: Multi-Health Systems.

Hare, Robert D.; and Neumann, Craig. 2006. "The PCL-R Assessment of Psychopathy: Development, Structural Properties, and New Directions." In Christopher Patrick, ed., *Handbook of Psychopathy.* New York: Guilford. Pp. 58-88.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2009. *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism, Translated, with Introduction.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2002. *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2nd Edition.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2000. *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2nd Edition.

Kelly, Daniel; Stich, Stephen; Haley, Kevin J.; Eng, Serena; and Fessler, Daniel M. T. 2007 "Harm, Affect and the Moral/Conventional Distinction." In *Mind and Language*. 22.2: 117-131.

Kelly, Daniel; and Stich, Stephen. 2008. "Two Theories About the Cognitive Architecture Underlying Morality." In Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence, and Stephen Stitch, eds., *Innateness and the Structure of the Mind, Vol. 3: Foundations and the Future.* New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 348-366.

Levy, N. "The responsibility of the psychopath revisited." In *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*. 14(2): 129–138.

Link NF, Sherer SE, Byrne NP. Moral judgment and moral conduction in the psychopath. Canadian Psychiatric Associations Journal. 1977;22(7): 341–346.

Maibom, Heidi L. 2008. "The Mad, the Bad, and the Psychopath." In *Neuroethics*. 1: 167–184.

Marsh, Abigail A.; and Cardinale, Elise M. 2014. "When psychopathy impairs moral judgments: neural responses during judgments about causing fear." In SCAN. 9: 3-11.

Nichols, Shaun. 2002. "How Psychopaths Threaten Moral Rationalism, or Is it Irrational to Be Amoral?" In *The Monist*. 85: 285-303.

Nucci, Larry. 2001. *Education in the moral domain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nucci, L.P.; and Herman, S. 1982. "Behavioral disordered children's conceptions of moral, conventional, and personal issues." In *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology.* 1982 September 1982. 10(3): 411-25.

Rini, Regina. 2012. Comment.

http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.ca/2012/04/on-whether-job-of-ethicist-is-only-to.html?showComment=1333532727972#c1634538590100957292 Viewed 25 March 2015

Rust, Joshua; and Schwitzgebel, Eric. 2014. "The Moral Behavior of Ethicists and the Power of Reason." In Hagop Sarkissian and Jennifer Wright, eds. *Advances in Experimental Moral Psychology.* New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing. Pp. 91-109.

Schwitzgebel, Eric. 2013. "The Moral Behavior of Ethics Professors." http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~eschwitz/SchwitzPapers/EthicsClasses-131210a.htm Viewed 25 March 2015

Schwitzgebel, Eric. 2012. "On Whether the Job of an Ethicist Is Only to Theorize about Morality, Not to Be Moral." http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.ca/2012/04/on-whether-job-of-ethicist-is-only-to.html Viewed 25 March 2015

Schwitzgebel, Eric. 2006. "Emotional Engagement vs. Philosophical Reflection." http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.ca/2006/07/emotional-engagement-vs-philosophical_17.html Viewed 25 March 2015

Schwitzgebel, Eric; and Cushman, Fiery. Forthcoming. "Philosophers' Biased Judgments Persist Despite Training, Expertise and Reflection." Viewed at http://cushmanlab.fas.harvard.edu/docs/schwitzgebel_cushman_inpress.pdf

Simon, B.; Holzenberg, J.D.; Unger, J.F. 1951. "A study of judgment in the psychopathic personality." *Psychiatric Quarterly*. 25: 132–150.

Solomon, Robert C. 2003. *The Joy of Philosophy: Thinking Thin versus the Passionate Life.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Tien, David W. Forthcoming. "Wang Yangming's Moral Psychology and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy." In Justin Tiwald, Ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Philosophy.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Tien, David W. 2012. "Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40.1: 52-71.

Tien, David W. 2010. "Metaphysics and the Basis of Morality in the Philosophy of Wang Yangming." In John Makeham, ed., *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. Springer. Pp. 295–314.

Tien, David W. 2004. "Warranted Neo–Confucian Belief: Knowledge and the Affections in the Religious Epistemologies of Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and Alvin Plantinga," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion.* 55(1): 31–55.

Turiel, Elliott. 1983. *The Development of Social Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turiel, Elliott. 1979. "Distinct conceptual and developmental domains: social convention and morality." In the *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation.* 25: 77-116.

Van Nordern, Bryan. 2014. "Wang Yangming." http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wang-yangming/ Viewed 25 March 2015