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ON THE CLAIM “ALL THE PEOPLE ON THE STREET ARE SAGES”



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The famous statement from the Neo-Confucian tradition, “All the people on the street are sages” (满街人都是圣人), is commonly believed to have first been made in a short poem by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) about the famous Buddhist city of Quanzhou. In the poem, Zhu Xi writes: “This place has been called a Buddhist kingdom; all the people on the street are sages” (此地古称佛国，满街皆是圣人).¹ However, the statement is more frequently attributed to another Neo-Confucian philosopher, Wang Yangming (1472–1528), and it is often alleged to be a typical claim in his teachings. The attribution of the claim to Wang Yangming and the philosophical significance of the claim for Wang’s teachings may be partly due to passage 313 in the *Chuanxilu* 传习录, where Wang Yangming and his two disciples have a morally instructive exchange relating to this claim:

【313】先生锻炼人处，一言之下，感人最深。一日，王汝止出游归，先生问曰：“游何见？”对曰：“见满街人都是圣人。”先生曰：“你看满街人是圣人，满街人倒看你是圣人在。”又一日，董萝石出游而归，见先生曰：“今日见一异事。”先生曰：“何异？”对曰：“见满街人都是圣人。”先生曰：“此亦常事耳，何足为异？”盖汝止圭角未融，萝石恍见有悟，故问同答异，皆反其言而进之。

313. Our teacher [Wang Yangming]’s instruction can be as simple as one sentence yet it can profoundly enlighten and inspire us. One day, Wang Ruzhi returned from a leisurely walk. The teacher asked him, “What did you see (*jian* 见) in your walk? Ruzhi answered, “[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages.” The teacher said, “Did you look upon the people in the street as sages, or was it actually that the people in the street looked upon you as a sage among them?”² On another day, Dong Luoshi returned from a leisurely walk, went to see the teacher, and told him, “I saw (*jian* 见) a strange thing today.” The teacher asked, “What is strange?” Dong Luoshi replied, “[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages.” The teacher said, “This is after all an ordinary thing. Why do you think it is strange?”

Because Ruzhi did not quite get rid of his horn of arrogance [and probably did not really consider ordinary people on the street as having sagehood] and because Luoshi’s realization [that everyone indeed has sagehood] was dim, the teacher responded differently to the same statement. Yet, in each case he purposefully reversed what Wang Ruzhi and Dong Luoshi respectively said, in order to help them advance. (my translation)³

In understanding this claim at its face value, usually isolated from its embedded context, some readers of Wang Yangming wonder how naive and wishful he was in believing that all the people on the street were actually sages.⁴ For obviously he should have known that not all the people on the street were sages—sages are rare

(see *Analects* 7:26), and even Confucius did not regard himself as a sage (see *Analects* 7:34). On the other hand, other readers see the claim not as intending to be literally true, but rather as potentially true. This second group of readers, in their effort to make sense of the claim, have inserted an adverb of “potentially” into it: “All the people on the street are *potentially* sages.”⁵

Does this “reading into” maneuver do justice to the text of passage 313? What was the “original face” (本来面目) of the claim (or better, “utterance”) *in the context* of passage 313? Moreover, if we could indeed reasonably ascribe a conception of moral potentiality to Wang Yangming outside the context of passage 313 but in the text of the *Chuanxilu*, in what sense would he understand the concept?

In order to answer these questions, I have made a close reading of passage 313. In a nutshell, my findings are twofold. First, The common practice of treating the saying in question as a factual-sounding claim (questionably attributed to Wang Yangming) stems from a failure to understand it in its original context. When the saying is put back into its original context, it can be shown that it is *not* used as a factual or actuality claim,⁶ nor even as a potentiality claim (claiming that “All the people on the street are *potentially* sages”), but as an expression of an existential-moral attitude (understanding or realization) of Wang Yangming’s students, Wang Ruzhi (1483–1541) and Dong Luoshi (1457–1533): “[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages.” This first-person expression of attitude, in contrast to a factual (actuality) claim, or a potentiality claim, has nothing to do with (actually or potentially) true/false values. Rather, it (as an expression of attitude) can be deemed sincere or not, authentic or not. Second, Wang Yangming would probably not like the formulation “All the people on the street are sages (圣人)” (without the “I saw”), because for him there is a distinction between “sagehood/sageliness” (圣) and “sage” (圣人)⁷—although he saw everyone as innately having sagehood in the sense that they all have innate moral knowing (良知),⁸ he would not readily call everyone actually a sage. He argues that in order to strive to be a sage, one has to “extend,” *zhi* 致 (“reach,” “exert,” or “exhaust”), one’s innate moral knowing, but he stresses that such extending is immediately effective—any action of extending is immediately an expression of one’s innate moral knowing and *also immediately* (right here and right now) a striving effort of *being* a sage (in that particular regard). Finally, I will conclude with a few hermeneutic strategies in dealing with a seemingly simple passage in a philosophy classic.

To prove the two points above, not only will I carefully study every cue and hint in passage 313; I will also compare the utterance in question (“I saw that all the people on the street are sages”) with Wang Yangming’s other relevant expressions, such as “This innate moral knowing everybody has” (这良知人人皆有)⁹ and “There is a sage in everyone’s chest” (人胸中各有个圣人),¹⁰ as well as with the famous saying in *Mengzi* 6B2, “Everyone can become a Yao or a Shun” (人皆可以为尧舜).¹¹

The first point in 313 that is worth a close examination is that for Wang Yangming (and his students) the word “*jian*” 见 can be understood in two different senses. On the one hand, it can have the sense of “seeing something (e.g., a horse or a chariot) on the street” *without a proper* emotional engagement and *without a proper* will-

ing.¹² On the other hand, it can have the sense of “seeing something on the street” with a proper emotional engagement and with a proper willing.¹³ A morally proper “seeing,” according to Wang Yangming, is neither to see “naked” things out there (which, in his understanding of the integration of cognition and affection, is not possible) nor to see things from the perspective of “selfish desires” (*si yu* 私欲), but to see them from the perspective of “innate moral knowing.”

To show these two different senses of “seeing,” not only do we need to focus on the occurrences of the word *jian* 见 in passage 313; we also need to review Wang Yangming’s understanding of the interrelationship between “extending innate moral knowing” (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知), “seeing/realizing one’s nature” (*jian xing* 见性), and “hearing-seeing” (*wenjian* 闻见 or *jianwen* 见闻).

It is well known that Wang Yangming identifies his core teaching of “extending innate moral knowing” with “seeing/realizing one’s nature.” For him, “seeing/realizing one’s nature” is *not* simply to see or to hear factual happenings out there. He made this distinction between “seeing/realizing one’s nature” and “hearing-seeing” (factual happenings) explicitly in the following passage:

[330] 一友举佛家以手指显出，问曰：“众曾见否？”众曰：“见之。”复以手指入袖。问曰：“众还见否？”众曰：“不见。”佛说还未见性。此义未明。先生曰：“手指有见有不见。尔之见性常在，人之心神只在有睹有闻上驰骛，不在不睹不闻上着实用功。尽不睹不闻，实良知本体。戒慎恐惧，是致良知的功夫。学者时时刻刻常睹其所不睹，常闻其所不闻，功夫方有个实落处。久久成熟后，则不须着力，不待防检，而真性自不息亦。岂以在外者之闻见为累哉？”

330. A friend of Wang Yangming [one day] related a Buddhist story. In the story the Buddha stuck out a finger to show [what one sees or realizes], asking his disciples: “Did you see it?” (or “Have you seen it?”). The disciples answered, “Yes, we did.” Then the Buddha put the finger into his sleeve, asking again, “Do you still see it?” The disciples replied, “No, we do not.” The Buddha told them that they have not seen (realized) their (Buddha) nature. The friend was not clear about the point of the story. Wang Yangming explained: “A finger is sometimes seen and sometimes not, whereas your seeing/realizing your nature should be always constant. [However,] one’s mind is [usually] only occupied with what can be seen or heard [external objects out there] and not practically working on what is not seen or heard [innate moral knowing]. Conscientious exertion on what is not seen and not heard is actually extending your *benti* 本体 of innate moral knowing. Being cautious [over things one does not see] and apprehensive [over things one does not hear] are the *gongfu* (*kungfu* 功夫, work, effort) of extending innate moral knowing. When those who aspire to learn ‘see’ what is not seen and ‘hear’ what is not heard, their *gongfu* then has concrete application. When after a long time they have mastered the task, they would not need to exert energy, and without any caution or control their true nature will spontaneously operate without cease. How can seeing (or not seeing) or hearing (or not hearing) external things hamper [one’s moral knowing]?” (my translation).¹⁴

In this passage, Wang Yangming argues that seeing/realizing one’s nature is different from seeing an external object (e.g., a finger), which is sometimes visible and sometimes hidden. Seeing/realizing one’s nature does not depend on (and would not be bothered by) “seeing or hearing” *any particular* “external things.” The former

can be called a “seeing/realizing” in moral cultivation (道德修养之见), which Wang Yangming often uses “*jian*” 见 or “*jian de*” 见得 to describe, whereas the latter can be called external seeing and hearing (外在知见). This distinction of the two kinds of seeing is echoed in many other passages in the *Chuanxilu*. For example, Wang Yangming says, “Innate moral knowing of our moral nature does not come from hearing and seeing” (德性之良知，非由于闻见).¹⁵

However, Wang Yangming also contends that actual “seeing/realizing one’s nature” *cannot* be separated from “hearing-seeing.” According to him, “extending innate moral knowing”—which is the same as “seeing/realizing one’s nature”—and “hearing-seeing” indeed intertwine:

[168] . . . 良知不由见闻而有，而见闻莫非良知之用。故良知不滞于见闻，而亦不离于见闻。孔子云：“吾有知乎哉？无知也。”良知之外，别无知矣。故致良知是学问大头脑，是圣人教人第一义。今云专求之见闻之末，则是失却头脑，而已落在第二义矣。 . . . 大抵学问功夫只要主意头脑是当。若主意头脑专以致良知为事，则凡多闻多见，莫非致良知之功。盖日用之间，见闻酬酢，虽千头万绪，莫非良知之发用流行。除却见闻酬酢，亦无良知可致矣。故只是一事。

168. . . innate moral knowing does not come from seeing and hearing, and yet all seeing and hearing constitute the application of innate moral knowing. Therefore, innate moral knowing is not impeded by seeing and hearing, nor is it separated from seeing and hearing. Confucius said, “Have I had knowledge [that is, knowledge independent of innate moral knowing]? I have not.” Independent of innate moral knowing there is no other knowing. Therefore, the extending of innate moral knowing is the basic guiding idea for learning and the first principle of the teachings of the Sage. Nowadays people talk about solely seeking the subsidiary of external seeing and hearing, which is to fail to follow the basic guiding idea, and thus to fall to a secondary idea. . . . Generally speaking, the key to learning and *gongfu* is to attend to the basic guiding idea. If your basic guiding idea focuses on extending innate moral knowing, then, however much you may hear or see, all belong to the application of extending innate moral knowing. For in one’s daily life, although there is a vast variety of seeing-hearings and of dealings with others, there is nothing that is not the function and operation of innate moral knowing. Without seeing-hearing, without dealings with others, there will be no innate moral knowing to be extended. Therefore, seeing-hearing as well as dealings with others and extending innate moral knowing constitute one single process. (my translation)¹⁶

In this passage, Wang Yangming stresses that although “extending one’s innate moral knowing,” which comes to the same thing as “seeing/realizing one’s nature,” is different from “seeing external things,” the latter is not independent from the former. *What* and *how* one “sees and hears” is ruled or guided by one’s application (or failure of application) of innate moral knowing. One’s dispositional preference for or avoidance of a thing is already in one’s seeing of the thing. It is not the case that one first saw and recognized beauty and then (through a later-on added thought) started to like beauty, nor is it the case that one first smelled something stinky and then (through a later-on added thought) started to dislike it.¹⁷

Given Wang Yangming’s distinction between “seeing/realizing nature” and “seeing-hearing,” it is reasonable to assume that in passage 313, quoted above, he

was *not* interested in any factual report by his students (Wang Ruzhi and Dong Luoshi) of what (“external” happenings) they actually saw during their respective walks. He was rather interested in his students’ *understanding* or *realization* (*jian* 见 or *jiande* 见得) of his teachings (e.g., his ideas on “extending innate moral knowing” and “seeing/realizing one’s nature”) in their daily activities, such as taking “a leisurely walk.” In other words, the word *jian* 见 in the context of the passage has to be taken in the “thick” sense of “understanding” or “realizing,”¹⁸ not in the sense of a “naked” or “thin” seeing—a perception that does not involve understanding, emotion, and willing. This can be shown in the replies of both students to Wang Yangming’s question.

Wang Yangming’s initial question to Wang Ruzhi (“What did you see during your walk?”) may be answered in two ways: one is simply to report what fact he [Wang Ruzhi] saw on the street (as a factual observation), and the other is to express what he *understood* or *realized* (as self-understanding/realization) in what he saw on the street. However, since both Wang Ruzhi and Dong Luoshi assumed (or “knew”!) that their teacher was not asking them about what mere “external things” they had seen, neither of them replied to their teacher’s question (“What did you see?” and “What is [the] strange [thing you saw]?” respectively) by making any *factual* claims, such as “[I] saw a lot of people on the street” or “[I] saw many chariots on the street.” In other words, both students knew very well the difference between the above-mentioned two senses of “seeing.”

Unfortunately, however, many of us (readers of Wang Yangming) may have forgotten the difference when we approach passage 313. Many of us actually fail to distinguish just these two senses of “seeing.” Why? Because we are habitually deceived by the surface similarities of two different sentences whose uses are actually different.¹⁹ Consider the following pair of sentences:

- A. “I saw that all the people on the street are Chinese” (我见满街人都是中国人).
- B. “I saw that all the people on the street are sages” (我见满街人都是圣人).²⁰

On the surface, both sentence A and sentence B have exactly the same grammatical structure and the same word “saw” (*jian* 见), and these similarities tend to lead us to assume or think (often habitually and unconsciously) that how we understand the word “saw” in both sentences must also be the same. Based on this surface comparison of the two sentences, we tend to think that since sentence A is reporting a fact—“I” (whoever the speaker is) saw—then sentence B must also be reporting a fact: “I” saw. Moreover, we think that since sentence A can be factually true (e.g., if “I” am visiting a town or a city in China) or false (when the people on the street that “I” met—e.g., in a remote place in Africa—are not Chinese), then sentence B must be factually *true* or *false* as well. But then we realize that what is claimed sentence B, “All the people on the street are sages,” is not likely to be factually true at all (again, see *Analects* 7:26 and 7:34), regardless of the actual context in which the utterance appears. Now the analogy between sentence A and sentence B breaks down. Yet, still captivated by the magical power of the analogy, we don’t want to

allow the statement “I saw that all the people on the street are sages” to be false. Consequently, in an effort to save sentence B (to make it true), we make the distinction between “potentiality” and “actuality” when we say that “[I] saw that all the people on the street are *potentially* sages,” or simply leave the “[I] saw” out, thus ending up with a general potentiality claim, “All the people on the street are *potentially* sages.” We believe this potentiality claim would accommodate the fact that many or even all the people on the street are not *actually* sages.

Instead of surrendering to the magical power of the analogy, I think we will fare better if we dismiss the analogy by paying close attention to the “depth grammar” (i.e., the actual use) of the word “saw” in the two sentences A and B. In sentence A, *in a given (ordinary) context*,²¹ the word “saw” is used as simply “seeing” or “objectively’ observing” (although you may recall that for Wang Yangming a totally “thin” or “naked” seeing is impossible), but in sentence B, in the mouths of Wang Yangming’s two students in passage 313, it is used in the sense of “seeing . . . as . . .” (“understanding” or “realizing”). With this understanding of the actual application of the word “saw,” we need *not* treat sentence B as reporting a fact; we need *not* treat it as either factually true or false (in the way we treat sentence A). Therefore, when Wang Ruzhi and Dong Luoshi each replied to their teacher’s question by saying, “[I] saw that all the people on the street are all sages,” they are *not claiming* “The people on the street are all sages,” as if they were reporting a fact (if so, the claim is obviously false), for they must have known that actual or realized sages are rare. Nor need we treat sentence B as always true and try to save it by making the distinction between moral potentiality and moral actuality, for sentence B is an expression of an attitude that is neither *factually* true or false nor *potentially* true or false. It is not the speaker’s prediction and hypothesis (about the people on the street being sages) that may be proven to be true or false. None (among Wang Yangming and his students) intended to do a sage survey on the street!

I want to argue that “All the people on the street are sages,” as an expression of attitude, is based on the speaker’s *encountering* and *understanding* of the people on the street. By “encountering and understanding” I mean that it is neither a mere subjective mood in the speaker nor any other inner property existent “in” the people on the street. It is rather an existential “coming-together” of the speaker and the people on the street. The people on the street (their behaviors, etc.) form a factor that *triggers* the utterance and the speaker’s realization, but they do not constitute a *determining cause* for the realization and the utterance. Two persons, seeing the same thing (e.g., people on the street) may very well feel and understand it differently—these two persons are not purely passive receptacles, as it were, for the bare imprinting from the people on the street. For example, another random person on the street would not come to the same realization as Wang Yangming’s two students did, even if that random person on the street is another student of Wang Yangming. Just think about the story of the joy of fish in the *Zhuangzi*: both Zhuangzi and Hui-shi were walking along a river and observed that the fish were swimming at ease; only the former made the utterance “That’s the joy of fish,” and the latter even questioned precisely that very possibility. Zhuangzi’s own mindset, mood, and understanding of life also

play a constituting role in his encounter with the fish and his understanding of the fish's joy. Similarly, in passage 313 of the *Chuanxilu*, the speaker's (either of the two students of Wang Yangming) conditions play an active role in *constituting* what he sees; he does not simply passively mirror what is "out there." He realizes (or at least "is claiming that he realizes") that he is treating all on the street as if they were sages. In other words, he has adopted a particular point of view, perspective on, or attitude toward the people he sees on the street.

To further clarify the use of *jian* 见 (see/realize, or see . . . as . . .) in passage 313, we need to examine another often neglected detail in the passage, namely Wang Yangming's shift from "*jian*" 见到 "*kan*" 看. Notice that initially Wang Yangming used "*jian*" in asking Wang Ruzhi a question: "What did you see/realize (*jian*)?" When Wang Ruzhi answered by saying "[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages," Wang Yangming, in response, switches to *kan* 看: "Did you look upon [*kan*] the people in the street as sages, or was it actually that the people in the street looked upon [*kan*] you as a sage among them?" (你看满街人是圣人，满街人倒看你是圣人在). I argue that this shift from "*jian*" to "*kan*" on Wang Yangming's part is not accidental.

The word "*kan*" in Chinese is composed of two elements: an eye (目) and a hand (手). Together they seem to serve to objectivize the act of seeing—what one sees is what one can grasp with a hand. In other words, *kan* perhaps indicates a static process that suggests a separation between the seer and the seen; for example, one *kan* (looks at, reads) a text where the reader and the text are separate things. Contrary to *kan*, however, the word *jian* (见/見) is composed of an eye (目) and two legs (儿) and thus may signify a dynamic, ongoing personal awareness that tends to fuse the seer into the seen; for example, one *jian* (understands or realizes) the meaning of the text. In other words, *jian* indicates a state of awareness that one may end up with after the act of *kan*. I think Wang Yangming simply followed this conventional distinction between *kan* and *jian*. For example, in the *Chuanxilu*, in answering his student Xu Ai's question about the unity of knowing and action, he says, "Therefore, *The Great Learning* points to the genuine knowing and action for people to look upon (*kan*), [and] talks about 'like loving a lovely sight, like hating a bad odor.' Seeing [*jian*] a lovely sight belongs to knowing, and loving a lovely sight belongs to action."²² Here the word *jian* is used to describe a subject's *personal, inner awareness* of what is there ("a lovely sight"), whereas the word *kan* is used to highlight a person's act of looking upon a text—out there.

In the Chinese Chan (Zen) classic, the *Platform Sutra*, the distinction between *kan* and *jian* is particularly stressed to the extent that the act of *kan* (as in *kan jing*, "fixing on or being obsessed with the inner quietness of one's mind") is regarded as a passive Chan practice, whereas *jian* is regarded as a positive seeing into the Buddha nature in everyone's daily activities.²³ Wang Yangming in his youth was seriously "into Daoism and Buddhism,"²⁴ so it is reasonable to assume that he was aware of the fact that the word *kan* may be taken to have a negative meaning in contrast to the word *jian*.

In shifting from "*jian*" to "*kan*," Wang Yangming seems to imply that Wang Ruzhi did not personally and authentically see/treat (*jian*) the people on the street as sages,

but rather *indeed* looked (*kan*) (down) upon them as separated from himself—as perhaps inferior to himself—as Chan points out in his translation of passage 313: “Because Ruzhi was not quite adjusted to the ordinary people [and deep in his mind did not consider them sages].”

There are two reasons to accept Chan’s interpretation that Wang Ruzhi “deep in his mind did not consider them [the ordinary people] sages.” First, Wang Ruzhi was known as a somewhat arrogant person: he was condescending when he first visited and discussed issues with Wang Yangming, and he was also showing off by traveling in a fancy chariot with cattail mat to attract people on the street, an act that was severely criticized by Wang Yangming.²⁵ Second, in the remaining part of passage 313, Wang Yangming advised his other students to be humble when they preached his teachings to ordinary people: “You assumed a bearing of a sage to lecture people on learning. When they saw a sage coming, they were all scared away. How could you succeed in lecturing to them? You must become one of the people of simple intelligence and then you can discuss learning with them” (Chan’s translation). The fact that this portion of the text is compiled together in one section with Wang Yangming’s exchange with Wang Ruzhi may give us a hint that, at least in the mind of the recorder (another of Wang Yangming’s disciples, Qian Dehong), Wang Yangming did not think Wang Ruzhi was authentically *seeing* the people on the street as sages.

Given the evidence above, I surmise that Wang Yangming’s response to Wang Ruzhi, “*man jie ren dao kan ni shi shengren zai*” (满街人倒看你是圣人在), may very well have an ironic tone, which can be captured by rendering the response as “It is rather that the people on the street must have looked upon (*kan*) you as presenting yourself (*zai* 在) [“being conspicuously there”], as a sage.” Chan’s translation seems to have neglected Wang Yangming’s shift from “*jian*” to “*kan*,” and thus totally misses Wang Yangming’s ironic tone in the response.²⁶

Suppose Wang Yangming did not switch from *jian* to *kan* in his response to Wang Ruzhi; that is, supposing he stuck to *jian*, we would have “[You said] You saw that all the people on the street are sages, but it is rather that all the people on the street saw you as a sage” (你见满街人是圣人，满街人倒见你是圣人在). Given our previous clarification of *jian* as “seeing/realizing” in moral cultivation, Wang Yangming’s response would amount to an acknowledgment that not only has Wang Ruzhi *reached* his moral seeing or realization, but also that all the people on the street have *reached* their moral seeing or realization. But I think Wang Yangming would not so dogmatically assert that all the people on the street have reached their moral realization. While Wang Yangming knew his student Wang Ruzhi very well, so that he could reasonably judge if his student’s realization was genuine or not, he could not reasonably claim that the strangers on the street have reached their moral realization, because he knew nothing about the strangers on the street to warrant the claim.

Missing the subtlety of the word “*jian*” and overlooking the shift from “*jian*” to “*kan*” in passage 313 are two very common misunderstandings of the passage. But there is another, which is simply to drop the “[I] saw (*jian*)” altogether from the original expression “[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages,” that is, to transform an expression of the form “I saw that P” into a simple “P.” The alleged claim

(“The people on the street are all sages”) is thus possible when it is abstracted out from its original context (“[I] saw/realized that all the people on the street are sages”). But how come many readers of passage 313 simply miss the “[I] saw” in front of “All the people on the street are sages”?

I think this oversight of the “[I] saw” may come from our deep and often unconscious “craving for generality”²⁷ when we are dealing with statements in philosophy texts and elsewhere. In the original context, the statement “[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages” is an expression of a personal attitude toward the people on the street, because *wo jian* (“I saw . . . as . . .” or “I realized . . .”) is a personal act. The statement is definitely not equivalent to “Anyone (or everyone) sees that all the people on the street are sages” (任何人见满街人都是圣人). But once we remove “*jian*” from the statement, the remaining portion, “All the people on the street are sages,” becomes a universal, a-temporal statement, a fact-like (rather than an existential) statement. Hence, we have reached a kind of generality: we believe that the statement “All the people on the street are sages” utters a deep philosophical insight about all the people on the street being sages. And even though we quickly realize that it is factually false, we still try our best to save it, thus resulting in the potentiality claim of “All the people on the street are potentially sages” via the distinction of potentiality and actuality.

But the problem with this effort to save the statement is that *in the context* of passage 313, neither Wang Ruzhi nor Dong Luoshi subscribed to such a distinction; both of them explicitly claimed that they saw all the people on the street *are/as* sages, not *are potentially* sages. How about Wang Yangming? Did he subscribe to such a distinction? Would he?

I think Wang Yangming would be very cautious about the claim “All the people on the street are sages” (notice: without “I saw”), and he would probably not make it himself, even though admittedly he was agreeable to the expression “[I] saw all the people on the street are/as sages” (when it was uttered by his second student Dong Luoshi in the dialogue), as he appeared to believe that it expressed Dong Luoshi’s sincere (but hesitating) attitude toward the people on the street. Several reasons may be given for why Wang Yangming himself would probably not make the claim (without “I saw”), either.

First, Wang Yangming explicitly makes the distinction between sagehood or sageliness (圣) and sage (圣人). For him, everyone has the capacity of innate moral knowing, and in this sense everyone can be called “sagely,” but not everyone is automatically a sage. Only those who naturally (or spontaneously) extend their innate moral knowing can be so entitled:

心之良知是谓圣。圣人之学，惟是致此良知而已。自然而致之者，圣人也；勉然而致之者，贤人也；自蔽自昧而不肯致之者，愚不肖者也。愚不肖者，虽其蔽昧之极，良知又未尝不存也。苟能致之，即与圣人无异矣。此良知所以为圣愚之同具，而人皆可以为尧舜者，以此也。是故致良知之外无学矣。《王阳明全集》，卷八，书魏师孟卷 p. 312
The innate moral knowing in [everyone’s] heart is called sagehood. The sage’s learning is just to extend this innate moral knowing. Those who can spontaneously extend it are called sages; those who can exert efforts to extend it are called worthy people (or persons

of virtue, *xianren*); those who are self-unaware and would not extend their innate moral knowing are called the foolish and unworthy. The innate moral knowing of the foolish and unworthy still exists even though they are extremely self-unaware. If the foolish and unworthy were willing to extend their innate moral knowing, then they would be no different from the sages. Thus, both the foolish and the sages have innate moral knowing, which is why everyone can be a Yao or a Shun. Therefore, outside extending innate moral knowing there is no [other] learning. (CWWYM, vol. 8, "Letter to Wei Shimeng," p. 312; my translation)

良知良能，愚夫愚妇与圣人同。但惟圣人能致其良知，而愚夫愚妇不能致，此圣愚之所由分也。（卷二，p. 56）

The innate moral knowing and ability is the same to both the foolish and sages. However, only the sages can (would) extend their innate moral knowing, whereas the foolish would not extend theirs. It is by this that the foolish and the sages are distinguished. (CWWYM, vol. 2, p. 56; my translation)

Those who try to extend their innate moral knowing and those who refuse to make an effort to extend their innate moral knowing are *not* called sages, but called, respectively, "worthy people" (*xianren*) and "the foolish and unworthy" (*yu bu xiao zhe*). Since it is *not likely* that all the people on the street are people who naturally (or spontaneously) extend their innate moral knowing, *not* all of them can be called sages. In the context of passage 313, Wang Yangming did not slip into believing that all the people on the street are *actually* (*xiancheng* 现成) sages; he did not subscribe to a watered-down, relaxed version of a conception of sage, which applies to everyone without any qualification.²⁸

Second, it is true that Wang Yangming also uses the expression "There is a sage in everyone's chest" (人胸中各有个圣人) (my emphasis), which seems to be saying that everyone is a sage. But it only *seems* to be so, because his expression "There is a sage in everyone's chest" is indeed very different from the statement "All the people on the street are sages (满街人都是圣人) (my emphasis).²⁹ The former expresses the same idea as the expression "This innate moral knowing everybody has" (这良知人人皆有), which speaks of one's potentiality of becoming a sage, not of everyone's *actually* being a sage. While readers are more likely to treat "There is a sage in everyone's chest" as a metaphorical statement, they are less likely to treat "All the people on the street are sages" in the same way; in fact, the latter can easily tempt readers to imagine a context in which it is treated as a factual (actuality) claim.³⁰

Therefore, to confuse the "actuality of being a sage" and the "potentiality of being a sage" would miss Wang Yangming's original teachings of the distinction between sagehood (圣) and sage (圣人). The result of this confusion is mixed. As Chen Lai 陈来 points out:

The claim "All the people on the street are sages" can easily lead to a mistaking of "originally have" for "actually have." Strictly speaking [if we do justice to Wang Yangming's teachings], it can only be said that [for] all the people on the street each has a sage in his/her chest, or that all the people on the street are potentially sages. If we regard "All the people on the street are sages" as a [factual] claim without qualification, the result would

be twofold: on the one hand, it may raise people's self-confidence and empower their ability for self-liberation; on the other hand, it downplays the demand of each individual's personal moral cultivation and the importance of spiritual purification.³¹

Here Chen Lai comments that the result of the confusion above "may raise people's self-confidence and empower their ability for self-liberation,"³² but a few pages later in the same book he adds: "but if the innate moral knowing is improperly taken to be actual, and if all the people on the street are actually taken to be sages, moral fanaticism may result, which would injure the sanctity of moral principles and neglect the fact that only through a persistent progress can we reach a complete accord with moral principles."³³ I think Chen Lai's addition is crucial, because the claim "All the people on the street are sages" is more like a *political* slogan (similar to the one that states "All are equal"), which can be empowering, but only "externally"—not personally and not existentially. Those who heard it may be inspired or encouraged, but it is not necessary that those who heard it will *personally understand* what the slogan means to them, nor is it guaranteed that they will look to their own innate moral knowing and extend it. In other words, those who heard it *may not* make their *gong fu* (effort) to make the political slogan an ethical one. As a result, what looks like a potentially empowering political slogan may quickly lead to moral and political fanaticism when it is not properly accompanied and buttressed by corresponding ethical self-cultivation.

Third, Wang Yangming would argue that "All the people on the street are sages," without the (personal) *jian* 见 ("I saw"), sounds like talking about people "out there" on the street, rather than about one's personal innate moral knowing in one's everyday encounters. Wang Yangming's focus on talking about everyone's potential of becoming a sage is that it is personal and existential extending—"in" everyone's chest—not impersonal or external description or prediction. One does not need to seek sageliness (圣人气象) in the sages (out there); one should simply seek it from one's own innate moral knowing.³⁴

Finally, Wang Yangming's responses to his two students in passage 313 show that he is not evaluating the *truthfulness* or even the *probability* of the claim "All the people on the street are sages"; rather he is commenting on the two students' respective attitudes in uttering the expression "[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages." For Wang Yangming, Wang Ruzhi is hasty and arrogant, and is not really sincere and authentic in saying "[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages," so he needs to be warned (reined in) that his attitude is actually distancing himself from ordinary people.³⁵ In contrast, Dong Luoshi is a humble man³⁶ who is unnecessarily hesitant in making the same utterance (which expresses his attitude or his realization), so he needs to be urged on in insisting on his "dim" (but promising) realization.³⁷ When Wang Yangming says "This [Dong Luoshi's seeing/realization that all the people on the street are sages] after all is an ordinary thing," he does not say that the fact that "All the people on the street are sages" can be universally and easily verified. Rather, he is advising Dong Luoshi that he should be confident in his realization.³⁸

Now that we know why Wang Yangming would probably not like the claim “All the people on the street are sages,” how would he see the potentiality claim that “All the people on the street are *potentially* sages”? As I have argued above, he would rather prefer to see people as being/having a sage (originally) *in their chest* or *in their heart* rather than see people *on the street* as being sages. If we can grant that such “inner” metaphors do indicate a kind of potentiality that may manifest itself outwardly, then we can say that Wang Yangming does subscribe to the concept of moral potentiality. If so, how should we understand his conception of moral potentiality?

For Wang Yangming, there is no temporal gap between the morally potential and the morally actual, nor is there a qualitatively hierarchical difference between a young person who extends his innate moral knowing and an old man who does the same. To show this I need to make a detour to a relevant remark in the *Mengzi*, “Everyone Can Become a Yao or a Shun” (人皆可以为尧舜), which appears at 6B2:³⁹

Cao Jiao asked, “Is it the case that everyone can become a Yao or a Shun?”⁴⁰

Mengzi replied, “It is.”

Cao Jiao continued, “I have heard that King Wen was six feet two inches tall, while Tang was six feet tall. Now, I am six feet two inches tall. I am already eating as much as I can. [D. C. Lau has: “yet all I can do is to eat rich.”] What else can I do to be like them?”

Mengzi replied, “What difficulty is there?” Simply do it! Suppose there is someone who cannot even pick up a chicken. This makes him a weak man. But if he can lift one hundred pounds, this makes him a strong man. Similarly, someone who can shoulder the burden of Gargantua is a Gargantua. Now, why should people be worried about being unable (to be like Yao or Shun)? They simply do not do it. To walk slowly behind one’s elders is called being ‘filial.’ To walk quickly ahead of one’s elders is called being ‘un-filial.’ Is walking slowly something that people are incapable of? It is merely that they do not do it. The Way of Yao and Shun is nothing other than filiality and brotherliness. If you wear the clothes of Yao, recite the teachings of Yao, and perform the actions of Yao—this is to be Yao. If you wear the clothes of Tyrant Jie, recite the teachings of Tyrant Jie, and perform the actions of Tyrant Jie—this is to be Tyrant Jie. (Van Norden’s translation)

In what sense can we call a person a Yao or a Shun? It is obviously impossible for another person to be literally Yao or Shun himself. Nor is it likely that any other random person will be a ruler as Yao and Shun were (because most ordinary people lack the relevant skills, virtues, and personal charisma required for a ruler). So to be a Yao or a Shun must have meant something else. In the quote above, it means to do the same thing (e.g., dealing with one’s parents) in the same way (e.g., respecting them), or to do some relevant things in a similar way—in short, “[to perform] the actions of Yao.” “*Ren jie keyi wei Yao Shun*” (人皆可以为尧舜), on this reading, should be better seen as “Everyone can do things in the way Yao and Shun did them” (人皆可以为尧舜〔所为〕). And doing things in Yao’s and Shun’s ways has nothing to do with one’s physical strength; rather, it has to do with one’s moral capacity—for example, “to walk slowly behind one’s elders” (an act of being filial)—which every normal person has.

An important point in the quote above is that, even though everyone “can do” (可以) things in the way Yao and Shun did, there is no temporal gap between “can

do” (可以为) and “[actually] do” (为), that is, no temporal gap between the potential and the actual. When you are twenty, you do things as Yao and Shun did; you *are* a Yao or a Shun *in that regard*. When you are fifty, you do things as Yao and Shun did; you *are* a Yao or a Shun *in that regard*. The importance of each act is that it is self-sufficient. In this regard (concerning the significance of specific moral actions), Mengzi would not think that a twenty-year-old “you” is a “sprout” and a fifty-year-old “you” is a “tree,” or that the former is “less” of a Yao or Shun and the latter is “more” of a Yao or Shun. Rather, he would think that you are equally a Yao or a Shun whether you are twenty or fifty. To do it or not to do it, *right here and right now*—that’s what makes the difference. This is not to deny that a morally more experienced and more self-conscious person is more inclined to act as Yao or Shun did in relevant circumstances; this is only to deny that being morally more experienced or more self-conscious would automatically put one or one’s acts high on the hierarchical ladder: a more experienced agent’s act is “more moral” than a similar act performed by a less experienced agent.⁴¹

We might call this conception of potentiality an “immediacy model” in which there is no temporal gap between potentially doing and actually doing, and there is no qualitative degree of difference in the importance of an act, whether it is performed by a more experienced agent or a less experienced agent.⁴²

In Mengzi’s understanding, the idea of a sage, properly understood, is a *regulative* ideal (in Kant’s sense), a moral demand, or a driving force for moral cultivation. It guides one’s moral endeavor and highlights the importance of constant (non-stop until death) moral practice, but it is not a description of an actual person who is still alive (Yao and Shun—and if we can include Confucius—were all sages in the past); nor should it be taken to mean that a fifty-year-old person is accumulatively *more of a sage* than a twenty-year-old person even when both of them do what Yao and Shun did. In the light of this understanding of the idea of a sage, it is no accident that while Youzi in the *Analecets* talks about “root” (1:2) and Mengzi talks about “sprouts” (*Mengzi* 2A6), no one in either of these books speaks of “fruits” (as finished or completed products)—let alone says that “fruits” are qualitatively better than “roots” or “sprouts”—because morally speaking one is *always on the way* to producing such “fruits,” and this producing process is a never-ending journey until death. This is why no one alive in the *Analecets* or the *Mengzi* is called a sage.

I think Wang Yangming’s remarks “This innate moral knowing everybody has” (这良知人人皆有) and “There is a sage in everyone’s chest” (人胸中各有个圣人) should be read in the same way that “Everyone can do what a Yao or a Shun does” (人皆可以为尧舜) is read.⁴³ This can be shown in the following passage from the *Chuanxilu*:

[320] 门人有言邵端峰论童子不能格物，只教以洒扫应对之说。先生曰：“洒扫应对就是一件物，童子良知只到此，便教去洒扫应对，就是致他这一良知了。又如童子知畏先生长者，此亦是他良知处。故虽嬉戏中见了先生长者，便去作揖恭敬，是他能格物以致敬师长之良知了。童子自有童子的格物致知。”又曰：“我这里言格物，自童子以至圣人，皆是此等工夫。但圣人格物，便更熟得些子，不消费力。如此格物，虽卖柴人亦是做得，虽公卿大夫以至天子，皆是如此做。”

320. One of the disciples said that Shao Duanfeng maintained that small kids are not able to apprehend things (*ge wu*) and therefore should only be taught to sprinkle-sweep the floor and to respond when they are called. Our teacher [Wang Yangming] said, “Sprinkling-sweeping the floor and responding when they are called are things [for apprehending]. If a small kid’s innate moral knowing can only apply to these things, teaching them these things is to extend their innate moral knowing. Moreover, that a small kid knows to respect a teacher or an elder is also where his innate moral knowing lies. Therefore, even though he may be playing, when he sees a teacher or an elder he immediately bows to show his respect—that shows he is able to apprehend things by extending his innate moral knowing to revering teachers and elders. A small kid naturally has his own way of apprehending things and extending innate moral knowing.” The teacher then added, “In this apprehending of things that I am talking about here, from a small kid to a sage, all require the same kind of effort, with the exception that the sage is more skillful in apprehending things and therefore does not need to make any effort. Even a vendor of fuelwood can apprehend things in this way. From nobles and high officials to the emperor, all apprehend things in this way.” (my translation)

According to Wang Yangming, even small children have their own way of “apprehending things and extending innate moral knowing,” which is manifested in their “sprinkling-sweeping the floor,” their “responses when they are called,” and their showing “respect to teachers and elders.” Qualitatively speaking, a small child’s extending innate moral knowing is no different from a sage’s extending innate moral knowing, even though a sage is “more skillful in apprehending things and therefore does not need to make any effort.”⁴⁴ It is true that, compared with an adult’s life, a child’s life circle is small, and his dealings with others simpler, but in terms of extending their innate moral knowing (instead of what specific things they try to apprehend), there is no qualitative difference between an adult and a small child. Therefore, this passage (320) exemplifies an “immediacy model” of moral effort, similar to the one we gather from Mengzi’s remark “Everyone can do what a Yao or a Shun does.”

I hope by now that this essay has established the two promised points. First, the alleged claim “All the people on the street are sages” is not only alleged, but also downright fabricated by people who want to read it that way, because neither of Wang’s two students in passage 313 of the *Chuanxilu* nor Wang Yangming himself made the claim as it is—as if it were a universal, factual report. Rather, both students made an existential, attitudinal utterance in the form of “[I] saw that all the people on the street are (as a) sage.” Second, Wang Yangming would probably not like the claim that “All the people on the street are sages,” nor would he like the claim that “All the people on the street are *potentially* sages.” He would rather prefer “There is a sage in everyone’s chest” and “This innate moral knowing everyone has.” His preference means that he did have a conception of moral potentiality, but it takes the form of an “immediacy model” where there is no temporal gap between moral effort and moral achievement.

To conclude, I would like to add a few words on how the close reading above of the alleged claim “All the people on the street are sages” can remind us of some

important hermeneutic strategies when we try to understand a statement or utterance in a philosophy text. First, it highlights the need to pay close attention to the specific context in which the statement or utterance is made. This means that we have to examine the statement in its context with a magnifying glass—checking all the hints and clues; it also means that we have to fight against our craving for an abstract generalization that usually isolates a statement from its context—for example, to fight against our tendency to uproot “All the people on the street are sages” from the context of passage 313 in the *Chuanxilu*.

Second, it reminds us not to be deceived by the surface of a statement, because its surface (due to some misleading comparison) often disguises its depth grammar (actual use in the context). Even though the surface grammars of “[I] saw that all the people on the street are Chinese” and of “[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages” are similar, their depth grammars are radically different. The former is a factual report, but the latter is an existential-moral expression of attitude.

Finally, it demonstrates that in order to properly understand a statement in a philosophy text, a survey of the overall philosophical framework of the philosopher (who made the statement) is often indispensable. This means that we have to explain holistically a cluster of ideas or statements by the philosopher in question. As is shown above, we have to understand multiple ideas, such as “innate moral knowing,” “seeing and hearing,” “seeing and looking at,” “sagehood and sage,” Wang Yangming’s two students’ respective personalities, Wang Yangming’s connection with Mengzi and Confucius, et cetera, to fully understand the expression “[I] saw that all the people on the street are sages.”

Notes

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- 1 – According to Bryan Van Norden, while this “unembedded” expression is commonly taken to be a praise of the Buddhist heritage in the city of Quanzhou, what it actually meant to say may be ironic: it means that “the Buddhist standards for being a sage are so low that, by their standards, everyone in the street counts as a sage” (Bryan Van Norden, personal communication). Van Norden’s speculation seems reasonable and warranted, given Zhu Xi’s ridicule of what he perceived as “labor-saving” methods of Buddhist learning (see Chu Hsi, *Learning to Be a Sage: Selections from the Conversations of Master Chu, Arranged Topically*, trans. with commentary by Daniel K. Gardner [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], Introduction, p. 21).

- 2 – Wing-tsit Chan’s translation of Wang Yangming’s response to Wang Ruzhi (“In your view the people filling the street are all sages, but in their view, you are a sage” [你看满街人是圣人，满街人倒看你是圣人在]) treats the compound sentence in question as two sentences joined by a conjunction. But other translations are possible. For example, one can interpret the link between the two simple sentences in the compound as hypothetical: “If you look upon people [as if they are] sages, then they would look upon you [as if you were] a sage presenting [in front of them].” (See a similar rendition in Frederick Goodrich Henke, *The Philosophy of Wang Yang-ming* [London: Open Court Pub. Co, 1916], p. 173). Another possible translation is to treat the compound as a comparison: “It may be rather that ‘People on the street look upon you (presenting) yourself as a sage’ than that ‘You look upon them [as if they] are all sages’” (与其说“你看满街人是圣人”，不如说“满街人倒看你是圣人在”). I think this last translation of mine better captures Wang Yangming’s ironic tone in his response than the conjunction and the hypothetical renditions. Bryan Van Norden (in a personal communication) concurred with my interpretation of the original Chinese sentence but suggested a rendition that is not restricted to the grammatical form of the original. He suggested that to capture the tone in English, the sentence is better translated as a question even though the original is not a question: “Did you look upon the people in the street as sages, or was it actually that the people in the street looked upon you as a sage among them?” Here I have adopted his suggestion.
- 3 – Passage numbers throughout this essay are based on Wing-tsit Chan’s translation of the *Chuanxilu*, a collection of Wang Yangming’s teachings that was recorded by his close disciples; see Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).
- 4 – See *Yin Haiguang Xiansheng wenji* 殷海光先生文集 (Collected works of Yin Haiguang), vol. 2 (Taipei: Guiguan Tushu Youxian Gongsi 桂冠圖書有限公司, 1985), p. 886.
- 5 – See Chen Lai 陳來, *Youwu zhi jing: Wang Yangming zhuxue de jingshen* 有無之境—王陽明哲學的精神 (The realm of being and non-being: The spirit of Wang Yangming’s philosophy) (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2006), p. 160: “Strictly speaking [if we do justice to Wang Yangming’s teachings], it can only be said that all the people on the street each has a sage in his/her chest, or that all the people on the street are *potentially* sages” (emphasis added). Also see Yao Caigang 姚才剛, *Rujia daode lixing jingshen de chongjian* 儒家道德理性精神的重建 (The reconstruction of Confucian moral reason) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2009), p. 7.
- 6 – None of the speakers in passage 313 (Wang Yangming and his two students, Wang Ruzhi and Dong Luoshi) have directly made the alleged *claim* that “All the people on the street are sages.” Both students said “[I] saw that all the peo-

ple on the street are sages.” And the teacher said that “This [Dong Luoshi’s *seeing* all the people on the street as sages]” is “an ordinary thing,” *not* that “All the people on the street are sages” is an ordinary thing. In choosing the word “ordinary,” Wang Yangming may be making a purposeful exaggeration on how easy it is to be enlightened in seeing all the people on the street as sages.

- 7 – See *Wang Yangming quanji* 王陽明全集 (Complete works of Wang Yangming), comp. and ed. Wu Guang 吳光, Qian Ming 錢明, Dong Ping 董平, and Yao Yanfu 姚延福 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2011), series 1 (hereafter cited as CWWYM), “Letter to Wei Shimeng,” 8:312.
- 8 – *Liangzhi* 良知 has been translated variously as “intuitive knowledge” (Henke, *The Philosophy of Wang Yang-ming*), “innate knowledge” (Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living*), “innate moral knowledge” (Yong Huang, “A Neo-Confucian Conception of Wisdom: Wang Yangming on the Innate Moral Knowledge (*Liangzhi*),” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33, no. 3 [2006]), and “pure knowing” (Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism* [Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett], 2009). I think it is better to combine Yong Huang’s and Ivanhoe’s translations by rendering *liang* 良 as “innate moral” and *zhi* 知 as a gerund, “knowing,” because *liang* has the sense of both “innate” and “moral,” and *zhi* indicates *knowing how* (thus, its meaning is better captured by “knowing”) rather than *knowing that* (which would be rendered “knowledge”). Notice also that this “knowing” is not a mere lean or thin concept of epistemic, cognitive “recognizing”; it is involved also in emotional engagement and willing. As Wang Yangming points out, “Seeing-hearing without exception is a function of innate moral knowing. . . . Outside innate moral knowing, there is no other knowing” (CWWYM, “Reply to Ouyang Chongyi,” 2:81; my translation; see passage 168).
- 9 – CWWYM, 3:108; see passage 221.
- 10 – CWWYM, 3:105; see passage 207.
- 11 – Wang Yangming quoted this saying of *Mengzi* in CWWYM, 3:136; see passage 318.
- 12 – For Wang Yangming any “seeing” is intrinsically associated with emotions and will; there is no “naked” “seeing.” For example, if a teenager is envious of her peers’ having an iPhone 6, then her seeing an iPhone 6 in an Apple Store may be simultaneously associated with her emotions (coveting or craving) and will (will to obtain one). On the other hand, if she already has one, at seeing an iPhone 6 in an Apple Store she would have an emotion of indifference to it and she would not to buy it. Either way, her seeing is not naked, that is, not just seeing totally deprived of emotions and will. This idea of seeing is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s view that perception has an affective or emotive dimension, which in turn contributes to appropriate behaviors (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul,

1962], p. 52). Accordingly, heart (*xin* 心) for Wang Yangming does not mean the corporeal organ, the heart, but the actual suffering of one's having feelings, having perceptions and willings, and making judgments in his or her everyday dealings and transactions (“心不是一块血肉，凡知觉处便是心。如耳目之知视听，手足之知痛痒。此知便是心也。” [CWWYM, 3:138; see passage 323]). Nor is heart a private Cartesian inner “agent” that is separated from these dealings and transactions. It is in line with this understanding of “heart” that Wang Yangming makes the claim that “There is no thing/event outside the heart” (心外无事 or 心外无物) (CWWYM, 1:17 and 28; see passages 32 and 83).

- 13 – This second sense of “seeing” can be related to *Analects* 12:1, where Confucius stresses that in following rituals one should see, hear, speak, and move in certain appropriate ways.
- 14 – The original Chinese text of the passage, “尔之见性常在，人之心神只在有睹有闻上驰骛，不在不睹不闻上着实用功” can have a different punctuation—one that Chen follows—as “尔之见性常在人之心神。只在有睹有闻上驰骛，不在不睹不闻上着实用功。” But this punctuation makes the meaning of the sentence puzzling, for, first of all, it seems to say that “your seeing/realizing your nature is [already] constantly in your mind,” and second, this punctuation leaves a huge gap between the meaning of the sentence before and after the period. If “your seeing/realizing your nature is constantly in your mind,” then how come you are still “only occupied with what can be seen or heard [external objects out there] and not practically working on what is not seen or heard [innate moral knowing]”?
- 15 – CWWYM, 2:80 and 57; my translation. Also see Wang Yangming’s contrast between “exert effort on ‘hearing-seeing’” (在闻见上用功) and “exert effort on ‘heart-land’ [moral cultivation]” (在心地上用功) (ibid., p. 37).
- 16 – CWWYM, “A Reply to Ouyang Chongyi,” 2:80–81.
- 17 – See CWWYM, vol. 1: “见好色属知，好好色属行。只见那好色时，已自好了；不是见了后，又立个心去好。闻恶臭属知，恶恶臭属行。只闻那恶臭时，已自恶了；不是闻了后，别立个心去恶。” Chan’s translation is as follows:

Seeing beautiful colors appertains to knowledge, while loving beautiful colors appertains to action. However, as soon as one sees that beautiful color, he has already loved it. It is not that he sees it first and then makes up his mind to love it. Smelling a bad odor appertains to knowledge, while hating a bad odor appertains to action. However, as soon as one smells a bad odor, he has already hated it. It is not that he smells it first and then makes up his mind to hate it.

Chan’s translation of “se” as “beautiful colors” is not entirely accurate, for “se” actually means “looks,” “surface appearances,” and it often refers to a person’s (a male’s or a female’s) face or countenance. (Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for clarifying this point.) Slingerland translates Confucius’ use of the word in the *Analects* 9:18 and 15:13 as “female beauty”: “I have yet to meet a

man who loves Virtue as much as he loves female beauty” (Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003]), but both Burton Watson (*The Analects of Confucius* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2007]) and Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (*The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1998]) translate “se” in the same passages from the *Analects* as “physical beauty,” without restricting it to only “female beauty.” Bryan Van Norden translates the famous line “如好好色” in the *Great Learning* as “like loving a lovely sight” (Justin Tiwald and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han Dynasty to the 20th Century* [Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2014], p. 218), with a footnote explaining that “sight” here clearly has connotations of sexual attractiveness in the original classical Chinese. Translating “se” as “physical beauty” or as “sight” (that is, without restricting it to female beauty) seems a better option.

- 18 – In this sense, *jian* is similar to the term “*darsana*” (“sight”) in Buddhism—indicating the experience of seeing or understanding the true nature of reality and of self. The experience is transformative in the sense that it leads to enlightenment.
- 19 – My analysis below is generally inspired by Wittgenstein’s many remarks (explicitly and implicitly) on surface and depth grammar. On the surface grammar of words, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 7, and *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 187; and on the depth grammar of words, see *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 23, and *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, § 187; and on the depth grammar of words, see *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 23, and *Philosophical Investigations*, § 182, 199, 257, 492, 664, and p. 18 n.
- 20 – Compare this statement with “I saw [that] all the people on the street are sons of God.”
- 21 – It is essential here to stress that the difference between sentence A and sentence B is not *in* the sentences but in the *contexts* in which they are used. I thank one of the anonymous readers for highlighting this point.
- 22 – The original Chinese is “故《大学》指个真知行与人看，说‘如好好色，如恶恶臭’。见好色属知，好好色属行 . . .” (CWWYM, 1:4). Also, see endnote 17 above.
- 23 – See Puqun Li, with Arthur K. Ling, *A Guide to Asian Philosophy Classics* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 268.
- 24 – See “出入于二氏之学” and “吾亦自幼笃志二氏,” in CWWYM, 1:1, 42, and 144.
- 25 – See Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲, *Ming ru xue an* 明儒学案 (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan 商务印书馆, 1935), vol. 32, *Taizhou xue an* 泰州学案, no. 1, *Chu Shi Wang Xin Zhai Gen* 处士王心斋先生良.

- 26 – See endnote 2 above.
- 27 – Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 17.
- 28 – To ascribe “All the people on the street are sages” to Wang Yangming would make him too close or similar to some of his disciples, namely those so-called “left-wing” later Wangists—Wang Longxi (1498–1583) and Wang Ruzhi—who argue, respectively, for “existing-completed innate moral knowing” (现成良知) and that “ordinary people’s everyday activities are already in the dao” (百姓日用即道); and both downplay the importance of *gongfu* (moral effort).
- 29 – Therefore, I think Fung Yu-lan [Feng Youlan] is mistaken in thinking that for Wang Yangming “This pure knowing everyone has” (这良知人人都有) says exactly the same thing as “All the people on the street are sages” (满街都是圣人). See Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 313:
- . . . every man possesses that intuitive knowledge which is the manifestation of his original mind, and through which he immediately knows that right is right and wrong is wrong. Everyone, *in his original nature*, is a sage. That is why the followers of Wang Shou-jen were in the habit of saying that “the streets are full of sages.” (my emphasis).
- It is clear that Fung You-lan failed to notice Wang Yangming’s distinction between sagehood (or sageliness, 圣) and sage (圣人).
- 30 – When Wang Yangming told his student Yu Zhong, “You in your heart are originally a sage,” Yu Zhong stood up and did not dare to accept it. Yu Zhong’s timidity may be because “You in your heart are originally a sage” *sounds like* (at least to Yu Zhong) “You are (actually) a sage” (CWWYM, 3:105).
- 31 – Chen Lai, *Youwu zhi jing*, p. 160; my translation.
- 32 – Even this point is suspicious, because Wang Yangming’s expression, “There is a sage in everyone’s chest,” already has the function of encouragement and empowerment.
- 33 – Chen Lai, *Youwu zhi jing*, p. 177; my translation.
- 34 – See “How does one recognize sageliness? Your moral knowing is originally the same as the sage’s; if you clearly recognize and realize it, you will know sageliness does not belong to a sage but lies within yourself” (圣人气象何由认得? 自己良知原与圣人一般, 若体认得自己良知明白, 即圣人气象不在圣人而在于我矣。 (CWWYM, 2:66).
- 35 – Wang Yangming’s reply that “All the people on the street saw you (presenting yourself) as a sage” could also imply that all the people on the street should work on extending their own innate moral knowing rather than simply watching “a sage” out there on the street.
- 36 – Dong Luoshi was much older than Wang Yangming but very humble; at the age of sixty-eight he sincerely wanted to be Wang Yangming’s student upon hearing his teaching. See *Ming ru xue an*, vol. 14.

- 37 – See the *Analects* 11:22, where Confucius adopted a similar individualized teaching method in responding to the same question from his two students, who have very different personalities.
- 38 – Wang Ruzhi may be regarded as *kuang zhe* 狂者 (wild, or overly confident), and Dong Luoshi may be deemed *juan zhe* 狷者 (fastidious, or overly cautious). See *Analects* 13:21 and *Mengzi* 7B:37.
- 39 – Wang Yangming quoted this saying with agreement in *CWWYM*, 1:32.
- 40 – “Wei” 为 (in “人皆可以为尧舜”) is translated as “become,” which might imply a temporal process (“becoming . . . in the future”). A better way of rendering it is to translate it as “do”: “Everyone can do what Yao and Shun do,” or better, “Everyone can do things in the way Yao and Shun do them.” I think this rendition avoids the possible implication that “wei” indicates a temporal gap between “being able to do something” and “actually doing it.”
- 41 – One practical implication of being equal in the face of (present) moral acts (regardless of the moral agent’s being more experienced or not) is that longtime practitioners have no reason to be proud of themselves, and that novices do not have to feel inferior to other experienced practitioners. See Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, *The Sun of Wisdom: Teaching on the Noble Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, trans. and ed. Ari Goldfied (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), pp. 126–127.
- 42 – Contrary to Chen Lai, I do not think that Wang Yangming’s expression of “extending [innate moral knowing] to the very bottom” (*kuo chong dao di* 扩充到底 [CWWYM, 3:109]) primarily implies a temporal process of growth that leads to a “peak” (see Chen Lai, *Youwu zhi jing*, pp. 154 and 166). My interpretation is that the expression simply means “extending innate knowing by *actually acting*,” not by talking. The word “bottom” symbolizes acting or continuously acting; it does not merely (or primarily) symbolize a “peak” that one can hope to reach *only* when one gets old. Otherwise, the earlier acts in life would not be self-sufficient or intrinsically valuable.
- 43 – Also see *Analects* 7:30: “The Master said, ‘Is Goodness really so far away? If I simply desire Goodness, I will find that it is already here!’” (Slingerland, *Confucius Analects*, p. 74). I must quickly add that the “immediacy model” does not imply that ethical cultivation is a once and for all act, but a continuous lifelong effort (see *Analects* 8:7).
- 44 – In *Analects* 1:2, filial piety and brotherly love are usually regarded as both logically and temporally prior to the concept of Goodness/humanness: “Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness?” (Slingerland, *Confucius Analects*, p. 1). However, strictly speaking, filial piety and brotherly love *are* already expressions of humanness; it is *only in contrast with* a late stage of practicing humanness that Youzi remarked that filial piety and brotherly love are the root of humanness. Filial piety and brotherly

love, as expressions of humanness, do not need *time* to develop into humanness. Also, in the *Mengzi*, there seems to be a temporal distance between the “four sprouts” and their actual extending. And this developmental model of moral cultivation and moral growth makes sense when Mengzi talks about a well-cultivated person being more ethically mature than an inexperienced youngster. Even here I suspect that “being ethically mature” for Mengzi only indicates more of a proneness to ethical behavior. It does not imply that the value of a more ethically mature person’s deed is *qualitatively* worth more than that of a less experienced person’s corresponding deed. For Mengzi, the choice is to do or not to do things in Yao’s or Shun’s ways, and the result is right now under one’s nose. Therefore, one’s age (except, perhaps, if one is a very young baby in his/her mother’s arms) does not matter as far as one’s moral cultivation is concerned; certainly being merely old in age does not automatically mean that one is morally more mature (see *Analects* 14:43).