
FROM KNOWLEDGE OF VIRTUE TO KNOWLEDGE OF NATURE: THE DOCTRINE OF INNATE KNOWLEDGE IN WANG YANGMING'S PHILOSOPHY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF INFORMATION

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Abstract: *For a long time, the excessive subjectivism of Wang Yangming's doctrine of innate knowledge has been a common critique. The root of this issue lies in the traditional paradigm's interpretation of Wang Yangming's discussions on knowledge. The philosophy of information provides new insights for addressing this problem within the context of the school of Mind (心学). On the cognitive level, Wang Yangming's idea that "there is nothing outside the heart" no longer represents an absolute opposition between moral knowledge and sensory knowledge, but rather implies that the meaning of things can only truly manifest through the mind's perception, that is, the emergence of information within the mind as it grasps the inherent information. On the value level, the philosophy of information deepens Wang Yangming's interpretation of morality, with the shift from "the mind's nature is neither good nor evil" to "to cultivate goodness and eliminate evil is the investigation of things" reflecting a process that ascends from the non-moral initial state of inherent information to the creation and practice of regenerated information. By interpreting key issues in Wang Yangming's philosophy through the lens of information theory, this approach opens up new possibilities for the modernization of the school of Mind, while also enriching its classical foundation, thus constructing a solid platform for dialogue with Chinese traditional philosophy.*

Keywords: *Nothing exists outside the mind; Philosophy of Information; The Four Sentences of Teaching.*

ITHEA Keywords: *Theory of Computation; Logics and Meanings of Programs; Semantics of Programming Languages*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54521/ijita32-04-p05>

Introduction

As a crucial branch of Eastern philosophy, Wang Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind has long been criticized for its tendency of excessive subjectivism in the doctrine of innate knowledge. The root cause of this issue lies in the limitations of traditional paradigms in the interpretation of its epistemology. The Philosophy of Information offers a new perspective for addressing this dilemma within the Philosophy of the Mind. Based on the dual dimensions of cognition and value, this paper takes "Nothing exists outside the heart" and "the Four Sentences of Teaching" as the core, and reinterprets Wang Yangming's philosophy by drawing on concepts such as inherent information and self-emergent information in the Philosophy of Information. This not only opens up new paths for the study of the Philosophy of the Mind but also lays the foundation for its modern transformation.

Common Concerns:

The Possibility of Dialogue Between the Philosophy of Information and Wang Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind

Though the philosophy of information and Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind may, on the surface, belong to distinct philosophical systems, setting aside the apparent similarities or differences between them, their shared concern with certain fundamental issues reveals the potential for mutual understanding and connection. From a broader perspective, the common issues they address include how to achieve a non-reductive, non-dualistic, and multi-layered understanding of the world's existence, and how to explain the mechanisms that operate between these different levels. The philosophy of information posits that inherent information already possesses its own meaning and evolutionary logic; when humans grasp this inherent information, new systems of meaning—referred to as self-emergent information—are generated.

Through further reflection, "regenerated information"[K.Wu 2005] is created. This theoretical framework offers valuable insights for understanding several key issues in Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind.

On the epistemological level, the traditional paradigm often interprets Wang Yangming's notion of "Nothing exists outside the heart" as suggesting that the meaning of all things in the universe is grounded in the scrutiny of innate knowledge, positioning the doctrine of innate knowledge within a framework of moral ontology.[Zongsan 2003] This interpretation inherently contains an unavoidable issue: the separation between moral knowledge and sensory knowledge, as if human understanding of the world is split into two overlapping systems. This undoubtedly constitutes a deviation from Wang Yangming's philosophy in a certain sense. In this regard, we may use Brenner's distinction between "Meaning 1" and "Meaning 2"[Brenner 2008] to explain: when the cognizing subject, the "heart," intuitively grasps inherent information (Meaning 1), it simultaneously generates self-emergent information (Meaning 2), which continues to evolve through reflection and practice into regenerated information. Viewed this way, the idea of "Nothing exists outside the heart" does not negate the meaning of the natural world, but rather indicates that the "heart" generates self-emergent information as it grasps inherent information.

On the value level, Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind is primarily reflected in his "Four Sentences of Teaching," which are: "The nature of the mind is neither good nor evil; the movement of the will is good or evil; to know good and evil is the innate knowledge; to practice goodness and eliminate evil is the investigation of things." [Yangming 2008] These statements are difficult to understand within traditional philosophical paradigms, yet they can be reinterpreted through the lens of the philosophy of information. The philosophy of information posits that regenerated information is the encoding of Meaning 2 itself, and thus represents the encoding of the process of the process—i.e., it is the result of reflecting upon Meaning 2.[Zhensong 2024] Based on this premise, at least two conclusions can be drawn: First, inherent information itself contains latent value orientations (good or not good), and "innate knowledge" is the internal recognition and judgment of the "heart" as it grasps these pieces of

information. Second, the apparent contradiction between Wang Yangming's epistemological interpretation of "investigating things" (格物) and his practical focus on "practicing goodness and eliminating evil" can be resolved through the process of generating and revising regenerated information, as outlined in the philosophy of information.

Epistemological Issues:**From Wang Yangming's Concept of "Nothing Outside the Heart" to the Representation of the Worldview in the Philosophy of Information**

Inherent information, as an objective existence, does not disappear due to human negligence or oversight; it continues to undergo processes of assimilation and differentiation. Self-emergent information, on the other hand, is the form that inherent information takes after being intuitively grasped by the subject. It thus encompasses both "natural meaning" and "subjective meaning." When Wang Yangming says "Nothing exists outside the heart," he does not deny the existence of inherent information; rather, he implies that self-emergent information must manifest through the cognitive subject. Without the "heart's" grasp, those "natural" aspects of the world do not form actual meaning for the individual and do not engage with human knowledge and action. This clearly points to an attempt to distinguish between inherent information (Meaning 1), which exists prior to the subject's grasp, and self-emergent information (Meaning 2), which is shaped by the subject's engagement. The process of "attaining innate knowledge" (致良知), as Wang Yangming describes it, can thus be understood as a conscious, reflective, and experiential process on the part of the subject. In this light, it may be interpreted as the transformation of inherent information into self-emergent information—through the practice, perception, and recognition of the heart, the meaning of the natural world can truly "take form" within the mind.

On this basis, Wang Yangming's theory of the unity of knowledge and action can be understood within the theoretical framework of regenerated information. Wang Yangming believed that "attaining innate knowledge" is both an epistemological issue and a matter of practice, which means that the meaning

of things must be "discovered" by the heart while necessarily being acted upon; that is, people must continually engage in practice and reflection on the foundation of this value-consciousness.[Yangming 2008] In traditional philosophical paradigms, "knowledge" is considered an epistemological issue, and "action" is a practical issue. Wang Yangming's claim that "knowledge and action should be viewed as one" is difficult to comprehend within these frameworks and often leads to attempts to mediate the two through the subject of knowledge and action, leaving it somewhat ambiguous and indirectly explained. The concept of "regenerated information" proposed by the philosophy of information requires that, upon grasping Meaning 2, individuals further encode and reflect upon it, thereby generating a new system of meaning (regenerated information). In this regard, the philosophy of information provides a relatively thorough understanding of Wang Yangming's unity of knowledge and action, particularly his views that "knowledge is the intention behind action,"[Yangming 2008] "action is the practice of knowledge,"[Yangming 2008] and "the moment the thought is activated, it is already action." This theoretical framework offers a clearer and more systematic interpretation of Wang Yangming's integration of knowledge and action.

Ethical Issues:

An Interpretation of Wang Yangming's Four Sentences of Teaching through the Lens of the Philosophy of Information

In his later years, Wang Yangming summarized the essence of his lifelong learning into the "Four Sentences of Teaching": "The nature of the mind is neither good nor evil; the movement of the will is good or evil; to know good and evil is the innate knowledge; to practice goodness and eliminate evil is the investigation of things." These sentences encapsulate Wang Yangming's summary of the moral philosophical concerns that were central to Confucianism during the Song and Ming periods. The interpretations of the Four Sentences by Wang Yangming's later followers reveal a contradiction between Wang Ji's theory of inborn sincerity and Qian Dehong's theory of acquired rectification of the mind, with the emphasis eventually shifting toward the former.[Wailu 1987] However, it is evident that the richness of Wang Yangming's philosophy

cannot be fully encompassed by Wang Ji's later "Theory of the Four Negations" (四无说).[Yangming 2008] Thus, how to elucidate the Four Sentences using new philosophical frameworks has been a persistent issue. The philosophy of information, known for its cutting-edge, profound, and complex nature, offers a promising avenue for developing new interpretations of Wang Yangming's Four Sentences, opening a fresh perspective on this classical doctrine.

First, the phrase "The nature of the mind is neither good nor evil" can be understood as the "initial state" of natural meaning and subjective consciousness. The philosophy of information holds that inherent information (Meaning 1) exists "naturally" in the world, free from human-imposed labels of good or evil. Thus, "neither good nor evil" can be interpreted as the state in which, at the level of the mind's nature, no judgment of "good" or "evil" has yet been made about things. This represents the "undifferentiated" state of inherent information before it is classified or evaluated by the subject. The mind's nature being neither good nor evil, in this sense, refers to the cognitive subject's examination of inherent information (Meaning 1) in its pure, unclassified form, detached from any moral evaluation. Secondly, "The movement of the will is good or evil" can be understood as the process through which assimilation and differentiation of information lead to subjective evaluation. Wang Yangming's notion of "the movement of the will is good or evil" implies that once the subject pays attention to or contemplates the world, various emotions, intentions, and value judgments emerge as forms of "knowledge." In other words, when inherent information (Meaning 1) enters the sphere of human consciousness, the subject will interpret or "absorb" it in different ways, and self-emergent information (Meaning 2) is thereby presented. This process reflects the subjective transformation of information, where the mind actively engages with, reorganizes, and assigns meaning to the raw, unprocessed data it receives from the world. Furthermore, "To know good and evil is innate knowledge" can be understood as the subject's internal grasp of Meaning 1 and Meaning 2. In the philosophy of information, self-emergent information represents the state in which inherent information (Meaning 1) is grasped by the subject and simultaneously carries subjective meaning (Meaning 2). "Innate knowledge" (良知) can be seen as the subject's ability to directly and clearly perceive and judge

information. Since innate knowledge is inherent, the phrase “to know good and evil is innate knowledge” refers to the intrinsic wisdom humans are born with to distinguish right from wrong. When the subject intuitively grasps and identifies inherent information and its internal meaning, the mind, upon examining and judging the inherent information, naturally uses innate knowledge to discern which information reflects “harmony” and “positive orientation” and which requires caution or correction. Thus, self-emergent information (Meaning 2) arises from this process. Finally, “To practice goodness and eliminate evil is the investigation of things” can, in the context of the philosophy of information, be understood as the creation and practice of regenerated information. Regenerated information refers to the process by which humans, through thought and reflection, encode and create new meaning structures (information) from Meaning 2 itself. In Wang Yangming’s view, “knowing good and evil” is not merely a theoretical discussion but must be realized through concrete actions—this is what is meant by “To practice goodness and eliminate evil is the investigation of things” in the final part of the Four Sentences. In Song-Ming philosophy, “investigating things” (格物) originally meant “to investigate the principles behind things,” while practical cultivation (功夫) was considered a separate issue.[Xiaolin 2005] However, in Wang Yangming’s philosophy of the mind, “investigating things” is understood as engaging in personal practice, transforming oneself, and correcting one’s thoughts. This leads to the issue of the unity of knowledge and action: “Knowledge is the intention behind action; action is the practice of knowledge,”[Yangming 2008] and “The place where knowledge is true, sincere, and resolute is action; the place where action is clear, aware, and precise is knowledge.”[Yangming 2008] Thus, the process of regenerating and refining information becomes the means by which knowledge and action are seamlessly integrated and mutually reinforce each other.

This transformation, when understood within the framework of traditional philosophy, is difficult to explain. From the perspective of the philosophy of information, it can be interpreted as the process of, after grasping inherent information (Meaning 1) and generating self-emergent information (Meaning 2), repeatedly engaging in practice and reflection on these meanings, thereby forming “regenerated information.” When individuals continuously engage in

"practicing goodness and eliminating evil," they are essentially reinforcing (assimilating) the "beneficial" and "positive" factors in the information realm, while excluding (differentiating) the "harmful" and "negative" ones. Furthermore, they continually feed their understanding of good and evil back into their cognitive system, creating an ongoing cycle. This cycle, in turn, drives the further elevation of innate knowledge (the nature of the heart), representing the dynamic process of "the unity of knowledge and action." Through this process of constant practice and reflection, both the moral understanding and the capacity for action grow together, reinforcing each other in a continual loop of improvement and transformation.

Conclusion

By virtue of the framework of the Philosophy of Information, this paper has successfully resolved the core dilemmas in the traditional interpretation of Wang Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind: On the cognitive level, it interprets "Nothing exists outside the heart" as the process in which the "heart" grasps inherent information and generates self-emergent information, breaking the separation between moral knowledge and sensory knowledge; On the value level, through the evolution of inherent information, self-emergent information, and regenerated information, it clarifies the logic of "the Four Sentences of Teaching" from a non-moral initial state to moral practice, and at the same time provides a systematic explanation for "the unity of knowledge and action" — the generation and practice of regenerated information is precisely the linking bond for the integration of knowledge and action. This interpretation not only enriches the classical connotation of the Philosophy of the Mind but also promotes its breakthrough from the constraints of traditional paradigms. It builds a solid platform for the modernization of the Philosophy of the Mind and the dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy, and also provides a new reference paradigm for the contemporary interpretation of classical philosophical thoughts.

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