

Wang Yangming's Meta-ethics: Moral Realism, Anti-realism, a Response Dependent Theory, or a Stimulation Dependent Theory?

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In appearance, situated within the contemporary debate between realism and anti-realism in moral theories on the nature of moral qualities, Wang Yangming would clearly be on the side of anti-realism. He not only makes it clear that the principle that governs everything is within one's heart/mind, he also criticizes Zhu Xi for seeking the principle outside one's heart/mind. For example, the principle that governs one's relationship to one's parent is filial piety, which lies within one's heart/mind and not within the body of one's parents. At the same time, however, Wang also states that the heart/mind naturally knows to be filial when seeing one's father, to love when seeing one's brother, and to have commiseration when seeing a child falling into a well. So while filial piety is within one's heart/mind, one knows to be filial only when one sees one's parents. In this sense, Wang's moral theory is something between realism and anti-realism. P. J. Ivanhoe compares Wang's theory with John McDowell's response-dependent theory as a *via media* between extreme moral realism and antirealism. McDowell regards moral quality as something similar to John Locke's secondary qualities such as colors and sounds, which are response dependent: they are qualities within things but dependent upon the responses from perceivers. However, I argue that there is a significant difference between Wang and McDowell. For McDowell, moral qualities are in things although they are dependent upon our responses to them. For Wang, however, moral qualities are within our heart/mind although they are dependent upon the stimulations by things. It is in this sense that moral qualities, for Wang, are stimulation dependent. Through an examination of Wang's theory of the heart/mind's stimulation (*gan* 感) by and response (*ying* 應) to external things, we can explore in what sense Wang's theory is unique and how it can avoid some obvious problems with radical moral realism and anti-realism as well as some not-so-obvious problems with McDowell's not-so-radical response-dependent theory, some of which have already been identified by Ivanhoe.