

## Review on the View of Knowing and Doing in Ancient Chinese Philosophy

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### Abstract

In ancient Chinese philosophy, Knowing and Doing is a pair of important philosophical category, which has already been discussed by previous thinkers ranging from pre-Qin period to modern times. The relationship between Knowing and Doing is not only a question in the field of theory of knowledge, but also a question in the field of theory of morality. Many thinkers have discussed this question with different contexts, and their discussions mainly focus in four aspects, namely: the time sequence of Knowing and Doing; the importance of Knowing and Doing; the difficulty of Knowing and Doing; the division and combination of Knowing and Doing. The analysis of those ideas is of significance of exploring the modern value within those traditional philosophical wisdom, and realizing the modernity transformation of traditional culture.

### Keywords

Ancient Chinese philosophy, The view of Knowing and Doing; review.

### 1. Introduction

There has been discussion on the relationship between Knowing (cognition) and Doing (practice) for long time, and philosophy in different time offers their understanding of this question. In ancient Chinese philosophy, Knowing and Tao is linked together, and there is inner connection between Knowing, Doing and Tao. The understanding of Knowing and Doing will help the mastery of Tao. Tao not only refers to the understanding of general character of matter, but also the mastery of inner cultivation and exterior action. Therefore, Knowing and Doing are used both in the field of epistemology and in the field of moral theory in ancient philosophy. The source of knowing and moral concepts are summarized as the relationship between Knowing and Doing, so the theory of morality and the theory of knowing interlaces and influences each other. For many philosophers, Knowing and Doing is used together. Therefore, when analyzing each philosopher's thoughts on Knowing and Doing, we should examine the context of its usage and thing it refers to.

### 2. View of Knowing and Doing in Pre-Qin Period

The concepts of Knowing and Doing first appear in “Shangshu” and “YueMing”, which says that what is difficult is not knowing but doing. In Pre-Qin period, Confucius pointed out in the Analects of Confucius that one is born to know is the most superior; one knowing by learning is the second; one learning when meeting difficulty is the third; one refuses to learn when meeting difficulty is the lowest? [1] 177 (Ji Shi of the Analects of Confucius) For Confucius, he believes that people are born to know and also learn to know; what is more, Confucius emphasizes the importance of the Doing, and learning (Doing) can achieve Knowing in same level for all people. Confucius hate empty talk, he pointed out that over-talk of gentleman as one kind of shame. [1]155 (Xianwen, Analects of Confucius), and gentlemen talk less, doing more.[1] 41 (Liren, Analects of Confucius ). Gentlemen are cautious in speech and agile in doing. (learning , Analects of Confucius) In moral cultivation, he emphasizes the practice of serving humanity by oneself, believing in learning and practicing by oneself.

There is recording of Knowing and Doing in *Doctrine of Mean*. In *Doctrine of Mean*, the process of study is divided into five stages: one need to inquiry knowledge in detail in order be well known. And

one need to think carefully, distinguish clearly, practice in person in order to understand thoroughly, which includes the process of “Knowing and the process of Doing. *Doctrine of Mean* also pointed out that one part of them are born with Knowing, another part of them can get them only by learning, small part of them know them after meeting with difficulties, and the rest of them get to know them for benefit. That is to say, “the way” of accessing to Knowing and Doing is not the same, but the purpose and the result is the same.

Mencius believes that what people can do without study is the good of humanity; what people can think without study is the conscience.[2] (Jinxin, Mencius) In his opinion, people are born with the “four ends”, and have the innate “knowledge and ability”, and only need to invent the mind to feel relaxed, which is mainly discussed in the theory of morality. Xunzi severely criticizes Mencius' theory of moral nature. He believes that human nature is evil and they pretend to be good. (Xin'E, Mencius) That is to say, human nature is originally evil, pretending to be good for the need of maintaining the order of group life. In the field of epistemology, Xunzi points out that the mind has the ability to think. One has the ability to think for one can feel sound through ears, and feel the shape of object through eyes. [3] 204 (Zhengming, Xunzixun)Heart has the ability to understand things, and this process involves the touch of the object. One can gain profit by great effort, make progress by physical practice, become successful by studying. [3]71 (Rudun, Xunzi). Here, “For” and “Learning” refer to people's practice, “Gain”, “Achievement” means the gain of Knowing. In his opinion, Knowing is not the ability people are born with, but obtain in practice.

### 3. The View of Knowing and Doing in the Period of Two Han Dynasties

Dong Zhongshu's relationship between Knowing and Doing is embodied in the field of epistemology. He holds that Knowing precedes Doing, which means one needs to understand the nature of law before taking action. (Birenqiezhi, Chunqiufanlu). He believes that Knowing has a guiding role in Doing, but the source of Knowing is the mysterious apocalypse. Wang Chong is opposed to the theory of natural talent. He believes that knowledge is not true unless one hears or sees it. Knowledge comes from learning, and if one does not ask, he does not know it. (Shizhi, Lunheng) He emphasizes that Knowing comes from learning (Doing), and Knowing is inseparable from the function of the senses. Learner needs to make decision according to what he sees. But he also sees the limitations of the senses, and the sage have questions, too. (Shizhi, Lunheng) He knows that all people have limitations. In his criticism of divination, he advocates the test criteria of “clarity in effectiveness” and “making decision in front of evidence”, emphasizing the practice of verifying the correctness of Knowing.

### 4. The View of Knowing and Doing in the Period of Song and Ming Dynasties

Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao first put forward the question of the relationship between Knowing and Doing, and they clearly state that Knowing is before Doing: Chen Yi says that in the end, one must be knowing, and then take action; if one is without the knowledge of Knowing, how can he live? Knowing must precede doing, such as in a journey, Knowing works as light. In his opinion, only under the light of Knowing, one can achieve his goal, that is to say, the guidance of Knowing to Doing. For example, he says that if a person wants to go to the capital, he must know which way he is going to go, and then he can get there. [4] (Volume 18 of Yishu) Without the guidance of Knowing, Doing will lack a clear direction and thus fail to achieve its goal. For him, Knowing has been a necessary part of Doing, and without Knowing, Doing is impossible. He also mentions that for big matters, it is difficult to do, and it is also difficult to know. [4](Yishu)

Zhu Xi inherits the ideas of Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. He also believes that “Knowing comes before Doing”, and put forward the idea that Doing is more important than Knowing and Knowing and Doing must go hand in hand”. He believes that scholars should first be poor in matters and principles, and practice in person after understanding that facts and principles. He works hard for his whole life in order to explore truth and realize the purpose of Knowing, meanwhile, put all his Knowing into practice. This view is completely consistent with the idea of Cheng Yi that one can achieve nothing without Knowing.

Zhu Xi also says that Doing is more important than Knowing, for example, if one can just saying without actually Doing, then Confucius can finish his lecturing with two days. Although Zhu Xi stresses the importance of Doing, emphasizing the difficulty of Doing, his emphasis is more on Doing with the purpose of Knowing. Therefore, in fact, what he emphasizes is the process of Knowing, which also belongs to the level of Knowing. Zhu Xi's thoughts has an important influence on the later generations, including the academic style and scholar style. His thoughts and research methods still have great influence until the middle of the Ming dynasty. In the Ming dynasty, Zhu Xi's thought of valuing Knowing is pushed to the extreme, resulting in the tendency of valuing Knowing and belittling Doing, which causes the decline of academic style and scholar style.

Wang Yangming criticizes Zhu Xi's thought of valuing Knowing and belittling Doing, at the same time he puts forward the idea of the unity of Knowing and Doing, insisting that Knowing is inseparable of Doing, that is to say, Knowing and Doing is in the process of constantly closing to each other. Wang Yangming's idea has a huge impact on the academic circle at his times, and influences the following generations. In the discussion of the relationship between Knowing and Doing in Chinese philosophy, Wang Yangming offers the most most prominent and distinctive understanding for his definition of the relationship of Knowing and Doing from the ontology, which enriches the traditional connotation and denotation of Knowing and Doing. Wang Yangming's concept of Knowing and Doing has a milestone significance in the development of the relationship between Knowing and Doing in the whole history of Chinese philosophy. His theory of unity of Knowing and Doing is put forward under special historical conditions, which inherits from predecessors and at the same time with innovation and uniqueness. Liang Qichao comments that the unity of Knowing and Doing by Wang Yangming is the most famous and valuable slogan in the academic history.

Wang Yangming's decedents could not spread his thought wider, and at the same time Wang Fuzhi uses "Ontology of Qi" to criticize Wang Yangming's idea of reestablishing, and he puts forward the idea that Knowing interacts with Doing to achieve certain effect. For Wang Fuzhi, Doing is very important, which is ignored in the eyes of Master Chen and Zhu that results into scholars' attachment to Knowing in Song dynasty. Meanwhile, he holds that the unity of Knowing and Doing by Wang Yangming treating Knowing as Doing, which is tantamount to the ignorance of Doing. In fact, Wang Fuzhi misinterpret Wang Yangming's thoughts.

After criticizing the view of Knowing and Doing in Song Dynasty and by Wang Yangming, Wang Fuzhi proposes his view of Knowing and Doing, which emphasizes that Knowing must depend on Doing, and only Doing leads to success. Doing can achieve the effect of Knowing, but Knowing may not always secure Doing. The key to success is Doing, not Knowing. That is to say, Wang Fuzhi stresses the importance of Doing: practice includes Knowing, but Knowing is not always include practice. In the process of cognition, Doing serves the leading role. He repeatedly underlines that person talking about theories may not obtain Knowing, only the one with practice owns Knowing. (Volume 13, Four Books Interpretation)

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main question in the history of Chinese philosophy is the relationship between Knowing and Doing, and the discussion for this question can be divided into four aspects: the time sequence of Knowing and Doing; the importance of Knowing and Doing; the difficulty of Knowing and Doing; the division and combination of Knowing and Doing. In different historical periods, the emphasis on the relationship between Knowing and Doing is also different. Wang Yangming and Wang Fuzhi offer the most profound understanding of the view of Knowing and Doing. Although Wang Fuzhi criticizes Wang Yangming's view, they share a lot of similarities. Their view of Knowing and Doing make contribution to the understanding of the connotation and denotation of Knowing and Doing. The concept of Knowing and Doing in traditional Chinese philosophy has a guiding role in current society, especially the idea of the unity of Knowing and Doing advocated by Wang Yangming and Wang Fuzhi, which attaches importance to practice and represents Chinese preference to practice.

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