

From Cognitive Mind to Moral Mind: The Transformation of the "Mind" in Wang Yangming's Philosophy

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Abstract: The core of Wang Yangming's enlightenment at Longchang lies in the transformation from a cognitive mind that stands in opposition to external objects to a moral mind that identifies with the unity of all things. Wang Yangming's pursuit of learning was aimed at becoming a sage. Prior to his enlightenment, he largely adopted Zhu Xi's theory of "gewu" (investigating things) to pursue sagehood—employing the cognitive mind to recognize the world, accumulating knowledge of external affairs, and ascending to an understanding of "tianli" (the universal principle). However, this approach led him into the dilemma of dualism, wherein "the principle of things and my mind remain divided as two." After enlightenment, Wang discovered a self-sufficient moral essence of the mind—"liangzhi" (innate knowing). He established liangzhi as the moral subject, and through the practice of "zhi liangzhi" (extending liangzhi), projected tianli onto all things. In doing so, he transformed the realm of sensuous existence into a realm of moral significance, thereby constructing an ethical and humanistic world in which all things are unified as one.

Keywords: Wang Yangming; Cognitive Mind; Innate Moral Mind; Realization of Innate Moral Knowledge.

1. Introduction

Mr. Tang Junyi once remarked: "The philosophy of Yangming emerges directly from the issues and doctrines raised by Zhu Xi. The essential distinction between the two lies in subtle nuance, and can be seen as a further development of Zhu's thought." This assessment is quite accurate. The relationship between "xin" (the mind), "xing" (human nature), and "li" (principle) forms a central axis of inquiry in Song-Ming Confucianism. From Zhu Xi's view of the mind as governing emotions and nature to Wang Yangming's assertion that "the mind is

principle," the debate consistently revolves around the interplay among these three concepts. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, the transformation of Wang Yangming's concept of the mind before and after his enlightenment at Longchang marks a critical shift away from Zhu Xi's conception of the mind as a cognitive faculty, which led to the bifurcation of mind and principle. Understanding this shift is crucial to discerning the essential philosophical differences between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming and to appreciating the distinctive meanings each ascribes to the notion of "mind." Comparing Wang Yangming's moral subjectivity with that of Kant can further clarify how Yangming grounded moral subjectivity and realized the unity of all things. This comparative inquiry offers new dimensions for cross-cultural philosophical dialogue and facilitates a deeper understanding of both Wang and Kant's philosophical thought.

2. Bamboo Investigation: The Path to Sagehood Through Subject-Object Dualism

The story of Wang Yangming's investigation of bamboo embodies an attempt to attain sagehood under the guidance of Zhu Xi's gewu philosophy. Zhu Xi's gewu represents a typical intellectual cognition based on a subject-object dichotomy. Zhu Xi asserted, "For every thing, there must be a principle; yet principles are formless and difficult to comprehend, while things leave traces that are easy to observe. Thus, one seeks the principle through the investigation of things" [2, p.631]. Because "principles are formless and hard to grasp," Zhu Xi strongly opposed those who "resort to vague and unknowable realms, sit idly all day tasting empty words, and await a sudden enlightenment" [2, p.1297]. He considered such attitudes as influenced by Buddhist thought and leading to idle speculation. Since "things have visible traces," Zhu Xi formulated his theory of gewu, advocating starting from concrete and perceptible objects and gradually accumulating knowledge of

specific phenomena to ultimately ascend to an understanding of tianli. As he stated: "Scholars must exhaustively investigate the principle in all things, deepening their inquiry from what they already know and striving to reach the utmost. When effort has endured long enough, there will be a sudden and thorough enlightenment, whereby the subtleties of all things—outer and inner, fine and coarse—will be thoroughly understood, and the full substance and function of the mind will be illuminated" [3, p.8]. After Zhu Xi's death, his philosophy gradually became dominant. In the second year of the Huangqing era of the Yuan Emperor Renzong, Zhu Xi's works were mandated as official texts for the imperial examination system. From that point on, Zhu Xi's school was officially endorsed and held a position of unrivaled authority, becoming the required path for scholar-officials aspiring to success in the imperial examination system—a status that persisted into the mid-Ming dynasty.

Wang Yangming was born in the eighth year of the Chenghua reign under the Ming Emperor Xianzong. At the age of eleven, he resolved to "study in order to become a sage," thereby embarking on the path to sagehood. However, due to the absence of proper mentorship and guidance, Wang failed to find the way to sagehood and thus conformed to the prevalent literary scholarship of his time. By eighteen, he yearned for the wisdom of the sages. While escorting his wife, Madam Zhu, from Hongdu back to his hometown, Yuyao, Wang passed through Guangxin, where he paid a visit to Lou Yiliang. Through Lou, Wang encountered the Neo-Confucian doctrine and firmly believed that "sagehood could be attained through learning." Consequently, Wang diligently sought out and studied the writings of earlier sages.

One day, reflecting on the ancients' claim that "all things have outer and inner, fine and coarse aspects; even a single blade of grass or a tree contains profound principle," Wang seized the abundant bamboo in the government offices and attempted to investigate bamboo in pursuit of sagehood. However, after prolonged contemplation, he failed to comprehend the underlying principle and fell ill [4, p.1002]. This marked Wang's first unsuccessful attempt to attain sagehood through bamboo investigation. Upon reflection, Wang attributed this failure to his previously scattered and unmethodical reading, lacking gradual and deepening insight. Although subsequent systematic study

broadened and deepened his understanding, he still felt that the "principle of things and my mind remain divided as two."

Wang Yangming sought to achieve sagehood by employing Zhu Xi's method of gewu zhizhi (investigating things to attain knowledge), yet this pursuit ultimately led him to the perplexity of a "dualistic mind." At this stage, although Wang Yangming had not yet fully articulated his concept of mind, his subsequent enlightenment reveals that he referred to the original mind or innate knowing—a spontaneous, intuitive moral consciousness (liangzhi) that requires neither learning nor deliberation. In contrast, the "principle" (li) he sought through gewu, following Zhu Xi's framework, pertained to empirical knowledge and the rational comprehension of external objects. The question thus arises: Is Wang Yangming's "bamboo investigation" approach to sagehood viable? More fundamentally, can intellectual analysis of concrete objects and the acquisition of empirical knowledge produce the innate moral mind?

Although Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism differ in their ultimate aims, they share a consistent epistemological stance: the cognitive mind and the "innate mind" belong to two fundamentally different domains—the realms of the transient and the absolute. As the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana states, "One mind opens two gates"—a philosophical structure shared by both Eastern and Western thought—wherein one gate corresponds to suchness (true reality), the other to arising and ceasing (phenomenal reality) [5, p.95]. The Buddhist Three Marks of Existence—impermanence (anitya), non-self (anatman), and nirvana—express the view that all phenomena, including the self, are in constant flux and therefore devoid of inherent essence. The vivid sense of self and an external world arises because one has not realized this emptiness, thus remaining trapped in a delusional realm constructed by discriminating consciousness.

This mode of consciousness operates by dualistically separating subject and object, generating afflictions of birth and death, pleasure and suffering, rooted in the mistaken attachment to a self. Therefore, all afflictions stem from self-clinging. To realize suchness, one must relinquish this attachment. As expressed in Buddhist scripture, "When a single thought does not arise, the entirety is manifest;

once the six senses are engaged, clouds obscure the view. Cutting off afflictions only intensifies sickness; the path toward thusness can itself be mistaken" [6, p.316]. Here, "single thought" and "six senses" refer to consciousness. Once consciousness is active, one falls into a delusive world, and the true Buddha-nature is obscured. Clinging to this illusory world and attempting to dispel afflictions through cognitive engagement only compounds the problem. The "thusness" perceived within this illusory realm is itself a false view, not the genuine ultimate reality.

Taoism has long upheld a tradition of skepticism toward rational knowledge. In the opening lines of the Tao Te Ching, Laozi states, "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name." The Tao is presented as ineffable and cannot be defined through concepts or linguistic categories. Since consciousness relies on concepts and categories as its cognitive tools to apprehend external objects, it follows that consciousness is inherently incapable of grasping the Tao.

Concepts arise through the differentiation and definition of attributes among things. Thus, consciousness is limited to recognizing distinctions between things. Laozi elaborates on this relational nature of existence: "Being and non-being give rise to each other; difficult and easy complement each other; long and short contrast with each other; high and low depend on each other; sound and tone harmonize with each other; front and back follow each other—thus it ever is" (Tao Te Ching, Chapter 2). The world of consciousness is therefore perpetually filled with fixed judgments and binaries of right and wrong. Clinging to these dualistic standards leads to what Zhuangzi refers to as "chengxin" (fixed mind). In *Qi Wu Lun* (Discussion on Making All Things Equal), Zhuangzi states, "People tend to follow their preconceived notions and take them as their teachers. But who, then, can truly claim to be without a teacher? Why must it be only those who rely on transmitted knowledge who are said to have teachers? Even those who claim to derive understanding from within their own minds are guided by such internalized assumptions. Thus, even the ignorant are not without teachers." Taoism advocates transcending such dualistic judgments and a liberation from chengxin to attain the "mind of the Tao."

Laozi proposes a method for this transcendence:

"In the pursuit of learning, one increases daily; in following the Tao, one diminishes daily" (Tao Te Ching, Chapter 48). The epistemology of learning entails the continuous accumulation of knowledge to more comprehensively understand and master phenomena. Zhuangzi cautions against this mode, stating, "Life is finite, but knowledge is infinite. To pursue the infinite with the finite is perilous" (Zhuangzi, Yangsheng Zhu). By contrast, the pursuit of the Tao involves the systematic removal of one's accumulated knowledge and conceptual frameworks—diminishing them continually until nothing remains. Only when all concepts are stripped away and consciousness ceases its activity can one enter the profound contemplation of the "mind of the Tao."

The Confucian doctrine of "benxin" (the original mind) was first proposed by Mencius, who stated, "It is not that the mind is infused from without; I possess it inherently—it is merely that I have not reflected upon it" (Mencius, Gaozi I). The benxin is innate, manifesting as knowledge without prior learning or deliberation. Similarly, Lu Jiuyuan contended that "this principle is originally granted to me by Heaven and is not externally imparted" [7, p.4]. Consequently, Lu Jiuyuan strongly opposed Zhu Xi's scholastic method of moral cultivation, criticizing that "being bound by superficial debates and relying solely on external teachings. That which Heaven has endowed becomes secondary, and the roles of host and guest are reversed. Delusion ensues without reflection, and confusion persists without resolution" [7, p.4].

The benxin was originally luminous, spiritually perceptive, omniscient, and responsive. However, under Zhu Xi's framework, the benxin was to be abandoned in favor of seeking tianli and internalizing it as the guiding norm for behavior. As Zhuangzi remarked, "Knowledge is boundless," implying that no matter how diligently one pursues it, one can never attain omniscience and will inevitably fall into perplexity. Zhang Hengqu echoed this skepticism, stating: "The moral virtue of human nature is inherently genuine and unhesitating, whereas knowledge is susceptible to falsity and inertia." He distinguished two types of knowledge: "The knowledge derived from perception and experience arises through interaction with external things and does not belong to moral nature. The knowledge of moral nature is independent of sensory perception" [8,

p.24]. Although tianli acquired through sensory experience may become internalized, it remains external in origin and is ultimately distinct from the benxin. Thus, this externally derived tianli becomes an "other" within the benxin, and behavior governed by this tianli constitutes heteronomy.

Kant argued that free will is the foundation of morality. Therefore, heteronomous actions cannot be considered genuinely moral. Correspondingly, Zhang Hengqu asserted that "actions taken through effort and sincerity are not of the nature itself." Such compelled conduct, lacking autonomy and self-determination inherent in the benxin, can only be classified as moral instruction, aligning with the Doctrine of the Mean's teaching: "To be sincerely enlightened by oneself is called nature; to be enlightened through sincerity is called education."

Zhu Xi originally sought to attain an understanding of tianli through the method of gewu qiongli (the investigation of things to exhaust principles). However, paradoxically, this relentless pursuit of knowledge tended to foster selfish desires, leading one into an endless quest for external knowledge that ultimately obscured the benxin (original mind) and resulted in self-alienation. The tianli obtained through gewu, rather than arising spontaneously from the benxin, could never fully harmonize with the inner moral. Instead, it remained abstract and detached, imposing moral norms on human behavior in the form of external ethical regulations. Such heteronomous morality does not constitute genuine moral action. True morality, according to this view, lies in the conscious discovery of one's inherent nature (benxin), the establishment of an autonomous moral subject, and the embodiment of the benxin in concrete and authentic moral practice. In this regard, Mou Zongsan commented on Zhu Xi: "His extensive and meticulous dissection of the mind's manifestations culminated only in a system of static containment and inward restraint within his lifetime" [9, p.50]. Zhu Xi's gewu zhizhi methodology was essentially a method of textual study that yielded a system of knowledge, but it failed to produce authentic moral action.

Prior to his enlightenment at Longchang, Wang Yangming's quest for sagehood, whether characterized by Zhan Ganquan's "five indulgences" (knightly chivalry, archery, literary

composition, Taoism, Buddhism) or Huang Zongxi's account of Wang's "initial immersion in literary studies, then gradual reading the works of the Neo-Confucian Cheng-Zhu school and proceeding to investigate things in sequence, followed by exploration of Buddhism and Taoism," was fundamentally an intellectual endeavor. He aimed to acquire external principles and experiences through study, thereby constructing a system of knowledge to serve as the standard for personal conduct. Soon thereafter, Wang Yangming realized that "this mental agitation is not the Dao." That is, one cannot reach the Dao through the cognitive mind (renzhixin). At this stage, although he discerned that intellectual understanding alone was insufficient for attaining the Dao, he had not yet fully articulated the concept of original mind, nor had he identified the principle of innate knowing (liangzhi). In his Guizhou discussions on the unity of knowledge and action, Wang remarked: "At the moment one sees beauty, one is already attracted—it is not that one sees beauty and then decides to like it. Similarly, upon smelling a foul odor, one is already repulsed—it is not that one first smells it and then sets up a mind to dislike it." At this point, Wang had begun to intuit the existence of the benxin, yet could not articulate it explicitly. What he rejected was the act of "setting apart of the mind," referring to the rational, analytical cognition. Once this cognitive mind arises, the Dao becomes concealed. While in Chuzhou, observing many students engrossed in intellectual understanding yet lacking attainment, he remarked that such pursuits were of no real benefit and advised them to "practice seated meditation (jingzuo)." Yet this still merely rejected zhijie (intellectual comprehension), without affirming a positive alternative. Only many years later did Wang clearly state in his Letter in Reply to Yuanjing: "The essence of this learning lies in introspective seeking; it is not accessible through cognitive understanding."

3. Zhiliangzhi: The Path to Sagehood through the Discovery of the Moral Mind

Wang Yangming was long troubled by the dilemma that "the investigation of things renders my mind ultimately divided into two." This internal conflict persisted until his exile to Longchang, Guizhou, following his opposition to imperial orders. It was there, through his enlightenment at Longchang, that this confusion

was resolved. Wang declared: "I began to realize that the Way of the sages is fully contained within one's nature. To seek principles externally in things was mistaken" [4, p.1007]. His Longchang enlightenment fundamentally overturned Zhu Xi's gewu zhizhi (investigating things to extend knowledge) approach, shifting from seeking principles in external objects to recognizing that the mind itself contains the complete tianli. Why do these two fundamentally opposed methodological approaches exist? The crux lies in the divergent understandings of the mind held by Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. Zhu Xi conceptualized xin as the perceptual mind, whereas Wang Yangming conceived of xin as the innate moral mind.

In the chapter on theories of mind in Chen Lai's *Studies in Zhu Xi's Philosophy*, it is noted that Zhu Xi's notion of xin is that of perception. Perception, in this context, carries two meanings: one being the capacity for perception, and the other being the content perceived [10, p. 248]. While the capacity for perception is ethically neutral, the content perceived inherently contains both good and evil. Zhu Xi states, "The mind is what moves things, and it naturally involves good and evil" [11, p. 86]. In other words, he believes that the content of human conscious activity encompasses both moral and immoral elements. On the one hand, Zhu Xi affirms that "The entirety of the mind is serene and clear, containing all principles" (Yulei, vol. 5, recorded by Cheng Duanmeng). On the other hand, he also strongly opposes the notion that "merely recognizing within oneself a conscious and perceptive spiritual substance and thereby regarding it as one's nature" (Wenji, vol. 41, reply to Lian Songqing). Thus, in regard to the relationship between mind and nature, Zhu Xi advances the doctrine that "the mind governs both nature and emotions." In essence, the mind contains both tianli and human desires. "It is one and the same mind—when perception follows the desires of the senses, it is the human mind; when it follows principle and righteousness, it is the moral mind" (Yulei, vol. 78, recorded by Lin Xuemeng). Due to this duality of the mind, Zhu Xi maintains that "although human nature contains benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, the mind contemplates myriad things without rest. Thus, nature cannot completely govern the mind" (Yulei, vol. 100, recorded by Wan Renjie). For this reason, Zhu Xi could not accept the proposition of "the mind

is principle."

Similar to Zhu Xi, Kant stands out in the history of Western philosophy as the only thinker who proposed two distinct modes of cognition. One mode pertains to the "realm of sensibility," which Kant refers to as phenomena, derived from sensory perception and experience. The other corresponds to the "realm of intellect," which Kant terms things-in-themselves, accessible only through intellectual intuition. According to Kant, every individual is endowed with an innate and inescapable set of a priori forms of cognition. These forms, combined with sensory data obtained through the five senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body), give rise to empirical, sensory knowledge of the external world. Subsequently, through the faculty of understanding and speculative reason, objective laws governing phenomena can be discerned.

The "thing-in-itself," in Kant's view, is purely an object of intellectual contemplation and can only be apprehended via intellectual intuition. Such intellectual intuition, however, can only be exercised by an infinite mind. As God is conceived as an infinite being, only God possesses the capacity to apprehend the noumenal world. Within the Western tradition, humanity is conceived as a finite creation of God and therefore lacks intellectual intuition. Consequently, Kant holds that humans are incapable of knowing the thing-in-itself. In this framework, the moral law or tianli is attributed to the personified God, and human access to this law is contingent upon divine revelation.

Both Zhu Xi and Kant concur that humans are finite beings and therefore possess a dimension of "sensibility." Precisely because of this finitude, Zhu Xi does not accept that the mind's activities necessarily follow the "Dao mind" aligned with tianli, and he rejects the proposition that "the mind is principle." Likewise, Kant does not believe that humans can transcend innate sensory intuition to attain pure intellectual intuition, and thus he denies that humans possess such intellectual intuition. As a result, both philosophers posit the necessity of an objective external standard—be it tianli or moral law—to serve as a universal ethical criterion for human conduct.

While Zhu Xi and Kant emphasize human finitude and thereby negate human infinitude, Wang Yangming acknowledges human finitude but also discovers an "infinite" aspect within human nature—the innate moral mind. He

asserts that although humans are finite, they possess the potential for infinitude; through moral practice and self-cultivation, one can actualize this inherent infinite *benxin*, thereby entering the realm of sagehood. Accordingly, Wang Yangming advances the proposition "the mind is principle" and inaugurates the doctrine of *liangzhi* (innate moral knowing).

In Lecture Six of *Fourteen Lectures on the Convergence of Chinese and Western Philosophy*, Mou Zongsan argues that the pivotal nexus for the integration of Chinese and Western philosophy lies in Kant's bifurcation between empirical realism concerning phenomenal knowledge and transcendental idealism regarding the thing-in-itself. This shared dualistic framework opens the possibility for philosophical convergence. The West adopts a positive stance toward the phenomenal realm, while Chinese philosophy takes a positive attitude toward the intellectual realm. By "positive," it is meant an affirmation of ontological reality. For example, Kant views transcendent concepts, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and freedom of the will, as "empty concepts" in theoretical reason since humans lack intellectual intuition. In practical reason, these concepts function only as regulative principles without any empirical instantiation. In contrast, Chinese philosophy holds that humans possess intellectual intuition, which can be actualized through moral practice and spiritual cultivation, thereby manifesting their object, the "original mind."

Cheng Mingdao states: "All things are fully contained within me; this is not unique to humans, but applies equally to all things. All proceed from here. Yet, things cannot reason, whereas humans can. Even though humans can reason, they neither add nor subtract from the myriad principles. All principles lie equally laid out"[12, p.34]. Both human and non-human entities are equally endowed with *tianli*, yet the distinction lies in humans' capacity to reason and thus become aware of the "original mind," which things cannot do. This "original mind" is neither a mere physical organ nor a biological instinct as Xunzi suggested, nor is it the perceptual mind of Zhu Xi. Rather, it aligns with Mencius' conception: "All things are complete within me. To return to sincerity within oneself—therein lies the highest joy" (Mencius, Jin Xin, Part 1). It resonates with Zhang Hengqu's statement: "To establish the mind for Heaven and Earth"

(Zhangzi Yulu), Lu Xiangshan's assertion: "The universe is my mind, and my mind is the universe" (Collected Works of Lu Jiuyuan, Vol. 22), and Wang Yangming's poetic expression: "At the moment of silent and scentless solitary knowing, lies the very foundation of all that exists under Heaven and Earth" (Four Poems on Innate Knowledge). Wang further clarifies: "What is my mind? Its very essence is moral nature, and this moral nature is none other than the universal principle"[4, p.37].

This "original mind" is the metaphysical subject of *xing* and *li*, as Mencius described—the source of innate compassion, shame, modesty, and discernment, which generate benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. It is from this mind that the ethical and humanistic significance of the myriad things in the universe arises. Without this mind, there is no *li*; with it, *li* manifests. Hence, Wang Yangming proclaims: "The mind is principle; outside the mind, there is no object, no event, no principle, no righteousness, no goodness" (Letter to Wang Chunfu, No. 2), and "The luminous and spiritual nature of *tianli* is what we call *liangzhi* (innate knowing)" (Reply to Shu Guoyong). Thus, Wang's concept of *liangzhi* is identical to the "original mind," and all moral and humanistic meanings in the world are revealed through this *liangzhi*. By means of *liangzhi*, Wang transforms the principles of phenomena in the "sensory realm" into the ethical principles of the "intellectual realm," thereby incorporating *tianli* within *liangzhi*. Hence, his dictum "there is no principle outside the mind." Consequently, comprehension of *tianli* can only be achieved by inwardly seeking it within the "original mind" through "realizing innate knowing" (*zhiliangzhi*), which Wang Yangming famously advocates.

Wang Yangming's doctrine of *zhiliangzhi* comprises two dimensions. The first is the moral cultivation of the self: "However, ordinary people cannot avoid the obstruction of selfish desires; therefore, it is necessary to employ the work of *zhizhi gewu* to overcome selfishness and restore principle. When the innate knowledge of the mind is unobstructed, fully activated, and flows freely, that is to manifest one's knowledge"[4, p.6]. The second dimension is the moral perfection of external things: "By extending the universal principle of my mind's innate knowledge into all things, all things attain their proper principles, which is meant by *gewu*"[4, p.39].

While the first dimension is relatively uncontroversial, the second raises an important question: since all things inherently possess their own principles, why would they require human effort to manifest them? Wang Yangming's disciples were perplexed by this. Xu Ai asked: "If supreme goodness is only sought in the mind, might it fail to exhaust all principles and affairs under Heaven? For instance, in the matter of serving one's father, there are many particular details such as *wenqing dingsheng* (attending to his warmth or cold, morning and evening greetings)—should these also be sought through the mind?"[4, p.2] From Xu Ai's perspective, ritual acts have objective physical regularities independent of the mind. He thus questioned how such external standards could be apprehended through introspection. This reflects Xu Ai's doubt concerning Wang Yangming's dictum that "the mind is principle" and that "there is no principle outside the mind." From Xu Ai's viewpoint, there indeed exist principles beyond the mind, since the principles of things belong to the phenomenal realm and are the objects of the cognitive mind, and therefore do not reside within the intellectual realm of innate knowledge. What Wang Yangming seeks to extend and apply to all things is the moral and humanistic principle in the intellectual realm. This reveals a divergence in how the two understood the notion of *li*.

In response to his disciples' concern, Wang Yangming insisted that one must first "eliminate selfish desires and preserve the universal principle" to unveil the "original mind" and "attain a clear moral orientation." It is through innate knowledge that one discerns the appropriateness of actions and thereby achieves moral conduct. Regarding the principle of things, Wang Yangming replied: "Why would one not inquire into them?" He did not deny the existence or necessity of studying physical principles. Rather, he maintained: "These are conditions that arise from the sincere and filial mind. It is necessary first to have this sincere and filial mind, and only then do these conditions manifest."

Mou Zongsan argues that Wang Yangming's doctrine of *zhi liangzhi* necessarily contains epistemological dimensions, without which the realization of innate knowledge would be impracticable. In moral practice, innate knowledge only judges whether an action ought to be done, but how to do it depends upon a

proper understanding of the principles of the matter in question. For example, in the case of filial piety, while *liangzhi* dictates the moral necessity of caring for one's parents through *wenqing dingsheng* (ensuring seasonal comfort and offering daily attentiveness), the actual implementation of these practices involves numerous concrete steps. Without knowledge, one would be unable to realize filial sincerity. For filial action to be fully realized, besides the judgment of innate knowledge, one must also possess empirical knowledge of serving one's parents as a prerequisite. Thus, in the practice of *zhi liangzhi*, innate knowledge must simultaneously exercise self-determination while voluntarily "descending" into the discriminating cognitive mind, effecting a subject-object division in order to grasp the principles of things. This enables the understanding and control of things to implement innate knowledge fully. Thus, the transformation of innate knowledge into the cognitive mind becomes a necessary step in realizing knowledge, making knowledge an integral part of it. From this perspective, one may affirm that "there is no principle outside the mind."

Beyond this assertion, Wang Yangming's contemporaries also questioned his proposition of "There is nothing outside the mind." Within the realm that Wang constructs through *liangzhi*, objects are no longer conceived as self-subsisting entities independent of human perception; rather, their significance is constituted through the interpretive and valuative activity of *liangzhi*. Accordingly, Wang Yangming declared, "There is nothing outside the mind."

During Wang's travels in Nanzhen, a friend pointed to a flowering tree growing on a cliff and questioned: "If nothing exists outside the mind, how can this flower bloom and wither deep in the mountains, entirely unrelated to my mind?" Wang replied, "Before you look upon this flower, the flower and your mind both share in silence and stillness. When you observe this flower, its colors suddenly become clear. Thus, you see that this flower is not outside your mind"[4, p.94].

This friend's challenge, invoking the self-blooming and self-falling flower of the cliff, posed a direct inquiry into Wang's notion of "There is nothing outside the mind." Rather than responding directly, Wang employed the contrast between "clarity" and "silence" as

metaphors for the states of "seeing" and "not seeing" the flower.

The "Nanzhen flower observation" episode is a pivotal element in Wang Yangming's philosophical articulation and has long attracted scholarly attention. Qiao Qingju summarized previous interpretations as follows. Feng Youlan and Zhang Dainian approached this passage from the standpoint of subjective idealism, likening it to Berkeley's dictum that "To be is to be perceived." In contrast, Xiong Shili and Mou Zongsan, drawing on the notion of liangzhi as an ontological resonance with the ten thousand things, advocated a mind-object monism. Zhang Xuezhi and Guo Qiyong argued that the Nanzhen flower episode addresses the meaning the flower holds for humans rather than the flower's objective reality itself [13, p.49]. This research integrates these insights and discusses the episode from a constructivist perspective.

Throughout the *Chuanxilu* (Instructions for Practical Living), Wang Yangming's concept of mingbai (illumination) carries two distinct meanings: one refers to straightforward, simple clarity, and the other specifically denotes the clarity of liangzhi. Similarly, ji (stillness or quietude) also bears two senses: one is stillness in the sense of non-movement, the other refers to a Buddhist-like quietude of emptiness and detachment. In the context of the "Nanzhen flower observation," mingbai should be understood as the illumination of liangzhi, while ji encompasses both tranquility and the Buddhist notion of emptiness.

The notion of emptiness (kongji) originates in Buddhist philosophy, which teaches that all phenomena arise from dependent origination and are impermanent and devoid of intrinsic essence (zixing). From an ontological perspective, the absence of self-nature equates to non-existence. Hence, Buddhism regards the world as ultimately non-existent. When "I" have not perceived the flower, liangzhi remains quiescent and latent. At this juncture, both "I" and the flower exist in their factual state, corresponding to Kant's "phenomenal realm" and to the Buddhist illusory "samsaric world," where all things undergo the cycles of birth, aging, sickness, death, and the spontaneous arising and passing away of phenomena. Both "I" and the flower lack intrinsic nature and thus do not truly exist. Wang Yangming expresses this ontological insight when he states: "Heaven, earth, ghosts, spirits, and myriad things have

existed for ages; without my luminous mind, they would all vanish — for it is through my awareness that their existence is revealed"[4, p.109].

When "I" direct attention toward the flower, "I" transition from a state of quietude into one of perceptual engagement. Liangzhi immediately manifests and clarifies. Under its radiance, all things appear as "things-in-themselves." Within the "intellectual intuition realm," liangzhi is regarded as the spiritual essence of creation: "These spirits generate heaven and earth, form ghosts and emperors, and all emerge therefrom"[4, p.91]. As the source of moral, ethical, and value significance, liangzhi does not create the myriad things ontologically ex nihilo. Rather, it imparts moral and ethical significance to all things, thereby revealing them within a humanistic and moral framework. As Wang Yangming declares: "My spiritual clarity is the sovereign of heaven, earth, ghosts, and spirits. Without it, who would revere the heights of heaven? Who would bow to the depths of the earth? And who would discern the auspicious and inauspicious among ghosts and spirits? Without my spiritual clarity, heaven, earth, spirits, and all things would cease to exist. And if my spiritual clarity is severed from them, it, too, would not exist"[4, p.109]. In this humanistic cosmos, liangzhi reigns as the ontological ground of all things. It constitutes their ontological basis, providing the existential grounding for their presence.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of cognitive paradigms, Wang Yangming's concept of the mind underwent a fundamental transformation marked by his enlightenment at Longchang, shifting from a dualistic cognitive mind rooted in the subject-object dichotomy to a moral original mind embodying the unity of all things. The cognitive mind operates on the basis of the separation between mind and things, regarding the myriad external things as objective realities to perceive and analyze. This cognitive mind employs sensibility, intellect, and reason, relying on concepts and logic to grasp the laws governing phenomena. During this phase, Wang Yangming chiefly followed Zhu Xi's gewu philosophy to understand the world. His pursuits in chivalry, archery, and literary composition exemplify this, with the "bamboo investigation" being the most emblematic. However,

knowledge thus acquired pertains solely to empirical facts about things, whereas Wang's ultimate goal was to realize the innate moral mind to achieve sagehood. This divergence is encapsulated in the dilemma of "the principle of things and my mind ultimately remain as two separate entities."

Wang Yangming's enlightenment at Longchang signified a fundamental turn from the cognitive mind that stands opposed to things to the original mind that is unified with all things. Correspondingly, the cognition mode changes from analytical investigation to creative construction. The creation of the moral original mind is, in essence, a process of meaning construction. Its object is no longer ontological knowledge about things but rather moral-ethical and value-laden significance. It centers on human liangzhi as the moral subject. Through perceptual communion with things, liangzhi expands and projects its sincere and luminous tianli onto all things, thereby endowing them with moral and ethical significance. In doing so, it constructs a moral humanistic realm. Within this realm, liangzhi reigns as the sovereign of all beings; all things come into existence and become manifest through the construction and creative projection of liangzhi.

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