Pain and Moral Knowledge

CHI-KEUNG CHAN, 陳志強

Abstract

This article offers a new interpretation of moral knowledge in Wang Yangming's 王陽明 philosophy, emphasizing its embodied foundations and practical significance. I advance two central claims. First, although moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) is often construed as an internal mental sense to know right from wrong, Wang's writings reveal its deeper grounding in bodily perception, particularly in the perception of pain. Second, while the extension of moral knowledge (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) is typically understood as an inward process of correcting one's mental states, Wang understands it more fundamentally as the practice of recognizing the affective interconnectedness and mutual resonance between oneself and other beings. Drawing on close readings of Wang's key texts, informed by comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives, I argue that this embodied and relational account both deepens our understanding of the unity of knowledge and action in Wang's thought and enriches contemporary discussions of moral motivation.

1. Introduction

As a critic of the Cheng-Zhu School of Pattern, the prominent Ming philosopher Wang Yangming 王陽明 (Shouren 守仁, 1472–1529) revitalized the School of Mind and reasserted the primacy of the *heart-mind* (*xin* 心) as the cornerstone of moral practice. Wang's contributions extend beyond the confines of Confucian intellectual history, engaging broader philosophical questions such as the nature of moral knowledge, the interplay between human and world, mind and body, knowledge and action, and the dynamics of moral practice.

In Wang Yangming's philosophy, *liangzhi* (良知) – variously translated as 'moral knowledge', 'innate knowledge', 'good knowing', or 'pure knowing' – serves as a foundational moral compass guiding ethical life. The idea has its roots in classical Confucianism, where Mencius observes that even a child in arms already knows to love their parents and to respect their elder brother, without the need for deliberation (*Mencius* 7A: 15). Citing *Mencius* 6A: 15,

doi:10.1017/S0031819126101533 © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wang describes *liangzhi* as the 'moral sense' of the heart-mind (*xinzhiguan* 心之官), characterized by an essential capacity for ethical 'thinking' (*si* 思) (1992: 72). In what follows, I translate *liangzhi* as 'moral knowledge', a choice also adopted by scholars with expertise in this field, such as Huang Yong. This translation preserves a degree of constructive ambiguity between the Confucian concept of *liangzhi* and the notion of moral knowledge in contemporary ethical theory. There is substantial overlap between the two. In contemporary moral philosophy, 'moral knowledge' is typically understood as knowledge of what is morally right and wrong. Wang likewise attributes this function to *liangzhi*, as when he writes: '*liangzhi* is simply the heart-mind of right and wrong' (1992: 111) and 'knowing good and knowing bad is *liangzhi*' (1992: 117). At the same time, the two concepts emerge from distinct philosophical frameworks, which naturally lead to important differences in meaning. Contemporary accounts often construe moral knowledge in explicitly epistemic terms, as a mental and dualistic *judgement* between right and wrong. By contrast, the Confucian idea of *liangzhi* extends further, encompassing not only the discernment of right and wrong but also affective resonance with others, a sense of metaphysical unity, bodily awareness of morally salient situations, and an innate, unselfconscious responsiveness to ethical demands. This combination of thematic overlap and conceptual divergence creates a productive space for the two traditions to illuminate and enrich one another. It is within this space that comparative philosophy can make a distinctive contribution, advancing both Confucian and contemporary discussions of moral knowledge. Equally central to Wang's thought is the *extension of moral knowledge* (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知, literally 'to extend moral knowledge'), which he presents as the cornerstone of moral practice (*gongfu* 工夫), variously translated as 'practical effort', 'ethical training', or 'self-cultivation'. In the Confucian tradition, moral practice is regarded as essential to the transformation of human existence into its ideal form. This article examines how moral sense and moral practice are integrated through the lens of *embodiment* in Wang Yangming's philosophy. I argue that the embodied dimension of moral knowledge plays a crucial role in grounding and advancing ethical life, yet it has received insufficient attention in existing scholarship. A fuller account of this aspect not only deepens our understanding of Wang's teachings but also illuminates broader questions in moral philosophy.

This article presents two main arguments:

First, it deepens the prevalent interpretation of Wang Yangming's concept of moral knowledge, which is commonly understood as a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mental sense for knowing right from wrong. Prominent scholars in the field often focus on examining *liangzhi* as the moral sense to recognize the ethical qualities of one's own 'mental events' (Lederman 2022a: 182), enabling individuals to judge the moral value of their 'thoughts' as either 'good' or 'bad' (Shun 2011: 101-102). Some also interpret Wang's emphasis on 'subjectivity' as being primarily concerned with 'inner decision' and 'internal self-renewal' (Tu 1976: 170-171). While it may not be the original intention of these scholars to suggest that *liangzhi* refers solely to an independent mind or to inner mental states contrasted with a mind-independent external reality, the absence of attention to the role of the body may risk giving that impression. Without a fuller account of embodiment, such interpretations may inadvertently present Wang's philosophy as overly internalist or mentalistic. In this article, I introduce a largely overlooked perspective that emphasizes the unique explanatory role of bodily perception in enriching the understanding of moral knowledge. Bodily perception in humans exemplifies the heavenly *resonance* and *response* (*ganying* 感應) inherent in all beings, with the perception of *pain* (*tong* 痛) playing a crucial role in shaping our ethical lives. This approach can effectively explain why certain forms of knowledge naturally lead one to take action, providing the strongest form of moral motivation. Consequently, it refreshes our understanding of Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action.

Second, this article enriches the conventional interpretation of extending moral knowledge, which is typically understood as the mental exercise of correcting one's inner states on the basis of moral knowledge of good and bad, which then, in turn, leads to the moral action of doing good and eliminating bad. For example, several prominent scholars describe the extension of *liangzhi* as a process by which its moral *judgement*s 'reach out', fostering not only love for the good and hatred for the bad, but also motivating the corresponding actions to promote the good and remove the bad (Shun 2011: 103). Often, interpretations of Wang Yangming's teaching focus on refining 'mental states' to 'cleanse our minds' from 'bad ideas' (Liu 2017: 262) and include ethical training that emphasizes sincerity through recognizing and correcting one's 'psychological state' (Tiwald 2023: 68). While these interpretations faithfully capture an important dimension of Wang's doctrine – particularly in emphasizing the role of discriminative *judgement* between right and wrong, or good and bad – my analysis goes further by examining the interplay between mental *judgement* and bodily perception. I propose that, given Wang's foundational emphasis on cultivating connections

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and achieving resonance with other beings, mental exercises such as *judgement* and deliberation derive their significance from this more primary, embodied and relational basis.

Before turning to the main discussion, two clarifications are in order:

First, regarding the research methodology of this article. My aim is to contribute both to historical scholarship on Wang Yangming and to philosophical inquiry into his thought. I argue that an embodied interpretation of Wang's philosophy is not only textually well-grounded and faithful to his writings, but also philosophically compelling in its account of, and guidance for, human ethical life. On the historical side, I do not construct an unconstrained, entirely novel view that departs from Wang's own thinking; rather, I support my interpretation with textual evidence that, I contend, accurately captures the embodied character of his teachings. On the philosophical side, I maintain that Wang's insights are not confined to the historical and cultural context of sixteenth-century China. They articulate universal ethical truths that remain relevant for guiding moral life across times and cultures. In this respect, I aim to offer philosophically coherent arguments, supplemented where appropriate by empirical observations, to further support and illuminate Wang's position. My ultimate goal is to contribute both to the historical study of Wang's thought and to contemporary debates in moral philosophy to which his ideas remain highly relevant.

Second, a clarification is needed regarding the main thesis of this article. It is certainly true that oneness and unity are central themes in Wang Yangming's philosophy. For Wang, the mind and body, cognition and emotion, knowledge and action, reality and practice are not distinct or separate entities, but inherently unified. In light of this, it would be a serious distortion to claim that his philosophy is grounded exclusively in either the mind or the body. At first glance, this article might appear to suggest that Wang's philosophy is solely about bodily perception. However, that is not the actual intention of this work. While leaning too far toward the mind risks an internalist or idealist interpretation, leaning too far toward the body can lead to a misleading behaviorist or naturalist reading. Both represent one-sided extremes that, according to widely shared scholarly understanding of Wang's philosophy, are generally considered untenable. At the same time, to simply state that Wang incorporates both mind and body is so obviously true as to be trivial. What is crucial, and central to the aim of this article, is that while many influential scholars have thoroughly examined the structure and function of the mind in Wang's moral philosophy, the role of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the body – especially the bodily perception of pain – has received far less attention. *How does this bodily dimension relate to moral cognition?* This article seeks to address this key question and fill the gap in the existing literature. This article, then, does not reject or contradict existing interpretations of Wang's thought; rather, it seeks to complement and enrich them by highlighting the embodied dimension of moral knowledge. In doing so, it contributes both to a fuller understanding of Wang's philosophy and to broader contemporary discussions in ethics.

2. Pain and moral knowledge

Advancing Mencius' account of moral knowledge, Wang Yangming connects it with the idea of the human 'original condition' (*benti* 本體). He maintains that all individuals inherently embody this condition, characterized by a harmonious unity of knowledge and action that enables seamless and effortless expression. As Wang writes (1992: 5): 'if it concerns the original condition of knowledge-action (*zhixing benti* 知行本體), then it is indeed innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) and moral ability (*liangneng* 良能). Even for those who struggle, it can still be said that they are "born knowing and acting with ease."' The term *benti* has been variously translated as 'inherent reality' (Angle & Tiwald 2017), 'in-itself' (Ivanhoe 2002), 'original natural condition' (Lederman 2022a), and 'original state' (Liu 2017). While these renderings converge in presenting *benti* as the complete and fundamental ground of humanity – something that can never be lost – the term involves two related but distinct senses. In its ontological sense, it denotes an inherent and intrinsic *ti* (體, 'substance' or 'essence') that generates its specific *yong* (用, 'function' or 'activity'). In its more empirical sense, it refers to a primary state of human existence, especially as it manifests in infancy and early childhood. Recognizing both senses allows the following discussion to illuminate not only the moral metaphysics of Wang's philosophy but also to provide a grounded basis for engaging its empirical dimensions in relation to moral psychology. In emphasizing the need for a 'foundational origin' (*benyuan* 本原) for moral cultivation, Wang explicitly uses newborn infants (*yinger* 嬰兒) as exemplars, urging that our model should both reflect and, through cultivation, restore their original state of 'pure vital energy' (*chunqi* 純氣) (1992: 14). This perspective resonates with Song philosopher Cheng Mingdao's 程明道 (Hao 顥, 1032–1045) striking observation (1992: 53) that 'by observing chicks, one can observe benevolence'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Together, these teachings highlight the importance of recognizing the original state of beings as the basis for moral cultivation, and naturally lead to the question: what makes young children, or the original human condition, so distinctive?

Both empirical research and Confucian philosophy highlight young children's *high sensitivity to pain and itchiness*, as well as their *deep interconnectedness with other beings*. Common sense suggests that children are generally more sensitive and reactive to pain than adults, a phenomenon further explained by scientific research examining physiological and developmental factors. For instance, a study by El Tumi *et al*. (2017) has shown that younger children are more sensitive to noxious stimuli compared to older children and adolescents. Additionally, Fitzgerald (2005) found that sensory circuits in newborn infants are more excitable than those in older individuals, indicating that infants exhibit pronounced pain behaviours. This study also reveals that infant pain involves functional signalling pathways and receptive fields that gradually become tuned during the postnatal period, features that become absent in the mature nervous system of healthy individuals.

In the Neo-Confucian context, Wang intriguingly connects the perception of pain to the moral heart-mind, stating (1992: 121),

> **[T1]** The heart-mind is not merely a piece of flesh; *wherever there is perception, there is the heart-mind* (凡知覺處便是心). For instance, the perception of sight and sound by the eyes and ears, and *the perception of pain and itchiness by the hands and feet* (手足之知痛癢), *these perceptions themselves are the heart-mind*.

As [T1] makes clear, perceptions are not merely manifestations of the heart-mind; they are the heart-mind. Wang is not drawing a dualistic distinction between mind and body, in which the body serves only as a passive medium for expressing the 'real' ethical and ontologically significant heart-mind. Rather, the text affirms the unity of mind and body: bodily perceptions are integral to, and constitutive of, the heart-mind's content. On this view, the heart-mind in Wang's philosophy does not refer solely to inner mental states in contrast to outward bodily expression. Instead, bodily perceptions are part of the very nature and foundation of the heart-mind, and thus are constitutive of *liangzhi*. Echoing this, Cheng Hao's insights are instrumental in linking physiological experience to moral significance. He famously suggests that the Confucian concept of benevolence (*ren* 仁) is best understood in medical terms. As Cheng observes (1992: 17), 'medical texts describe the paralysis of the hands and feet as a lack of benevolence' (醫書言手足痿痺為不仁),

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

implying that true benevolence, by contrast, involves the capacity to feel pain and itchiness. Cheng further teaches (1992: 53) that the medical act of taking the pulse (*qiemai* 切脈) might best exemplify benevolence, a point later elaborated by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (Huian 晦庵, 1130–1200) (2010: 3268), who explains that it enables one to sense the vital energy circulating through the blood vessels (*xueqi zhouliu* 血氣周流). It is important to note, however, that what gives the act its ethical significance is not the mere physical contact but the underlying sense of unity, resonance, and identification with the patient, such that the doctor regards the patient as an extension of their own self. In this state of attunement, one feels the pain and discomfort of others as if directly experiencing them, and is thereby moved – with both urgency and sincerity – to relieve their suffering and restore their health, just as one would strive to heal oneself.

This is why, for Wang, bodily perception is not a morally neutral physiological fact but a paradigmatic example of the resonance and response among myriad beings. And among human bodily perceptions, the perception of *pain* – more so than seeing, hearing, or other senses – plays a uniquely formative role in shaping our ethical lives. As Wang elaborates (1992: 79),

> **[T2]** Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things are originally one body with me. The suffering and pain of the people, how could they not be felt as sickness and pain that pierce my own body? *Not knowing the sickness and pain of one's own body, there can be no heart-mind that knows right from wrong (不知吾身之疾痛,無是非之心者也)*. The heart-mind that knows right from wrong does so *without deliberation* and is capable *without having learned* – this is what is called *liangzhi*.

In [T2], Wang strikingly grounds the mental sense of knowing right from wrong in bodily experience, particularly *sickness and pain* (*jitong* 疾痛), which arise spontaneously and naturally. This invites us to reconceive *liangzhi* as intrinsically bodily and non-deliberative. For Wang, a benevolent and great person not only feels their own pain and itchiness but also resonates with and responds to the suffering of others. Through this shared resonance and mutual attunement, one experiences *'com-passion'*, which constitutes the core of innate moral knowledge. Accordingly, Wang suggests that recognizing the sickness and pain of one's own body – and resonating with the pain of others as members of one's greater self – forms the foundation of a heart-mind capable of discerning right from wrong.

It is in this light that Wang develops his doctrine of the *'one-body'* (*tongti* 同體), building on the idea of vital energy circulating in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

blood vessels and expanding it into a metaphysical account of resonance and response among the myriad beings. Wang explains (1992: 124),

> **[T3][a]** Question: 'It is said that the human heart-mind and external things form one body, just as the parts of a physical body are interconnected through the circulation of blood and energy (*xueqi liutong* 血氣流通), making them one body. If humans were separate entities (*yiti* 異體), then how could animals, plants, and even more distant things be considered one body?'
>
> **[b]** Wang replied: 'You only need to observe *the subtleties of resonance and response* (*ganying zhi ji* 感應之幾). Not only animals and plants but even heaven, earth, and ghosts and spirits are one body with me.…**[c]** Heaven, earth, ghosts, spirits, and all things cannot exist without *the spiritual clarity* (*lingming* 靈明) of my heart-mind, and my spiritual clarity cannot exist without heaven, earth, ghosts, spirits, and all things. Thus, everything is part of a single flowing vital energy (*yiqi liutong* 一氣流通). How could there be any separation?'

In [T3][a], an inquirer seeks clarification on the meaning of Wang's 'one-body' doctrine. Echoing Cheng-Zhu thought, the human heart-mind and external things are understood as forming a unity, similar to how the parts of a body are connected through the circulation of blood and energy. However, they note that if the 'one body' is understood solely in this physiological sense, humans would already be distinct from one another, let alone from animals and plants. In [T3][b], Wang emphasizes that animals, plants, heaven, earth, ghosts, and spirits all form one body with humans when viewed through the lens of resonance and response. This perspective reveals a vision of interconnectedness where humans and myriad beings are not independent but mutually constitutive, actively influencing one another through dynamic interactions. Finally, in [T3][c], Wang extends the physiological process of circulating blood and energy (*xueqi liutong* 血氣流通) to the metaphysical concept of universal interconnectedness (*yiqi liutong* 一氣流通) through a shared logic of resonance and mutual influence. The physiological circulation sustains the individual's life and responsiveness, while the metaphysical circulation expresses the continuous flow of vital energy binding all beings together. On this view, the resonance and responsiveness among humans and the myriad beings are not merely analogous but

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

grounded in the same ontological pattern, forming the basis of ethical life and motivating care for others' well-being as integral to one's own. Since all beings share the same vital energy, this interconnectedness extends beyond an individual's physiological life to relationships with others. This connection is not merely an ontological fact but also represents a moral ideal to strive toward. Echoing Cheng Hao's view that 'a benevolent person is indistinctly united with all things' (1992: 17), Wang similarly asserts: 'a great person views himself and the universe as one body' (1992: 252). Thus, just as a *physically healthy person* feels the pain and itchiness of their own hands and feet, a *morally healthy person* regards all beings as extensions of themselves and deeply feels their pain and itchiness. This one-body doctrine forms the ethical foundation of Wang Yangming's philosophy, where moral action arises naturally through resonance with the interconnected fabric of existence.

What merits further attention in [T3][c] is Wang's articulation of the heart-mind in terms of *spiritual clarity*. Wang explains that the significance of myriad beings is illuminated through the spiritual clarity of the heart-mind, while the heart-mind itself gains substantive content only through its interactions with myriad beings. The term spiritual clarity is enriched by the concept of *empty, spiritual, clear awareness* (*xuling mingjue* 虛靈明覺), portraying the heart-mind as a receptive and responsive vessel, empty yet capable of resonating with the Pattern (*li* 理) of various beings. Wang compares the heart-mind of a sage to a clear mirror, which, though empty of fixed images, responds appropriately to whatever it reflects: 'the sage's heart-mind is like a clear mirror; it is simply clarity itself. It responds to stimuli appropriately, reflecting everything without exception' (1992: 12). He further elaborates: 'the heart-mind is empty and clear; it contains all patterns and responds to all matters' (1992: 15). For example, when facing a child about to fall into a well – as described in *Mencius* 2A: 6 – although the child's physical existence appears to be a 'separate entity' from us, we nevertheless resonate with the Pattern of life-generativity inherent in the child's being, which prompts us to act morally by saving them. Similarly, while humans and fish are even more 'separate', we can still resonate with them, perceive, and thereby understand their nature (*xing* 性) as aquatic creatures that require water, an understanding that guides our moral response to help them flourish in their natural habitat. While the term *emptiness* (*xu* 虛) denotes the receptiveness of the heart-mind – like the emptiness of a mirror or vessel, which enables them to respond to and engage with things appropriately and fully – the related term *nothingness* (*wu* 無) emphasizes the absence

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of any fixed substance in the heart-mind, cautioning against conceiving it as an independent object to be sought (see Chan 2024, 2025, for further discussion). Wang considers nothingness so fundamental that he extends it to illuminate the nature of both the sensory organs and the heart-mind: 'the eyes have no substance; their substance lies in the colors of myriad things. The ears have no substance; their substance lies in the sounds of myriad things. The nose has no substance; its substance lies in the smells of myriad things. The mouth has no substance; its substance lies in the tastes of myriad things. Similarly, the heart-mind has no substance (*xin wu ti* 心無體); its substance lies in the approval and disapproval that arise from the resonance and response with heaven, earth, and myriad things' (1992: 108). This perspective ties back to [T1], where Wang explains that the perceptions of pain and itchiness by the hands and feet, as well as the perceptions of sight and sound by the eyes and ears, are all manifestations of the heart-mind. These perceptual experiences reveal the human capacity to resonate and interact with myriad beings. In Wang's thought, the heart-mind is never understood as isolated, independent, or opposed to the body or the world. Instead, mind, body, and world together constitute an inherently unified whole in their original condition. In light of this, bodily perceptions are not merely physiological sensations but carry profound moral significance, forming the groundwork for ethical resonance and response. The shared vital energy among all beings enables a form of intercommunication that constitutes the basis of *'com-passion'*. While compassion is often understood as an action initiated by the subjectivity of the 'I' or by a compassionate mind directed toward another's suffering, Wang's philosophy suggests that genuine compassion transcends both the individual self and the individual mind. As Wang states (1992: 272), learning to become an ethical exemplar (*junzi* 君子) is, at its core, the learning aimed at realizing oneself (*weiji* 為己). This ideal state is ultimately defined by regarding the myriad beings as forming one body, unified with oneself (*yiti* 一體). Paradoxically, realizing oneself requires overcoming the selfish ego (*keji* 克己), which in turn leads to a state of letting go of the self (*wuji* 無己). Elsewhere, Wang writes even more strongly: 'the learning of the sage is founded on having no self' (1992: 232). On this view, genuine ethical interaction does not depend primarily on an 'I' or on discrete mental events imbued with moral content. Rather, it emerges when the self and mind become empty and clear – open, receptive, and responsive to others. True compassion requires minimizing the self and cultivating mental emptiness, thereby allowing one to perceive and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

receive the whole reality of the other. It is through this openness and receptivity, rather than through the assertion of one's own mind or moral intentions, that authentic compassion emerges. While moral phenomena are often assumed to arise primarily from operations of the mind – inner states filled with proper judgement, deliberation, and decision – the emphasis on nothingness discloses a less 'minded' dimension of moral experience. This perspective of nothingness, or *unmindedness*, shifts the focus from mind to body, drawing greater attention to spontaneous and natural forms of perceptual resonance.

Correspondingly, empirical research demonstrates that ethical behaviour often manifests through affective interactivity rather than solely through deliberate mental judgement. For instance, in child psychology, newborns cry in response to the cries of other newborns, exhibiting affect-sharing and contagious reactions that serve as early indicators of empathetic development (Geangu *et al*. 2010). These affective feelings of connectedness observed in young children reflect a form of *primary intersubjectivity*, which forms the foundation of our social and ethical lives (DeSouza 2013). Similarly, in Confucian philosophy, contemporary thinker Tang Junyi (2016: 408) describes the primary expression of moral benevolence as 'a warm and pure feeling of indistinct unity and inseparability with others (渾然與人無間隔之溫純樸厚之心情)'. It is noteworthy that both moral psychologists and Confucianists emphasize such primary connections or mutual communications between individuals as a form of an unreflective process. DeSouza (2013) suggests that, from infancy, we exhibit a *pre-reflective ethical know-how* that enables us to comprehend and navigate the moral world, emphasizing that this active ethical engagement from birth does not arise from intellectual concepts but originates in pre-linguistic, pre-reflective perceptual experiences and sensorimotor capacities. Similarly, Tang (2016: 412–413) conceives the primary expression of moral benevolence not as rational mental judgement but as a *beyond-self-aware* (*chao zijue* 超自覺) phenomenon, a mode of resonance that transcends conscious human deliberation and is grounded in the interconnectedness of all beings. This conception resonates with Wang's view, which identifies such a capacity as inherent not only in newborn infants but also, in principle, in grass, trees, tiles, stones, and myriad other beings (Wang 1992: 107). Wang's concept of innate moral knowledge can thus be best understood as a dynamic state of *co-existence, co-living, co-becoming, and co-creation* among beings in the world. While contemporary psychologists hold that ethical expertise is acquired rather than innate, and Neo-Confucian scholars tend to regard it as inherent, both perspectives converge in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

recognizing that the primary state of human beings, as manifest in infancy and early childhood, already displays an initial expression of ethical capacity, one that builds on a first-nature responsiveness to moral significances.

Before closing this section, it is worth revisiting the role of perception in Wang's philosophy, especially in light of ongoing debates in recent scholarship. In a series of widely discussed works (2022a; 2022b; 2023), Lederman proposes an *introspective model* of Wang's thought that places greater emphasis on the doxastic coherence within one's mental states. He explicitly argues against what he terms the *Perceptual Model*, which he regards as 'arguably the most prominent position in the Anglophone scholarship on Wang' (2023: 135). While not all proponents of the Perceptual Model focus specifically on the concept of genuine knowledge as Lederman does, they generally, as Lederman summarizes, emphasize how a virtuous person perceives ethically significant features of their environment and responds seamlessly with appropriate demeanor and affect. One of Lederman's central objections to the Perceptual Model is textual. He observes that Wang repeatedly insists that moral qualities such as filiality and respect are not external to the mind. Since Wang does not hold that these qualities are instantiated in the environment, he cannot have believed that genuine knowledge of them is identical with perceiving properties instantiated in the world (Lederman 2023: 145). This is best read as a textual challenge to the Perceptual Model, given Wang's famous claims that 'the mind is Pattern' (心即理) (1992: 2, 26, 43, 51, 121) and 'there is no Pattern outside the mind' (心外無理) (1992: 15, 239). However, Lederman's textual case should be assessed in light of the broader and more balanced context of Wang's teaching. When challenged that 'the mind is Pattern' seems incompatible with the earlier Cheng brothers' view that 'Pattern is in things' (在物為理), Wang replied: 'in the phrase 'Pattern is in things', one should add the word 'mind' before 'Pattern'. This means that when the mind is in things, it is Pattern (此心在物則為理)'. (1992: 121). This passage offers strong textual evidence for a more accurate understanding of Wang's view on whether Pattern belongs to the mind or to the world, and in turn provides potential support for the Perceptual Model. Here, Wang makes clear that Pattern exists neither exclusively within the mind nor exclusively in the external world. He rejects a dualistic separation of mind and world, affirming instead their close unity. On this view, moral qualities such as filiality and loyalty are not simply the exclusive properties of either mind or world. Rather, as Wang further elaborates, 'when this mind is engaged in serving one's father, it

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is filiality' – filiality comes into being only when the mind is engaged in serving one's father. This account of Pattern's relation to mind and world also coheres with Wang's general doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action. As Lederman himself articulates (2022a: 207), a person genuinely knows filiality if and only if they are acting filially. The Perceptual Model accommodates this, since engaging in the act of serving one's father is itself an instance of acting filially. In sum, the Perceptual Model can be defended as both philosophically coherent and textually grounded in Wang's writings. It captures Wang's view that knowledge of moral qualities such as filiality is co-created through the resonance and mutual responsiveness of mind, world, and practical action. The embodied interpretation developed in this article assumes that a person 'perceives' filiality, and that filiality is not simply 'out there' but is co-created through dynamic interplay between mind and world. On this reading, the view is largely consistent with the Perceptual Model and may be regarded as a sophisticated variant of it.

3. Resonance and ethical practice

Certainly, Wang has described and discussed the ideal state of sagehood; however, it should be recognized that, in Wang's philosophy, the ideal state is simply the original state of human beings – nothing more is added. One might naturally assume that the original state and ideal state are fundamentally different, with the original state being a natural endowment present from birth, and the ideal state an achievement reached through diligent, deliberate effort. It is commonly understood that it is only through conscious choice and dedicated effort in cultivating one's moral life that the outcomes of such processes can bear ethical significance. However, Wang (1992: 2) explicitly states, 'the state of the heart-mind that is not obscured by selfish desire is itself the heavenly principle; there is no need to add anything from the outside'. What follows from this metaphysical position is an ethical training aimed solely at restoring and maintaining this original state of heavenly nature. As Wang clarifies (1992: 28), 'our efforts are aimed at reduction day by day, not at accumulation. To diminish a bit of human desires is to restore a bit of the heavenly Pattern'. Following this, Wang (1992: 4) clarifies that the separation of knowledge and action into two distinct categories is only a state obstructed by selfish desires, contrasting with the original state. He thus emphasizes that the teachings of sages on knowledge and action are simply intended to help individuals restore

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their original condition, one that actively and persistently connects and resonates with others. However, as people mature and develop rational and cognitive abilities, they acquire instrumental rationality that often prioritizes calculating benefits and risks over expressing their original selves. A person may naturally feel compassion and be moved upon seeing a stranger get hurt, but if they are preoccupied with their own desires, such as rushing to work, or if they recall social experiences suggesting that criminals may exploit people's sympathy for fraudulent purposes, they may choose to ignore all similar situations, thus creating a separation between self and others, and between knowledge and action. This also explains why Wang intriguingly points out that the knowledge gained from hearing and seeing may hinder one's natural moral sense, and that those who have never been formally educated may find it easier to align with Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action (1992: 1172). In this way, reducing desires and thoughts while returning to one's original state indicates the key to moral practice.

Extending moral knowledge (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知, or in short form *zhizhi* 致知) is widely recognized as the paramount principle of Wang Yangming's teachings. While a common interpretation holds that extending moral knowledge involves applying the conscious sense to judge right and wrong across various scenarios, this article seeks to enrich that view by drawing attention to an often overlooked dimension. Building on insights from [T1] and [T2], I suggest that this practice may also be understood as extending one's personal perceptual experience of pain and itchiness into broader contexts.

As Wang explains (1992: 85),

> **[T4] [a]** Innate moral knowledge is where the heavenly Pattern naturally and luminously discloses itself; it is nothing other than a *genuine, wholehearted feeling of compassionate sorrow* (*zhencheng ceda* 真誠惻怛), which is its very original condition […] **[b]** Mencius' assertion that 'the way of Yao and Shun lies only in filial piety and fraternal love' is intended to remind people of the place where innate moral knowledge manifests as most genuinely personal and profoundly sincere, allowing no obscurity or concealment. As long as people, in their loyalty to rulers, benevolence to others, love for all creatures, and in all activities between movement and stillness, speaking and silence, extend their singular concern of innate moral knowledge with genuine, wholehearted compassion for pain and sorrow towards their parents and elder brother, then it naturally is the Way. Although the affairs of the world are ever-changing and boundless, by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> extending this genuine, wholehearted compassion for pain and sorrow of innate moral knowledge towards one's parents and elder brother, one ensures no gaps or oversights, for there exists only this single form of innate moral knowledge. Beyond this single concern of innate moral knowledge towards one's parents and elder brother, there exists no further innate moral knowledge that can be extended; hence it is said, 'the way of Yao and Shun lies only in filial piety and brotherly love'.

[T4][a] explicitly states that the original condition of innate moral knowledge is fundamentally a *genuine and sincere feeling of pain and sorrow*. Extending this innate moral knowledge to various domains naturally leads to the realization of corresponding virtues. According to *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Explaining and Analyzing Characters* 《說文解字》), the term *ce* (惻) is defined as pain (*tong* 痛), referring to the experience of compassion or the feeling of another's pain, while *da* (怛) is defined as distress (*can* 憯), denoting a deep sense of sadness or sorrow. Together, *ceda* reflects humanity's capacity for affective resonance with the pain of others, leading to a profound sadness at their suffering. This response originates in bodily perception, progresses through metaphysical resonance, and culminates in ethical compassion. Consequently, all ethical training must stem from this singular origin, which forms the foundation of moral life.

In [T4][b], Wang further observes that this innate moral knowledge is most authentically and deeply expressed through filial piety and fraternal love. Generally, the pain and sorrow experienced by one's parents and siblings are deeply shared by the individual, evoking the most profound and sincere feelings. Whenever a close family member suffers from pain and sorrow, one naturally feels an empathetic response, as if experiencing the pain themselves. Wang considers such synchronous perceptual feelings of pain and itchiness that originate within oneself and resonate toward others as the most original form of innate moral knowledge. Despite the ever-changing and boundless nature of the ethical challenges we encounter, one can effectively respond to them by extending this profound form of innate moral knowledge. In a relevant passage, Wang (1992: 58) mentions that the original condition of the heart-mind is already the heavenly principle and requires no thinking or deliberation. He thus asserts that 'not thinking or deliberating is precisely ethical training'. Philosophically, then, extending moral knowledge as ethical training fundamentally involves extending the beyond-self-aware bodily awareness and perceptual feelings of pain and itchiness from oneself

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to more beings, thereby realizing innate moral knowledge in broader contexts.

Though not explicitly formulated in Mencian philosophy, a threefold structure – one that may serve to illuminate aspects of Wang Yangming's moral psychology – can be reconstructed by borrowing the narrative framework of the famous story in the *Mencius*: In the account of King Xuan of Qi sparing the ox (*Mencius* 1A: 7), Mencius imparts an ethical lesson by focusing the King's attention on the ox's *pain* and suffering. By prompting the King to reconnect with his own past experiences of empathetic resonance, Mencius leads him to extend these *feelings* towards the suffering of other innocent people – this forms the first key component of extending moral knowledge. Mencius further helps the King recognize this empathetic response as an expression of *benevolence*, thereby setting him on the *right* path to sagely rulership, which constitutes the second component. Anchored in these deep feelings of empathy, the King is naturally motivated to acquire *extensive knowledge* and cultivate *rational thinking*, enabling him to formulate effective policies that enhance the well-being of his people – the third component of this process.

Thus, the extension of innate moral knowledge involves three essential components in this transformative process:

1. Bodily pain and knowledge-action unity

By empathizing with *the experience of pain*, Wang tightly integrates the mental and bodily dimensions in moral practice, thus illustrating the essential meaning of the unity of knowledge and action. Wang (1992: 123) often reminds us that in aspiring to be a sage, one must practice in a way that 'one strike leaves a mark, one slap draws blood' (一棒一條痕,一摑一掌血). Otherwise, if one's life is like 'dead meat', unresponsive to pain, then all ethical practice will be in vain (譬如一塊死肉,打也不知得痛癢,恐終不濟事). This clearly emphasizes that genuinely feeling one's own pain and that of others is foundational to all moral practices. Similarly, the pursuit of self-realization must be as intense as the experience of being cut by a knife or pricked by a needle; one cannot endure such pain even for a moment and must act immediately to remove the knife or needle to find relief (如刀割,如針刺,忍耐不過,必須去了刀,拔了針, Wang 1992: 36). There is not even the slightest separation between knowing pain and acting to relieve it – the response is instantaneous and effortless, bypassing any deliberate decision-making. Wang offers

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

another striking analogy, comparing the resolve for moral cultivation to the single-minded focus of someone in acute heartache: 'holding firm to one's will is like feeling intense heart pain. When the heart is in pain, how could there be any time or energy for idle chatter or trivial matters?' (持志如心痛。一心在痛上,豈有工夫說閒話、管閒事, Wang 1992: 13). Just as the urgency of physical pain leaves no room for distraction, true resolve for self-realization requires unwavering focus and immediate action. The connection between physical pain and moral living lies in their shared immediacy and urgency: the sharpness of physical pain compels an instant response, and genuine moral resolve demands the same intensity of focus and promptness in action. For example, one who is self-aware and realizes they are being burned by fire does not pause to deliberate whether to move away or consider the reasons for taking action – they simply act. This same immediacy applies to ethical practice, especially in close interpersonal relationships. For example, if one becomes aware that a beloved family member is trapped in a fire, they must act instantly and spontaneously to rescue them, whether by calling firefighters or rushing into the fire themselves. Consequently, the knowledge and action involved are unified without the gap of timely consideration. The practice of extending moral knowledge is fundamentally about extending this perception of painful experience to broader contexts. Here, the concept of knowledge is not primarily about making conscious judgements of right or wrong. Rather, it is better understood as a resonance with and responsiveness to other beings.

I take this finding to be both novel and significant, particularly for scholarship on Wang's thesis of the unity of knowledge and action. It draws attention to an overlooked but crucial aspect of his teaching: the role of bodily pain. As Brys (2025: 424-425) observes, the causal theory of action – the 'standard story' of intentional action – typically assumes that purely internal mental states, such as beliefs, desires, or intentions, cause a person's bodily actions. On this view, the problem of causal deviance naturally arises because the presence of such mental states does not guarantee that the corresponding bodily event will occur. Brys suggests that a promising way forward is to reject the underlying assumption that bodily movements count as actions only if they are appropriately caused by such purely inner states. My interpretation develops this line by showing how bodily pain offers a clear alternative. As the key passages [T1] indicate, in Wang's account knowledge is not confined to purely inner states. Not only does the mind know; it is, in Wang's words, 'the hands and feet [themselves] *knowing* pain and itch'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This resonates with another of Wang's well-known statements on the unity of knowledge and action: 'I have often said that knowing is the *directive* (*zhuyi* 主意) of acting, and acting is the practice of knowing; knowing is the beginning of acting, and acting is the completion of knowing' (1992: 4). Rendering *zhuyi* here as 'directive' is a substantive interpretive choice and therefore requires justification. The term *zhuyi* appears only three times in Wang Yangming's writings, and across these occurrences it consistently denotes not an independent mental intention, but an orientation internal to ethical practice itself. In one instance, Wang emphasizes that acquiring empirical knowledge through hearing and seeing should not be rejected, but rather incorporated into ethical cultivation once it is properly grounded in the extension of moral knowledge, which he characterizes as *zhuyi tounao* (主意頭腦) (1992: 71). When *zhuyi* is explicitly linked with *tounao* (頭腦), literally 'head–brain', the compound does not denote a discrete mental state antecedent to action. Instead, it refers to the fundamental basis or 'first order of concern' that governs how ethical practice is to be carried out (Tu 1976). In another related passage, when Wang compares moral cultivation to the process of transforming unprocessed grain into polished rice, he does not describe purity as an external goal imposed upon the activity, nor as an effect produced by a prior intention. Rather, the practical work of pounding, winnowing, sifting, and selecting is itself already structured by an orientation toward purity, such that refinement proceeds intelligibly only within that orientation (1992: 13). In this context, the *zhuyi* of the effort is not something that causes the refining activity, but the immanent directive through which the activity is organized and sustained as refinement rather than as mere physical labor. Read together, these passages provide textual and conceptual support for understanding *zhuyi* as a directive, that is, as an immanent orientation operative within practice, rather than as an 'intention' understood as a separable mental state that causally produces action. The philosophical implication of this reading is significant. *Zhuyi*, so understood, does not precede action as an independent motivational state, nor does it function as an inner cause standing behind outward behavior. Instead, it names the guiding clarity through which action is structured from within. Knowing, in this sense, is not prior to acting, but is enacted in and through it; acting is the continuous work through which knowing is realized and refined. Just as there is no purity apart from the process of refinement, there is no knowing apart from acting. Knowledge and action are thus internally continuous aspects of a single moral process: knowing is directive only insofar as it functions

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as an immanent orientation within embodied action, rather than as an independent cause producing external effects. In the examples discussed above, when the hands and feet realize – and thereby *know* – pain, one immediately begins to act to relieve it. The act is not an external addition to an inner state; it is the natural completion of the holistic realization and knowledge of pain. The problem of causal deviance arises only when knowledge is restricted to purely internal mental states and action is reduced to mere bodily movement. By recognizing bodily pain as constitutive of the very essence of moral knowledge, my interpretation clarifies how knowledge can be, by its very nature, a bodily concept – one that naturally manifests in action and thereby forms a genuine unity with it.

2. *Moral judgement and graded concern*

By building upon the heart-mind's original function of perceptual resonance, which connects individuals to one another, the heart-mind can establish its *derivative function of judging right from wrong*. As Wang Yangming articulates (1992: 238), 'one should devote themselves to establishing sincerity (*liqicheng* 立其誠). One need only be concerned with whether their heart-mind is sufficiently sincere (*chengqie* 誠切) for the Way – like tastes to the mouth and sights to the eyes – why worry about distinguishing between sweetness and bitterness, beauty and ugliness?' Another passage reinforces this (1992: 67), 'the "original feature" is what our sagely teachings describe as "innate moral knowledge" … Innate moral knowledge is just innate moral knowledge itself; good and bad differentiate themselves. What more of good and bad is there to consider?' Both passages highlight a central feature of Wang's teaching: what matters most, and most fundamentally, is the heart-mind's sincere perceptual resonance with the myriad beings. This resonance is the primary mode of moral practice, often operating beyond conscious deliberation, much like the state Mencius describes in which moral knowledge manifests as an ethical phenomenon that one 'knows without having to deliberate'. In such a state, Wang makes clear that explicit, discriminating judgement is unnecessary. Following these ideas, the primary aim of moral practice should be to recognize resonance and interconnection among beings, empathetically engaging with their suffering. Wang's teachings (1992: 6) illuminate this perspective: not only does one naturally express a profound compassion upon seeing a child about to fall into a well, but similar feelings of intolerance of suffering and protective care extend to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suffering of animals, plants, and even inanimate objects like broken tiles and stones. It is natural, and foundational in Confucian teaching, to feel a deep bond, intimate love, and genuine care for one's parents and siblings, such that in ordinary moral contexts one cannot bear, and would never even consider, deliberately causing them harm. By contrast, our connection with more distant beings, and our disposition not to harm them, is often less explicit or intense, especially as the separation in kind or species increases. A sceptical reader might question whether we truly feel care for distant animals, plants, and other non-human beings. However, as resonance and connection with other beings deepen through moral cultivation, it becomes natural to extend one's concern beyond immediate interpersonal relationships to encompass the wider world, thereby embracing both animal welfare and environmental ethics. A morally cultivated person, for example, may come to care about polar bears threatened by habitat loss due to environmental destruction, to feel aversion to casually picking wildflowers or trampling grass, or to refrain from taking shells from the beach out of concern for the shoreline ecosystem. Building on this foundation, the derivative concepts of good and bad can be reconstructed as follows: 'Good' is defined as promoting and enhancing the existence and vitality of oneself and others, while 'Bad' involves permitting or exacerbating the suffering and destruction of oneself and others. In this way, the effort to establish sincerity extends beyond merely correcting one's inner mental states. Instead, Wang proposes a broader scope for the concept of sincerity that encompasses bodily action and the holistic self.

A related question arises from recent work by Wilson (2024), who identifies a potential tension between Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action and his political conduct in warfare. Wilson observes that Wang's actions in battle involved killing and what he calls the 'compartmentalization' of ethical relationships, including the sacrifice of filial duties to his parents in favour of loyalty to the people. If empathy and the one-body thesis are central to Wang's views, it is puzzling how he could claim to experience the unity of knowledge and action under such circumstances. The interpretation defended here resolves this puzzle by rejecting the assumption that one-body and metaphysical unity preclude retributive justice or the differentiated ordering of relationships. In his political writings, Wang himself illustrates this point through an analogy: parental love naturally extends to all children, but if two children rebel and attempt to harm their eight virtuous siblings, the parents must remove the two to safeguard the others (Wang 1992: 561–562). This

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

position is not merely a pragmatic concession but an integral part of Wang's philosophical teaching. A related theoretical concern is that his claim that 'the great person forms one body with all things' might conflict with the *Great Learning*'s teaching on distinguishing degrees of moral concern (Wang 1992: 108). Wang's response is that moral knowledge itself contains gradations: such distinctions follow naturally from the underlying moral and cosmic order. He offers another analogy: one must love one's whole body without partiality, but when under attack, it accords with Pattern to use one's hands and feet to protect the head. This does not imply that the hands and feet are valued less; rather, it reflects the proper ordering of priorities in light of the situation. The present article emphasizes moral knowledge as grounded in interconnectedness and unity, corresponding to the Confucian virtue of benevolence. At the same time, Wang affirms that the *Great Learning*'s advocacy of graded concern also expresses 'the natural pattern of moral knowledge' and corresponds to the Confucian virtue of righteousness. On Wang's account, benevolence and righteousness, though oriented toward unity and differentiation respectively, are mutually reinforcing aspects of a single, integrated conception of moral knowledge. This integration explains why the benevolent interconnectedness emphasized here is fully consistent with his political actions, including those in battle, when aimed at realizing righteousness.

It is important to relate this issue back to the article's central thesis that pain perception contributes to moral cognition. The question, here, is whether pain perception also operates in Wang's acts of retributive justice, and if so, whether it functions in the same way as it does in acts of benevolence. On the present interpretation, Wang's doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action implies that moral knowledge, as embodied awareness, inherently manifests as responsive action: to know pain is naturally to be moved to alleviate it. In warfare, Wang's acts of killing wrongdoers indeed inflicted pain upon them, yet his embodied concern – as one who regarded all beings as forming one body – extended beyond the wrongdoers to the larger community. In this sense, his retributive actions are motivated by a higher-order perception of collective pain: the suffering of the innocent people and the disruption of social harmony. Just as the pain felt in a particular part of the body from a needle or a surgeon's knife may be endured for the sake of the health of the body as a whole, Wang's reluctantly undertaken punitive actions of killing particular wrongdoers can be understood as responses to a deeper perception of collective pain – the suffering of the social body as a whole, especially the innocent citizens wounded

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by rebellion and disorder. His efforts to pacify and restore peace thus arose from a compassionate responsiveness to this broader pain. In this sense, Wang's retributive justice and benevolent concern converge: the painful act of punishment becomes a means of healing the ethical body as a whole.

3. Deliberative thinking and empirical knowledge

Third, when extending genuine, sincere empathy for pain to a broader context, one naturally develops *deliberate efforts* that encompass extensive knowledge and rational thinking. Consider someone experiencing the pain of being pricked by a needle; they instinctively know the appropriate response – simply to remove the needle. This instinct extends to others experiencing similar pain, where the ethical practice involves assisting in removing the needle. However, in a world that is everchanging and boundlessly complex, instinctive knowledge and spontaneous action may be insufficient. For example, if the needle breaks and becomes stuck in one's finger, one must engage in deliberation to find better solutions, perhaps by consulting others or learning to use appropriate tools. Similarly, if one's parents are suffering from diabetes, instinctive knowledge alone cannot alleviate their suffering. One must engage in a process of *extensive study* (*boxue* 博學), *accurate inquiry* (*shenwen* 審問), *careful reflection* (*shensi* 慎思), *clear discrimination* (*mingbian* 明辨), and acquiring empirical *knowledge through seeing and hearing* (*jianwen zhi zhi* 見聞之知). These efforts, though rooted in extensive knowledge and rational thinking, are driven by the original compassionate feelings of pain and can be regarded as natural extensions of those feelings.

Thus, the ethical quality realized in resonating with and responding to others' experiences does not depend solely on one's own knowledge or intentions. One must also act as an active listener, emptying their heart-mind to receptively welcome and understand the reality of others and the world. This invites a reimagining of moral practice, shifting the focus from the mind and self to the body and others, and from subjective will to encompass objective knowledge. Ethical training is not primarily about judging between right and wrong and thereby correcting one's inner mental states. Instead, according to [T1], the heart-mind is fundamentally about perceptual resonance, particularly the bodily experiences of pain and itchiness that originate within oneself and connect with others. As supported by [T4], Wang interprets his teaching of extending moral knowledge

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

primarily as a process that extends compassionate feelings from oneself to those close to us and ultimately to myriad things in the world. As Wang reminds us, ethical training is not solely a mental exercise; it must be a process of *practical refinement in real-life affairs* (*shi shang molian* 事上磨煉).

4. Concluding remarks

This article seeks to enrich and deepen our understanding of moral knowledge and its associated practices in Wang Yangming's philosophy. Drawing on close textual analysis, I argue that the essence of moral knowledge is grounded in bodily perception, particularly the perception of pain. Through a genuine and wholehearted feeling of pain and sorrow, one develops a profound connection with, and responsiveness to, the existence and well-being of others. This resonance forms the foundation of ethical life, enabling individuals to embrace a sense of unity and interconnectedness – a 'one-body' – with the myriad beings. On this basis, one comes to distinguish right from wrong and good from bad. This perspective provides a deeper account of the origin of moral knowledge and enriches the genealogy of morality. Building on this foundation, the practice of extending moral knowledge involves not merely correcting one's mental states by recognizing right and wrong, but expanding the original, genuine, and wholehearted feeling of pain and sorrow from a specific occasion to broader contexts. In this way, Wang Yangming's moral metaphysics offers a distinctive perspective that grounds morality in the ontological unity of human beings and the myriad things. The Neo-Confucian line of thought developed in this article may also find resonances with related research in Aristotelian ethics, moral sentimentalism, and care ethics, all of which tend to highlight the foundational role of virtuous nature, affective resonance, and interpersonal relationships. A comprehensive comparative study of these traditions lies beyond the scope of this article; however, such an inquiry would be a promising avenue for further exploration through collaborative efforts among scholars with different areas of expertise.

This study seeks to contribute to the intellectual history of Neo-Confucianism by offering a more accurate and nuanced understanding of several core concepts and doctrines in Wang Yangming's philosophy. It also addresses broader philosophical issues, including moral motivation, the unity of knowledge and action, and ethical cultivation. By drawing on insights from moral psychology,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the study bridges disciplinary boundaries and connects theoretical analysis with empirical research. In a boundaryless era, diverse perspectives can converge into a form of collective wisdom that deepens our understanding of human ethical experience.

The light is never bound within; it connects and shines everywhere.[1]

AI Declaration.

During the preparation of this manuscript, I used ChatGPT solely for grammatical checking and to improve the English readability of the text. I affirm that this assistance was strictly limited to linguistic refinement and that no new substantive content was introduced in the process. As the sole author, I take full responsibility for the content of the article

References

Angle, Stephen C., & Justin Tiwald. 2017. *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Polity)

[1] This research was funded by the 2030 Cross-Generation Young Scholars Program: *International Outstanding Young Scholars*, sponsored by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan (Grant No. 114-2628-H-002-022-), and by the Young Scholar Fellowship: *Einstein Program*, Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan (Grant No. 112-2636-H-002-001-). I am grateful to the editor of *Philosophy* and to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Versions of this work were presented on several occasions, including the 98th Annual Meeting of the APA Pacific Division; a workshop on Wang Yangming's philosophy; the 2025 Annual Conference of the Chinese Association of Philosophy; and the international workshop *'Chinese Philosophy in Taiwan and Japan: Present Conditions and Future Prospects'* at Kyushu University. I am indebted to the feedback I received from audiences at these events, including Stephen Angle, Harvey Lederman, Jenny Hung, Ming-chao Lin, and many others, whose comments significantly enriched this work.. Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Polly Lai, Kathrine Chan, and Logan Chan for their invaluable and immeasurable support.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Brys, Waldemar. 2025. 'Knowing-to in Wang Yangming', in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. by Justin Tiwald (Oxford University Press), pp. 415–431
Chan, Chi-Keung. 2024. 'Enactive Moral Agency in Wang Yangming', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 64.3, pp. 283–297
Chan, Chi-keung. 2025. 'Action Just is Knowledge', *Philosophical Explorations*, 28.1, pp. 103–121
Cheng, Hao & Yi Cheng. 1992. *Ercheng yishu and Ercheng waishu 二程遺書·二程外書[Surviving Works of the Two Cheng's and Additional Works of the Two Cheng's]* (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe)
DeSouza, N. 2013. 'Pre-Reflective Ethical Know-How', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16.2, pp. 279–294
El Tumi, H, M.I. Johnson, P.B.F. Dantas, M.J. Maynard & O.A Tashani. 2017. 'Age-related Changes in Pain Sensitivity in Healthy Humans: A Systematic Review with Metaanalysis', *European Journal of Pain*, 21.6, pp. 955–964
Fitzgerald, Maria. 2005. 'The Development of Nociceptive Circuits', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 6.7, pp. 507–520
Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2002. *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*, 2nd edn (Hackett Publishing)
Shun, Kwong-loi. 2011. 'Wang Yang-ming on Self-Cultivation', *Daxue. Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 38.s1, pp. 96–113
Lederman, Harvey. 2022a. 'The Introspective Model of Genuine Knowledge in Wang Yangming', *Philosophical Review*, 131.2, pp. 169–213
Lederman, Harvey. 2022b. 'What Is the "Unity" in the "Unity of Knowledge and Action"?', *Dao*, 21.4, pp. 569–603
Lederman, Harvey. 2023. 'Conceptions of Genuine Knowledge in Wang Yangming', in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. 7, ed. by Tamar Szabó Gendler, Julianne Chung, & John Hawthorne (Oxford University Press), pp. 134–175
Liu, JeeLoo. 2017. *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (John Wiley & Sons)
Tang, Jun-yi. 2016. 'Wenhua yishi yu daode lixing 文化意識與道德理性 [Cultural Consciousness and Moral Rationality]', in *Tang junyi quanji [Completed Work of Tang Junyi, Vol. 12]* (Jiuzhou Chubanshe)
Tiwald, Justin. 2023. 'Coming to Terms with Wang Yangming's Strong Ethical Nativism: On Wang's Claim That 'Establishing Sincerity' (*Licheng* 立誠) Can Help Us Fully Grasp Everything that Matters Ethically', *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*, 39, pp. 65–90
Tu, Weiming. 1976. *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming's Youth (1472-1509)* (University of California Press)
Wang, Yangming. 1992. *Wang Yangming quanji 王陽明全集 [Collected Works of Wang Yangming]*, ed. by G. Wu (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe)
Wilson, Trenton. 2024. 'Battle Testing the "Unity of Knowledge and Action"', *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 23.4, pp. 653–664

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Zhu, Xi. 2010. *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 *[Complete works of Master Zhu]* (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe)

Chi-keung Chan 陳志強 (ckc@ust.hk) is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Humanities, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819126101533 Published online by Cambridge University Press