

Wang Yangming on Goodness as Knowledge and Action

Timo Ennen*

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Wang Yangming's notions of a moral awareness (*liangzhi* 良知) and the unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing heyi* 知行合一). Building on recent discussions, the paper proceeds from Wu Zhen's claims that the two notions imply each other and do not pertain to epistemology and Huang Yong's claim that *liangzhi* is not merely knowledge about moral matters but is itself good. If *liangzhi* were not itself good but merely knowledge about certain moral matters, action would require an additional, separate step that would originate outside of *liangzhi* and decide whether *liangzhi* should be made efficacious here and now. The causality of action would then lie outside of *liangzhi*—that is, outside of awareness of the good. I first argue for goodness as knowledge and action by rejecting its alternatives. If we limit the efficacy of goodness to mere knowledge or mere action, the agent's awareness of the good offers no explanation as to why the action is happening. I then show how these considerations may illuminate Wang's idea that *liangzhi*, rather than being merely an epistemic capacity, is the principle of the cosmos (*tianli* 天理) itself.

Keywords: Wang Yangming, goodness, unity of knowledge and action, *liangzhi*, cosmic principle

* Timo Ennen is a Ph.D. graduate in Philosophy and Religion from the Division of Humanities at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). E-mail: timo.ennen@connect.ust.hk

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I. Introduction

Many recent interpretations of the Neo-Confucian thinker Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 (1472-1529) have centered around his notions of the unity of knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一) and *liangzhi* 良知 (good or pure knowing).¹ These interpretations are largely characterized by a divide between epistemological and metaphysical or cosmological readings. While the former conceive of *liangzhi* as an epistemic capacity, the latter tend to interpret *liangzhi* through the lens of Wang's holism and organicism. This naturally prompts the questions of why there is such a divide in interpretations, and whether it reflects an inconsistency in Wang's teachings or results from the nature of their reception. Instead of addressing these questions directly, this article puts forward its own interpretation with the aim of bridging this divide by taking up insights from both sides. Agreeing with Philip J. Ivanhoe that one would go "awry by construing Wang's thought as primarily concerned with epistemology and largely ignoring its metaphysical and moral dimensions" (Ivanhoe 2022, 63), I explore how, by virtue of the unity of knowledge and action implied by it, *liangzhi* pertains to both us and the cosmos. After all, Wang articulates *liangzhi* as the cosmic principle (*tianli* 天理)—the principle of the cosmos itself.

In the following, to illustrate what is at stake in the divide between epistemological and metaphysical readings, and to provide background for my own exposition of the relationship between *liangzhi* and the unity of knowledge and action, I begin by discussing recent contributions to this debate. I first discuss Philip J. Ivanhoe and Harvey Lederman and then Wu Zhen 吳震 and Huang Yong 黃勇. Thereupon, I argue for goodness as the unity of knowledge and action by rejecting its alternatives. If we limit the efficacy of goodness to mere knowledge or mere action, the agent's awareness of the good offers no explanation as to why the action is happening. The causality of action would then lie outside awareness of the good. As a result, a description of an agent's

¹ "Good knowing" is the literal translation used by Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald (2017), whereas Philip J. Ivanhoe (2009) renders *liangzhi* as "pure knowing." Other common translations are "innate knowledge," adopted by Wing-tsit Chan (Wang 1963), and "moral knowledge," used by Huang Yong (Huang 2017).

action could neglect the very idea of awareness of the good. Finally, I show how these considerations exceed epistemology. For Wang, rather than being merely an epistemic capacity, *liangzhi* “is identical with” the cosmic principle (良知即是天理) (Wang 1963, sec. 169). Instead of pertaining to a limited domain, such as certain features of the mind or things in the cosmos, *liangzhi* pertains to the cosmos as a whole.

II. Ivanhoe and Lederman on *Liangzhi* and the Unity of Knowledge and Action

Ivanhoe’s word of caution quoted above addresses Harvey Lederman’s recent proposal of an “introspective model” (Lederman 2022a, 2023) to be found in Wang. Lederman conceives of *liangzhi* as a “conscience-like faculty” (2022a, 172) that distinguishes good from bad inclinations. For Lederman, *liangzhi* on its own is not sufficient to account for moral action, as it only provides awareness of the goodness or badness of an inclination without thereby constituting the efficacy of this awareness. The goodness in knowing a good inclination is distinct from the goodness that is efficacious in moral action. While what one’s *liangzhi* knows to be good might indeed be acted upon, for Lederman, this is not definitory of moral action. What accounts for the goodness of an action is a form of knowing distinguishable from *liangzhi* that Lederman calls “genuine knowledge” (*zhenzhi* 真知), using an expression Wang himself employs. This higher-order knowledge consists in taking that which one’s *liangzhi* identifies as good or bad as indeed good or bad. It thus designates the absence of “doxastic conflict” (2022a, 171), for it consists not in the immediate awareness of what *liangzhi* identifies as a good inclination, independently of any conflicting beliefs, but in wholeheartedly embracing the good inclination by overcoming any other doxastic obstacles. By aligning conflicting beliefs with the conscience-like voice within oneself, one exhibits the single-mindedness that is meant by genuine knowledge. This state of single-mindedness is not ascertainable by perceiving something, such as one’s behavior or other physical goings-on, but through liberation from any conflicting concerns that impede what one’s *liangzhi* knows to be good or bad.

Accordingly, in Lederman's account, moral action depends on one's motivational states being correctly aligned. Instead of *liangzhi* entailing its efficacy, Lederman conceives moral action as accompanied by a doxastic purity, in which one is liberated from any conflicting motivational states that impede one's conscience-like good knowing. Lederman's interpretation accounts for the fact that Wang seems to suggest that even in cases of failed or immoral action, *liangzhi* is still present. In this regard, Lederman writes that, according to the introspective model, "a person fails to act virtuously (or at least fails to have wholehearted inclinations) if and only if they suffer from a form of doxastic incoherence" (2022a, 210). Thus, for Lederman, it is one thing to know the good (*liangzhi*) and another thing to make the good one knows the unifying principle of one's commitments (genuine knowledge). There is immediate insight into the good, which, as such, is not yet sufficient for moral action, and there is the elevated insight exhibited by single-mindedness as a feature of one's state of mind, which, when accompanying action, provides for the moral character of that action. This elevated insight is introspective not in the sense of requiring an effortful process of self-interrogation, but in bearing on a cognizable feature of one's state of mind. Only when one has wholeheartedly embraced the inclination one's *liangzhi* knows to be good—that is, when one's mind is not pulled in opposing directions—can one's knowledge and action be considered genuinely good.

One of the criticisms Ivanhoe raises against Lederman's proposal is that such a construal of genuine knowledge as an "elevated form of knowledge, [comprehensible] independently of its relationship to action" (Lederman 2022a, 170-71), downplays the role of the unity of knowledge and action as one of the key notions of Wang. Ivanhoe argues that "for Wang, any view that clearly separates knowing from acting fails as an account of knowing or acting" (Ivanhoe 2022, 55). Moreover, the introspective model renders *liangzhi* or goodness itself as "wholly an internal affair" (2022, 56), isolated from any occurrences in the cosmos and the myriad things. Ivanhoe sees in this rendering an inadequate reduction of Wang's "metaphysical system," that is, a neglect of the fact that "Wang's teachings about the *unity of knowing and acting and that heaven, earth, and the myriad things form one body*

both depend on a set of robust metaphysical claims” (2022, 56). In this sense, Lederman’s introspective model disconnects Wang’s teachings from their Neo-Confucian metaphysical origins. Lederman characterizes both *liangzhi* and genuine knowledge as pertaining to the mind, rather than to the cosmos itself. Such a reading neglects the fact that, for Wang, human mindedness is “coextensive with the universe” (Ivanhoe 2002, 34) and that “moral life involves realizing one’s fundamental identity with all existence” (2002, 29).

Developing a “spontaneous response model,” according to which *liangzhi* designates a “seamless process of perceiving, construing, assessing, and acting” (Ivanhoe 2022, 60) and hence rules out any gap between the inner and the outer, Ivanhoe seeks to circumvent the separation of awareness of the good and the goings-on in the world, or of mind and cosmos. While I do not adopt Ivanhoe’s alternative model, in this paper, I share his concern regarding the reading of *liangzhi* as a mere epistemic concept. As I shall argue, thinking of *liangzhi* as an epistemic capacity, in contrast to the goings-on of the cosmos and the myriad things, renders Wang’s assertion that *liangzhi* is the cosmic principle obscure or even misleading.

III. Wu Zhen and Huang Yong on *Liangzhi* and the Unity of Knowledge and Action

According to Wu Zhen, Wang’s notion of the unity of knowledge and action cannot be isolated within epistemology or action theory independently of his “Learning of the Heart-Mind” (*xinxue* 心學) and its centerpiece, his notion of *liangzhi*. Even though Wang formulated this unity as early as 1509, eleven years prior to his mature teaching of *liangzhi*, “the unity of knowledge and action is the necessary expression of *liangzhi* itself” (Wu 2018, 24). By demonstrating how *liangzhi* and the unity of knowledge and action imply each other, Wu defends the unity and consistency of Wang’s philosophy as a whole.² Wu sup-

² This contrasts, for instance, with Chen Lai’s suggestion that Wang’s later teaching of the realization (or extension) of *liangzhi* (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) replaces his earlier idea of the

ports this claim by explicating one of Wang's propositions that likely dates from after 1521, that only appears in his *Surviving Words* (*Wang Yangming xiansheng yiyuanlu* 陽明先生遺言錄), and that has been neglected in contemporary scholarship. The sentence reads: "When a thought is aroused it is knowledge and action"³ (quoted in Wu 2018, 15). It supplements the expression that "when a thought is aroused it is already action" (Wang 1963, sec. 226), which appears in *A Record of Practice* (*Chuanxilu* 傳習錄). For Wu, the proposition is that a single thought of *liangzhi* (一念良知)—that is, an awareness of the good—cannot be cut off from the activity in which such awareness results. As such, drawing on this late proposition by Wang, Wu concludes that the unity of knowledge and action is not just an antecedent but already the expression of Wang's mature notion of *liangzhi*. In contrast to Lederman, Wu thus proposes what one may call the identity thesis of *liangzhi* and the unity of knowledge and action.

Wu finds the inherent connection between *liangzhi* and its motivational or efficacious aspects captured by Huang Yong's proposal to conceive of *liangzhi* as a state of "besire" or "knowledge-to," recently laid out in several articles (Huang 2017, 2020, 2022). Whereas "besire" denotes "a mental state that includes both belief and desire" (Huang 2020, 89), knowledge-to "will dispose or incline the possessor of such knowledge to act accordingly" (Huang 2017, 65); it contrasts with an overly intellectualist "knowing-that" or a merely skillful "knowing-how," as discussed by Gilbert Ryle (1945). Wu appreciates Huang's endeavor to spell out Wang's teaching in terms derived from contemporary philosophical discourse. Yet, resembling some of Ivanhoe's objections to Lederman, he worries that Huang leaves out an important dimension of Wang's philosophy—one that exceeds epistemology and finds its condensed expression in what Wang calls an "inherent reality"⁴

(logical) unity of knowledge and action (Chen 2020, 150). It also differs from Iso Kern's proposal to differentiate distinct notions of *liangzhi* that correlate with different phases of Wang's thought (Kern 2010). However, Wu is not the only one defending the unity and consistency of Wang's philosophy as a whole. See, for instance, Lin (2015) and Wong (2020).

³ 一念发动便是知亦是行

⁴ This translation stems from Angle and Tiwald (2017). I prefer Angle and Tiwald's translation to Chan's expression "original state" (Wang 1963), as it better captures the all-pervasive character of Wang's notion.

(*benti* 本體) of both us and the cosmos itself. Wu's critique is not limited to Huang but extends to a whole range of recent comparative engagements with Wang:

As often neglected by certain strands of moral psychology, behaviourism or pragmatist ethics in modern Western philosophy, Yangming's *liangzhi* is a sort of non-empirical, ontological reality. It is . . . the inherent reality of 'the cosmos being *liangzhi*' and '*liangzhi* being the cosmos'. Therefore, it is universal and omnipresent. (Wu 2018, 23-24)

I take it that Wu's point cannot be that Huang simply denies this dimension, since Huang himself acknowledges in an earlier article that "Wang's theory of innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi*) is . . . a metaphysical theory, as it is about the original state (*benti*) of the heart-mind" (Huang 2006, 402). Hence, Wu's point must rather be that it is not apparent how *liangzhi*, when conceived as *besire* or *knowledge-to*, relates to this metaphysical dimension. While Huang's proposal to think *liangzhi* through the notion of *besire*—a state of mind that encompasses both belief and desire—or *knowledge-to*, a motivational knowing that contrasts with *knowledge-that* and *knowledge-how*, may fit several of Wang's descriptions, it encounters significant challenges when wanting to account for how a state of mind or form of knowledge could bear on the cosmic principle itself. Given that Wang presents *liangzhi* as an inherent reality that pertains both to us and the cosmos, it is doubtful that all he meant was a certain type of mental states or a particular category of knowing. Epistemic concepts such as *besire* and *knowledge-to*, on their own, seem to leave the more metaphysically inclined passages on *liangzhi* untouched.

While agreeing with Wu that *besire* or *knowledge-to* do not exhaust the meaning of *liangzhi*, in the following, I examine *liangzhi* and its metaphysical significance by taking up an insight that itself motivated Huang's epistemic concepts. Huang observes that "for Wang Yangming, *liangzhi* is not merely knowledge about moral matters but is knowledge that itself is moral or good" (Huang 2022, 211). Hence, the succession of the parts of this compound word indicates that we are not merely dealing with knowledge about certain moral principles

or facts but with knowledge that is itself good. In the next section, agreeing with Wu's identity thesis concerning *liangzhi* and the unity of knowledge and action, I first show why this peculiar knowledge "that itself is moral or good" indeed implies the unity of knowledge and action. In the final section, I indicate how *liangzhi* pertains to the cosmos as a whole.

IV. Goodness as Knowledge and Action

According to Shi Weimin, Wang's "doctrine of the unity of knowing and acting is not . . . a claim about how the knowledge that is already acquired is to be related to acting" (Shi 2017, 51). Shi's observation is particularly apt, insofar as such already acquired knowledge would be general in nature—comprehensible independently of any concrete case in which it might be efficacious. It would therefore not be distinct from theoretical knowledge. Knowledge of certain moral principles or moral facts would be general knowledge—intelligible independently of the concrete situation in which one has awareness of the good. Such knowledge could be acquired prior to its execution in a concrete situation. It would be knowledge that one could first obtain and then, in a second step, apply—that is, relate to oneself and the particular situation in which one finds oneself. However, *liangzhi*—an awareness which is itself good—is not the application of something general, such as moral principles or facts, to a particular situation. If *liangzhi* were not itself good but merely knowledge about certain moral matters, action would require an additional, separate step that would originate outside of *liangzhi* and decide whether *liangzhi* should be made efficacious here and now. In that case, moral action would amount to action in accordance with a content that could be abstracted from the situation in which our action is called for, and that could therefore be made sense of independently of its execution—that is, independently of any action. Yet our relation to the good is not a relation to something general. In our awareness of a child that is about to fall into a well, we are not affected by some general cognizable principle or fact but by the concrete person whose life is at stake in the situation before us. Since

liangzhi is not knowledge about certain principles or facts but is itself good, it is awareness of goodness right here and now.

The main question motivating Wang's notion of the unity of knowledge and action is whether awareness of the good could be exhausted by mere knowledge—that is, knowledge without any efficacy. If *liangzhi* were to only denote knowledge, then the goodness in our awareness of the good would be separable from the goodness in the execution of that good. We would end up with a gap between awareness of the good and execution of the good that no further idea of the good could bridge. The result would be two entirely disconnected domains. It would appear as though, while the reason for our awareness of the good lies in the goodness of that very awareness, the reason for acting on that awareness must lie somewhere else, but not in that original awareness of the good.

The alternative to separating knowledge and action is to conceive of the goodness in our awareness of the good as being identical to the goodness in the execution of the good. The goodness of knowledge and action would be one and “the same goodness” (Rödl 2020, 288). We would not need to first come to awareness of the good and then, in a second step, determine whether this awareness should be executed in a given situation. This follows from the fact that the content of the awareness and the content of its execution are the same. If our awareness of the good had a content separate from the action, then our awareness would not be awareness of the concrete situation that calls for our response but awareness of something else. In other words, the efficacy of an action cannot be separated from the awareness of the goodness of which the action is the execution.

From a logical point of view, we may still distinguish knowledge or awareness of the good from its execution. However, in order to comprehend the good of which we are aware as that which is carried out, and in order to comprehend the action as the execution of the good we are aware of, one must already comprehend knowledge and action as arising from one single source: a single thought of *liangzhi* (一念良知). As comes out in a remark by Wang's disciple Wang Ji 王畿, we cannot conceive of good knowledge as a mere opinion (知非见解之谓) on a matter, nor of action as a mere bodily movement (行非践蹈之谓). For good

knowledge and action to be comprehensible as what they are, they must be conceived as getting their evidence from one single thought (只从一念上取证) of *liangzhi* (Wang Ji 2007, vol. 7, 159). In other words, the unity of knowledge and action cannot be understood by merely combining two originally independent components—by adding one bit of reality to another—but only by seeing why *liangzhi* concludes in both knowledge and action.

There is no additional step to be taken from our awareness of the good to its actualization in a concrete situation. As Wu rightly emphasizes, “strictly speaking, when we talk of using *liangzhi* to guide and regulate human action . . . , we thereby regard knowledge and action as two separate parts” (Wu 2018, 24). If we were to think of *liangzhi* as guiding our actions, we would thereby conceive of knowledge as first and action as second, or of knowledge as a means and action as its end. This would imply a two-step succession of applying something (our good knowing) to something else (our actions). Yet the unity of knowledge and action designates one step, not two. It is unproblematic to use the two terms, knowledge and action, to refer to distinguishable matters. Wang acknowledges that, in principle, “it will do no harm to talk about them separately” (Wang 1963, sec. 5). Yet they must be understood as originating from one and the same source. Ultimately, by comprehending them not through the lens of ordinary experiential knowledge but through *liangzhi*—that is, as springing from a single awareness of the good—Wang’s proposition that “knowledge is the beginning of action and action the completion of knowledge (知是行之始, 行是知之成) (Wang 1963, sec. 5) can be clearly distinguished from Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 formulation that knowledge comes first and action second (知先后) (cf. Wu 2018, 21).

The idea of a prior insight into the good and its subsequent application or execution would introduce a chronological sequence. Yet it is precisely this temporal gap between awareness of the good and action that Wang rejects. One prominent passage on the unity of knowledge and action, in which Wang addresses this misconception on the part of a friend, reads as follows:

A man must have the desire to travel before he knows the road. This desire to travel is the will; it is already the beginning of action. Whether the forks of the road are rough or smooth cannot be known until he himself has gone through them. . . . You said also that the difference is of course a matter of an instant and that you do not mean to say that it is clearly comparable to one's knowing today and then acting tomorrow. This shows that you have not examined the matter thoroughly. But even as you say, the fact that knowledge and action form a unity and proceed simultaneously is as a matter of course absolutely beyond any doubt. (Wang 1963, sec. 132)

Wang here dismisses the idea that a temporal succession could in any way account for the unity of knowledge and action. Such a succession would reduce knowledge to a mere general opinion on something, and action to a bodily movement subsequently added to it. Yet, as highlighted by Wang Ji, *liangzhi* is not to be understood as a mere opinion or belief, nor is action to be understood as its subsequent implementation.

Certainly, as time passes, one may prove unsuccessful in carrying out one's action. One might not be successful in completing one's action for all sorts of reasons. One might be struck by lightning during one's attempt to save a child that is about to fall into a well. On one's way to save the child, one might realize that there is another child nearby who is in urgent need of help as well. One might realize on one's way to save the child that one will not arrive in time. We can imagine an infinite number of cases in which an action is not completed, despite the agent's awareness of the good. However, in all of these cases, awareness of the good is not invalidated by the fact that the action remained incomplete. The same holds true for cases where external circumstances do not necessarily stop one's action but call for further adjustment or re-evaluation. This is not the issue. The issue is where moral action originates in the first place. Examples of incomplete action do not contradict Wang's assertion that "there have never been people who know but do not act [and that] those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know" (Wang 1963,

sec. 5).⁵ The point is that the knowledge bears the same goodness as its content as the action does, even when the action remains only an attempt. What explains both incomplete and successful moral action is the same as that which explains awareness of the good.

What explains our awareness of the good—*liangzhi*—is simply its goodness. But since this goodness cannot be cut off from the goodness of its execution, its execution must be explained by the same goodness that explains our awareness. It is one single awareness of one single goodness that underlies both knowledge and action. To repeat the expression of Wang quoted by Wu, “when a thought [of *liangzhi*] is aroused it is knowledge and action” (quoted in Wu 2018, 15). If this were not the case, the causality of our actions would be cut off from our awareness of the good. We would have to tell a story in which our actions are not grounded in our awareness of the good but in something else. It would no longer make sense to appeal to the goodness of an action when asked to explain it. The action would lie outside awareness of the good. We could then give an account of an agent’s actions without appealing to the idea that there is awareness of the good—that there is *liangzhi*. According to such an account, awareness of the good would not explain any occurrence in the cosmos.

To sum up, if *liangzhi* were to exhaust itself in mere action, independently of any knowledge or awareness, then our awareness of the good would not provide an explanation for why a particular action happens here and now. Likewise, if *liangzhi* were to stop at mere knowledge about certain moral matters, such as a propositional judgment that doing such-and-such is good, it would not provide an explanation for why a particular action happens here and now either. *Liangzhi* would thus be knowledge of something purely ideal but not efficacious as occurrences in the cosmos. How, then, could Wang argue that *liangzhi* pertains to both us and the cosmos?⁶ For Wang, our awareness

⁵ This is a point of agreement with Lederman, who likewise denies the identity of knowledge and action and does not regard incomplete or unsuccessful action as proof of moral failure (Lederman 2022b). Abolishing any distinction between knowledge and action would mean denying the possibility of being aware of a situation that calls for action while, at the same time, being unable to carry it out.

⁶ As mentioned above, this poses a challenge to Lederman’s reading, which renders *liangzhi*

of the good cannot stop at mere knowledge. That is to say, our awareness of the good is relevant to occurrences in the cosmos. As will be elaborated in the final section, since *liangzhi* is relevant to occurrences in the cosmos, it is not just one capacity or form of knowledge among others, but the principle of the cosmos itself.

V. *Liangzhi* as the Cosmic Principle

According to the formula of Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, the cosmic principle exists through particular manifestations (理一分殊). Thus, in order to approximate this cosmic principle, one must ascertain the individuating principles of particular things or affairs. This is how the Cheng-Zhu school justifies its emphasis on study—that is, on the investigation of things and their underlying principles. Approximating the cosmic principle is inextricably bound to a process of knowledge acquisition. Through inquiry into the underlying principles of things or affairs, one gradually comes to realize the cosmic principle. The medium through which one progresses toward the cosmic principle is knowledge—specifically, knowledge about intelligible, determinate things or affairs.

Yet this cannot be the starting point for Wang's notion of the cosmic principle. Wang conceives of the cosmic principle through the notion of *liangzhi*, which is not knowledge about something but that is itself good. Accordingly, Wang must also conceive of the cosmic principle through the unity of knowledge and action that *liangzhi* entails. While the Cheng-Zhu school adheres to a model of knowledge acquisition—an inquiry into particular principles in order to attain insight into the cosmic principle—for Wang, the cosmic principle must mean something different. While Zhu Xi's formula of knowledge being first and action second (知先行后) allows for the idea of acquiring knowledge and then subsequently executing or implementing it, Wang's notion of the cosmic principle must align with the unity of

as “wholly an internal affair” (Ivanhoe 2022, 56) and thus obscures its relationship to the cosmos as a whole.

knowledge and action. *Liangzhi*—awareness of the good—cannot be separated from its execution—that is, from its actualization as an occurrence in the cosmos.

So far, it may appear as if *liangzhi* determines only a particular part of the cosmos—namely, the realm of human activity. This would mean that, while we grant *liangzhi* some efficacy, it is restricted and does not extend to the cosmos as a whole. In contrast to the restrictions considered previously, here, *liangzhi* would not be limited to mere knowledge or mere action but rather to a certain kind of occurrences in the cosmos, as opposed to all other occurrences in it. In such a case, we would once again end up with a fractured picture in which the efficacy of *liangzhi* has a limit, rendering its relation to the cosmos as a whole incomprehensible.

If *liangzhi* amounted to nothing more than knowledge or a certain state of mind, then this fractured picture would indeed make sense: there would be awareness of the good on one hand, and on the other, there would be infinite occurrences in the cosmos independently of that awareness. However, Wang explicitly rejects such a restricted efficacy of *liangzhi* and even calls *liangzhi* the source or “spirit of creation” (造化的精靈) that generates the cosmos (生天生地) (Wang 1963, sec. 261). In virtue of the unity of knowledge and action, awareness of the good brings about its execution—that is, occurrences in the cosmos—and there is no way to isolate these occurrences from other occurrences in the cosmos. Strictly isolating one kind of occurrences from other kinds would mean rendering the cosmos as a unity incomprehensible. There would be the realm of the human where humans can effect change, and there would be the separate realm of the non-human where everything non-human effects change, and we would have no idea of how these two could pertain to one and the same cosmos. Yet Wang’s notion of the cosmos makes non-sense of such a division. In a cosmos understood as a unity of continuous transformation, no single occurrence can be completely isolated from that which precedes it or that which follows.⁷

⁷ Along similar lines, Ivanhoe states that when “seeing oneself as involved in mutual relationships of cause and effect which entail reciprocal benefit and harm – it is highly irrational not to recognize that the world in fact is one” (Ivanhoe 2002, 142).

Wang explains this character of the cosmos, which does not allow for a division between a morally relevant realm of occurrences and a morally indifferent realm, in more than one way. There is his notion of *qi* (氣), a vital force that connects all beings. He also describes this character in a manner akin to the teleological argument for the existence of God in Western philosophy. Along these lines, nourishment or the healing of diseases by medicine is evidence that humans share a body with the myriad things (Wang 1963, sec. 274).⁸ Thus, distinct parts of the cosmos interact in some way and are meaningful to each other. Be that as it may, there is, at least, the logical possibility that human actions, as occurrences in the cosmos, are bound up with other occurrences in the cosmos, thereby shaping the cosmos as such. In other words, “there is no limit to the internal relations by which something’s happening is joined to other things happening as to conditions of its actuality” (Rödl 2020, 293). This now allows the conclusion that *liangzhi*—awareness of the good—shapes the cosmos itself. As such, Wang can argue that “heaven, earth, and all things are contained in my [*liangzhi*’s] functioning and operation” (Wang 1963, sec. 269). This conclusion is not derived from the empirical sciences but from Huang’s insight that *liangzhi* is not merely knowledge about something good but is itself good.

The idea that awareness of the good bears on the cosmic principle carries significant implications. This idea underpins what 20th-century New Confucians later referred to as a “moral metaphysics.” As expounded by Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1990), moral metaphysics differs from a “metaphysics of morals” in that it does not merely employ metaphysical considerations to investigate a certain subject matter—namely, morality—but understands the entire significance of metaphysics as comprehensible solely through the idea of the good. Along these lines, awareness of the good would not pertain to a specific domain alongside the domains of physics, chemistry, biology and so

⁸ “Wind, rain, dew, thunder, sun and moon, stars, animals and plants, mountains and rivers, earth and stones are essentially of one body with man. It is for this reason that such things as the grains and animals can nourish man and that such things as medicine and minerals can heal diseases. Since they share the same material force, they enter into one another” (Wang 1963, sec. 274).

forth, but rather pervade the very notion of what is real.

Alternatively, if goodness merely pertained to a doxastic state, comprehension of what is real would not have to include awareness of the good. Then, goodness would be “wholly an internal affair” (Ivanhoe 2022, 56). There would be what, in medical science, is called a “translational gap”—a disconnect between theoretical understanding and practical application. In such a picture, the good and the cosmos would be two entirely separate domains. One then would indeed need a “metaphysic of morals” alongside a “metaphysics of nature,” as Kant has it (Kant 1997, 1-2). The good would belong only to us, not to the cosmos. According to such a picture, as Mou puts it, “no real morality has ever appeared . . . [since] to act in accordance with unconditional moral law can only be regarded as an ideal to which we may gradually approach” (Mou 2015, 335). At first glance, it might seem as if *liangzhi*, by being the cosmic principle, must be something hard to attain—something we strive toward infinitely without ever achieving it. However, for Wang, there is nothing remote or arcane about it. *Liangzhi* does not describe an infinite journey defined by its destination. Instead, it is inherent to human activity as such.

Wang states that “the sense of right and wrong covers all affairs and their variations” (Wang 1963, sec. 288). *Liangzhi*, as the inherent reality of both us and the cosmos, permeates everything. It pervades any moment of our lives, for the goodness of our lives may be at stake in anything we do, just as it pervades anything in the cosmos, for there is no content in the cosmos that is logically isolatable from human affairs and therefore incapable of making contact with, or being meaningful for, awareness of the good. Against this backdrop, we now see that analytic meta-ethics is built on a fundamental misunderstanding. Analytic meta-ethics treats ethics as a specific subfield that investigates a distinct region of reality, language, or psychology—for example, studying “moral properties” or “ethical terms” such as good, right, virtuous and so forth. In this sense, the cosmos would be something like a layer-cake, where morality is one layer alongside other layers that together form what we may call the totality of what is. Yet ethics does not have a circumscribable subject matter. When trying to build theories around “moral properties” or “ethical terms” as a structur-

ally unique type, analytic philosophers end up confusing rather than clarifying actual human life. There is no such thing as a distinct moral domain alongside other domains, and there is no such thing as a special kind of properties or facts that we may call moral and study in philosophy, analogous to the way we study physical, chemical, or biological facts in their respective disciplines. In Wittgenstein's terms, "ethics is transcendental" (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.421). By this, he means that there is no such thing as moral properties, values or norms existing as something to be encountered and investigated within the world, for ethics is not a science but rather that through which a human life and its world are so much as experienced or available in the first place. In Wang's terms, *liangzhi* is not some capacity or feature within the cosmos but constitutive of relating to a cosmos at all. *Liangzhi*—awareness of the good—is not awareness of a certain section or a certain kind of properties of the cosmos but its very principle.

Wang notes that, while the sense organs or their respective sensory capacities each pertain to particular aspects of the myriad things—such as the eye pertaining to color, the ear pertaining to sound and so forth—"the reality [of the human heart-mind] consists of the right or wrong in response to the cosmos and the myriad things" (Wang 2014, vol. 3, 108).⁹ Thus, whereas sensory capacities pertain only to particular features of the myriad things and, consequently, to particular aspects of what is, the human heart-mind's sense of right and wrong pertains to the myriad things in their entirety and the cosmos as a whole. The visible, audible, smellable, and tastable do not represent the cosmos as a whole, since each pertains to a particular sense organ and sensory capacity, whose efficacy is limited to a particular aspect of the cosmos. By contrast, the human heart-mind's awareness of the good is not subject to such constraints and is responsive to the cosmos itself. Instead of merely being one lifeform among others, the human lifeform is that peculiar lifeform which is responsive to any of the myriad things and any other lifeform. It is the only lifeform whose life-world is the cosmos itself. This is how I understand Wang's phrase that

⁹ 以天地萬物感之是非為體.

“the human is the heart-mind of the cosmos and the myriad things”¹⁰ (Wang, 2014, vol. 6, 214). Rather than proposing panpsychism—that is, ascribing mindedness to all of the myriad things—Wang here expresses how the cosmos, as the meaningful totality of the myriad things, is not constituted by mere addition of the myriad things contained within it, including the human being, but through the human being itself.¹¹

Liangzhi is not simply a part of the cosmos alongside other parts, such as other lifeforms or forms of knowledge, but the principle of the cosmos itself. It is thus not knowledge of a particular aspect or property of the myriad things, but an awareness that itself is the cosmic principle. Unlike knowledge of cognizable features of an extramental world, as in perception, or cognizable features of one’s own state of mind, as in introspection, this awareness pertains to that which governs “what is actual as such” and does not pertain to “a power of a certain animal species. No such power governs what is actual as such. Thinking the good to be a power of a certain animal species is the same as thinking the causality of the good . . . to be limited to a segment of the actual as opposed to governing change and becoming as such” (Rödl 2020, 295). If *liangzhi* were a circumscribable capacity or power of an animal species we call human, Wang could not argue that it is the source or “spirit of creation” (造化的精靈) that generates the cosmos (生天生地) (Wang 1963, sec. 261). Instead of being knowledge of a special kind of cognizable features or a particular form of knowing, *liangzhi* is the cosmic principle itself. *Liangzhi* “knows nothing and yet knows everything” (無知不無知) (Wang 1963, sec. 282), since it does not designate one form of knowing, in contrast to other forms, or a particular kind of cognizable features, in contrast to other kinds. It is precisely in not being a particular power or capacity that it is mirror-like responsivity to everything and that its efficacy does not pertain to a particular part of the cosmos but to the cosmos as a whole.

¹⁰ 人者，天地萬物之心也。

¹¹ This is my version of what Ivanhoe calls the co-extensiveness of human heart-mind and universe in Wang’s thought (Ivanhoe 2002, 34).

VI. Conclusion

This paper has examined Wang's notion of the good as knowledge and action. My reflections support Wu's claim that *liangzhi* and the unity of knowledge and action are inherently connected. Drawing on a late proposition of Wang cited by Wu, I have argued that knowledge and action are both grounded in one and the same goodness. The efficacy of an action cannot be separated from the awareness of the goodness of which the action is the execution. I have shown this by taking up Huang's insight that *liangzhi* is not knowledge about certain moral matters but rather is itself good. I have concluded the discussion with considerations on how *liangzhi*, thus conceived, can be understood as the principle of the cosmos itself, rather than as something that pertains to opinions or beliefs about moral matters, or to cognizable features of the world, in perception, or the mind, in introspection.

The key to understanding the relationship between *liangzhi* and the unity of knowledge and action is to pay attention to the concreteness of awareness of the good, as opposed to goodness conceived through principles, norms, values, virtues, facts and so forth. Just as an individual living being cannot be grasped through a law, because it does not just behave in general but acts concretely—that is, grabs food, moves from here to there and so forth, which the generality of law necessarily fails to account for—awareness of the good cannot be understood through any general matters, for anything general is, by definition, opposed to the concreteness of a particular situation in which our action is required.

To conclude, recent epistemological readings of Wang leave Wang's notion of the cosmic principle and his idea that "the human being is the heart-mind of the cosmos and the myriad things" (Wang 2014, vol. 6, 214) untouched. Certainly, epistemological readings need not deny that there are metaphysical considerations to be found in Wang. However, the epistemic concepts they employ make it hard to see how these concepts might relate to this metaphysical dimension. Unless one is willing to dismiss many of Wang's expressions as mere metaphorical embellishments, it seems that a mere epistemological rendering of key notions of Wang's thought runs into difficulties. Although recent epis-

temological interpretations of Wang are commendable for their precision and clarity, they can at times obscure the broader coherence of his philosophical vision. What we may find most illuminating in Wang's thought is the way he integrates areas of inquiry that contemporary academic conventions often treat as distinct disciplines.

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