



# An Analysis of Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind and Beauty

Huiying Zhang

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730070, Gansu, China.

**How to cite this paper:** Huiying Zhang. (2024) An Analysis of Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind and Beauty. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(9), 2138-2142.  
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.09.019

**Received:** August 16, 2024  
**Accepted:** September 14, 2024  
**Published:** October 11, 2024

\***Corresponding author:** Huiying Zhang, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730070, Gansu, China.

## Abstract

During the Ming Dynasty, society was undergoing a transition towards modernity, which led to a significant clash between traditional beliefs and emerging ideas in the philosophical realm. Wang Yangming, inheriting and further developing the teachings of Lu Xiangshan, played a crucial role in bridging the traditional and contemporary philosophical paradigms. Although Wang Yangming's philosophy does not explicitly address aesthetics, his deep artistic cultivation naturally imbues his discourse with an emotional dimension and rich aesthetic thought. This paper, grounded in Wang Yangming's philosophical theories, explores the aesthetic implications within the context of Yangming's thought. It argues that the essence of beauty is rooted in the "mind" (xin). Due to both the commonalities and individual differences inherent in the "mind," humans are able to appreciate the beauty of others as well as their own unique beauty. The ultimate form of beauty, as described by Wang Yangming, is the "realm of moral consciousness" (liangzhi jingjie), with the pursuit of "realizing innate knowledge" (zhi liangzhi) being the path to discovering this ultimate beauty.

## Keywords

Wang Yangming; Psychology; Aesthetics

## 1. The Origin of Beauty: Reflection of the Heart

Wang Yangming inherited Lu Jiuyuan's philosophy of the heart, which posits that "my heart is the universe," establishing the principle that "the heart is reason." This implies that the "heart" transcends all worldly things and cosmic laws. In this theory, the "heart" is not a physical heart of flesh and blood and must be distinguished from the human brain. What people commonly refer to as "thoughts in the heart" are not the true "heart," but rather the brain's thinking. The brain can command the body, while the "heart," as the fundamental essence, is an intangible and eternal existence. It not only surpasses all real existences but also integrates with all real existences, governing everything that exists. When the true "heart" and the brain are not unified, human actions often do not come from the "heart" but merely follow the brain's commands. This is why humans need to cultivate their "heart."

In the concept of "the heart is reason," "reason" refers to the heavenly principles and human laws, which are also a part of reality. "Reason" originates from and ultimately returns to the "heart." The "heart" itself is beyond distinctions of good and evil; it is free and complete. It is not only the prototype upon which morality and aesthetics are established but also the starting point and ultimate goal of moral and aesthetic pursuits (Pan, L., 2010).

The existence of the "heart" provides a common aesthetic prototype for people, thus endowing beauty with a certain universality. Conversely, since the ways and degrees in which individuals approach the "heart" vary, this also affirms the individuality of beauty. Therefore, beauty cannot exist in isolation in the external world (Ye, L., 2010). As Wang Yangming said, "When you do not look at this flower, this flower and your heart into silence. When you come to see this flower, the color of the flower becomes clear for a moment. Then you know that this flower is not outside your

mind' [(Ming) Wang Yangming, n.d., p. 118]. This demonstrates that while the flower exists objectively, beauty arises from the encounter between subjective consciousness and the objective image; both are indispensable. The flower, as an objective image, is akin to a model in a painting, the artwork is the result of combining the model's certain characteristics with the artist's subjective consciousness, the perceptual mind must be conveyed to the viewers by means of the material medium to produce the combination. Therefore, the origin of beauty is the reflection of the 'heart', human beings cannot see themselves with their own eyes, but only with the help of objects that can reflect the image of their own appearance, such as mirrors, water, etc., mirrors and water are a reality, but only when a person meets with them, only to produce a mirror, the human figure on the water. Thus, although 'the streets are full of saints,' not everyone knows that he or she is a saint, and the same is true of beauty. Free and complete beauty begins in the 'heart', but people do not necessarily know, only when the subjective consciousness and the objective object of the 'mirror' are relative to beauty. It can be said that it is the existence of the 'heart' that people since ancient times have been in the relentless pursuit of beauty, so since the emergence of the United States, this pursuit is the process of practice, in practice, human aesthetic activities step by step to the 'heart' return, and ultimately achieve the heart of the material The same, the unity of heaven and man in the perfect realm. For example, when I came to Zen meditation thirty years ago, I saw mountains as mountains and water as water. Later, when I met with knowledge and had a place to enter, I could see that the mountains were not mountains and the water was not water. Now that I have a resting place, I still see mountains as mountains and water as water' (The Five Lights, 1984, p. 1135).

## 2. The End of Beauty: The Realm of Conscience

The concepts of "innate knowledge" (liangzhi) and "realizing innate knowledge" (zhi liangzhi) hold central positions in Wang Yangming's philosophy of the heart. The term "innate knowledge" originates from Mencius, who stated, "That which a person can do without learning is his innate ability; that which he knows without thinking is his innate knowledge." Mencius believed that humans are born with a certain amount of innate knowledge. Wang Yangming incorporated this into his philosophy and provided a new interpretation under the theory that "the heart is reason." He suggested that "reason" originates from and ultimately returns to the "heart," completing the fullness of the "heart." Thus, "innate knowledge," "heart," and "reason" are unified.

Yang Ming pointed out that 'there is nothing bad in nature, so there is nothing bad in knowledge. Conscientiousness is the undeveloped middle, that is, it is the essence that is clear and impartial, silent and immovable, which is common to all people. However, it is not possible not to be obscured by material desires, so it is necessary to learn to remove its obscurity, but in the body of conscience, there can be no damage in the beginning to the slightest' [(Ming) Wang Yangming, n.d., p. 68]. Therefore, "innate knowledge" embodies the essence of the heart and, subsequently, becomes the ultimate form of beauty discussed earlier. Realizing innate knowledge is the external manifestation of one's true heart (Pan, L, 2010).

The significance of innate knowledge (liangzhi) lies in its presentation of triple worlds. Firstly, it acts as the spirit of creation, these "spirits" being the reason for the incarnation of all things. Without these "spirits," heaven and earth would not exist. In fact, these "spirits" are innate knowledge, transcending all things and endowing heaven and earth with meaning. In this sense, it is the essence of the universe, presenting as a world of meaning. Secondly, innate knowledge is something that humans are born with; thus, one's true heart inherently possesses moral judgment standards, presenting a moral world. Simultaneously, innate knowledge is a kind of transcendental spiritual awareness, presenting as an aesthetic world. The moral and aesthetic worlds are both based on the world of meaning, the aesthetic and meaning worlds adhere to the principles of the moral world, and the highest realm of both the meaning and moral worlds is the aesthetic world. The transformation of the meaning and moral worlds into the aesthetic world is the pursuit and return to one's true heart.

Wang Yangming advocated that "I am the universe, and the universe is me." The world of meaning, as a real existence, is perceived by one's true heart and is integrated with it, something that everyone possesses. However, due to differences in individual cultivation, the world of meaning perceived may not be identical. In the moral world, the undisturbed equilibrium of innate knowledge allows people to have a natural judgment of right and wrong. Earlier, it was mentioned that "the streets are full of sages." The reason why not everyone knows they are sages is precisely due to the "undisturbed equilibrium" characteristic of innate knowledge. Everyone is a potential sage but may not necessarily become a sage in the real sense The reason lies in the fact that true sainthood requires the progression of both and actions, seeking the manifestation and external of one's true heart, reaching a state where one cannot help dance with joy, not what greater pleasure there could be in the universe which is the ultimate aesthetic world.

Innate knowledge (*liangzhi*) aesthetics first possesses individuality. Although everyone is born with innate knowledge, the degree to which individuals cultivate their hearts varies, leading to different aesthetic perceptions and realms, thus exhibiting distinct and diverse individuality. Secondly, innate knowledge has emotionality. Wang Yangming stated, "Innate knowledge is merely the natural and clear manifestation of heavenly principles, it is genuine compassion, which is its essence." This "genuine compassion" refers to the experiential aspect of emotional experience. This emotional characteristic is precisely the reason for the connection between the philosophy of the heart and aesthetics. Furthermore, as the essence of the heart, innate knowledge possesses a certain intuitive transcendence, which is immediately obtained without the need for rational thought. The presentation of the aesthetic world is the illumination of innate knowledge. "Innate knowledge is not derived from perceiving or hearing, yet perceiving and hearing are all functions of innate knowledge. Thus, innate knowledge is neither confined to nor external to perceiving and hearing." Its observation cannot be separated from the practice of aesthetic theory, but it should not be confined to it, to avoid the disturbance of worldly consciousness on the externalization of innate knowledge. Wang Yangming referred to this disturbance as "evil intention," which includes human desires and utilitarian thoughts. Finally, Wang Yangming said, "Innate knowledge is observed only in the moment of response." Innate knowledge also possesses immediacy. Time, as a concept created by humans to record and describe motion, does not actually exist as an entity. Humans need time and the brain to live, but at the same time, time and the brain can also obscure the human essence (Eckhart Tolle, 2016). In reality, there is no past or future; humans only possess the present and can sense innate knowledge in the immediate moment.

The four characteristics of innate knowledge also imply different aspects of cultivation needed to achieve the aesthetic world. Firstly, it requires the cultivation of the individual's inner self, pursuing unity with the heart, known as the practice of "removing intention." Secondly, it requires the balance of sensibility, which means affirming "emotions." Unlike Zhu Xi, who pursued "will," Wang Yangming insisted on the unity of "emotions" and "will," asserting that human sensibility should not be obliterated. Thirdly, it involves the awakening of perceptual abilities. Over the long course of social development, humans have become accustomed to machines and rational thinking, gradually losing their innate perceptual abilities. Similar to animals that can sense danger, humans initially also possessed transcendental perceptual abilities. In the aesthetic world, this perceptual ability is most perfected. With all things in my heart, "I" can naturally sense the changes of all things. Finally, it requires grasping the present moment, transforming the life experiences and knowledge accumulated from "action" into "knowledge," while remembering that "action" must occur in the immediate present.

### 3. The Path to Beauty—The Dual Cultivation of Heart and Action

Wang Yangming's discourse not only elucidates the origin and ultimate destination of beauty but also provides a concrete approach to aesthetic practice—the realization of innate knowledge (*zhi liangzhi*). The realization of innate knowledge can be divided into two aspects: the cultivation of the heart (*xin shang gong fu*) and the cultivation of action (*shi shang gong fu*). "The cultivation of the heart" involves seeking clarity in the spiritual world, while "the cultivation of action" involves acquiring true knowledge through practice, inseparably linked to the objective world. However, these two aspects are not divided like the Chu-Han boundary but are two inseparable facets of the same practice.

"The cultivation of the heart" (*xin shang gong fu*) emphasizes "sincerity of intention" (*cheng yi*), focusing on an inward exploration of one's essence. This is a mental activity that is intrinsic and not outwardly visible, a form of internal practice. Wang Yangming's 'Four Sentence Teaching' says, 'There is no body of goodness and nausea, but there is a movement of goodness and malice; to know the good and the evil is conscience, and to remove the evil for the sake of the good is to make things better' [(Ming) Wang Yangming, n.d., p. 129]. The "intention" (*yi*) is what the heart manifests, and the essence is knowledge. Therefore, "intention" possesses the subjectivity originating from the heart and contains the subject's external responses. It involves both rational norms and sensory understanding. The relationship between intention and objects is one of directionality; the heart and objects are connected through intention. Thus, intention can be seen as the heart's direction toward objects, making intention the determinant of objects (Lu, Y, 2016).

Wang Yangming's concept of "evil intention" can be linked to the Zen notion of "attachment to forms," which signifies a form of obsession. "The essence of the heart should not allow any intention to linger, just like the eyes should not be clouded by dust. How much dust can there be? Even a little will make everything dark." "This intention is not only private thoughts; even good intentions should not linger, just like gold dust in the eyes will prevent them

from opening" [(Ming) Wang Yangming, n.d., p. 135]. Wang emphasized that the true heart should maintain its clarity and should not be clouded by intentions. Dust symbolizes evil intention, representing human desires and selfish thoughts; gold dust symbolizes good intention, representing human benevolence. Although the starting point of good intentions is positive, excessive attachment can still obscure the clarity of the heart. Both evil and good intentions, as well as human emotions and desires, should pass through the heart temporarily and fluidly without attachment. Therefore, one must "sincerely eliminate evil intentions" and also "sincerely eliminate good intentions," removing the obscurations of intention to maintain the heart's clarity, achieving a state where the heart's essence is neither good nor evil.

One must also be aware of the subjective mind's discriminations. "The vitality of heaven and earth is the same for flowers and grass; how can there be a distinction between good and evil? If you want to view flowers, you consider flowers good and grass evil; if you need to use grass, you then consider grass good." Such distinctions of good and evil arise from one's likes and dislikes. Flowers and grass inherently have no distinction between good and evil; it is human utilitarianism and desires that cause deviations in intention, attributing good and evil to objective phenomena. "Sincerity of intention" requires the fluidity of already-arising intentions, constantly monitoring one's thoughts. The criterion for good and evil is innate knowledge, which gradually reveals itself in one's spiritual world through the continuous process of eliminating intentions.

'True knowledge means so to act, and not acting is not enough to be called knowledge' [(Ming) Wang Yangming, n.d., p. 46]. "The cultivation of action" emphasizes the cycle of practice through the cooperation of action and true knowledge until the realm of clarity. Specifically, following things to the end, knowledge and action are united, true knowledge intrinsically drives the occurrence of action, and action tests true knowledge (Lu, Y., 2016). As far as aesthetics is concerned, "the cultivation of action" is the aesthetic practical activities, through the aesthetic practice to test the true knowledge of aesthetic self-awareness, and through the aesthetic practice will be transformed into their own aesthetic character (Pan, L. Y. & Fu, J. X., 2004), and the construction of their own aesthetic personality. Through conscientiousness, one can reach the realm of aesthetic practice, return to one's own heart, and find the realm of conscientiousness, but this is not the path of pursuing the end once and for all, but the path of ascending to sainthood, which should be carried out at all times.

#### 4. Conclusion

Beauty represents a state of returning to simplicity, a form of completeness, but it cannot be called perfection. In this state, a person's moral cultivation, intellectual accumulation, and other aspects achieve an appropriate level, embodying a subtle balance of "just right." From a perspective of realms, whether it is Heidegger's "poetic dwelling" or Wang Yangming's pursuit of "clarity," both are ultimate pursuits of beauty in the aesthetic sense, which is the "heart." It is a state of completeness and freedom that simultaneously encompasses both the collective and individual, uniting subject and object.

Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind indicates that the heart is both the starting point of beauty and the most sacred realm. It also outlines a practical path for the pursuit of beauty, elevating ordinary people to the same height as sages. Starting from the essence of the heart, every individual is equal and possesses the potential to achieve sainthood. Whether in the past or today, this philosophy affirms the significance of every ordinary person's existence. Since innate knowledge is inherent, through the dual cultivation of heart and action, and through diligent effort to realize innate knowledge, everyone can become a sage and reach a state of complete aesthetic fulfillment, where one cannot help but dance with joy.

#### References

- (Ming) Wang Yangming. 'Chuanxilu' (Record of Transmission), vol. 3, The Complete Works of Wang Yangming (New Edition), p. 118, p. 135.
- (Ming) Wang Yangming. 'Chuanxilu' (Under the Book of Transmission), The Complete Works of Wang Yangming (New Edition), vol. 3, p. 129.
- (Ming) Wang Yangming. 'Chuanxilu', The Complete Works of Wang Yangming (New Edition), vol. 2, p. 46, p. 68.
- Eckhart Tolle, C. Z. (2016). *The Power of Now*. CITIC Press.

- Lu, Y. (2016). *A Study of Wang Yangming's Aesthetic Thought*. Social Science Literature Publishing House.
- Pan, L. (2010). *The Aesthetic Wisdom of Yangming Xinxue*. Beijing University Press.
- Pan, L. Y. & Fu, J. X. (2004). The Unity of Knowledge and Action and Yangming's 'Aesthetics of Action'. *Zhejiang Journal*, 2004(01).
- The Five Lights. (1984). Vol. 17, Qingyuan Weixin Zenji, China Bookstore, 1984, p. 1135.
- Ye, L. (2009). *Principles of Aesthetics*. Beijing University Press.