

The Role of Intuition in Ethics: A Comparative Study of Wáng Yángmíng and William David Ross

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the ethical philosophies of Wáng Yángmíng and William David Ross to understand how moral intuition works in different traditions. Wáng Yángmíng's *xīn xué* (the learning of heart-mind) focuses on *liángzhī* (conscience) and *zhī xíng hé yī* (the unity of knowledge and action), while Ross's deontological ethics is based on "prima facie" duties and intuitive moral judgment. Although they lived in different times and cultures, both thinkers believed that true moral knowledge comes from within and must guide real-life actions. The problem addressed in this article is the lack of direct comparison between these two influential philosophers, especially regarding how moral intuition leads to ethical practice. The aim is to explore their similarities and differences to offer new insights into ethics today. This research uses a comparative philosophical method to analyze four key areas: (a) historical and cultural background, (b) development of moral theories of the time, (c) the role of moral intuition and judgment, and (d) the relation between knowledge and action. The study finds that while Wáng Yángmíng emphasizes inner self-cultivation and the inseparability of knowledge and action, Ross stresses rational reflection on intuitive duties. It finds that both philosophies connect moral knowledge with action, though through different frameworks—Wáng Yángmíng through self-cultivation and Ross through duty balancing. This article suggests that combining their approaches can help modern thinkers find a more holistic way to handle moral challenges. This comparison provides new insights into contemporary ethics by encouraging dialogue between Eastern and Western perspectives and promoting a more integrated view of moral reasoning that respects both intuition and rational reflection.

Keywords: Wáng Yángmíng, William David Ross, Ethics, Moral Intuition, Moral Action

INTRODUCTION

Wáng Yángmíng (1472–1529) is often heralded as one of the most influential thinkers in Chinese history. Alongside Confucius and Mencius, Wáng Yángmíng is ranked among the luminaries of Confucian philosophy, with a stature comparable to Zhū Xī (1130–1200), the architect of *lǐ xué* (the learning of the principle), known in English as Neo-Confucianism. His intellectual legacy transcends the boundaries of philosophy, encompassing his accomplishments as a scholar-official, military strategist, and writer (Israel, 2022). William David Ross (1877–1971), on the other hand, was a prominent contemporary Western ethicist and one of the key representatives of deontology. His theory diverges from both consequentialism and monistic deontological approaches like those of Kant. Central to Ross's ethical framework is the concept of "prima facie" duties—intuitive moral obligations that are inherently binding unless they conflict with other duties in specific situations. Unlike Kant's categorical imperatives, which demand universal adherence, Ross's pluralism recognizes the complexity of moral life, allowing for situational discretion in prioritizing conflicting duties, such as fidelity, beneficence, and justice (Skelton, 2022).

This article aims to examine the central elements of Wáng Yángmíng's *xīn xué* (the learning of the heart-mind) and William David Ross's deontological ethics (especially his concept of "prima facie" duties) by situating

them within their respective historical and cultural contexts. It explores their foundational concepts, particularly their views on the relationship between knowledge and action, the role of moral intuition, and their approaches to moral principles and moral education. Through a comparative analysis, this study seeks to identify points of convergence and divergence between their moral philosophies, thereby offering fresh insights into the role of intuition in ethical theory. Ultimately, the paper aspires to contribute to contemporary moral discourse by drawing on the strengths of both traditions to enrich our understanding of moral knowledge and ethical decision-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Chan (2008), Wáng Yángmíng's life was full of challenges, which greatly influenced his philosophical ideas. A key turning point came in 1508, when he was exiled to Lóng Chǎng. During this time, he had an important moment of realization that shaped his thought. This experience led him to develop his theory, which is based on the idea that principles are naturally part of the human mind. Scholars generally agree that conscience originated with Mencius, was further developed by Chéng Hào, expanded by Lù Jiǔyuān, and reached its zenith with Wáng Yángmíng, who synthesized and reinterpreted Confucian principles, completing the internal consistency of Confucian thought. In both ethical and metaphysical thinking, Wáng Yángmíng's philosophy gives an important place to the human heart-mind (*xīn*). He said that "the heart-mind is the principle" (*xīn jì lǐ*), which means that knowledge about right and wrong comes from the mind itself (Liu, 2024). This idea shows that moral thinking and the nature of reality are closely connected. Some scholars say this is similar to Western pragmatism, because it combines knowing and doing.

There are also comparisons between Wáng Yángmíng and some early Western philosophers. For example, some researchers think Wáng Yángmíng's focus on the mind is like Descartes, who also believed that the mind is the starting point for knowledge and philosophy (Lu, 2019). Another comparison is with Spinoza. Wienpahl (1969) shows that both Wáng Yángmíng and Spinoza believed in the importance of ethical life, self-reflection, and inner understanding. Wáng Yángmíng's ideas about *lǐ* (principle) and *qì* (material force), and his teaching about "the extension of pure knowing" (*zhìliàng zhī zhī*), are very important for his moral theory. He believed that people could find moral truth inside themselves through careful thinking and practice (Tien, 2010). This kind of thinking shows that Chinese philosophy also has its own metaphysical ideas, not just practical teachings (Lu, 2019). Because of these comparisons, some scholars think Chinese and Western philosophy have many things in common. This helps us to understand moral ideas in a wider and more global way, and to question the idea that only Western philosophy has deep theories about reality and ethics.

On the other hand, Ross's ethical theory, defined by deontological pluralism and moral intuitionism, has remained a central point of reference in twentieth-century moral philosophy (Phillips, 2019). His account, especially in *The Right and the Good* (1930) and *Foundations of Ethics* (1939), introduces the concept of "prima facie" duties—self-evident moral obligations that may be overridden in specific contexts. According to Postow (2006), Ross's method involves balancing these competing duties to determine one's actual duty, though he does not provide a definitive procedure for adjudicating between them, which has generated ongoing debate. Phillips (2019) among the scholars who have positioned Ross's view as a mediating stance between consequentialism and strict deontological absolutism, a framework some refer to as "classical deontology". His work is often commended for its moral sensitivity, clarity, and nuanced recognition of ethical complexity. However, it has also been criticized for its limited engagement with applied ethical concerns and for relying heavily on moral intuition without a systematic epistemology.

Dancy (1998) provides a notable critical engagement with Ross's theory, clarifying that while his article's title suggests a comparative perspective, it is in fact a focused response to Ross's rejection of consequentialist assumptions. Dancy argues that Ross's strategy to disentangle duties from outcomes might offer a stronger defense of non-consequentialist ethics, shielding it from the tendency to prioritize outcome-related duties to the neglect of others. This defense, Dancy suggests, highlights a deeper coherence in Ross's moral framework than often recognized. Phillips (2019) argues that the relevance of Ross's ethical theory lies not only in its

historical value but also in its capacity to generate dialogue with other moral traditions, such as Confucianism, where intuitive knowledge and moral obligation also intersect.

Even though Wáng Yángmíng and Ross lived in vastly different historical and cultural contexts, yet both developed ethical systems grounded in moral intuition and action. Wáng Yángmíng's *xīn xué*—the learning of the heart-mind—emphasizes the unity of knowledge and action (*zhī xíng hé yī*), whereas Ross's deontological ethics focuses on the role of “prima facie” duties in guiding moral decisions. Comparative studies of *xīn xué* have examined its intersections and divergences with the philosophies of René Descartes (Lu, 2019; Zheng, 2021), Immanuel Kant (Chen, 2018; Chen, 2019), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (Wang, 2024), Martin Heidegger (Ching, 1978), Spinoza (Wienpahl, 1969), Lawrence Kohlberg (Zhu, 2018), and Alvin Plantinga (Tien, 2004). However, no comparative analysis has yet been undertaken between Wáng Yángmíng's *xīn xué* and Ross's deontology. This study, therefore, fills a significant gap by examining how ethical concepts such as moral knowledge, duty, and action are conceived across distinct philosophical traditions. Such a comparison not only contributes to cross-cultural philosophical dialogue but also offers valuable insights for addressing contemporary ethical challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative philosophical method that integrates conceptual analysis with historical-contextual interpretation. It systematically compares Wáng Yángmíng's *xīn xué* (the learning of the heart-mind) and Ross's deontological ethics by identifying key philosophical concepts—particularly the relationship between moral intuition, knowledge, and action—and analyzing how these are developed and justified within each thinker's framework. The comparative approach aims not only to highlight similarities and differences but also to trace how each philosopher's ethical thought responds to the cultural, intellectual, and historical conditions of their time. The study applies textual analysis of primary sources, supported by secondary literature, to reconstruct the internal coherence of each ethical system. This study primarily references *Chuán Xí Lù* (*Instructions for Practical Living*), a collection of Wáng Yángmíng's dialogues and correspondence with his disciples, which serves as a vital source for understanding his philosophical thought. For Ross, this study draws chiefly on *The Right and the Good* (1930) and *Foundations of Ethics* (1939), which outline his moral theory of prima facie duties and his views on ethical intuitionism. It then uses cross-cultural philosophical comparison to examine points of convergence (e.g., moral intuition) and divergence (e.g., metaphysical and epistemological foundations). In doing so, the study follows the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, which emphasizes close reading, contextual sensitivity, and dialogical engagement across intellectual traditions. By combining conceptual precision with cultural-philosophical sensitivity, the methodology demonstrates how both Wáng Yángmíng and Ross offer valuable insights into moral life and ethical reasoning—insights that remain relevant for contemporary moral philosophy and intercultural dialogue.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

WÁNG YÁNGMÍNG'S XĪNXUÉ

Wáng Yángmíng's *xīn xué* represents both an inheritance and a profound evolution of Confucian thought. The philosophical roots of conscience can be traced back to Mencius's “four sprouts” (*sì duān*). Humans are born with the “four beginnings” of humaneness (*rén*), righteousness (*yì*), propriety (*lǐ*), and wisdom (*zhì*). The four sprouts are not imposed on humans from the outside, but are inherent in the human (Mencius, 2011). According to Mencius, the development of the “four beginnings” into the “four virtues” is a moral intuition without any utilitarian purpose. Mencius believed that morality comes from within each person and can be developed through self-reflection. This idea influenced later Neo-Confucian thinkers, who focused on inner moral awareness. In contrast, Zhū Xī argued that principle (*lǐ*) exists in everything and can be understood by studying the external world. Wáng Yángmíng, however, took a different approach, claiming that the heavenly principle is found within the human mind, and individuals must look inward to discover it. This internalist perspective forms the core of Wáng Yángmíng's *ethical theory*, which emphasizes three main tenets: “the

heart-mind is the principle” (*xīn jí lǐ*), “the unity of knowledge and action” (*zhī xíng hé yī*), and “the concept of conscience” (*liángzhī*). These will be discussed in the next three subsections.

(a) “The Heart-Mind is the Principle”

The concept of *xīn jí lǐ* is foundational to Wáng Yángmíng’s theory, forming a unified framework alongside *zhī xíng hé yī* and *liángzhī*. The three represent intentional, practical and purposive meanings, respectively, and they are progressive and interrelated relationships that form their ethical system. In Wáng Yángmíng’s framework, the *xīn* (heart-mind) is not limited to its perceptive function; it also possesses intrinsic moral consciousness. Wáng Yángmíng emphasized the ethical essence of the mind, asserting that morality originates from within. This is the foundation of his proposition that “the *xīn* is *lǐ*,” which Wáng (2018) explained as follows:

“The *xīn* is not merely a piece of flesh; wherever there is awareness, there is the mind. For example, the eyes and ears perceive sight and sound, and the hands and feet perceive pain and itch—this awareness is the *xīn* itself.” (Wáng, 2018, p. 303)

The relationship between the mind and external things has been explored by scholars like Cao (2016), who analyzed Wáng Yángmíng’s ideas through an existential-phenomenological lens, drawing parallels with Husserl’s concept of intentionality. A correct understanding of “*xīn jí lǐ*” requires recognizing that it means “the *xīn*, when applied to things, becomes the *lǐ*.” For example, when one’s mind focuses on filial piety, it embodies the *lǐ* of filial piety; when it focuses on loyalty, it embodies the *lǐ* of loyalty. Thus, *lǐ* (moral principles) arise from the application of the mind to particular situations and are not derived from external objects. For Wáng Yángmíng, the claim that “nothing exists outside the *xīn*” highlights that moral principles and intentions are inherently internal, originating within the individual rather than being imposed by external objects. This perspective grounds Wáng’s reinterpretation of the Confucian practice of “investigating things” (*gé wù*), emphasizing that understanding external phenomena begins with the mind’s own moral consciousness. As Wáng (2018) explained, “The essence of the mind is the heavenly principle.” The heavenly principle represents the ultimate moral law pursued by the sages and is inseparable from human nature. Wáng Yángmíng illustrated this concept with a famous assertion:

“When you do not look at the flower, it is silent in your mind; when you come to look at it, the color of the flower becomes clear, and you know that the flower is not outside your mind.” (Wáng, 2018, p. 268)

This statement stresses the subjective nature of human cognition: external objects are perceived and given meaning only through the mind. Wáng Yángmíng further argued that the mind’s clarity and reasoning are natural and untainted by external influences when it fully aligns with moral purpose. The *xīn* as the master of the body, integrates will and knowledge, enabling individuals to achieve moral clarity and unity with the world. Ultimately, Wáng Yángmíng’s idea of “the mind is principle” suggests that cognition and moral action are inseparably linked. By fully engaging the mind’s innate capacity for moral reasoning, individuals can perceive the true essence of all things. In this sense, Wáng Yángmíng’s *xīn xué* provides a holistic framework for self-cultivation, emphasizing the integration of mind, knowledge and action in the pursuit of philosophical enlightenment.

(b) “The Unity of Knowledge and Action”

Wáng Yángmíng’s “unity of knowledge and action” is his well-known doctrine. In Wáng Yángmíng’s theory, if the study of the *xīn* represents the work of the sage, then the unity of knowledge and action embodies the wisdom necessary for living a moral life. For Zhū Xī, knowledge and action were two distinct stages—relatively independent of one another—where knowledge serves as the basis for subsequent action. This metaphysical separation, however, led to the potential risk of “knowing without acting,” a problem that Wáng Yángmíng sought to address. Wáng (2018, p. 17) critically noted this issue, stating:

“One may spend time studying and discussing to gain knowledge, yet without action, one may never act and, consequently, never truly know.”

For Wáng Yángmíng, moral cognition and moral behavior are inextricably linked. True knowledge arises only through action, and without action, even vast theoretical knowledge remains incomplete and superficial. In this sense, knowledge and action are not separate phenomena but are instead aspects of a single, unified process. Wáng Yángmíng’s theory of the unity of knowledge and action aimed to address the academic shortcomings of Zhū Xī’s epistemology, which had contributed to excessive intellectualism and inaction among scholars of the time. The systematic explanation of this doctrine is attributed to discussions between Wáng Yángmíng and his disciple Xú Ài in 1512 during their return journey to Yuè. It is recorded that when Xú Ài struggled to understand the principle, Wáng (2018, p. 125) explained:

“All people know that one should be filial to one’s father and respectful to one’s elder brother, yet some fail to practice filial piety or respect. This is not a case of knowledge and action being two separate things; rather, it is a distortion caused by selfish desires. There is no one who truly knows but does not act. If someone claims to know but does not act, it simply means they do not truly know.”

For Wáng (2018, p. 44), “knowledge is the beginning of action, and action is the completion of knowledge.” Knowledge and action are mutually interdependent; neither can exist without the other. True knowledge is knowledge that is actualized through action, while action in turn deepens and refines one’s knowledge. Moral cultivation, therefore, is not about abstract theorizing but about practice—applying what one knows to moral action in daily life. In this context, it refers to self-cultivation through moral practice, and the unity of knowledge and action serves as the mechanism by which individuals integrate cognition and behavior. Wáng (2018, p. 18) further explained:

“Knowledge is the intention of action, and action is the effort of knowledge. There has never been anyone who knows but does not act. Knowledge without action is simply not knowledge. True knowledge is action, and the clear and precise discernment in action is knowledge.”

This doctrine resolves the inconsistency between moral cognition and moral behavior by positing that knowledge and action are not merely interrelated but are, in essence, one and the same. Where there is no action, there is no knowledge; where there is no knowledge, there is no action. This organic relationship underscores the practical and experiential basis of moral development. For Wáng Yángmíng, moral cultivation involves constant self-reflection and the application of knowledge in action to achieve harmony between internal moral cognition and external moral behavior. Wáng Yángmíng’s theory also emphasizes the importance of refining the *xīn* through practice. He believed that moral self-cultivation is not about rote memorization of rules but about purifying the *xīn*, where the *xīn* embodies moral principles. As Wáng (2018) stated, when a thought arises, it is already action. If it is not good, then this thought must be eradicated. This process requires constant vigilance to prevent the rise of selfishness and negative inclinations, ensuring that one’s thoughts and actions align with moral principles.

In summary, Wáng Yángmíng’s theory of the unity of knowledge and action resolves the dichotomy between moral cognition and practice, setting a higher standard for individual moral cultivation. True knowledge, in Wáng Yángmíng’s view, is actionable, and true action arises from genuine knowledge. His philosophy calls for continuous self-reflection, practical application, and the refinement of the *xīn* to achieve harmony between one’s inner moral conscious and outward behavior, ultimately leading to moral and spiritual enlightenment. For Wáng Yángmíng, moral growth is an active and transformative process. It brings together thinking, intention, and action, ensuring that knowledge leads to moral behavior and that practicing morality deepens understanding.

(c) “The Concept of Conscience”

The doctrine of “attaining conscience” (*zhì liángzhī*) stands as the central theme of Wáng Yángmíng’s *xīnxiué* and represents the core of his moral philosophy. Though composed of only three characters, this phrase

encapsulates the profound wisdom that Wáng Yángmíng accumulated throughout his life. In his later years, he summarized the essence of his teachings and the principles that guided him through life's challenges in this simple yet profound expression, underscoring its central role in his philosophical thought. At its core, *zhì liángzhī* refers to reaching one's innate moral awareness, which Wáng Yángmíng described as the ability to know good and evil naturally and instinctively. This self-awareness constitutes one's conscience, and achieving inner peace through the satisfaction of this moral awareness is the essence of *zhì liángzhī*.

The doctrine of *liángzhī* marks the culmination of Wáng Yángmíng's thought and represents the ultimate goal of his lifelong intellectual journey. It provides the ethical foundation for his philosophy. Its formulation not only signifies the final and most complete stage of Wáng Yángmíng's philosophical system but also exerted a profound influence on the development of intellectual thought during the Middle and Late Ming dynasties. The concept of *liángzhī* has its roots in the teachings of Mencius, who identified conscience as an innate moral faculty. For instance, described conscience as the natural capacity to act compassionately and discern right from wrong without formal learning. He famously used the example of a person instinctively rushing to save a child falling into a well, driven by innate compassion rather than calculation (Mencius, 2001).

Building on Mencius's thought, Wáng Yángmíng clarified and expanded the notion of conscience. During his later years, he defined *liángzhī* as "the ability to know good and evil." All humans possess an intrinsic moral awareness that enables them to distinguish right from wrong and pursue goodness. When a thought arises, one's conscience immediately perceives whether it is good or bad, right or wrong, leaving no room for deception or concealment. Wáng Yángmíng further extended *liángzhī* to encompass the universal order, claiming that it is shared by all things in the universe. In his work, he stated:

"Man's *liángzhī* is present in grass, wood, and stone. Without *liángzhī*, grass, wood, and stone cannot be what they are. Not only grass, wood, and stone, but also heaven and earth—without *liángzhī*, they cannot be heaven and earth. Heaven, earth, all things, and humanity are one, and the most subtle essence of this oneness is human moral consciousness." (Wáng, 2018, p. 267)

Wáng Yángmíng further elevated *liángzhī* to an ontological principle, describing it as the *Tao* or ultimate principle of existence. He explained: "*Liángzhī* is the essence of change and flow, flexible yet principled, and constantly adapting to circumstances" (Wáng, 2018). Practically, attaining *liángzhī* involves achieving the unity of knowledge and action by extending one's moral conscience to all things. Wáng Yángmíng viewed knowledge (*zhī*) as both a cognitive and practical process, inseparably linked to action. This unity entails harmonizing conscious moral awareness with practical application, making *liángzhī* both the foundation and the highest state of moral cultivation. For him, conscience is the knowledge of right and wrong, and "attaining" it requires refining one's thoughts and applying them in real-world actions. Moreover, Wáng Yángmíng's *liángzhī* includes several key aspects. First, he asserted that the sense of right and wrong is innate and universal, requiring no formal learning or reflection. This moral awareness exists equally in sages and ordinary people, whether ancient or modern. Second, Wáng Yángmíng identified *liángzhī* as the fundamental principle underlying the existence and continuity of all things in the world. It is the *Tao* of heaven and earth and the universal moral order.

In practice, Wáng Yángmíng emphasized self-reflection and moral action as the paths to attaining *liángzhī*. Cultivating conscience involves constant introspection to identify and eliminate selfish desires or negative inclinations. By refining one's moral awareness and extending it to all aspects of life, an individual develops authentic virtue and aligns their actions with universal moral principles. In summary, Wáng Yángmíng's theory of *liángzhī*, the culmination of his moral philosophy, establishes a higher standard of moral cultivation, and he advocates the unity of inner moral cognition and outer moral practice. Wáng Yángmíng elucidated the universal path to personal realization of harmony with the moral order of the universe.

ROSS'S DEONTOLOGY

Ross was a prominent contemporary Western ethicist and one of the key representatives of deontology. His theory diverges from both consequentialism and monistic deontological approaches like those of Kant. Central

to Ross's ethical framework is the concept of "prima facie" duties—intuitive moral obligations that are inherently binding unless they conflict with other duties in specific situations. Unlike Kant's categorical imperatives, which demand universal adherence, Ross's pluralism recognizes the complexity of moral life, allowing for situational discretion in prioritizing conflicting duties, such as fidelity, beneficence, and justice. Ross lived in the 20th century, when the study of ethics was in a phase of diversification. As society changed and science advanced, people thought more deeply about moral concepts. In his study of practical cases of moral judgment, Ross found that theories such as utilitarianism alone could not well explain all moral phenomena. Utilitarianism emphasizes the consequences of actions, i.e., the pursuit of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. However, Ross argued that some actions are morally right not because of their consequences, but because of the nature of the actions themselves. This reflection led him to formulate his own deontological ethics.

Ross held that monistic ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, oversimplify morality and are counter-intuitive (Pianalto, 2023). Kant's deontology focuses on finding the ultimate standard for determining the moral rightness of actions, believing that there is only one such standard. However, Kant's theory often faces counterexamples it cannot explain in practice. To resolve the moral dilemmas that utilitarian ethics and Kantian deontology cannot address, Ross proposed a pluralistic normative ethical theory—his famous theory of "prima facie" duties. Ross's deontology is to some extent an inheritance and development of traditional ethical thought. He draws on some ideas from Kantian ethics, such as the emphasis on moral obligation. Kant believed that moral behavior is based on obligation, acting out of respect for moral law, Ross's theory also focuses on obligation, but expands and refines it.

(a) "Prima Facie" Duties

The phrase "prima facie" means "at first glance," suggesting that these duties are morally binding unless something stronger overrides them. A duty may be a real obligation or just an apparent one, depending on the context. Ross (1930) described "prima facie" duties as basic moral obligations commonly recognized in everyday life. He defined them as:

"I suggest 'prima facie duty' or 'conditional duty' as a brief way of referring to the characteristic (quite distinct from that of being a duty proper) which an act has, in virtue of being of a certain kind (e.g. the keeping of a promise), of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant." (Ross, 1930, p. 19)

Such duties are not absolute but appear binding at first glance; they may be overridden by more pressing duties in specific circumstances. Prichard (1912), Ross's contemporary, described them as "claims"—things that look like duties in certain situations but may not be actual duties in the end. In his work, Ross (1930) listed the seven "prima facie" duties as: (1) fidelity, (2) reparation, (3) gratitude, (4) justice, (5) beneficence, (6) self-improvement, and (7) non-maleficence. These duties form the foundation of his ethical theory, which does not rely on consequences but on the moral intuition of obligations (Morreau, 1996).

Ross (1930) stated that this list is not final or complete. He also warned that the names of these duties, like "fidelity" and "gratitude," might be misunderstood because they sound like feelings or motivations. But duties, in his view, are not about internal motives, they are about doing the right actions. Therefore, people should not confuse these duty names with emotional states. The list is only a general outline based on moral experience, not a perfect system. It does not fully explain what to do when two duties conflict, but it helps begin deeper discussions about such cases. Ross emphasized that "prima facie" duties are central to moral life and are valid even when consequences are not favorable. These duties are normally binding, but sometimes they can come into conflict. In such cases, we must decide which duty is the actual one to follow. For instance, telling the truth is usually important, but in some cases, lying might be necessary to protect someone from harm. Likewise, keeping promises is a duty, but breaking a promise might be better if it prevents a greater wrong. Ross believed that we must carefully judge which duty applies in each situation. This flexible approach

allows people to respond thoughtfully when duties seem to clash. It offers a practical guide for real moral decisions, especially in complex situations where no single rule seems sufficient.

Building on this, Furlan (2024) notes that Ross's intuitionism is often seen as a form of commonsense ethics, which seeks to explain how ordinary people already think about right and wrong. Ross considered moral theory's main task to be capturing these real-life ethical judgments in a structured way. He also gave special importance to good judgment or practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), especially when resolving duty conflicts and identifying which duties are relevant in a situation. Ross believed that common sense morality, with its complexity and plurality, is best explained through general yet defeasible principles. These duties are "fundamental" because they are not derived from other duties or theories. When disagreements occur about the number or type of duties, Ross encouraged analysis to determine whether the duty in question is truly underived. Based on that, the list of duties could be revised. Sometimes he shortened or lengthened his list by combining certain duties. From the basic duties, more specific secondary duties can be developed. He also acknowledged that duties often overlap or conflict in real cases, where one action might arise from several duties. This view adds a flexible and practical aspect to his ethical system.

(b) Moral Conflict and Actual Duty

Ross (1930) acknowledges that moral duties can come into conflict. In such cases, the moral agent must decide which duty takes precedence based on the specific context. For example, one may have to choose between avoiding harm to others (the duty of non-maleficence) and keeping a promise to a friend (the duty of fidelity). In these situations, moral judgment must be made case by case. This flexibility is a key feature of Ross's deontology, which, unlike Kantian ethics with its strict universal rules, recognizes the complexity of real-life moral decisions. Ross (1939) explains that an actual duty is the "prima facie" duty that carries the greatest moral weight in a given situation.

The challenge lies in comparing and evaluating these conflicting aspects to determine our actual duty. Ross admits that there is no single principle for resolving such conflicts. Some duties—like keeping promises, making amends, and showing gratitude—are widely recognized, while others rely more heavily on moral intuition. As a result, determining our true duty is prone to error, but it is a task we cannot avoid. We may say that an action is morally right only when its rightness outweighs its wrongness. Addressing prima facie duties requires careful moral reasoning, including evaluating the situation, anticipating consequences, and considering the relative importance of each duty. The final obligation is established through thoughtful deliberation, often involving the reconciliation of competing ethical claims. This process reflects the complexity of moral life and the need for discernment in ethical decision-making.

(c) The Intuitive Nature of Moral Judgments

In *Foundations of Ethics*, Ross's (1939) moral intuition plays a central role in his ethical framework, particularly in his defense of intuition. Ross's (1930) contributions build upon his earlier work in *The Right and the Good*, emphasizing that moral intuitions provide immediate, non-inferential knowledge of "prima facie" duties. These duties are self-evident truths perceived through intuition. Ross emphasizes the intuitive nature of moral judgments. He argues that we have an intuitive perception of moral obligations, and that these intuitions are based on our moral experience and rational thought. When we are confronted with a moral situation, we can rely on this intuition to recognize what moral obligations exist. However, this intuition is not a random emotional response, but a considered moral sensitivity. For example, we intuitively know that lying is generally wrong because it violates moral obligations such as loyalty, and at the same time this intuition can be supported by rational reflection on the quality of honesty.

As noted already, Ross (1939) recognizes that humans have refined their ideas about right and wrong and rejected ideas and practices that used to seem right to many people. He does not regard intuition as infallible. Nevertheless, our best information about what is truly right comes from the carefully considered intuitions of people who are well-informed, perceptive, sensitive, and rational. The "prima facie" duties identify values that

have stood the test of reflection, experience, and time. Ross suggests that we should have some humility about our own views and be willing to seriously consider the views of others, because thoughtful people do sometimes have conflicting intuitions about complex cases.

COMPARISON BETWEEN WÁNG YÁNGMÍNG'S XĪNXUÉ AND ROSS'S DEONTOLOGY

Wáng Yángmíng's central idea is *liángzhī*, which he defines as the innate moral awareness within the human *xīn*. He maintains that moral judgment arises from internal reflection rather than external instruction (Chan, 2008). Similarly grounded in moral intuition, Ross argues that our sense of duty does not depend on experience or deduction but is immediately known through rational intuition, which he considers universal and a priori (Stratton-Lake, 2005). While Wáng Yángmíng emphasizes the “unity of knowledge and action,” insisting that moral awareness must be expressed through behavior, Ross focuses on how we navigate real-life moral dilemmas by balancing conflicting duties. For Wáng Yángmíng, conscience is directly tied to intuitive moral insight and self-cultivation. Ross, by contrast, identifies “prima facie” duties—such as fidelity and justice—that guide action, requiring rational deliberation to determine which duty takes precedence in a given context. Wáng Yángmíng stresses nurturing the inner self, while Ross emphasizes reasoned moral understanding. Despite their differing cultural backgrounds, both philosophers offer comparable views on moral intuition and judgment, as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Comparison between Wáng Yángmíng and William David Ross's Conception

Aspect of Comparison	Wáng Yángmíng	William David Ross
Historical and Cultural Context	Ming dynasty Neo-Confucianism; responded to Chéng-Zhū orthodoxy; stressed inner moral cultivation.	Early 20th-century British philosophy; influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and Kantian ethics.
Development of Moral Theories	Rejected dualism of <i>lǐ</i> and <i>qì</i> ; emphasized <i>xīn</i> (heart-mind) and <i>liángzhī</i> (conscience).	Critiqued utilitarianism and Kantianism; proposed pluralistic <i>prima facie</i> duties based on intuition.
Role of Moral Intuition and Judgment	<i>Liángzhī</i> as inborn moral sense; realized through introspection and moral practice.	<i>Prima facie</i> duties intuited through reason; clarified by practical moral judgment.
Relation between Knowledge and Action	<i>Zhī xíng hé yī</i> (unity of knowledge and action); moral knowledge must be practiced.	Moral knowledge guides action: duties must be weighed in context to determine the right action.

Based on the comparative table above, the discussion in the following subsections will elaborate on these four aspects—historical and cultural context, development of moral theories, role of moral intuition and judgment, and the relation between knowledge and action—from both philosophers.

(a) Historical and Cultural Context

Wáng Yángmíng lived during the mid-Míng Dynasty, a period marked by political instability, social unrest, and bureaucratic corruption. The growing power of eunuchs, frequent peasant revolts, and weakened central authority challenged traditional Confucian governance. Although economic development persisted, intellectuals increasingly questioned the rigidity of Chéng-Zhū Neo-Confucianism, which had long dominated scholarly thought (Angle, 2013; Van Norden, 2014). In response to these cultural and political challenges, Wáng developed a moral philosophy centered on the unity of knowledge and action and the cultivation of inner moral awareness. His ideas addressed both ethical and social needs of the time, offering a more dynamic and introspective alternative to prevailing doctrines (Tiwald, 2018). In contrast, Ross formulated his ethical theory in early 20th-century Britain, amid industrialization, scientific advancement, and moral shifts following the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The rise of capitalism and technological progress disrupted traditional moral

frameworks and contributed to dissatisfaction with utilitarianism. Ross's theory of *prima facie* duties emerged as a response, aiming to preserve moral intuition and pluralism within modern complexity (Audi, 2015). Educated and later taught at Oxford, Ross was shaped by the analytic tradition, emphasizing clarity and rational inquiry. His focus on moral intuition and accountability reflected efforts to reconcile enduring ethical values with a rapidly changing world (Stratton-Lake, 2005).

Wáng Yángmíng's thought drew from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, blending self-cultivation with reflection and practice. Influenced by Mencius's belief in human goodness, he emphasized that moral awareness arises from within and is nurtured through lived experience. His theory of unity between knowledge and action embodies Daoist harmony and Buddhist mindfulness, integrating inner moral insight with outward ethical conduct (Tiwald, 2018; Van Norden, 2014). Meanwhile, Ross's moral philosophy was shaped by the Western canon, particularly Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which stresses virtue, practical wisdom, and moral character. As an editor and translator of Aristotle's works, Ross applied these insights to construct his pluralistic moral theory. His engagement with Kantian deontology also shaped his emphasis on duty, while allowing room for flexibility through intuition and contextual reasoning.

As a whole, Wáng Yángmíng and Ross emerged from vastly different historical and cultural settings, which shaped their philosophical approaches. Wáng Yángmíng's thought developed within the Neo-Confucian tradition of Ming dynasty China, where moral cultivation, harmony with the cosmos, and the integration of metaphysics and ethics were central concerns (Tiwald, 2018). His philosophy reflects a holistic worldview rooted in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist influences. In contrast, Ross operated within the context of early 20th-century British moral philosophy, shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and post-Kantian deontology. His focus was more analytic, reflecting the Western philosophical tradition's emphasis on precise moral reasoning, ethical pluralism, and normative clarity (Skelton, 2022). While Wáng Yángmíng's philosophy is deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual practice, Ross's system is more abstract and principled, reflecting a modern concern for universal moral reasoning across diverse contexts.

(b) Development of Moral Theories of the Time

Despite their distinct contexts, both Wáng Yángmíng and Ross responded to the limitations of dominant ethical theories of their time by developing original and lasting philosophical frameworks. Wáng Yángmíng's critique of the rigidity of Chéng-Zhū Neo-Confucianism and Ross's rejection of utilitarianism and Kantianism reflect a shared commitment to addressing the shortcomings of prevailing moral doctrines.

In Wáng Yángmíng's era, Chéng-Zhū Neo-Confucianism served as the orthodox state philosophy. It emphasized the method of "investigating things to extend knowledge" (*gé wù zhì zhī*), which encouraged the search for universal principles through observation. However, this approach became increasingly detached from lived experience. Wáng's own efforts—such as days spent meditating on bamboo—proved unproductive and exhausting, leading him to realize that such practices produced scholars strong in theory but weak in practical ethics. Disillusioned, he developed the *xīn* school of thought, grounded in *liángzhī* (innate moral knowing). Wáng emphasized turning inward to one's moral conscience and integrating ethical practice into everyday life, making morality a lived, not abstract, pursuit.

In Western philosophy, Ross challenged utilitarianism's reduction of morality to outcomes and Kantianism's rigid formalism. Utilitarianism prioritized maximizing happiness regardless of motives, while Kant (1997) upheld universal moral laws based solely on reason and duty. Ross (1954) argued that both approaches overlooked the diversity and nuance of moral experience, particularly the role of intuition and emotional insight. He introduced the concept of *prima facie* duties—self-evident obligations such as fidelity, gratitude, and justice—that are known intuitively and applied contextually (Ross, 1930). This framework offers a balanced alternative to both traditions, valuing principle without ignoring practical complexity. As Ross noted, "many of our desires owe their very being to our possession of reason" (Ross, 1939, p. 205). Though critical of Kant, Ross continued to regard him as a pivotal figure in ethical thought.

Overall, both Wáng Yángmíng and Ross responded critically to the dominant moral theories of their times. Wáng challenged the prevailing Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of Zhū Xī, rejecting its overemphasis on external learning and rigid metaphysical structures. Instead, he returned to the inner moral awareness of the self, emphasizing *liángzhī* as the basis of ethical life. Ross, meanwhile, reacted against both utilitarianism and Kantian absolutism, arguing that neither could account for the complexity of moral life. He developed a pluralistic system based on multiple *prima facie* duties that reflect the richness of moral experience. Both thinkers innovated by shifting focus from rigid theoretical systems to practical moral engagement, offering new frameworks that integrate personal insight and context-sensitive judgment. Their contributions not only challenged dominant paradigms but also inspired further developments in both Eastern and Western ethical thought.

(c) Role of Moral Intuition and Judgment

Wáng Yángmíng and Ross came from different cultural backgrounds, but surprisingly enough, they both discovered moral intuition and at the same time attached great importance to the crucial role of moral intuition in understanding human moral behavior. Wáng Yángmíng summarized the concept of *liángzhī*, arguing that humans are born with the ability to make moral judgments. Similarly, Ross proposes “*prima facie*” duties (intuitive obligation), arguing that we can intuitively recognize certain behaviors, such as, for example, keeping promises, showing gratitude, and acting justly, as intrinsically right or wrong, and to a certain extent representative of human civilization and cultural common ground.

Wáng Yángmíng’s doctrine of *liángzhī* deeply embeds moral intuition within the foundation of human nature. He firmly believed:

“*Liángzhī* is what Mencius referred to as the ‘sense of right and wrong,’ which everyone possesses. This sense of right and wrong does not rely on deliberation to know, nor on learning to achieve; hence, it is called *liángzhī*.” (Wáng, 2018, p. 258)

This passage from Wáng Yángmíng’s *Chuán Xí Lù* highlights humanity’s inherent moral perception, asserting that everyone has the innate ability to distinguish between right and wrong. This capacity requires neither external teaching nor intellectual contemplation—it is naturally present within every individual, thus earning the name *liángzhī*. Wang regarded *liángzhī* as the fundamental basis of moral judgment, urging individuals to align their moral practice and self-cultivation with it. It suggests that *liángzhī*, as an innate ability for moral judgment, does not depend on external knowledge or complex rational deliberation. Instead, humans can naturally rely on this internal power to discern good from evil. In everyday life, when we witness someone in distress and feel a spontaneous sense of compassion urging us to help, this is *liángzhī* manifesting in the moment. Similarly, when we encounter injustice and are filled with righteous indignation, prompting us to stand up for fairness, this, too, is the work of *liángzhī*. Like a luminous spark hidden deep within every heart, *liángzhī* ignites when the situation calls for it, instinctively guiding us toward the moral path.

Similarly, Ross’s concept of “*prima facie*” duties centers on the intuitive recognition of moral obligations in ethical practice. He emphasizes their self-evident nature, stating:

“It is self-evident just as a mathematical axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident. The moral order expressed in these propositions is just as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe...” (Ross, 1930, p. 29)

Ross (1939) identifies specific actions that people intuitively recognize as morally right, such as keeping promises, expressing gratitude, and acting justly. Take the example of keeping promises: the moment we make a promise to someone, we feel an intangible sense of obligation, knowing that breaking the promise would be wrong. This feeling is a near-instinctive moral intuition. Ross argued that, in most cases, people do not need prolonged deliberation to understand that honoring promises is a moral imperative. For instance, when friends agree to meet at a certain time, even if a more enjoyable event arises, an internal voice reminds us to fulfill

our commitment because the intuitive duty of keeping promises is deeply rooted within us. Gratitude operates in a similar way. When someone has helped us in times of need, encountering them again later naturally evokes a desire to repay their kindness—not out of calculation, but from an intuitive sense of moral responsibility. Justice, too, is guided by intuition: in scenarios involving resource allocation or reward distribution, people naturally seek fairness and equality and instinctively feel dissatisfaction when witnessing bias or injustice.

To sum up, both Wáng Yángmíng and Ross emphasized the foundational role of moral intuition and judgment, though in distinct ways. Wáng Yángmíng's concept of *liángzhī* refers to an innate moral knowledge present within every individual, which can be awakened and clarified through self-cultivation and introspection. Ross, on the other hand, argued that we can intuit *prima facie* duties—basic moral truths that do not require inferential justification. While Wáng Yángmíng's intuition is grounded in metaphysical unity between the self and the moral order, Ross's is framed as a rational recognition of moral obligations. Despite these differences, both agree that moral understanding is not fully dependent on complex reasoning or abstract deduction. They instead affirm that moral clarity often comes from direct awareness—whether through inner harmony with the moral cosmos or through the exercise of practical wisdom. This shared emphasis on intuitive judgment underscores the universality of certain moral insights and reminds us that ethical action often begins not in theory, but in the immediacy of conscience.

(d) Relation between Knowledge and Action

The complex interplay between knowledge and action has been a central theme in philosophical exploration, with various viewpoints providing significant insights. Wáng Yángmíng proposed the notion of “the unity of knowledge and action” (Ivanhoe, 2000). From the development of Wáng Yángmíng's theory, a word on Wáng Yángmíng's illustrious the unity of knowledge and action that is, the knowledge and action are one act, not two—is in order (Chen, 2019). Wáng Yángmíng's theory of *liángzhī* emphasizes that “knowledge” is inherent, it believed that moral knowledge is inherent in the mind and can be accessed through introspection and self-cultivation. Wáng Yángmíng's emphasis on practice in “unity of knowledge and action”. Integration of moral cognition and practice.

“Knowledge is the essence of the mind, and the mind naturally knows. Seeing one's father, one naturally knows filial piety; seeing one's elder brother, one naturally knows fraternal duty; seeing a child about to fall into a well, one naturally feels compassion.” (Wáng, 2018, p. 24)

For Wáng Yángmíng, truly understanding a moral principle—such as filial piety—requires putting it into action, such as caring for one's parents and respecting elders. Merely claiming to understand without acting on that knowledge means one has not genuinely grasped the principle. Moral knowledge, in his view, must be realized through practice; it cannot remain theoretical or verbal but must be demonstrated in everyday conduct. He argued that true knowledge and moral action are inseparable knowing the good naturally leads to doing the good. His doctrine of the “unity of knowledge and action” affirms the essential link between moral understanding and ethical behavior, reflecting the harmony between theory and practice. Wáng (2018) realized that the Tao of the Sage is complete within the self and that seeking external understanding was misguided. Through acting in accordance with conscience, beyond concern for honor or disgrace, he discovered that true moral strength comes from within. As he states: “Your innate knowledge is your own standard. When you direct your thought, your innate knowledge knows that it is right if it is right and wrong if it is wrong. You cannot keep anything from it” (Wáng, 2018, p. 228). He further emphasized the importance of refining one's character through real-life engagement. By participating in daily affairs—managing relationships and facing life's challenges—individuals can test and strengthen their moral character. Through such practice, they can overcome selfish desires, align their behavior with ethical principles, and bring their *liángzhī* into full expression, achieving deeper levels of moral cultivation.

Wáng Yángmíng's doctrine of “*zhì liángzhī*” centers on leveraging one's innate moral conscience as a guide to action. When encountering moral situations, *liángzhī* enables individuals to discern right from wrong. Wang insisted that people must act promptly based on the directives of their *liángzhī*, embodying these moral

principles in their behavior rather than hesitating or overthinking. Thus, in terms of the unity of knowledge and action and moral cultivation, Wáng (2018) believes that one must grind at things and do *kung fu* to be beneficial, and that if one messes up when things go wrong, one will never grow. No matter what you do, only after grinding and putting in enough effort can you really achieve something, and only by being patient and concentrating on each and everything to the death can you really hone your skills. The importance of practice indicates that his theory of the unity of knowledge and practice is inherently consistent with his whole philosophy system (Zhū, 2018).

Like the teaching of Confucianism, Wáng Yángmíng emphasizes the importance of maintaining social harmony and fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities. By incorporating these core Confucian ideas and values. In moral practice, *liángzhī* provides the basis for judging right and wrong. Since *liángzhī* is innate, the priori *liángzhī* and moral judgement of the human mind, it is capable of objectively assessing whether an action conforms to moral norms or not. When faced with moral choices, as long as one has a conscience, one can clearly distinguish between right and wrong and thus make the right decision. In the practice of life, one encounters all kinds of difficulties and challenges, but by always adhering to one's conscience in one's moral behavior, one is able to constantly overcome these difficulties and raise one's moral level. As one's moral level rises, one's mind becomes clearer and purer, and one's behavior becomes more in accordance with moral standards.

Ross's deontological ethics holds significant practical value in moral judgment. He proposed that humans can directly perceive certain fundamental moral duties, such as honesty, keeping promises, and avoiding harm to others, through intuition (Ross, 1930). These intuitive judgments serve as an important source of moral knowledge and can be further refined through education and practice. In daily life, individuals can rely on these intuitive judgments to guide their actions, enabling them to make swift and accurate decisions when faced with moral dilemmas. However, Ross (1939) also acknowledged that moral duties often come into conflict. He clarifies this by distinguishing between different types of obligation:

"It is the overlooking of the distinction between obligations and responsibilities, between actual obligatoriness and the tendency to be obligatory, that leads to the apparent problem of conflict of duties, and it is by drawing the distinction that we solve the problem, or rather show it to be non-existent. For while an act may well be *prima facie* obligatory in respect of one character and *prima facie* forbidden in virtue of another, it becomes obligatory or forbidden only in virtue of the totality of its ethically relevant characteristics." (Ross, 1939, p. 86)

For example, a doctor treating a terminally ill patient might face a conflict between the duty to save a life and the duty to respect the family's wishes to discontinue treatment. In such cases, Ross advocated for carefully weighing various factors, including the patient's condition, the family's motivations, and the broader social implications, to arrive at the most appropriate moral decision. He emphasized that moral practice requires flexibility and situational judgment rather than rigid adherence to pre-established rules. This process of weighing competing duties demands a high degree of moral sensitivity and rational analysis, allowing individuals to make sound judgments in complex moral contexts.

Moreover, Ross (1939) stressed the importance of continually refining moral judgment through practice. He viewed moral philosophy as dynamic and evolving, capable of being improved through life experiences. If a moral action results in unforeseen negative consequences or new circumstances render previous moral principles inapplicable, individuals should reflect on these outcomes and adjust their moral beliefs accordingly. This iterative process ensures that moral practice remains adaptable and responsive to the complexities of life, enabling individuals to maintain moral flexibility and resilience in an ever-changing environment. Ross's deontological ethics not only offers an intuition-based approach to moral judgment but also emphasizes the importance of balancing conflicting duties in practice and continuously refining one's moral judgment. These perspectives provide valuable guidance for moral education and practice, helping individuals develop the judgment and agency needed to navigate complex moral situations effectively.

In summary, both Wáng Yángmíng and Ross emphasized that morality must extend beyond theoretical discourse and manifest in practical life. For both, the ultimate goal of moral knowledge is to guide behavior, enabling individuals to make correct moral choices and realize the value of morality in everyday life. Wáng Yángmíng's "*unity of knowledge and action*" focuses on the individual's inner moral cultivation and awakening of *liángzhī*, stressing personal practice as a means of moral perfection. In contrast, Ross's moral philosophy emphasizes balancing and prioritizing conflicting duties in specific situations, highlighting the objectivity and universality of moral obligations. Wáng Yángmíng's philosophy is more introspective, relying on the individual's innate moral sense, while Ross's approach leans toward an external framework of principles, emphasizing rational deliberation in practical contexts. In modern society, these philosophies offer complementary approaches: Wáng Yángmíng's "*unity of knowledge and action*" encourages personal moral cultivation and self-discipline, helping individuals internalize moral principles as guiding behaviors. Ross's emphasis on situational judgment provides a practical framework for navigating complex moral dilemmas, enabling individuals to apply moral knowledge flexibly and make reasoned decisions in real-world scenarios. By integrating both approaches, one can develop a robust moral framework that balances personal integrity with practical adaptability, ensuring the effective application of morality in diverse and challenging contexts, it could be explored further.

CONCLUSION

The study of Wáng Yángmíng's and Ross's ideas brings out important lessons from both Eastern and Western philosophy. Wáng Yángmíng believed that knowledge and action are deeply connected. His Neo-Confucian ideas focused on personal growth and moral understanding. He taught that real wisdom comes from combining thought and action in everyday life. His philosophy influenced Chinese thinking, guiding people to improve themselves and live morally. Ross, a philosopher in Western tradition, focused on moral responsibility and how we reason through ethical problems. While he didn't directly connect knowledge and action, his work explored how understanding moral principles can help guide our actions. His ethical theory offers a clear system for making good choices, even in tough situations. Both thinkers demonstrate that knowledge alone is insufficient; it must be translated into action. Their ideas encourage the practical application of knowledge, whether in personal decisions or professional contexts. Looking ahead, we hope that more individuals will explore how these insights can address contemporary challenges and foster dialogue across cultures and perspectives.

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