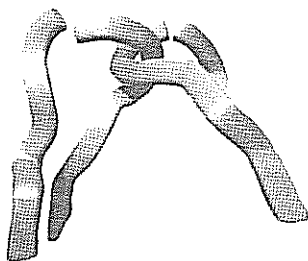




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# ZHI 知 AS UNCEASING DYNAMISM AND PRACTICAL EFFORT :

The Common Root of Knowledge and Action in Wang Yangming and Peter Sloterdijk

(“知”作为无止之动力与实践之努力：从知行同源论王阳明与施洛特狄克的哲学观)

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内容提要：本文之目的，在分析王阳明于《传习录》中对良知一词的概念与语意叙述。并参考近来德国哲学家施洛特狄克为“践行”概念所进行的哲学及知识论重构，为阳明思想之意涵提供有机而统整性的架构，以参与当代哲学背景中之论辩。本文第一部分批判性地检视柯雄文与秦家懿对王阳明知行合一之诠释，指出有别于这些学者以道德知识所进行的诠释，“知”的概念实际上要宽广得多。意指与世界所进行的情境式交往，其中涉及情感、感觉、知性以及伦理要素。在第二部分，将透过对王阳明“心”之虚灵明觉特性之分析，为此观点提供进一步支持。最后，再藉由王阳明“致知”与施洛特狄克“践行”概念之对比，强调后者对践行中分隔、自我省察、去私我、恢复对最高善的持守等阶段的说明，实为王阳明知行合一说之最佳注解。

关键词：王阳明 施洛特狄克 新儒学 修身 良知 比较哲学

In this article I aim at analyzing the conceptual and semantic articulation of the term *zhi* 知 in Wang Yangming's work *Chuanxilu*, providing the hermeneutic framework

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for an organic and comprehensive appreciation of its significance in Wang's thought as well with reference to the radical rethinking of philosophy and epistemology in terms of "exercise" recently offered by German scholar Peter Sloterdijk to the contemporary philosophical debate. In the first section of this work I will critically examine Wang's doctrine of *zhi-xing-he-yi* 知行合一 in the light of the interpretations advanced by scholars expert in Wang's thought like Antonio Cua and Julia Ching. My claim is that in this context the notion of *zhi*, circumscribed by these scholars to the meaning of "moral knowledge" may imply a broader conceptual function as situational engagement with the world that originally involves affective, sensorial, intellectual and ethical factors. In the second section I will try to provide a further foundation to my understanding through an analysis of Wang's perspective on mind (xin 心) as perpetually watchful, lively and dynamic focus. Finally, I will attempt a comparison between Wang Yangming's "effort to extending *liangzhi*" and the general theory of exercise and practicing life elaborated by Peter Sloterdijk, emphasizing how the field of praxis and effort may reveal itself as a hidden root for both knowledge and productive action.

## I. Wang's Doctrine of *Zhi-xing-he-yi*: A Critical Survey

Wang Yangming formulates the doctrine of *zhi-xing-he-yi* 知行合一 (commonly translated as "unity of knowledge and action"<sup>1</sup>) in a dialogue with the disciple Xu Ai, in the first part of *Chuanxilu*<sup>2</sup>. Wang's argument here may be summarized in three points:

*Zhi* and action are one in their original substance, only the selfish wishes may

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1 I have chosen to transliterate the word *zhi* 知 instead of translating it as "knowledge" like most scholars, and in particular the translator of *Chuanxilu*, Wing-Tsit Chan do. In my opinion the semantic spectrum of *zhi* in Wang's work goes far beyond the mere epistemological and theoretical meaning suggested by the word "knowledge", whose usage in Western philosophy may be misleading. In this essay I advocate for a structural rethinking of the word *zhi*, underlining its practical-oriented and ethically involved connotation.

2 For the English translation I used: Wing-tsit Chan (ed. by), *Instructions for practical living and other Neoconfucian writings by Wang Yang-Ming*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1963.

interpose between the knowledge of the good and its implementation, in which case the real meaning of *zhi* and action gets lost.

In their original substance, *zhi* and action merge together in a single act. This spontaneity is immediate like the link between the perception of a beautiful thing and its appreciation, or between the experience and the awareness of pain.

This truth is worth expressing and emphasizing, because among Wang's contemporaries has spread the false belief that *zhi* must precede action. In a further passage, Wang calls this false belief, derived from Zhu Xi's doctrine, an out-and-out moral sickness, since it is not simply a theoretical fault, but a hindrance to the actualization of virtue.

### **1.1 *Zhi-xing-he-yi*: Descriptive Statement or Prescriptive Ideal?**

Some scholars claim that the doctrine of the unity of *zhi-xing-he-yi* has only a prescriptive meaning, that is, that it indicates to us a *telos*, an ideal purpose to achieve. I will here shortly examine the interpretation of two scholars, A.S. Cua and J. Ching.

A.S. Cua, in his essay *The unity of knowledge and action. A study in Wang Yangming's moral psychology*, distinguishes between prospective and retrospective moral knowledge. In the first our acknowledgement of the value of an objective comes prior and lead our action and our commitment to implement it. Since it covers not only intellectual but also affective and volitional aspects, this knowledge is already in itself a sort of action; however, egoistic wishes may divert it from its practical culmination. Retrospective moral knowledge, in contrast, is the personal experience that arises from our involvement in human affairs, the often unreflective awareness of the fulfillment of our action and of our status as moral agents. Cua argues that in the statement, "*zhi* is the direction of action and action is the effort of *zhi*", Wang refers to prospective-anticipatory knowledge alone, whereas in the second statement, "*zhi* is the beginning of action and action the completion of *zhi*", is outlined the process that leads from prospective to retrospective moral knowledge. Cua writes: "The process for Wang is not a temporal process consisting of discrete stages ordered in terms of

before and after but a continuum of prospective moral knowledge through successful efforts eventuating in retrospective moral knowledge” ( Cua 1982: 18 ) . This continuum is indicated by Cua as to be a non-contingent link between two mutually dependent notions. Yang Xiaomei, analyzing this interpretative suggestion of Cua, remarks nonetheless that “such an elucidation does not entail the doctrine of identity of action and knowledge. On the contrary, it suggests a difference between the two: a task and its accomplishment. [...] Realization of prospective knowledge differs from prospective knowledge. Realization of prospective knowledge, i.e., action, can be interrupted by selfish desires, weakness of the will, etc., that is, the acknowledgment of a moral obligation does not guarantee that the obligation will be fulfilled. Action or realization of prospective knowledge in Cua’s interpretation serves as the glue, which brings together prospective and retrospective knowledge. The problem is that the glue is an element different from the things it is intended to bring together, and the glue cannot be dissolved without a trace” ( Yang 2009: 180–181 ) . Moreover, it is to be noticed that there is no textual evidence in *Chuanxilu* of a distinction between two types of *zhi* or of a change in *zhi* after and before the fulfillment of an action. On the contrary, we may find a steady and reiterate emphasis on the oneness and identity of *zhi* and action.

Julia Ching suggests that *zhi-xing-he-yi* has to be read in a prescriptive, not in a descriptive sense. Wang, in this hermeneutical approach, is not dealing with the analysis of a psychological or behavioral process, but instead with the indication of a moral ideal, as embodied in the person of the Sage. Wang’s aim is then to define a universal moral rule: exist such that in you *zhi* and action may be one. This presupposes that *zhi* and action have not a general but only an ethical meaning. “Since for Wang Yangming being and virtue are mutually identical, knowledge” (*chih*) refers primarily to moral knowledge, and ultimately to wisdom, by which one’s life is ordered in a meaningful manner. On the other hand, the word “action” (*hsing*), does not simply designate any movement whatsoever, but only that by which one acts in conformity to his “knowledge of the good”. In other words, just as true knowledge is always knowledge of virtue, true action should always be virtuous action.

“The unity of knowledge and action is primarily a moral ideal rather than a principle of epistemology.” Furthermore, “the perfect unity of moral knowledge and moral action is only a reality in the ideal man, the sage, who acts spontaneously according with his deep moral convictions, which have become for him like second nature ” ( Ching 1976: 66-68 ) . The ideal to pursue is thus the one expressed by Confucius in the *Lunyu*, where he affirms that in mature age he has been able to act accordingly with the will of his heart without violating the law. According to this “restrictive” interpretation, in “*zhi-xing-he-yi*” *zhi* has to coincide with *liangzhi* and action may be directed only towards the good.

Wang however, in defining the pedagogical-prescriptive intent of his doctrine, explains that a wicked thought too is in itself action. He notes that in their learning people of today separate *zhi* and action into two different things. “Therefore when a thought is aroused, although it is evil, they do not stop it because it has not been translated into action. I advocate the unity of *zhi* and action precisely because I want people understand that when a thought is aroused it is already action. If there is anything evil when the thought is aroused, one must overcome the evil thought. One must go to the root and go to the bottom and not allow that evil thought to lie latent in his mind. This is the basic purpose of my doctrine ” ( Chan 1963: 201 ) .

## **I.2 Sensory Knowledge and Moral Knowledge in Wang: An Analogical Relationship**

There are also passages in *Chuanxilu* where Wang seems to claim that cognitive acts insofar they are implied in the process of learning, independently from their moral character, entail and are in itself action. For instance: “To learn archery, one must hold out the bow, fix the arrow to the string, draw the bow, and take aim. To learn writing, one must lay out the paper, take the brush, hold the inkwell, and dip the brush into the ink. In the world, nothing can be considered as learning that does not involve action. Thus the very beginning of learning is already action. [...] To inquire is to learn; it is to act. As there is still doubt, one thinks. To think is to learn; it is to act. As there is still doubt, one sifts. To sift is to learn; it is to act. [...] This is precisely where my humble views differ from

those of later scholars, that in substance mind and principle are a unity and in our effort *zhi* and action advance simultaneously" ( Chan 1963: 100-101 ) . Furthermore, there are the innumerable analogies that Wang draws between moral and sensory knowledge. As we have seen before, Wang argues that the right or wrong of the influences and responses of Heaven, Earth and all things are the substance of mind in the same way that colors are the substance of eyes, or that knowing the good and practicing it are simultaneous acts-like seeing a beautiful color and appreciating it, or smelling a bad odor and feeling repulsion. In one dialogue with his disciples, Wang quotes a Chan parable that becomes a perfect epitome for his doctrine of *zhi-xing-he-yi*:

"Guan Shi asked the Teacher to describe the condition of equilibrium somewhat. The Teacher said, 'I cannot tell you any more than a dumb man can tell you about the bitterness of the bitter melon he has just eaten. If you want to know the bitterness, you have to eat a bitter melon yourself.' At that time Xu Ai was by the side of the Teacher. He said, 'This is exactly a case where true *knowledge* and action are identical.' All the friends present attained a certain enlightenment all at once." ( Chan 1963: 82 )

Nivison indicates that this implies that for Wang Yangming there is no effective difference between perceiving a sensible quality with a sense ( for example, sight ) and "perceiving" a value-quality with the mind ( Nivison 1973: 132 ) . The plausibility of a metaphor lies in the fact that both terms present a similarity or analogical relationship and both are unambiguous examples of the doctrine ( here of oneness of knowledge and action ) . Furthermore, the combination of the two terms should enrich their meaning through the revelation of their kinship. Moral knowledge, which is Wang's main interest, reveals a law akin to that which presides over sensory-empirical knowledge, and particularly over procedural knowledge, meaning the learning of something that cannot be expressed in words but only assimilated through practice.

Wang nevertheless writes that "there is no *zhi* outside *liangzhi*" ( Chan 1963: 150 ) . Do we interpret this statement in the sense that when Wang claims the unity of *zhi* and action only moral *zhi* is concerned, as for example J. Ching does, or that every kind of *zhi* is directly action, insofar it is a specific manifestation of *liangzhi*?

## II. The Everflowing Dynamism of Mind as *Zhi* and Effort

In order to explaining better Wang's conception of *zhi* as structural dynamism of mind (*xin* 心) as principle, it may be helpful to examine in a comparative way Zhu Xi's account about the origin of *zhi* in human mind. The departure point for both thinkers is a passage from the first chapter of *Zhongyong*. This passage plays a pivotal role in Neo-Confucian thought, because it offers the textual anchorage for the development of that genetic analysis of mind that was lacking in early Confucian philosophy, but it was required in order to contrast Buddhist refined and meticulous explanation of the developmental stages of mind. The *Zhongyong* says: "What Heaven imparts to men is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Dao. Cultivating the Dao is called education. The Dao cannot be separated from us for a moment. What can be separated from us is not the Dao. Therefore the superior man is cautious over what he does not see and apprehensive over what he does not hear. There is nothing more visible than what is hidden and nothing more manifest than what is subtle. Therefore the superior man is watchful over himself when he is alone. Before the feeling of pleasure, anger, sorrow and joy are aroused it is called equilibrium (*zhong* 中). When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony (*he* 和)."

### II.1 Zhu Xi's Tripartite Interpretation of Mind

In his "First letter to the Gentlemen of Hunan on *zhong-he*" Zhu Xi emphasizes how difficult and nonetheless crucial the correct hermeneutic rendition of *zhong-he* can be, depicting an important evolution inside his own interpretation. In the beginning Zhu Xi understand this passage in a dyadic way, claiming that the *weifa* 未发 state corresponds to nature, i.e. the Principle (or Great Ultimate) as it manifest itself in human beings, and is therefore structurally quiet and inactive, whereas the *yifa* 已发 stage refers to the emersion of mind as plexus of thoughts and feelings. As Zhu Xi notes, this interpretation revealed itself as unsatisfactory, not primarily for a theoretical reason, but for its outcome in meditative and spiritual life: "Right along, in my discussion and thinking, I have simply considered the



mind to be the state after the feeling are aroused, and in my daily efforts I have also merely considered examining and recognizing the clues [of activities of feelings] as the starting points. Consequently I have neglected the effort of daily self-cultivation, so that the mind is disturbed in many ways and lacks the quality of depth or purity." Striving to correct and purify the mind only in its affective and cognitive response to things, Zhu Xi at the beginning failed to recognize the irreducible bi-dimensional nature of mind. Human mind is a bridge that crosses the boundary between principle and material force and it is the living intersection of *xing* 性 and *qing* 情<sup>1</sup>.

This intuition leads Zhu Xi to a deeper tripartite rendition of the mind. Considered as embodiment of nature, mind in the *weifā* stage is perfectly quiet and inactive, without emotional or cognitive relation to external world. The task of self-cultivation has to be realized here, preserving with "caution and apprehension" this state in which the mind is coextensive to the nature, sitting in meditation, and, with an expression borrowed from Cheng Yi, "holding fast to seriousness *jing* 敬". The passage of *Zhongyong* refers also to a subtle and hidden dimension which can be perceived by the superior man when he is alone. To describe this state Zhu Xi coins the expression *duzhi* 独知 and interpret it as an intermediate condition between the not yet active mind and the state in which the mind, fully involved in the world, reacts to the exterior stimuli with feelings and thoughts. Only here Zhu Xi introduces the word *zhi* 知. Actually, the *duzhi* represents the genesis of *zhi* and action: "Loneliness is the realm of which is unknown to the others and known only by the subject alone (*duzhi*): the subtlest and obscurest actions that have not yet acquired an external form ( 细微之事迹未形 *xi-wei-zhi-shi-ji-wei-xing* ), but their motivation is

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1 Referring to Mou Zongsan's work, Shu-hsien Lu writes: "As prof. Mou Tsung-san pointed out, when Chu Hsi used his scheme of tripartite division into *hsin* ( mind-heart ), *hsing* ( nature ) and *ch'ing* ( feelings ), to interpret Mencius' thought, he was really giving quite a twist of Mencius' philosophy. [...] Lu-Wang's position to hold that mind is principle seems much closer to what Mencius has taught. But Chu Hsi hold that the mind comprises principles, the relation between the two is that of correspondence, as principle is static while the mind is active. Since it is impossible to find the teaching of such a theory in Mencius' thought which implies that principle is the creative source, Prof. Mou feel that although historically Chu Hsi was honored as the orthodoxy, in fact it was a side branch which assumed the position of orthodoxy." ( Shu-hsien Lu, "On Chu Hsi' s understanding of *hsing*", *The Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, pp.145-146. )

still in movement ( 几已动 *ji-yi-dong* ).” This primordial activation of mind is realized in intentions and actions that have already a form, but too small to be perceived by other human beings. Nonetheless, the subject is perfectly aware of them as they are close to the core of his mind, so that “there is nothing more visible and manifest” to him. The influence of the physical nature is already present in the sprouts of *zhi*, so that *zhi* can only emerge for Zhu Xi in intermingling with physical nature. Between this state and the full expression of mind in the world of daily affairs there is not a qualitative, but only a quantitative ( small subtle forms versus big visible forms ) difference.

## II.2 The Unity of Mind as Ceaseless Dynamism of Effort in Wang Yangming

Wang Yangming adopts the expression *duzhi* that Zhu Xi introduced in Confucian discourse, but extends its operation to the pristine state of mind. For him in the *weifu* condition, when mind is one with nature, what is “not-seen” and “not-heard” are the original intentions that are invisible and inaudible for the others, but only privately known. “If people do not exert effort toward what is privately known to them and exert it only toward what is publicly known, this is to act hypocritically [...]. This condition of *duzhi* is the root of sincerity ( *cheng* 诚 ). Hence all thoughts whether good or evil, are genuine. If one step is correct here, all the following steps will be correct, but if one mistake is made here, a hundred mistakes will follow.” ( Chan 1963: 77 ) If the pristine state of coalescence between mind and nature is the calmness prior of *zhi*, devoid of any active and knowing subjectivity, claims Wang Yangming, the risk is that it resembles the state of “samadhi”, the nothingness at the root of reality which for him is the final goal of Buddhist meditation. This is, from Wang’s point of view, a self-contradictory assertion, since “if apprehension is taken separately as appertaining to a situation when things are not privately known, the task will be one of fragmentary and isolated details, and will also be interrupted. [...] If one does not know, who is it that is apprehensive?” ( Chan 1963: 78 ) For Zhu Xi, mind is originally nature only in the sense that mind conforms itself perfectly to nature in its quiet passivity, and then, after activation, “holds fast the

mean” and adopt consciously the principle as measure and model. In both case, principle/nature is an exteriority which mind has to grasp or to conform with and thus without conscious activity, and a fragmentation and interruption is introduced in the ceaseless flow of mind. Asserting that mind is one and the same with principle, entails on the contrary for Wang that *xin/li* 心 / 理 is action from the very beginning, because mind as substance ( nature, *xing* 性 ) and mind as function ( feeling, *qing* 情 ) collapse into each other and mind is an uninterrupted continuous self-manifestation, activity-in-calmness and calmness-in-activity. This doctrine, writes Iso Kern, “is directed against Buddhists, who search for spiritual liberation in a meditative sinking down in the calmness without any activity of feeling and thinking, and retire from social affairs, and against [...] Zhu Xi and his disciples who divide ethical praxis into “caution and apprehension” in the calmness of the *weifafa*, and actions in the realm of *yifafa*” ( Kern 2010: 216 ) . The perpetual activity of mind involves that *duzhi* accompanies mental life from its very beginning, as the task of watching, refining, and rectifying. “Here lies all the spirit and life of many of the efforts of the ancients to make the personal life sincere. Truly, nothing is more visible than the hidden and more manifest than the subtle, and in all places and at all times and from the beginning to the end, this is the only task ( *gongfu* 工夫 )” ( Chan 1963: 78 ) .

From Wang’s hermeneutic torque of Zhu Xi’s rendition of *Zhongyong*, we can infer that *zhi* lies in the core of mind insofar mind is incessant action. In this analysis of mind we can find, from my point of view, the root and the metaphysical foundation of the unity of *zhi* and action. Mind is always in the state of *zhi*, because “From morning to evening, and from youth to old age, if one want to be without thought, that is, not to be conscious ( *zhi* ) of anything, he can’t do so unless he is sound asleep or dead like dry wood or dead ashes” ( Chan 1963: 78 ) . This thoughts and this awareness ( *zhi* ) are never morally neutral, but they are the unceasing task ( *gongfu* ) that constitutes mind. Even in explaining the practice of *jingzuo*, sitting in meditation, Wang stresses how it is not an experience of mental emptiness, but a constant effort to scrutinize thoughts and wipe out selfish desires. Since wiping out selfish desires is at the same time restoring the unceasing

flow of mind ( *liu dong* 流动 ) and allowing the *liangzhi* to shine, *gongfu* reveals itself not only as an ethical but also as a metaphysical generating power: “If a shining mind is always shining, it will always be both active and tranquil. Through this Heaven and Earth operate forever without cease.” ( Chan 1963: 132 )

From these premises it is possible to understand why even sensorial knowledge ( the bitterness of melon ) , affective/emotional knowledge ( the experience of sorrow ) and practical knowledge ( learn archery ) are in itself action and participate of the active nature of mind, since thoughts and perceptions are functions and expressions of *liangzhi*. For example, Wang in his letter in reply to Ouyang De writes: “*Liangzhi* does not come from hearing and seeing, and yet all seeing and hearing are functions of the *liangzhi*. Therefore *liangzhi* is not impeded by seeing and hearing. Nor it is separated from seeing and hearing” ( Chan 1963: 150 ) , and further: “Thinking is the emanation and functioning of *liangzhi*. If one’s thinking is the emanation and functioning of *liangzhi*, whatever he thinks about is the Principle of nature” ( Chan 1963: 152 ) . Precondition of this spontaneous irradiation and realization of *liangzhi* in all the shades of *zhi* is the unity of *gongfu*: “For in one’s daily life, although there is an infinite variety of experience and dealings with others, there is nothing which is not the functioning and operation of *liangzhi*. Without experience and dealing with others, there will be no *liangzhi* to be extended. Therefore the task is single. If one speaks of extending *liangzhi* and seeking *zhi* in seeing and hearing, in his way of putting it he somehow makes them two things” ( Chan 1963: 151 ) . And, in a more laconic way: “In the task of learning, singleness is sincerity, doubleness is falsehood” ( Chan 1963: 154-155 ) . This doubleness is the splitting of substance and function, nature and mind, mind and things. It is that fracture in the core of mind that Wang recognized in Zhu Xi’s partition between *weifa* and *yifa* and which destroys the organic ever-flowing dynamism of the *liangzhi*, the active effort of its extension.

This error produces itself when we search for the principle or substance of the mind outside the mind. The use of the English term “error” is here very close to its Latin etymological root: *errare*, to wander outside the established way or course. In fact, when

we separate the active flow of the mind from its principle we are abandoning the *liangzhi* that “is identical with the Way” ( Chan 1963: 146 ) and unceasingly generating. Wang adopts the expression *liuxing* 流行, course or stream to designate this perpetual activity (*xing* 行) of mind and *zhuo* 着, attachment, to indicate the interruption of this vital self-realization. “When the seven feelings follow their natural course (*liuxing* 流行) they are all function of *liangzhi*”, however, when there is an attachment “they become selfish desires and obscurations to *liangzhi*” ( Chan 1963: 229 ). This attachment to something perceived as external to the mind, or to the mind itself erroneously identified with a subject separated from the world belongs as doubleness to the realm of falsehood (*wei* ), i.e. is an unsubstantial, transient state of obstruction that does not affect the omnipresent clarity of the *liangzhi*: “As soon as there is any attachment, *liangzhi* is naturally aware of it. As it is aware of it, the obscuration will be gone, and we return to its substance.” ( Chan 1963: 229 )

In my opinion, the aporias entailed in our grasping of the equation between “knowledge” and “action” may be revised or solved if we accept the challenge that Wang Yangming issues to our epistemological understanding of *zhi* 知. For Wang, our mind is nature and not merely as the faculty of grasping the principle and preserving itself in a state of non-activation, or following the principle in the state of activation. Mind itself is the activity of the principle, and if not limited by selfish desires, is always in the state of *zhi*, i.e. in situational engagement with the world. Thinking about *zhi* as the act of a subject autonomously constituting and separating from the world that tries to appropriate an objective world means to irreparably lose the dimension of “*zhi*”. *Zhi* is beyond doubleness, it is the flowing state of active manifestation that is prior to the artificial separation of subject and object. *Zhi* is “subjective” in the sense that it implies a personal commitment and involvement in the world, and “objective” insofar as it is the constitution itself of the world as a meaningful, ethically appealing situation. *Zhi* and *gongfu* are the same “wondrous manifestation of *liangzhi*”, the commitment to constantly overcome selfishness and restore the dynamic openness of mind which is the purest and most perfect epitome of the principle.

### III. The Realm of Exercise and Practicing Life: A Comparison between Peter Sloterdijk and Wang Yangming

Many contemporary Western philosophers are challenging the traditional interpretation of philosophy as theoretical and purely rational activity, claiming its practical-oriented and life-changing significance. Among them the arguably most influential are Pierre Hadot, who in *Philosophy as a way of life*<sup>1</sup> reexamines the history of ancient Greek-Roman thought introducing the exegetic proposal of valuing philosophy as “spiritual exercise” that requires effort, training and existential engagement, and Peter Sloterdijk, who in his works *You must change your life*<sup>2</sup>, and *The art of philosophy*<sup>3</sup> develops a general theory of exercise and practice applying it to several fields, from Western philosophical and religious thought to anthropology and history of ideas. In this chapter I will synthesize the main points of Sloterdijk’s interpretative paradigm, comparing it with the results of my previous analysis of Wang Yangming.

#### III.1 Peter Sloterdijk’s Concept of “Exercise” as Effort of De-automatization

The common thread that runs across Peter Sloterdijk’s works is the concept of “exercise”. The semantic constellation organized around this core concept, involving expressions like “practicing life”, “askesis”, “vertical ascent”, aims to disclose and analyze that constant striving for self-perfection through a regulated physical or spiritual training that for Sloterdijk is the hidden root of both knowledge and action and constitutes the foundational act of civilizations. “The crossing from nature to culture and vice versa has always stood wide open. It leads across an easily accessible bridge: the practicing

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- 1 Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris 1987; English trans. *Philosophy as A Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. by Arnold Davidson, Oxford: 1995.
  - 2 Peter Sloterdijk, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern. Über Anthropotechnik*, Frankfurt 2009; English trans. *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, tr. by Wieland Hoban, Cambridge: 2013.
  - 3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Scheintod im Denken*, Berlin 2010; English tr. *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as APractice*, tr. by Karen Margolis, New York: 2012.

life. People have committed themselves to its construction since they came into existence, rather, people only came into existence by applying themselves to the building of said bridge. The human being is the pontifical creature that, from its earliest evolutionary stages, has created tradition-compatible connections between the bridgeheads in the bodily realm and those in cultural programs. From the start, nature and culture are linked by a broad middle ground of embodied practices" ( Sloterdijk 2013: 11 ). Sloterdijk borrows from Karl Jaspers the notion of "axial age", meaning that "step into the universal" ( Sloterdijk 2013: 192 ) that took place in the five great civilization-China, India, Persia, Palestine and Greece - in the period between 800 and 200 BC. Whereas for Jaspers this accelerated progress was triggered by the discovery of the inner space and the emergence of the notions of reason and personality, which for the Western culture can be synthesized in Socrates' motto "Know thyself !" Sloterdijk claims that this caesura was rather produced by the more basic discovery of the psychological mechanics of habits and of the possibility to mould it through practices of self-cultivation. The cultures generated by this discovery are characterized by the subdivision of human behavioral field in two polarized levels of value, like knowledge versus ignorance, or illumination versus blindness, where the first value is an attractor acting from above, a "yardstick for vertical tensions that provides orientation in mental systems" ( Sloterdijk 2013: 13 ). This encourages the secession of an elite of ascetics, literati and practitioners from the commonalities. Sloterdijk remarks that Nietzsche, defining Earth in *The Genealogy of Morals* as the "ascetic planet", where the Greek term *askesis* simply means "exercise" or "training", allows us to "encompass the continuum of advanced civilizations, the three-thousand-year empire of mental exercises, self-trainings, self-elevation and self-lowering-in short the universe of metaphysically coded vertical tension-in an unprecedented synopsis" ( Sloterdijk 2013: 34 ) .

From Sloterdijk's viewpoint, we lose the value and meaning of "exercise" if, like in Western spiritual tradition, we separate the realm of active life (*vita activa*) from that of contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*). Actually, the domain of exercise precedes the bifurcation between knowledge and action, outlining the feature of a performative self-

shaping that, in contrast with the productive work aimed at producing an external object, intensifies and improves the practicing subject itself. In this horizon, the act of knowing, epitomized by Greek philosophy in the *bios theoretikos*, the life exclusively devoted to the progress of thought, is not primarily an intellectual ideal but an ethos of the lucid life. Sloterdijk advances as examples Plato's discovery that man is a being potentially superior to himself and able, through a training of disembodiment and a therapeutics of passions to identify themselves with the Ideas, Cartesian suspension of the vital evidence of feelings, and Husserl's *epoché*, i.e. the exercise of withdrawing from the utilitarian everyday existence and bracketing any involvement and participation in life in the midst of life. Through these and other examples the history of Western philosophy reveals itself not as a merely epistemological quest for truth but rather as a bimillennial acrobatic training of self-purification and self-effacement, imbued with the awareness that "humans are only a mean to the angels they can be if they make an effort" ( Sloterdijk 2012: 75 ). If exercise transcends the caesura between knowledge and action, how can we describe its structural dynamics? For Sloterdijk the inward movement that establishes the realm of inner life is not an intellectual-cognitive act, but the exercise to uproot ourselves from our mechanical habits. The human being is a plexus of passive habits, acquired behavioral disposition and compulsive propensities and the goal of every spiritual, religious, or philosophical practice of self-cultivation is to de-objectify and de-automatize ourselves, appropriating through codified sequences of exercises what dominates us, passions, external circumstances, pervasive desires or social anonymity: "each time, the chance lies in the active present participle: in this form, the activated human is celebrated as one who is autonomously feeling, practicing, and imagining in opposition to the felt, the practiced and the imagined. In this manner, a subject human gradually sets itself apart from the object human [...]" ( Sloterdijk 2013: 197 ) This spiritual and ethical attainment will in turn be embodied in higher habits and re-automatized as a second nature.

The realm of exercise as autopoeitic subjectification is antecedent to any division body/mind. In this existential athleticism the practitioners aim at assimilating and incorporating higher levels of ethical abilities that enable them to execute previously



thought impossible tasks in a spontaneous and effortless way: “whoever has practiced properly overcomes the improbability of good and allows virtue to seem like a second nature. [...] They [the artists of virtue] perform the near-impossible, the best, as if it were something easy, spontaneous and natural that virtually happens of its own accord.” (Sloterdijk 2013: 184)

### III.2 Sloterdijk’s Exercise and Wang’s “Effort of Extending *Liangzhi*”: A Parallelism?

Before analyzing the progressive stages and the effective achievement of exercise in Sloterdijk’s works, we may refer back to Wang Yangming and try to determine in what extent the notion of exercise may find a parallelism in his thought. The attempt to tracing back the dualism knowledge/action to an original performative dynamism of self-cultivation associates both thinkers. The primal epistemological scene depicted by Western philosophy shows a knowing subject, ideally an unbiased observer, in the act of grasping through its perceptive and intellectual categories an object, or a portion of reality separately constituted and partially or totally irreducible, for its material remains, to the subjective field. This abstract reconstruction of our pristine relation with the world is very far from Wang’s perspective and predominant ethical interest. Not only our apprehension of events is imbued with volitional, affective and action-oriented significance, but the quality and adequacy of our responsiveness to the world is determined by our constant effort of wiping off any kind of mental stains and manifesting the brightness and universality of *liangzhi*. The effort of extending *liangzhi* (*zhi liangzhi de gong fu*) can be considered as the auroral intuition of Wang’s teaching and the final synthesis of an entire existence whole heartedly devoted to spiritual quest, political commitment and ethical self-improvement. In a passage of the *Chuanxilu*, explaining the metaphor of refining and grinding rice, Wang outlines the overarching horizon of effort, connecting the performance of every task and duty of scholarly life to specific stages of cultivation of the moral nature. The external behavior and the spiritual enhancement are represented as an indissoluble twofold process put into effect by the effort: “To study extensively, to inquire

accurately, to think carefully, to sift clearly and to practice earnestly are all efforts of refinement for the sake of singleness of mind. As to the rest, to study literature extensively is the effort to be restrained by the rules of propriety, to investigate thing and to extend knowledge are efforts to make the will sincere, to pursue study and inquiry is the effort to honor one's moral nature, and to manifest goodness is the effort to make the personal life sincere" ( Chan 1963: 29-30 ). On the basis of this common reference to moral effort as undergirding structure of human participation in the world, are we legitimized to establish a comparison between Wang's effort of self-realization and Sloterdijk's general theory of practicing life that exceeds their formal resemblance?

### **III.3 The Four Requirement of Exercise in Sloterdijk: A Comparison with Wang's Art of Self-cultivation**

To verify this, it is necessary to recall in a more analytical way the four structural requirement of the exercise in Sloterdijk's exposition, namely the vertical tension, the dynamics of activation of the acquired and inert layers of our experience, the entanglement of body and mind, and the progressive increment in capability through repeated execution, and to trace the correspondence with the art of self-cultivation fostered by Wang Yangming.

Referring to the vertical tension we may wonder how much this directional metaphor is indebted with the dualism between immanence and transcendence that is characteristic of Western culture. If the elective predilection of Sloterdijk for the imagery of verticality, from the mountain to the acrobat, is probably indebted with an agonistic torque in Western consciousness, nevertheless its meaning, the call to mobilization and self-transcendence is easily traceable in several places of the *Chuanxilu*, enabling for example Eske Møllgaard to speak, in his thorough analysis of Wang's essay "Pulling up the root and stopping up the source" of an "intense perfectionist drive of Wang Yangming's discourse" ( Møllgaard 2004: 377 ) calling to a collective counter-movement with respect to the "sinking" of Chinese civilization after Mencius. The impetus to transcend a condition of spiritual inertia and undertake the ascending path to wisdom is

vividly and dramatically emphasized by Wang in these terms: “Here, Gentlemen, all of you must have your minds determined to become sages. At all times and at every moment your effort must be so earnest and strong that ‘Every beating on the body will leave a scar and every slap on the face will fill the palm with blood’. [...] If you while away your time aimlessly, you will be like a piece of dead flesh which feels no pain even if it is struck. [...] When you go home, you will find only your old cunning way of doing things. Will that not be a pity?” ( Chan 1963: 255-256 ) This call to remolding themselves is permeated by a sense of urgency, a verticalization of time, where life is measured by the intensity and depth of the repeated training rather than by the plain, straightforward extension that in the unauthentic, not-realized existence separates birth from death <sup>1</sup>. Sloterdijk underlines this metamorphosis of time in the practicing life: “The adventure of advanced civilizations consists in lifting an existential time out of the cosmic, universally shared time. Only in this framework can one call upon humans to cross over from the even years of being into the dramatic situation of a project time. The acceleration whereby existence frees itself from the inertias of the course of the world is characteristic of the existential time.” ( Sloterdijk 2013: 243 )

Wang’s use of body-related metaphors also is not casual, implying that the wholeness of existence has to be revitalized ( from dead flesh to vital force condensed in blood ) through the effort. The realization of *liangzhi* takes the form of a systematic getting rid of what is inert, non reacting and unresponsive in the habitual stream of everyday existence. This relates to the second aspect of exercise, the conversion from passivity to activity. As we have seen, the uninterrupted dynamization of our existential attitude is embedded in the *élan vital* that characterizes the *liangzhi* both in its psychical and cosmic-poietic dimension. The polar opposite of this ideal condition, the selfish ego, is produced by the fixation on things, habits, empirical certainties. This standstill of the original pulse is an automatization that transmutes

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1 See also Wang’s claim that “In a single day a person experiences the entire course of history” ( Chan 1963: 311 ) .

mind in a thing among things, a tangle of obstinacy, worldly desires and self-centered thoughts. Borrowing from Mencius the designation of sagehood as “the task of always doing something”, Wang specifies that this activity is oriented toward a higher state of awareness and vigilance and even the practice of *jingzuo* has to be accompanied by a sifting close examination of the ceaseless stream of thoughts. As seen above, this activity involves the body-mind as an organic unity, and self-realization is often described through the metaphors of incorporation and embodiment. From a lexical point of view, we may notice that Wang very often uses the expression *tiren* 体认, meaning “personal experience”. This has several implications: the identity between the mind and the heavenly Principle has to be directly experienced, *liangzhi* cannot be realized or clearly grasped but through practical knowledge ( Chan 1963: 58-59 ), and late Confucians had lost awareness of Mengzi’s truth regarding *liangzhi* and *liangneng* because they had not experienced it directly in their hearts, due to their choice instead to pursue a dogmatic and abstract mode of knowledge ( Chan 1963: 68-69 ). Iso Kern claims that *ti* means here the body and all these expressions mean knowledge or comprehension of something through “incorporating” it in our experience. We can translate these expressions as “to experience in our own body”, “to understand in our life”, “to understand something by implementing it in our daily practice” ( Kern 2010: 155 ). Even the apical realization of wise man encompasses the entirety of psychophysical existence, expressing itself as empathic capability to feel the pain of the other creatures as his own, as “forming one body with the universe”.

Remembering the last requirement of Sloterdijk’s “exercise”, we may notice that the constant self-renewal of effort make easier any further execution until the task of extending *liangzhi* flows effortlessly: “When after a long time he has mastered the task, he does not need to exert energy, and without any caution or control the true nature will naturally operate without cease.” ( Chan 1963: 255 ) There is a stepped path that from pupil leads to the Sage. The Sage is like the adult that, having learned to walk, travels effortlessly for thousand *li*, and needs no particular instruction; while the pupil, in

contrast, is like a child who is trying to learn to walk and needs to lean on the wall, getting stronger step by step ( Chan 1963: 180 ) . The point of interest here is that progress in the field of virtue is assimilated to the procedural knowledge, meaning that sort of knowledge that allows us to learn to perform complex operations simply by practicing them. For Wang Yangming the effort that is aimed at surpassing the attrition of habits produces an effective progress-in-being and not only a progress-in-knowing.

### III.4 The Stepped Path of Exercise: from Spiritual Conversion to Anthropocosmic Vision

Sloterdijk, examining a broad range of spiritual, philosophical and mystical paths from different cultures tries to delineate in a synthetic exposition the progressive stages of the practicing life. The first stage is defined by Sloterdijk as “spiritual secessionism”. “All increases of a mental or bodily kind begin with a secession from the ordinary.” ( Sloterdijk 2013: 217 ) The conversion from passivity to activity implies an uprooting from the everyday certainties and the beginning of a spiritual journey. In world literature, we may find various metaphoric rendition of this turn of the whole being that cuts the continuum of the habitual, ordinary reality through an ethical distinction between those who are immersed in the triviality of the earlier life and those who head for a superior sphere of being. The exit of the freed prisoner from Plato’s Cave and the awakening from a state of dream represent two paradigmatic expression of this inner revolution in both Western and Eastern cultures. The splitting between the realm of shadows and the realm of daylight marks the difference between an illusory projection and a stable level of reality saturated with truth, and sometimes the anguished loneliness of the awakened who feels himself unable to recall his fellows to a heightened awareness. In one of his lyrics Wang depicts himself as the only watchful person among a self-oblivious humankind: “The whole world is drowned in sleep / But the lonely man—who is he? —by chance still sober / Cries aloud but cannot stir the others, / who stare at him in great astonishment.”<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned

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1 Quoted in: Julia Ching ( Ching 1976: 235 ) .

discourse on “Pulling up the root and stopping up the source” represents perhaps the most dramatically rhetoric address to his disciples to leave behind a declining world lacerated by greed and selfish ambitions and a false knowledge put into service of the individual eagerness for worldly success. Conversion, stresses Sloterdijk, can be described as a reversal of sight, a reorientation of the whole existence through an inward movement of self-recollection.

This withdrawal of attention from an alienating world to ourselves enables us to discover the unexplored region of the inner being: an enclave where “there is nothing to which I can be indifferent, as I bear responsibility for everything here” ( Sloterdijk 2013: 226 ) . No matter if we denote it as Plato’s noetic psyche, the mind-soul unaffected by the passage of time, as inner citadel like in Medieval mystic, or as transcendental subject outpost of the absolute spirit in the individual like in German Idealism, in any case we can synthesize this capital discovery with the words of St. Augustine: *in interiore homine habitat veritas*, the truth dwells in the inner human being. The world-relinquishment implies a self-acquisition that discloses a vast, inexhaustible space of improvement: “once the outside world has been separated from me and has become distant, I find myself alone and discover myself as a never-ending task” ( Sloterdijk 2013: 227 ) . We may notice here a conceptual and linguistic parallelism with that re-orientation toward *xin* and discovery of *liangzhi* that represented for Wang the alpha and omega of his existence. In a lyric of 1524, Wang condenses for his disciples the meaning of this discovery:

Confucius resides in every man’s heart,  
Hidden by distractions of ears and eyes.  
The real image being now discovered,<sup>1</sup>  
Doubt no longer [your] *liang-chih*.  
[...]  
In every man there is a [mariner’s] compass,

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1 Probable reference to the doctrine of “The original face of Buddha”, introduced in Chan Buddhism through the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, transmitted in Ming Canon of 1440.

His mind-and-heart is the seat of thousand changes.  
Foolishly, I once saw things in reverse:  
Leaves and branches sought I outside.

The soundless, odorless moment of solitary self-knowledge  
Contains the ground of Heaven, Earth and all beings.  
Foolish is he who leaves his inexhaustible treasures,  
With a bowl, moving from door to door, imitating the beggar.<sup>1</sup>

Dwelling in the eccentric position of the inner mind I find in the inner core of myself something that transcends my "little self" and is the measure and foundation of the whole universe. Sloterdijk calls it in a provisional way the "Great Self" or the "Great Other", because in the beginning I perceive it as a witness consciousness that reminds me the perfection which I am striving for. A meticulous work of self-vigilance and scrutiny is required to define and preserve the boundaries of this ideal space from the stains of the wicked desires deriving from my intermingling with the world. Sloterdijk outlines two different ways of dealing with this supreme principle: a constant increase in knowledge and spiritual excellence in order to conform with the model, or a self-emptying and removal of any obstacle or selfish attachment in order to allow the supreme brightness to emerge and manifest in me. There is here a similarity with the bifurcating paths of Zhu Xi's progressive and stepped self-improvement and Wang's self-realization. Sloterdijk claims that this two modalities of exercise are hierarchically distanced, the former being only an intermediate stage and the latter the final attainment.

The climax of the practicing life is the identification with the Great Self and the transmutation of the asymptotic approach to an external model in a restoration of my pristine hidden root: "we could never perfect ourselves without already having a share in perfection; indeed, we could not even want to approach the *summum bonum* were it not already within us as a target image, albeit only darkened and broken.

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1 Quoted in: Julia Ching ( Ching 1976: 242 ).

The purpose of all practice is to break this breaking, to clear the darkening, and to correct the deviation of the perfect into the imperfect [...]. The wise man, then, is not an artist with visions of something new, but rather a conservator in search of the original state. The restoration of a concealed archetype is his passion.” ( Sloterdijk 2013: 251 ) Iso Kern, analyzing the chronological evolution of the concept of *liangzhi* in Wang’s work, claims that after about 1520, we may witness a gradual widening and semantic drift of the term *liangzhi* in Wang’s work ( Kern 2010: 244-249 ) . Adopting Kern’s terminology, it seems useful to consider this change in terms of the “psychological-dispositional” concept of the innate propensity to the good and the “moral-critical” concept of the conscience broadening into the metaphysical dimension. Wang’s sorrow regarding his conviction and the exile, his growing sense of existential vulnerability, and his firm belief that only by getting rid of the fear of death is a man able to accomplish his destiny, lead him to rethink his entire life and the teachings that he has transmitted to his disciples. In this climate of increased sensibility, his ethical doctrine creatively merges with the echoes of his juvenile passage through Buddhism and Daoism, until it flows into a broad anthropocosmic vision, to which Wang often refers using the word “faith” ( *xin* 信 ) . In a letter to his disciple Shouyi in 1520 Wang writes: “For some time now, I have believed that the three words *zhi-liangzhi* are the hidden eye of the true doctrine of the Sages’ school. Before, I doubted that they were exhaustive. But now, since I have been involved in a difficult situation, this term ‘*liangzhi*’ is no longer incomplete. It is like when one on a boat takes the helm. When waves are small or the sea is dead calm all goes as desired. But when you have to face the storm wind and the breaking waves only if you have the helm in your hands you can avoid a shipwreck.”<sup>1</sup> It is not enough for Wang to know that a person possesses inside his or her mind the germ of the inclination to the good, since it may nevertheless be neglected rather than cultivated; or that he or she has a clear conscience, since it is still susceptible to stains from outer or inner

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1 A citation from Iso Kern ( Kern 2010: 238-239 ) .



darkness. From these psychologically and empirically rooted points, Wang moves towards something that transcends everyday experience, something that may confer to the Confucian school an unshakeable certainty in the midst of all the storms of the world and blaze a trail to that not only the young Wang, but also several of his contemporaries looked for in the eternal *Dao* or in the nature of Buddhahood<sup>1</sup>.

It is worth here noting that the stepped path of self-cultivation outlined by Sloterdijk evokes correspondences not only in the Confucian doctrine but also in the other mainstream schools of Chinese philosophy, namely Daoism and Buddhism. The process of withdrawal from the world, declined by Wang in the ethical sphere as removal of the selfish attachments, covers in Sloterdijk a broader range of human behaviors and disposition, and may as well be interpreted as aesthetical and religious secession from the world, including the movement of spiritual return to the root described in the Daoist classics like the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* and the concrete withdrawal from worldly affairs, supported by the doctrine of the deceptive and illusory nature of the samsaric world, of the Buddhist monks. The controversy in Chan Buddhism about the priority of the gradual practice through a meditative path of self-perfection, or the sudden enlightenment and extinction of the illusion of enduring self may provide a parallelism with the two ways of progression in perfection and self-emptying of the soul described by Sloterdijk. The "fasting of the spirit" celebrated in the *Zhuangzi* is an example of the self-emptying techniques of Daoism which culminate in the abandonment of the dualist thought and the perfect embodiment of the Dao. The ultimate fall of the boundaries between *samsara* and *nirvana* in the

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1 Nivison suggests that for Wang the discovery of the eternal essence of the *liangzhi* ( the *liangzhi benti* ) resolved an ethical enigma ( how to adhere to the good even when it is threatened by egoism and the weakness of one's human will ) in a way very similar to Plato's solution to the epistemological enigma. How can I learn something new, asks Plato, if not by remembering perennial Ideas and restoring the perfect knowledge, that was from the beginning already in me? How can I put my trust in the ultimate attainment of good, asks Wang, if not due to the fact that the supreme good lies from the beginning inside each man, bright and unaffected by our weaknesses and faults? See David Nivison, "Moral Decision in Wang Yang-Ming: the Problem of Chinese 'Existentialism'", *Philosophy East and West* 23:1/2, 1973, pp.125-126.

Mahāyāna Buddhism's road to salvation may offer a further example of the spiritual goal described by Sloterdijk as "identification with the Great Other". These concise references are only aimed to emphasize that the above analyzed process of self-cultivation constitutes a commonality shared by the three Chinese majors schools of thought, and to suggest how further comparative studies between Sloterdijk's work and the texts and practices of Daoism and Buddhism may constitute a fruitful and promising field of research.

Following Sloterdijk's reconstruction of the different stages of exercise, we can return now to the point in which the descriptive and prescriptive interpretations of the unity of *zhi* and *xing* merge together, since with Kantian terminology, in Wang's universe the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me are from the very beginning one and the same. The exercise of achieving *liangzhi* in the midst of everyday life by overcoming every egoistic attachment - is not an act separate from *liangzhi*, nor should be thought in terms of some imperfect and decayed embodiment of an eternal reality in man's troubles. *Liangzhi* as a dynamic principle is never an immobile and accomplished idea; it is indeed its act of self-externalization in the seven emotions and in the actions. Its nature is thus one of expansion and perennial self-transcendence. The shining void at the core of the human mind is no different from the shining void that allows everything to arise and to decline. The human power of self-transcendence, of getting rid of the hindrance of ego, is one and the same with the cosmic generative force. The realm of exercise described by Sloterdijk finds in Wang's thought a coherent metaphysical foundation. On balance, with a Confucian background in mind, we can easily realize that *zhi zhi* is not so much a cognitive activity as an approach of self-transformation and self-actualization. For Confucianism in general, including Wang, doing moral behaviors is nothing less than the way leading to metaphysical realm. Moral practice is precisely where the metaphysical world converges with the moral world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for Chang Tzu-li's comment that helped me to develop this interpretation of Confucianism.

## Conclusion: self-actualization as responsiveness and responsibility

To summarize the results of this comparative work, we can affirm that knowing and acting are unified and traced back by both authors to an original dynamism of self-activation. Sloterdijk underlines that knowledge, even understood in the strictest epistemological sense of theoretical life, that is dominant in Western philosophy, is nonetheless a systematic exercise of purification from passions and illusory biases and alignment with the universal which involves not only the abstractive faculty, but the entirety of human existence. We noticed how Wang's effort to extend *liangzhi*, that is the apical point of the unity between *zhi* and action shares many features with Sloterdijk's exercise, namely the consideration of human being as a whole, manifesting itself in volitional, affective, intellectual, bodily activities that simultaneously concur to the task of self-realization; the ethical urgency that permeates its manifestation, producing an existential and temporal condensation and intensification; and the self-reinforcing effectiveness of its repetition; that pedagogically aims to an increasing spontaneity in the identification with the endless dynamism of *liangzhi*. The articulation, proposed by Sloterdijk, of the exercise in the stages of secession, self-scrutiny, emptying of the selfish ego and manifestation of the supreme good as original possession to be restored, may help us, in my opinion, to better analyze the effort of extending *liangzhi* in its multifaceted structure, that not necessarily involves a chronological development, but may contribute to logically reconstruct the ultimate coalescence of subjective effort of extending *liangzhi* and objective dynamism of *liangzhi* itself. The cardinal difference that nevertheless underlies this similarity between exercise and Wang's effort resides, from my point of view, in the ethical character of both concepts. Whereas in Sloterdijk's works ethics is declined as the categorical imperative of changing our lives, that resonates in us as vertical tension toward an individual attainment of perfection, in Wang Yangming the moral appeal to our conscience is always rooted in a social horizon outlined by the interpersonal Confucian value of *ren* 仁. In a passage aforementioned Wang explains that *zhi* is the substance of the intention and for the intention to function, there must be the thing in which it is to function, and the thing is an event. As

examples for “things” or “events” Wang adopts in sequence “serving one’s parents”, “serving one’s ruler”, and “being humane to all people and feeling love toward things” ( Chan 1963: 14 ) . The structural aspect of dynamicity that belongs to *zhi* in its interaction with the world coincides ultimately with the effort to extend and broaden its efficacy in concentric circle from the family to the cosmos. Relational empathy and social responsibility are for Wang the instances and the original disclosures of *zhi*. The actualization and realization of *liangzhi* in which *zhi* culminates is a universal graduated participation and sympathy. The inseparable unity of *zhi* and action reaffirms itself in its original meaning: just as I cannot know the pain if I do not experience it in myself, so *zhi* is a perceptive appropriation of the other, the endless becoming-I of the universe. If the goal of Wang’s exercise is cosmic responsiveness, transparent resonance without any kind of inertia and passivity, this responsiveness is nevertheless, in its highest grade, responsibility, and the reality in which I am embedded is a social network of mutual attentiveness and ethical obligation to the other. Taking into consideration this crucial difference of accent, that leads Wang Yangming to give prominence to the duty towards a socially constituted reality, and Sloterdijk to privilege, coherently with the dominant Western approach, the self-realization of the individual, I believe that the suggestion to consider exercise and practicing life as root and original framework of theory and praxis, can provide us with an interesting, cross-cultural contribution to the correct understanding of Wang’s claim of *zhi-xing-he-yi*.

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