An Existential-Phenomenological Analysis of The Mind-Thing Relation in

Wang Yangming’s Philosophy

Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the Mind-Thing relation in Wang Yangming’s philosophy from an existential-phenomenological perspective. As is well known, a critical step for Wang Yangming in detaching from Zhu Xi’s system is his revision and reinterpretation of the *Great Learning*. Things, in Wang Yangming’s hermeneutics, refer to the objects upon which the subjective intentionality dwells and discloses itself. In light of the resemblances between Wang Yangming’s *yi* and Edmund Husserl’s “intentionality,” this thesis scrutinizes Wang Yangming’s renowned proposition that “nothing exists outside of Mind” and the metaphor of the quiescent flower in the mountain. It further analyzes Wang Yangming’s position on the ontological relation between Mind and Thing “prior to” their synthesis based on the thought of Sartre and Heidegger. Drawing upon the renowned claims of Wang Yangming’s that “Mind is Principle” and “unification of consciousness and action,” this thesis then provides an analysis of the ethical meaning of Wang Yangming’s
Mind-Thing relation, arguing that it can be better understood in light of existentialist notions such as possibility, *ektasis* and action.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Biography of Wang Yangming

In 1492 (the fifth year of Hongzhi 弘治, during the reign of Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗), twenty-one-year-old Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) sat in front of the bamboo in his yard and began a seven-day investigation of their principle in order to achieve sagehood. According to the Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming 年譜, he was inspired by Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) teaching that “of this multitude of things every one has its own exterior, interior, subtlety and roughness, so even grasses and trees have their own utmost principles 眾物必有表裡精粗, 一草一木, 皆涵至理” (Wang 1223). At the end of the investigation, he became ill and disappointedly announced the hopelessness of his becoming a sage in his own lifetime.
However naive his understanding of Zhu Xi’s doctrine was, young Wang Yangming’s attempt to achieve sagehood through the investigation of bamboo was not meaningless at all. His futile attempt to become a sage by exhausting the principle of bamboo per se, on the contrary, revealed a “meaningful question” lurking within Confucianism (Chen 21), albeit in a melodramatic way. In retrospect, it was also a continuation of his childhood aspiration to become a sage, which he initially declared in a conversation with his teacher when he was just twelve years old. His ardent, enthusiastic and even zealous search for the true meaning of life was most vividly manifested in his vacillation among different philosophical and religious doctrines before he finally settled on Confucianism.

Wang Yangming had seriously pursued a variety of teachings and doctrines—military strategy, poetry and literature, Buddhist meditation and ascetic isolation, Daoist cultivation of longevity and immortality, etc. Having come in his early thirties to regret such studies especially of Buddhism and Daoism, Wang Yangming wholeheartedly embraced the Confucian tradition, accompanied by another renowned Confucian, Zhan Ruoshuo 湛若水 (1466-1560). However, at that
Wang Yangming was still beset by several old questions plaguing Neo-Confucianism, including the crucial question about the Mind-Thing relation, which he had failed to resolve a decade earlier under the influence of Zhu Xi’s teaching. Before we delve into the question of Mind-Thing relation, it is worth mentioning that in the mid-Ming Dynasty when Wang Yangming lived, Zhu Xi’s annotations of the *Four Classics* 四書 had already been established as the orthodox teaching for the civil service examination. Therefore Zhu Xi’s thought on this question exerted an indispensable influence on Wang Yangming. Here is what Zhu Xi wrote in his annotation:

The dictum that extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things means that in order to extend my own knowledge to the utmost, I have to delve into things and exhaust their principles. There is no illuminated human mind without intelligence and there is nothing under Heaven without principle. It is only because there are principles left unexhausted that knowledge is not fully extended. That is why at the very beginning of its teaching, the *Great Learning* urges intellectuals to exhaust the principles of all things under Heaven to the utmost, based on the principles one already
knows. When the continuous effort is sufficiently exerted and thus one day all these principles are intertwined as one thread, then knowledge of this multitude of things, their exterior, interior, subtlety and roughness, will be extended to and thus the Mind will achieve the ultimate enlightenment of its own essence and manifestation.

所謂致知在格物者，言欲致吾之知，在即物而窮其理也。蓋人心之靈，莫不有知；而天下之物，莫不有理；惟於理有未窮，故知其有不盡也是以大學始教，必使學者即凡天下之物，莫不因其已知之理而益窮之，以求至乎其極。至於用力之久，而一旦豁然貫通焉，則眾物之表裏精粗無不到，而吾心之全體大用無不明矣。(Zhu 7)

The cultivation of mind or the investigation of things—which was the primordial foundation of Confucianism? This crucial question was also debated by Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139-1192), the latter of whom was considered the precursor to Wang Yangming in “Learning of Mind”心學, during the Southern Song dynasty. Yet their irreconcilable views led to a schism within Neo-Confucianism: Zhu Xi held the view that the acquisition of transcendent principles in objective things was primary, while Lu Jiuyuan held the view that the enlightenment of immanent principle in the subjective mind was primary. Their disagreement
analytically involves the question as to the relation between Mind and Principle: Zhu Xi is reluctant to stipulate the identity of Principle and Mind insofar as the former is transcendent and provides a universal law to which the latter is to conform; Lu Jiuyuan, on the other hand, upholds the identity of Principle and Mind insofar as normatively the latter is the immanent legislator of the former.¹ As Qian Mu concludes, the question of whether Principle is inside Mind or dispersed among Things and the subsequent question of how then to realize Principle had not been satisfactorily resolved by Neo-Confucians before Wang Yangming (Qian 31).

Wang Yangming never gave up pondering these questions. However, despite his passionate proclamation that he would revive sagely learning in his thirties, Wang Yangming was still in the stage of derivative learning, remaining reliant on earlier Confucian thought. The turning point in his philosophical development

¹ With respect to the quintessential difference between them, Carsun Chang thinks that in Zhu Xi’s system mind is strictly divided into the normative realm and naturalistic realm while in Lu Jiuyuan’s system these two realms form a unity (Chang 10); similarly, Julia Ching also points out the difference of opinion between the two regarding whether mind is good in-itself or not (Ching 18-19). Fung Yu-lan claims that the fundamental question is “whether the laws of nature are or are not legislated by the mind or Mind” (Fung 462). Mou Zongsan thinks that it is determined by the different status afforded to mind: for Zhu Xi, mind is a contingent being that can only cognize principle externally, empirically and objectively while for Lu Jiuyuan, mind is an absolute being that can manifest principle internally, transcendentally and subjectively (Mou 130-35).
finally came with his relegation to Longchang, a remote area of the Ming
empire, to serve as the administrator of the post-house there, as punishment for his
outright criticism of the emperor. On his way to Longchang, Wang Yangming was
followed by assassins but fortunately he escaped their plot by feigning his suicide.

His years of difficulty and disgrace at court, thwarted ambitions at sagehood,
constant inquiry into the meaning of existence without discovering a final answer,
and finally his miserable life in a remote area caused tremendous distress for Wang
Yangming, until one day in Longchang, he finally achieved enlightenment.

Although the historical account of this event is imbued with a bit of mysticism, its
content is rather plain: “My essence is absolute,” he discovers, “and my previous
search for principle in external things was mistaken.” (Wang 1228). This was, perhaps, more of a concrete account of his own life
experiences than a rigorous philosophical statement, but it did convey Wang
Yangming’s original insight into the old question that had posed a challenge to
generations of intellectuals before him. This was the turning point that divided
Wang Yangming’s intellectual life into two major stages: before the enlightenment
in Longchang, which we might call the stage of “miscellaneous and derivative studies,” and after, which we might call the stage of “original philosophical construction.”

According to *A History of Ming Confucian Scholars* 明儒學案 written by Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610—1695), the second stage after Longchang enlightenment can be further divided into three phases (Huang 181). In the first phase, following his enlightenment in Longchang, Wang Yangming dedicated himself to verifying his own views based on his reexamination of Confucian classics and a practice of quiescent meditation. His major philosophical claim in this period was the reiteration of “sincerity of intentionality” (*cheng yi* 誠意) in the *Great Learning* 大學 to counterbalance a one-sided emphasis on “investigation of things” (*ge wu* 格物) and thus to accentuate the ethical connotations of the *Great Learning* (Chen 126-27). The initial method he proposed to realize the Principle was primarily quiescent self-cultivation, which is to maintain the unadulterated state of the Original Mind. (Wang Yangming would later regret this stress on quiescent self-cultivation and complement it with constant self-cultivation through things and...
affairs. He would further expound the “unification of consciousness and action” (\textit{zhi\ xing\ he\ yi} 知行合一) in order to eradicate any possible obsession with contemplation and quiescence.

In the second phase, Wang Yangming explicitly proclaimed the doctrine of “innate consciousness” (\textit{liangzhi} 良知). From a historical perspective, the turning point of this transition was his victory in quelling Prince Ning’s rebellion while serving as a regional military governor. Several months of perilous military life and, more critically, vicious rumors and political trials following the rebellion\footnote{Accounts of various slanders and political conflicts can be seen in \textit{Wang Yangming’s Chronological Biography} (1286-87). According to Julia Ching, this victory “initiated the worst trial of his life” in which Wang Yangming was even accused of being the accomplice of the rebel prince and as a result, one of his students involved in the conflict died in prison (Ching 32).}, led to another crisis but also another opportunity for Wang Yangming to practice his own philosophy. When he was fifty years old, as the \textit{Chronological Biography} records it, Wang Yangming began to uphold the doctrine of “realization of innate consciousness” (\textit{zhi\ liangzhi} 致良知) after he finally confirmed that innate consciousness enabled him to “forget misfortunes and detach from (the obsession with) life and death” (\textit{wang\ huan\ nan,\ chu\ sheng\ si} 忘患難,出生死) (Wang 1278).
His method for realizing innate consciousness was to preserve it whether in times of psychological activity or tranquility.

In the third stage, Wang Yangming’s thought came to maturity and full sophistication after he returned his hometown in Zhejiang province. In 1525, Wang Yangming wrote one of his most influential treatises, *Letter to Gu Dongqiao* 答顧東橋書, to propound the “unification of all things as one” (*wan wu yi ti* 萬物一體). In 1527, Wang Yangming dictated the *Inquiry into the Great Learning* 大學問, which was compiled by his disciple Qian Dehong 錢德洪 (1496—1574), as his final interpretation of this Confucian classic. In the same year, Wang Ji 王幾 (1498-1583) and Qian Dehong, Wang Yangming’s two most extraordinary disciples, had a debate over the essence of innate consciousness and the effort to realize it: Wang Ji held the trans-moral perspective that insofar as the essence of Mind as neither good nor evil is already realized, the intentionality, consciousness and things springing from Mind will be absent of good and evil; Qian Dehong held the moral perspective that insofar as the essence of Mind as neither good nor evil must be realized, the intentionality, consciousness and things springing from Mind have to be constant moral struggles
between good and evil (Wang 117, 1307). Wang Yangming affirmed the merits of both sides but in his “Four Dictums” (四句教) proclaimed himself in favor of Qian Dehong’s ethical stance, explaining his view as follows: “Neither good and nor evil is the essence of Mind; either good or evil is the manifestation of intentionality; consciousness of good and evil is innate consciousness; doing good and removing evil is the rectification of things (無善無惡是心之體，有善有惡是意之動，知善知惡是良知，為善去惡是格物)” (118). In 1529, Wang Yangming died during another military mission. He left the world with eight final words—“This mind is illuminating. What else to say? (此心光明，亦復何言)?” (Wang 1324).

**Literature Review**

In assessing Wang Yangming’s position in the history of philosophy, Carsun Chang identifies him as the “most powerful and influential thinker in China” who anticipated both George Berkeley’s esse est percipi and Immanuel Kant’s practical reason (Chang 3, 12, 15). Mou Zongsan considers the Lu-Wang School to be the most authentic and orthodox inheritor for the Confucian tradition, preserving the
true essence—“moral consciousness” (dao de yi shi 道德意識)—of Confucianism (Mou 115—116). Fung Yu-lan points out that Wang Yangming “completed and systematized the teaching of the Mind school” (Fung 506). However, Wang Yangming was not only a scholar of philosophy, but also a philosopher who practiced his own doctrine. His inspiring wisdom as well as his extraordinary passion for authentic life enriches the possibility of human existence. His spirit reflects the ideal image of man envisaged in Confucianism, whose “perfectibility” and “inexhaustible potentiality.” as Wei-ming Tu puts it, comes from “man’s own strength, rather than the mediation of some supernatural agent” (Tu 79).

Wang Yangming’s doctrine is a crucial contribution to studies on “pre-modern” Chinese philosophy. Several central themes and topics stand out among these studies: “innate consciousness” and the “realization of innate consciousness”; the “unification of consciousness and action.” the “unity of all things as one” and so on.

Traditional studies on Wang Yangming from within the Neo-Confucian perspective, by and large, treated the philosophical departure of Wang Yangming from Zhu Xi as a decisive moment that adumbrated the split between the School of Principle
(Cheng–Zhu School) and the School of Mind (Lu–Wang School). The investigation of this split is also a crucial part of modern academic studies of Wang Yangming.

With increasing intellectual exchange between Chinese and Western scholars, these major themes and topics have been put into comparative perspective and analyzed in relation to Western philosophical categories. From my point of view, the tremendous amount of academic literature on Wang Yangming’s philosophy can be divided into two categories: the idealist interpretations and the non-idealist or counter-idealist interpretations.

The idealist interpretations consider Wang Yangming’s philosophy to be the counterpart of Western idealism, or at least close to it. These interpretations are advocated by scholars such as Wing-tsit Chan (1963), Carsun Chang (1955), Fung Yu-lan (1966) and Joseph Needham (1956). These scholars have conducted fruitful comparisons between Wang Yangming and Western idealists such as George Berkeley and Immanuel Kant (transcendental idealism) etc. For instance, Chang believes that Wang Yangming’s assertion that “nothing exists outside of Mind” resonates with Berkeley’s idealist assertion that esse est percipi (Chang 3, 15).
Joseph Needham further argues that Chinese metaphysical idealism climaxed in Wang Yangming’s philosophy and that “he anticipated the idealism of Berkeley by some two hundred years” (Needham 509). Framing the schism between the Cheng-Zhu School and the Lu-Wang School in terms drawn from a Western philosophical context, Fung Yu-lan claims that fundamentally this represents a conflict between “Platonic realism” on the one hand and “Kantian idealism” on the other (Fung 281).

By contrast, the non-idealist or counter-idealist interpretations: the non-idealist interpretations either refuse to treat Wang Yangming’s philosophy in terms of the discourse of idealism versus realism, retaining instead a traditional Chinese philosophical perspective, or bracket the epistemological and logical elements of Wang Yangming’s thought while emphasizing his ethics. The counter-idealist interpretations, meanwhile, explicitly reject the dualism informing idealism with its separation of internal consciousness and external world. Non-idealist and counter-idealist interpretations are advocated by scholars such as Qian Mu (1930), Iki Hiroyuki (1961), Takehiko Okada (1973), Julia Ching (1976), Mou Zongsan

Inside the non-idealist camp, Qian Mu explicitly contends that Wang Yangming’s explanation of the Mind-Thing relation through a corresponding intentionality that links the two surpasses both Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan, and is substantially different from Western idealism (Qian 73-74). Iki Hiroyama’s article provides an extraordinary example of discussing Wang Yangming’s philosophy without invoking the Western paradigm of idealism and realism, especially with regard to the unification of Mind and Thing, external and internal, ego and non-ego, empirical knowledge and a priori moral knowledge. In her monograph on Wang Yangming Julia Ching affirms Qian Mu’s view against the idealist interpretation.\footnote{See Ching 1976, 232n62. In the Chinese version of the book later published in 1987, Ching explains that her refutation of idealist interpretation is due to the “dichotomy of mind and body” (心物二分) introduced by Descartes (233).} Tang Junyi also points out that Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming’s emphasis on the existence of things in consciousness hardly bears any resemblance with Western epistemological idealism (Tang 215-16). Philip J. Ivanhoe conducts a comparison between Wang Yangming and Mencius, focusing chiefly on Confucian thought in an
effort to uncover the “creative and spontaneous aspect of moral life” and “context-sensitive and particularist nature of moral judgment” in Wang Yangming’s philosophy (Ivanhoe 135).

Quite differently, the counter-idealist approach propounds the similarities between Wang Yangming’s philosophy and phenomenological-existentialism: The first scholar to associate Wang Yangming’s philosophy with existentialism is Takehiko Okada, who names Wang Wang Ji’s (one of Wang Yangming’s important disciples) school “the Existential or Realization school.” According to Okada, the Existential school concentrates on the immediate intuition and “cultivation of freedom from goodness.” Although Okada does not provide a theoretical explanation of what he means by “existential,” I think at least two characteristics stand out in his analysis of the Existential school: (1) an emphasis on the existential vitality of the mind and self-realization; (2) a transmoral tendency derived from the notion of nothingness (Okada 139-49). From the ethical perspective, Mou Zongsan makes a path-breaking comparison between Wang Yangming’s philosophy and Soren Kierkegaard’s philosophy according to the tripartite stages that the latter
proposes; Chen Lai presents in his work a comprehensive comparison between
Wang Yangming’s philosophy and the doctrines of Edmund Husserl, Martin
Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Hwa Yol Jung gives a more detailed and direct
comparison between Wang Yangming’s doctrine and “existential phenomenology”
based on an analysis of intentionality, unity of knowledge and action, and so on.

This discussion of idealist and non-idealist interpretations might be to some
extent simplistic—for instance, Wei-ming Tu in his “The Neo-Confucian Concept of
Man” presents Wang Yangming’s philosophy as “dynamic idealism” while also
pointing out the similarity between the “great man” in Wang Yangming’s
philosophy and Heidegger’s Da-sein (Tu 86-87). Nonetheless, it at least facilitates a
general understanding of the variety of approaches to Wang Yangming’s thought.

My own work is in line with the non-idealist and counter-idealist perspectives,
especially the existential-phenomenological one, which has greatly influenced its
arguments and guided its fundamental direction in developing a more
comprehensive explanation of Wang Yangming’s philosophy.

However, this thesis is not a mere recapitulation of arguments made by the
previous studies. Its particular contribution lies in a micro-level analysis of Wang Yangming’s philosophy from the existential-phenomenological perspective in order to support the macro-level conclusion. My work here is mainly grounded on primary sources from both sides to open up a virtual dialogue between Wang Yangming and these Western philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre. I hope that it can provide some new insights into the problem of the Mind-Thing relation in both its ontological and ethical dimensions and avoid the kind of top-down comparison that concentrates merely on empty concepts and slogans at the macro-level.

The Existential-Phenomenological perspective

Why study Wang Yangming’s philosophy from the perspective of phenomenology and existentialism? As the evaluations of Wang Yangming’s life world and intellectual trajectory discussed above demonstrate, his thought is of great importance in the history of philosophy. Therefore I believe a careful analysis of it is bound to yield meaningful insight into Neo-Confucianism as well as pre-modern Chinese philosophy. On the other side, over the course of the last century or more,
phenomenology and existentialism have developed marvelous legacies as two inseparable philosophical movements. As far as I am concerned, there are at least three benefits to studying Wang Yangming’s philosophy from the existential-phenomenological perspective.

First, there is its emphasis on human subjectivity as well as its ontological synthesis with the world that it lives in. Soren Kierkegaard’s emphasis on subjectivity and aversion to the Hegelian philosophical system anticipate the existentialist revolutions in traditional ontology and ethics. Edmund Husserl takes the Cartesian Cogito as his point of departure while initiating the phenomenological credo of “going back to things.” As I will explain later, Husserl’s concept of intentionality is key in bridging Wang Yangming’s philosophy and phenomenology. Martin Heidegger further develops Husserl’s Cogito or transcendental Ego into his concept of Da-sein as a worldly subjectivity that is always being-in-the-world and being-with-others. Jean-Paul Sartre inherits both Husserl and Heidegger’s thoughts on subjectivity while critically developing them into his concept of being-for-itself based on his concept of “nothingness.” All of these thinkers, to some extent,
confronted the similar situation that had troubled Wang Yangming—the lack of existential subjectivity in the foundation of philosophy.

Second, there is its critique and surpassing of both idealism and realism.

Heidegger’s classic critique of idealism and realism suggests that their falsity lies in their separation of the subjective consciousness and the objective world, which forces both sides to take on the impossible task of proving “whether an external world is objectively present or demonstrable” (Heidegger 191-92). In alignment with Heidegger, Sartre also repudiates both realistic and idealistic views of the relation between consciousness and world insofar as he asserts that the former and the latter are inseparably synthesized through the internal negation rather than positing any active-passive relation between two separate existents (Sartre xiii-xiv).

As we will see, Wang Yangming too establishes innate consciousness as the springboard of his whole philosophy and particularly emphasizes the inseparable unity of consciousness and world in his claim that “nothing exists outside of Mind,” which has, I will contend, been misinterpreted as idealism by some scholars.

Third, there is its exposition of nothingness and non-being as existential
concepts. The concepts of nothingness and non-being are intimated in Heidegger’s thought on Da-sein’s potentiality-of-being and *ekstasis* in temporality, and further analyzed in Sartre’s work. However, for existentialists nothingness and non-being are not merely Hegelian antithesis of being. As for Chinese philosophy, Joseph Needham insightfully suggests that its distinctive characteristic is the tendency to “skip the stage of formal logic and go straight to the stage of Hegelian logic” (Needham 478). However, the Neo-Confucian exposition of nothingness, for example, is not logical or metaphysical speculation, but an existential description of concrete experiences. This is especially the case for Wang Yangming, since he consciously incorporates the Buddhist and Daoist concept of “nothingness” into his own philosophy. In this sense, existentialism provides us with a pertinent vantage point to analyze Wang Yangming’s thoughts on nothingness.

**Notes on Translation**

In this article, several terms are translated differently from the standard versions. Before engaging in analysis of Wang Yangming’s philosophy, I think it is
necessary to clarify the rationale behind these translations.

*Liangzhi* 良知—innate consciousness. The standard translation of *liangzhi* is “innate knowledge.” Certainly, this has its own canonical and philosophical ground. Canonically, Wang Yangming borrows this term from Mencius’s axiom that “The ability possessed by men without having been acquired by learning is their intuitive ability, and the knowledge possessed by them without the exercise of thought is their intuitive knowledge” (Legge 350). Originally, *liangzhi* designates the knowledge that is innately bestowed upon human beings by Heaven. However, in Wang Yangming’s philosophy *liangzhi* means more than the knowledge that is to be known; it also means the knowing consciousness. As Carsun Chang explains, the word *liangzhi* combines three meanings—“knowing,” “moral consciousness” and “intuitive knowledge” (Chang 10). My translation of *liangzhi* as “innate consciousness” aims to preserve the sense of “innate knowledge” as the self-consciousness of *liangzhi* which posits itself as its own known object, but also emphasizes the sense of active knowing as a knowing subject. It also demonstrates Wang Yangming’s stipulation that *liangzhi* is ontologically identical to moral
principle as an active manifestation. The translation “innate knowledge,” by contrast, does not accentuate this “knowing” attribute of liangzhi as an active process.

Zhi liangzhi 致良知—realization of innate consciousness. In keeping with the translation of liangzhi as innate knowledge, many scholars translate zhi liangzhi as the “extension of innate knowledge.” However, “extension of knowledge” appears to stress on the quantity or extent of knowledge as an epistemological process, which obscures the ethical connotation of liangzhi as the absolute legislator as well as the perfect manifestation of moral law. “Realization,” by contrast, not only includes the meaning of “extension” insofar as in Wang Yangming’s philosophy zhi liangzhi has to be achieved through the worldly affairs and things, but also hints at the ethical connotation of moral autonomy as an internal process.

Ti 體—essence. Ti is commonly translated as “substance.” My concern with this translation lies not its English meaning, but the meaning it acquires in a Western philosophical context. In his summary of Chang Tung-sun and E.R. Hughes’s explanation of “substance” in Chinese philosophy, Joseph Needham points out that while in Western philosophy “substance” normally refers to a self-enclosed entity
that accords to the principle of identity, in Chinese philosophy *ti* refers to a relational entity that is always “becoming” or “de-becoming” towards something that it is not (Needham 478). I think this is a very inspiring observation. Thus to avoid any confusion in Western context I think it is best to translate *ti* as essence, as in the essence of phenomenoa. In Wang Yangming’s philosophy, essence and its manifestation are not separable in the sense that essence is the essence of manifestation and manifestation is the manifestation of essence; for Wang Yangming, as for the modern phenomenologist, essence does not lie “behind” its phenomenon, but rather is manifested “in” its phenomenon.

*Yong* 用—manifestation. *Yong* in its ordinary Chinese usage means “function,” but the English word “function” does not convey the full meaning of *yong*. In Chinese *yong* refers metaphorically to the disclosure of *ti*, thus *yong* is used as a philosophical term. Therefore I think the word “manifestation” is more appropriate to convey this sense of *yong*.

*Yi* 意—intentionality. Conventionally *yi* is translated as “will,” especially in the canonical phrase “sincerity of the will” found in the *Great Learning*. However, as I
will demonstrate in the second chapter, *yi* in Wang Yangming’s philosophy does not merely refer to the faculty of will or volition, but primarily refers to the ontological synthesis of Mind and Thing manifested in intention. As Hwa Yol Jung claims, “in reference to action and thought, *yi* may then imply practical intention and theoretical intention respectively. *Yi*, that is, consciousness as activity, therefore, is best described as ‘intentionality’ in the phenomenological sense” (Jung 44).

Intentionality can refer to intentionality in volition, cognition or feeling, which I think comes closest to Wang Yangming’s understanding.

**Summary of Argument**

Structurally, the Mind-Thing relation in Wang Yangming’s philosophy is discussed in two dimensions: its ontological dimension and its ethical dimension.

Chapter Two, “The Ontological Question of the Mind-Thing Relation,” concentrates on the relation of the being of Mind and the being of Thing in Wang Yangming’s philosophy. Wang Yangming believes that the being of Mind and the being of Thing are inseparably synthesized through intentionality. His notion of intentionality
shares something in common with Husserl’s notion of intentionality and his understanding of Mind-Thing relation is similar to the noesis-noema relation described in Husserlian phenomenology. Thus we can give a coherent account of Wang Yangming’s radical claim that “nothing exists outside of mind” (xin wai wu wu 心外無物), without, I think, departing from Wang Yangming’s original understanding. Drawing upon Sartre and Heidegger’s criticisms of idealism, I go on to scrutinize Wang Yangming’s position on the relation between being-for-itself and being-in-itself “prior to” their synthesis. The answer to this question brings us to the conclusion that Wang Yangming is not, strictly speaking, an idealist and it also opens the door for our discussion of ethics.

Chapter Three, “The Ethical Question of the Mind-Thing Relation,” switches our focus from ontology to ethics. Our point of departure for the ethical dimension is Wang Yangming’s renowned claim that “Mind is Principle” (xin ji li 心即理). This seemingly idealistic claim can only gain its own legitimacy and consistency under a strictly ethical interpretation—Mind is the principle of thing as the thing in moral action. Moral principle and moral value originate from our innate consciousness as
nothingness. This is parallel to the existentialists’ notions of possibility, potentiality, meaning and value as something lacking and non-being, which can only come into existence through human existence. For Wang Yangming, innate consciousness of value is disclosed in “precaution and apprehension” (jie shen kong ju 戒慎恐懼), but it is an attunement toward Joy (le 樂), which is the original structure of Mind. This disclosure of primordial value entails action-toward-value in an authentic way.

Insofar as existential possibility as moral value is distinct from logical, objective possibility, it necessitates what Wang Yangming upholds as the “unification of consciousness and action.”
Chapter Two: The Ontological Question of the Mind-Thing Relation

The Mind-Thing Synthesis and Intentionality

The Mind-Thing relation is of cardinal importance in Wang Yangming’s philosophy. The intellectual crisis of his early twenties arose, as we saw in Chapter One, from the discrepancy between Mind and Thing—as he said later, “it is as though my mind and the principle of things are two separate things” (然物理吾心終若判而為二也) (Wang 1224). His naïve attempt to become a sage through the investigation of bamboo is emblematic of this crisis: on the one hand, he does not want to give up the authoritative standpoint expounded in the Great Learning that the “investigation of things” is the first step in the process of self-cultivation; on the other hand, he cannot see why his own possibility of becoming a sage must be grounded on knowledge of objective things. To borrow Sartre’s expression “circuit
of selfness”—that is, “the relation of the for-itself with the possible that it is”

(102)—the question here can be seen as why the knowledge of objective things should be the foundation of Wang Yangming’s surpassing the “self” that is an investigator of bamboo towards becoming a “self” that is a sage.

Confronted with this crisis, Wang Yangming looked to his Confucian predecessors, but did not find any of their solutions perfectly satisfying. It was only after his sudden enlightenment in Longchang that Wang Yangming gradually found a way to account for this complex question (Wang 1228). Briefly put, he came to stipulate that Mind is the origin on which everything else is grounded. This bears a fundamental similarity to Husserl’s phenomenological assertion that the consciousness of mind is the “absolute being,” wherein “all other regions of beings are rooted” (Husserl 171), and also to Heidegger’s treating the ontology of Da-sein as the “fundamental ontology, from which alone all other ontologies can originate” (Heidegger 11). Wang Yangming’s establishing of Mind as the primordial being provides a solid ground for his further elucidation of the Mind-Thing relation, which culminates in this observation:
Mind is what presides over the body; intentionality\textsuperscript{4} is what emanates from the mind; consciousness is the essence of intentionality; thing is what intentionality dwells upon.

For instance, if intentionality is directed towards filial piety to parents, then filial piety to parents is a thing; if intentionality is directed towards loyalty to the prince, then loyalty to the prince is a thing; if intentionality is directed towards benevolence to common people and myriad things, then benevolence to common people and myriad things is a thing; if intentionality is directed towards seeing, hearing, speaking and acting, then seeing, hearing, speaking and acting are a thing. That is why I say there is no principle outside of the mind and nothing exists outside of the mind. The axiom that “nothing will exist if intentionality is not sincere” in the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean} and the efforts at “illuminating the illuminated virtues” in the \textit{Great Learning} both refer to the

\textsuperscript{4} Here my translation and later discussion of \textit{yi} is inspired by Jung’s work “Wang Yang-ming and Existential Phenomenology.” According to Jung, “In reference to action and thought, \textit{yi} may then imply practical intention and theoretical intention respectively. \textit{Yi}, that is, consciousness as activity, therefore, is best described as ‘intentionality’ in the phenomenological sense” (Jung 44).
sincerity of intentionality and the way to achieve this sincerity can only be the rectification of things.

身之主宰便是心；心之所發便是意；意之本體便是知；意之所在便是物。如意在於事親，即事親便是一物；意在於事君，即事君便是一物；意在於仁民愛物，即仁民愛物便是一物；意在於視聽言動，即視聽言動便是一物。所以某說無心外之理，無心外之物。《中庸》言『不誠無物』，《大學》『明明德』之功，只是個誠意。誠意之功只是個格物。(Wang 6)

Traditionally this quote from Wang Yangming is discussed in relation to ethics: the most influential interpretation reads this as his critique of heteronomy of the will and assertion of Kantian autonomy of the will (Chen 36), but I will save the analysis of this ethical dimension for Chapter Two. My rationale is that I think there is an ontological dimension underlying Wang Yangming’s words.

There is no doubt that Wang Yangming aims primarily at the construction of ethics rather than ontology. This is intimated not only in his hermeneutical reinterpretation of the canonical notion of “investigation of things” as “rectification of things,” based on the multivalent meanings of the term ge

5 Zhu Xi’s explanation is typically considered to be in contrast to Wang Yangming’s view because he puts “sincerity of the intentionality” after “investigation of things.” Wang Yangming chooses the opposite view and
he raises to explicate ge’s moral meaning. However, that the “rectification of things” is the cornerstone of Wang Yangming’s moral philosophy would be completely incomprehensible if Mind and Thing were not in some way ontologically synthesized. It would be more natural to imagine that insofar as Mind is the absolute being, to be morally autonomous could equally mean to abstain from “external” things. Yet this is quite the opposite of Wang Yangming’s view. What’s more, even though we admit that the examples Wang Yangming raises are imbued with moral value, they still implicitly posit the association of our mind with things—if not, the fact that we can superimpose our moral values on things that are ontologically external to us without an intermediary being would be mysterious. Therefore this ontological relation between Mind and Thing is an indispensable question that needs to be clarified before any ethics can be established.

In light of this fundamental question, we refer back to the text quoted above:

for Wang Yangming intentionality is what emanates from the mind to the thing, but interprets ge wu as “rectification of things.” The gist of this debate is discussed by Wing-tsit Chan in his annotated translation of the Great Learning (Chan 84-85). Mou Zongsan considers the different interpretation of ge wu is the “most evident sign” distinguishing Wang Yangming’s system from Zhu Xi’s system insofar as in the former one, ge wu is deprived of its epistemological meaning and given a metaphysical meaning instead (Mou 26-27).
this does not mean that initially there exists a mind and a thing, separately enclosed
in themselves, which intentionality magically bridges together. Mind and Thing are
ontologically inseparable; this inseparability is manifested in concrete mental
processes such as the objectivating of filial piety to parents as an

“affair-value-complex object.” Certainly, such concrete mental processes can be
reflected in abstraction and thus we can envisage subjectivity and objectivity as two
essentially differentiated regions wherein the analysis of mind, thing, consciousness
and intentionality can take place. However, what we can gain from this abstraction
would be completely nullifies if the ontological unity of subject and object were to
be cancelled in the process. As Wang Yangming indicates, Mind is the source of
intentionality, and consciousness as the essence of intentionality is the manifestation
of Mind.

This consciousness is similar to Husserl’s transcendental consciousness after
phenomenological reduction, which radiates intentionality to the world as a

“consciousness that is always a consciousness of something” (Husserl 234). The

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6 Husserl uses “value-complex” and “affair-complex” to designate the noema that corresponds to the noesis of
“valuing” and “judging” (220). Here I combine these two in order to designate an affair that is imbued with
moral value like the loving (value) treatment of parents (affair).
ontological unity of Mind and Thing is manifested through intentionality. In this sense, Wang Yangming’s exposition of the Mind-Thing relation resembles Husserl’s thoughts on the relation between “noesis” and “noema”—noema is the correlative transcendence of noesis as immanent consciousness. In the example of benevolence towards common people and myriad things, common people and myriad things being treated with benevolence are the correlates of a benevolent intentionality. Husserl designates the noesis-noema relation as “eidetic law,” which “states that there can be no noetic moment without a noematic moment specifically belonging to it” (226). This law is exactly what Wang Yangming attempts to arrive at through his assertion that “Thing is what intentionality dwells upon.”

However, given a detailed analysis of the text, Mind in Wang Yangming’s theory does not appear to be equivalent to intentionality. Rather, it is the esse that grounds intentionality as intentional manifestation of Mind in the world. As Wang Yangming says here, “intentionality is what emanates from the mind” and “consciousness is the essence of intentionality” (Wang 6). Therefore Mind as the primordial consciousness constitutes the ground on which intentionality transcends
“subjectivity” into the world.

Wang Yangming’s analysis here resembles Sartre’s: seeing Husserlian Ego as a kind of transcendence, Sartre identifies the pre-reflective Cogito or non-positional consciousness—the “immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself” (Sartre liii)—as the ground for reflective and positional-consciousness. For Sartre, what underlies intentionality is the being-for-itself as a pure nothingness.

The structure at the basis of intentionality and of selfness is the negation, which is the internal relation of the For-itself to the thing. The For-itself constitutes itself outside in terms of the thing as the negation of that thing; thus its first relation with being-in-itself is negation. (Sartre 123)

Are there any fundamental characteristics that Mind in Wang Yangning’s philosophy and being-for-itself in Sartre’s have in common? In the next two sections we will provide a further analysis, especially of consciousness’s relation to transcendent objects and internal nothingness.
Mind, Quiescent Thing and Horizon

In Wang Yangming’s claim that “nothing exists outside of Mind”, the synthesis of Mind and Thing is not limited to particular mental processes, but extended to the synthesis of consciousness and everything—that is, the whole world. However, this radical claim is doubted even by Wang Yangming’s own advocates. Here is a conversation between Wang Yangming and one of his friends:

Master Yangming travels in the town of Nan and one of his friends asks while pointing to a flower tree in the rock: “Nothing under Heaven exists outside of Mind. However, a flower tree like this blossoms and withers by itself somewhere deep in the mountain, so how is it inside my mind?” Master Yangming says: “When you have not seen this flower, it is quiescent within your mind. When you come and see this flower, this flower is suddenly animated. That is why you know it does not exist outside of your mind.”

先生游南鎮，一友指巖中花樹問曰：「天下無心外之物，如此花樹，在深山中自開自落，於我心亦何相關？」先生曰：「你未看此花時，此花與汝心同歸於寂。你來看此花時，則此花顏色一時明白起來。便知此花不在你的心外。」(Wang 107-108)
For Wang Yangming, a quiescent state of being in consciousness is still being rather than non-being. Certainly to claim that even when his friend does not see the flower, the flower is nonetheless in his mental process in the same way as when he sees it would be not only idealistic but also mysterious. However, Mind here does not designate any particular consciousness but the transcendental consciousness taken universally. In this sense, the transcendental consciousness is open to the world as a whole, so nothing \textit{a priori} exists outside of Mind. It is only after we are situated in the world in a certain spatio-temporal relation that some things become animated and others quiescent according to our particular intentionality. This idea resembles Husserl’s explanation of “the field of potentiality.” As Husserl puts it:

An object existing in itself is never one with which consciousness or the Ego pertaining to consciousness has nothing to do. The physical thing is a thing belonging to the surrounding world even if it be an unseen physical thing, even if it be a really possible, unexperienced but experienceable, or perhaps experienceable, physical thing…It is inherent in the essence that anything whatever which exists in reality but is not yet actually experienced can become given and this means that the thing in question
belongs to the undetermined but determinable horizon of experiential actuality at the
particular time. (107)

Husserl’s explanation perfectly corresponds to Wang Yangming’s example of
the unseen flower—“quiescence” finds its counterpart in Husserl’s notion of “the
undetermined but determinable horizon.” Mind as the transcendental consciousness
transcends itself towards the world as a whole and in this transcending,
intentionality determines its horizon. This horizon of intentionality arises not
because we as human beings have “eyes” but because we import possibility into the
world with our existence.

This leads us to what Sartre illustrates as the “co-presence” of being-for-itself
and being-in-itself: “…the For-itself is presence to all of being-in-itself. Or rather
the presence of the For-itself is what makes being-in-itself exists as a totality” (169).
Sartre considers the present *ekstasis* of being-for-itself to be its presence to all
being-in-itself, so in this inverted perspective, we present ourselves in *ekstasis*
toward the whole world, including the unseen flower. Therefore Mind and Thing are
co-present as an inseparable synthesis. Being quiescent suggests that the unseen
flower does not exist in the mind as an appearance in the way a seen flower does, but it does exist in mind as a potential co-presence with consciousness.

Furthermore, the notion of the “unseen flower” itself can only come into existence through what Sartre calls “double nihilation”: first we have to posit the idea of an unseen flower as something lacking through a nihilation of our reality and then effect a double nihilation of reality in order to posit the flower as something unseen. It is only because we can posit a possible horizon with the flower that we can find that our current horizon lacks the flower. Therefore the “unseen flower” comes into being primordially because of our mind. However, this does not mean that we can conjure the appearance of the unseen flower as something “inherently immanent.” We can conjure the unseen flower through an intentionality of free phantasy, but if we want to perceive the actual flower as it is in the rock, we have to “come and see it”—to objectivate it as an object. In any case, the unseen flower is a transcendence that cannot be reduced to our consciousness of it.
Ontological Relation between the Being of Mind and the Being of Thing

However, if we push our inquiry beyond this concrete synthesis in order to acquire a more thorough understanding of the Mind-Thing relation, a question arises: can the unseen flower exist—being itself as it is—without any consciousness? This is not simply to ask if the unseen flower exists outside of the mind, but more fundamentally if the world comes into being because of the mind. Actually this is also a question that besets Husserl. Husserl believes that objects in themselves are not “self-sufficient” beings, so intentionality as “Ego-ray” animates the transcendence into noema as the correlate of noesis. Husserl’s view is criticized by Sartre as being idealistic and “unfaithful” to his own principles. Sartre’s reason for such criticism is that the transcendent being, as “full positivity,” becomes something passive and relative in the noesis-noema relation that Husserl describes. For Sartre, consciousness—at the heart of which lies nothingness—cannot ontologically ground transcendent beings; this means that our mind cannot ontologically give being to beings, but rather it must transcend itself towards beings as that which it lacks.

Therefore as Sartre claims, consciousness as “being-for-itself” is an “incomplete”
being and it must surpass itself towards “being-in-itself” in order to form a synthesis.

As revealed in some philosophical fragments, Wang Yangming’s answer seems to be closer to Sartre’s than Husserl’s:

Master Yangming says: “The innate consciousness of human being is the innate consciousness of grasses, trees, tiles and stones. Without the innate consciousness of human being, grasses, trees, tiles and stones cannot be what they are. Is this only limited to these things? Without the innate consciousness of human being, even Heaven and Earth cannot be what they are. Heaven, Earth, and myriad things between them, are as a unity with human being. The point at which this unity manifests in its most refined and excellent form is the intelligent and illuminating consciousness of human being…”

先生曰：「人的良知，就是草木瓦石的良知。若草木瓦石無人的良知，不可以為草木瓦石矣。豈惟草木瓦石為然，天地無人的良知，亦不可為天地矣。蓋天地萬物與人原是一體，其發竅之最精處，是人心一點靈明…」(107)

This paragraph is difficult to understand due to its ambiguous expressions. Wang

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7 The translation here borrows the rendering of the same line from Wing-tsit Chan in A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy (685).
Yangming envisages the being of all beings as one being, and in this way he firmly secures the ontological synthesis of Mind and Thing.

The difference between Mind and Thing is that Mind, as consciousness, is the most illuminating part of the whole organism while Things remain its necessary constituent apart from consciousness. When Wang Yangming says that “without the innate consciousness of human being, even Heaven and Earth cannot be what they are,” it seems that he steers in Husserl’s idealistic direction. However, taken as a whole, envisaging everything under Heaven as one being suggests that mere consciousness cannot give being to the whole organism, even though we admit that a conscious organism would be dead or in stupor if we were to purge it of consciousness. Wang Yangming’s words focus primarily on the interdependent relation between consciousness and the world, but we can trace the hint that between the stances of Husserl and Sartre, he might be closer to the latter—that if there were no consciousness at all, the world would not be unified together as it is present in consciousness, but the world would still be “real” as a detotalized positivity. Here is another quote from Wang Yangming to confirm this supposition:
Without my intelligent and illuminating consciousness, Heaven, Earth, ghosts, deities and myriad things cannot exist as they are, while without Heaven, Earth, ghosts, deities and myriad things, my intelligent and illuminating consciousness cannot exist either… The disciple asks again: “Heaven, Earth, ghosts, deities and myriad things, they have been existing since ancient times. Why do they not exist without my intelligent and illuminating consciousness?” Master Yangming responds: “Now if you look at the dead person whose refined and intelligent consciousness is scattered, then where are his Heaven, Earth and myriad things?”

「我的靈明，便是天地鬼神的主宰。天沒有我的靈明，誰去仰他高？地沒有我的靈明，誰去俯他深？鬼神沒有我的靈明，誰去辨他吉兇災祥？天地鬼神萬物離去我的靈明，便沒有天地鬼神萬物了。我的靈明離卻天地，鬼神萬物，亦沒有我的靈明。如此，便是一氣流通的，如何與他間隔得！」又問：「天地鬼神萬物，千古見在，何沒了我的靈明，便俱無了？」

曰：「今看死的人，他這些精靈游散了，他的天地萬物尚在何處？」(124)

The first line refers again to the internal bond between consciousness and world, Mind and Thing. However, the disciple raises a question that is similar to what we are asking now: can being-in-itself still be being without a consciousness to
illuminate it or animate it? Wang Yangming does not give his disciple a direct, theoretical response. Instead, he raises the example of a dead person whose consciousness is gone. As Wang Yangming claims, the dead person’s Heaven, Earth and myriad things no longer exist since the consciousness that once objectivated these things no longer exists.

At first glance, this seems to be in line with Husserl’s assertion that strictly speaking noema is not real, insofar as it must itself appear to the noesis, the absolute consciousness. However, we have to be careful to note that Wang Yangming does not deny his disciple’s view that there is an “objective” world that has existed since ancient times. What he denies is only that the dead person’s world can continue to persist after that person’s consciousness is gone. The pronoun “his” before “Heaven, Earth and myriad things” is crucial to our comprehension of Wang Yangming’s words. In contrast to “his” world that does not exist any more after his death, the worlds that are not “his” still exist as long as the minds with which they form a synthesis exist. The inter-subjective world is always there, as the correlate of a collective consciousness. Wang Yangming neither denies that there has existed a
world since remote ages, nor intimates that the world would be any different to those of us who are alive if a person other than us were to die. Therefore, although Wang Yangming never explicitly states that the world would still exist if there existed no consciousness at all, from the example he raises we can deduce that if all conscious beings were to die, it would be “our” world that would no longer exist rather than that the world per se.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that this does not contradict the aforementioned proposition that “nothing exists outside of Mind.” That the world can exist without any consciousness at all implies that ontologically the world does not come into being because of our consciousness. Being-in-itself, as Sartre demonstrates, is full positivity that is exhausted in its own being. However, the being of beings can only be revealed in the consciousness of Mind. Wang Yangming’s contention is primarily aimed at the synthesis of Mind and Thing rather than the reduction of Thing to Mind.

Here is a quote from Heidegger that sheds light on Wang Yangming’s claim:
However, only as long as Da-sein is, that is, as long as there is the ontic possibility of understanding of being, “is there” being. If Da-sein does not exist, then there “is” no “independent” either, nor is there an “in itself.” (196)

I have compared Wang Yangming’s thoughts on the Mind-Thing relation with those of Husserl and Sartre. For Husserl, this noema-noesis relation is concretely given in the eidetic intuition. Similarly, this worldliness of our being, characterized as “being-in-the-world,” is seen as the basic structure of Da-sein in Heidegger’s existentialism. However, the Mind-Thing relation is still in a veil of mist if we accept it as something concretely given without further inquiry into why it is so.

Sartre tackles this question head on and works out a comprehensive answer based on the concept of Nothingness. Wang Yangming is also renowned for his transforming “Nothingness”, a fundamental concept in Buddhism and Daoism, into a complementary concept of “Being” in Neo-Confucianism. Chen Lai thinks that it was Wang Yangming who finally accomplished both a theoretical and practical “sublation” of Daoist and Buddhist “Nothingness” into Confucianism, a long-lasting process that can be traced to the end of Eastern Han dynasty (241-42). As previously
demonstrated, although Wang Yangming’s Mind-Thing relation corresponds to Husserl’s noesis-noema relation, the former standpoint is in a fundamental way closer to Sartre’s exposition of the relation between being-for-itself and being-in-itself. This prima facie demonstration is further supported by the following comparison between Wang Yangming and Sartre.

Master Yangming says: “Eyes have no essence, so the color of myriad things is their essence. Ears have no essence, so sounds of myriad things is their essence. Noses have no essence, so the odor of myriad things is their essence. Mouths have no essence, so the taste of myriad things is their essence. Minds have no essence, so the right or wrong correspondence with Heaven, Earth and myriad things is their essence.

又曰：「目無體，以萬物之色為體；耳無體，以萬物之聲為體；鼻無體，以萬物之臭為體；口無體，以萬物之味為體；心無體，以天地萬物感應之是非為體。」(108)

These lines seem to be merely reiterating the truism that our perceptions originate from the external world. However, the last line intimates something more than that. It stipulates that the original state of mind is without any essence, namely, that it lacks essence. As a result, the mind has to transcend itself towards the myriad
things and realize its own essence through a correspondence with myriad things on which it also confers the moral value of rightness and wrongness. Whether it is the corresponding appearance of things, or the moral value conferred on things, they are all things lacking in the original state of mind. In other words, because Mind originally lacks its own essence, it is not a self-sufficient being. In order for the mind to found its own being, it has to form a synthesis with myriad things. At this point Wang Yangming’s account of nothingness overlaps with that of Sartre’s:

Human reality is not something which exists first in order afterwards to lack this or that; it exists first as a lack and in immediate, synthetic connection with that it lacks. Thus the pure event by which human reality rises as a presence in the world is apprehended by itself as its own lack. In its coming into existence human reality grasps itself as an incomplete being. (89)

For Sartre human being as being-for-itself imports Nothingness into the world, which means that it can put its own being in question and further in “nihilation.” The ontological structure of being-for-itself is that as a lack it is synthesized with what it lacks. As the a priori Cogito, being For-itself has no essence of its own except as an
empty flow of consciousness. Its incomplete being compels it to reach outside of itself in order to establish itself in the sense that without an “other,” there is no “self.”

As Sartre claims, “Without the world, there is no selfness, no person” (104). This is designated as an “internal negation” between being-in-itself and being-for-itself.

This is a description of Wang Yangming’s Mind-Thing relation down to its core. For Sartre, this original transcending of being-for-itself towards being-in-itself always carries the original value and possibility of being-for-itself to the extent that every transcending already presupposes a being that is beyond the original being. This opens the door for his existential ethics. Similarly, that Mind has no essence of its own likewise paves the way for Wang Yangming’s explication of his own moral philosophy. This leads us to the next chapter.
Chapter Three: The Ethical Question of the Mind-Thing Relation

Mind as Moral Principle

We have demonstrated in the first chapter that for Wang Yangming, Mind and Thing are ontologically synthesized and their relation is concretely manifested in intentionality. With the claim that “nothing exists outside of Mind,” Wang Yangming establishes Mind as the point of departure for sorting out the ontological relation between Mind and Thing and claims that Mind primordially transcends itself towards a world of things and forms a synthesis there. We also determined through our investigation of Wang Yangming’s philosophy that Mind and Thing are fundamentally different kinds of beings insofar as Mind lacks its own essence while Thing discloses itself as a full positivity of being. However, if we revisit Wang Yangming’s sudden enlightenment in Longchang that “the essence of Mind is
absolute,” does this not contradict the claim that “minds have no substance”?

The answer to this question brings us to the ethical dimension of the Mind-Thing relation. As seen previously, Wang Yangming is less sympathetic to the idealist solution that consciousness ontologically causes beings to exist than to the existentialist solution that consciousness reveals beings as “being there.” The former view can be found in Husserl, who attempts to reduce the existence of the trans-phenomenal being to our mere knowledge of such phenomena. However, another of Wang Yangming’s renowned and controversial propositions, building on his sudden enlightenment, is that “Mind is Principle” (xin ji li 心即理). Here are a few lines of conversation between Wang Yangming and his disciple Xu Ai:

Master Yangming says: “Mind is Principle. Is there anything or any principle under Heaven that is outside of Mind?” Ai asks: “For instance, filial piety to our fathers, loyalty to our prince, trustworthiness to our friends, benevolence towards our people: there are many principles that need to be investigated.” Master Yangming sighs and then says: “This kind of doctrine has veiled the truth for such a long time, so how can I enlighten you with a few words? However, I will answer you according to your own
specific questions. For example, in the treatment of our fathers, can we seek out the principle of filial piety in our fathers? In the treatment of our prince, can we seek out the principle of loyalty in our prince? In making friends and governing people, can we seek out the principle of trustworthiness and benevolence in our friends and our people?

All these principles are in our minds. Mind is Principle. This mind, if it is not veiled by selfish desires, is the principle of Heaven without any insufficiency…”

先生曰：「心即理也。天下又有心外之事，心外之理乎？」愛曰：「如事父之孝，事君之忠，交友之信，治民之仁，其間有許多理在，恐亦不可不察。」先生嘆曰：「此說之蔽久矣，豈一語所能悟；今姑就所問者言之。且如事父不成，去父上求箇孝的理；事君不成，去君上求箇忠的理；交友、治民不成，去友上、民上求箇信與仁的理，都只在此心。心即理也，此心無私欲之蔽，即是天理，不須外面添一分。」

This proposition casts more shadows on the conclusions we have so far. At first glance, if we define Principle as the essence of things, then to assert that Mind is Principle amounts to asserting the identity of the mind and the essence of the thing. Thus taking the investigation of bamboo as an example, the physical essence of bamboo—such as that it obeys the law of gravity, or that it is hard and green—is
identical to the consciousness of bamboo that posits it as an objectively present being. Compare this with the claim that “there is no principle outside of Mind”: this seems to reduce the essence of the transcendent object to the immanent consciousness, and thus eliminates the difference between being-for-itself and being-in-itself insofar as our consciousness is the essence of the being-for-itself *simpliciter*.

However, this confusion derives from the vagueness of the word “Principle.” For Wang Yangming, Thing does not refer only to being-in-itself as the simple object we encounter in the world, but more importantly means the thing as “human reality” that our intentionality dwells upon. As Jung points out, “For Wang, ‘thing’ really means ‘affair’ or ‘event’ (shih 事), which primarily suggests the principles of human relations” (Jung 45). Actually this is already intimated in the conversation between Wang and Xu as well as in Wang Yangming’s elucidation of “intentionality” discussed in Chapter Two. He considers “filial piety to parents,” “loyalty to the prince” and “benevolence to common people and myriad things” to be things. “Parents,” “prince” “common people and myriad things”: all of these are things in moral actions.
Herein lies the crucial point in understanding what Wang Yangming means when he says “Mind is Principle”—Mind is the being that confers moral principles upon action by virtue of the fact that it brings such moral values as love, loyalty, benevolence into existence. In this way “Mind is Principle” means not that the essence of being-in-itself is identical to the consciousness of for-itself, but that the moral principle of our intentional action is identical to the consciousness of it. It is for this reason that Julia Ching translates “Mind is Principle” as that “the source of all virtues lies in hsin, in man’s mind-and-heart.” As she explains,

This proposition represents Yangming's attempt to internalize the moral quest, by claiming for the mind-and-heart, the possession of all moral principles, and even by identifying hsin with virtue or the sum total of moral principles. (Ching 57-8)

This claim is fundamentally concerned with the ethical dimension of the Mind-Thing relation. However, it does not mean that the ethical dimension is separable from the ontological one. They are entangled with each other so long as we consider the ethical dimension to be about primordial values, which precede and lay the foundation for ethics as a formal discipline. For Wang Yangming, everything we
encounter, whether it is an object or an affair, is manifested within a corresponding
intentionality, and every intentionality presupposes a value, which is either good or
evil. This is why he reinterprets the “investigation of things” as “rectification of
things.” The latter interpretation brings the ethical question to the fore because it not
only asks “what” or “how,” but also “why” with regard to the things in intentionality.
This “why” has its ontological ground in the being for-itself—as Sartre says, “The
being by which the ‘Why’ comes into being has the right to posit its own ‘Why’ since
it is itself an interrogation, a ‘why’” (619-20). The meaning of being, viz., its ethical
question concerning its own existence, is imported with its own being from the
beginning because it can always interrogate its own existence about its own meaning.
Therefore, the proposition that “Mind is Principle” can only gain its justification in
the ethical dimension with respect to the primordial value of the being for-itself.

Wang Yangming’s emphasis on the ethical dimension is in contrast to
Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of the Mind-Thing relation. Husserl aims
primarily at a description of the Cogito in its thinking and reflecting that takes Ego
as the point of departure. In “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man” written in
his later years, Husserl concludes that transcendental phenomenology is oriented toward the “development of a real method of grasping the fundamental essence of spirit in its intentionalities and consequently of instituting an analysis of spirit with a consistency reaching to the infinite…becoming in this regard a purely theoretical spectator” (Husserl 190). However, Wang Yangming aims primarily at a description of Cogito as the legislator of moral values and the ground for moral actions. The ontological clarification of intentionality is merely an intermediary step for Wang Yangming in revealing the primordial value that lies behind everything we embrace in our consciousness as things in action. This ethical stance is likewise stated in Soren Kierkegaard’s existentialist thoughts: “The actual subjectivity is not the knowing subjectivity, for through knowing he is in the medium of the possible; it is the ethically existing subjectivity” (Kierkegaard 265). This is where our analysis moves from phenomenology to an existentialist exposition of “possibility” and “potentiality.” Here is what Heidegger says about this question:

Existing being-in-the-world as such is disclosed in the for-the-sake-of-which, and we called this disclosedness understanding. In understanding the for-sake-of-which, the
The mode of being of Da-sein as a potentiality of being lies existentially in understanding. Da-sein is not something objectively present which then has as an addition the ability to do something, but is rather primarily being-possible. Da-sein is always what it can be and how it is its possibility. (134)

This for-the-sake-of-which is what is disclosed by our primordial understanding as our potentiality. Therefore behind every possibility there is always a meaning conferred on that possibility by Da-sein. This understanding of meaning corresponds to Wang Yangming’s “innate consciousness” as the primordial source that gives rise to values. Furthermore, Heidegger defines what he calls “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” according to Da-sein’s resoluteness or irresoluteness towards its own potentiality-of-being. This means that the potentiality of Da-sein can only be authentically brought into existence by Da-sein as an individuated self rather than the “they” or the things being-taken-care-of. This is very similar to Wang Yangming’s stance that “Mind is Principle,” which ascertains the identity of Mind and its own value as its own potentiality. Benevolence, loyalty, filial piety,
trustworthiness, etc.: none of these values can originate from the things that Da-sein
is taking care of, such as people, prince, parents and friends. To revisit the example
of investigating bamboo, Mind cannot conjure the essence of bamboo as something
objectively present at will, but Mind determines its own possibility as the action of
investigating bamboo. Only in the latter sense can the proposition that “Mind is
Principle” be valid.

**Nothingness, Possibility and Moral Value**

However, how can Mind or being for-itself, at the heart of which lies
nothingness, be the source of value? For Wang Yangming, it is only on account of
this lacking of essence that Mind is capable of being the legislator of its own moral
principle. Here are a few words regarding this problem:

The emptiness of Innate Consciousness is exactly the Great Void of Heaven. The
nothingness of Innate Consciousness is exactly the formlessness of the Great Void. The
sun, the moon, wind, thunder, mountains, rivers, people and things, all those that have
forms and appearances manifest and interpenetrate within the Great Void and its
formlessness, but can never exist as the obstruction of Heaven. All that the sage does is
act in harmony with his Innate Consciousness so that Heaven, Earth and myriad things
all function and move in his Innate Consciousness. Therefore is there anything that can
exist outside of it to be its obstruction?

良知之虛，便是天之太虛；良知之無，便是太虛之無形。日月風雷山川民物，凡有貌象形
色，皆在太虛無形中發用流行，未嘗作得天的障礙。聖人只是順其良知之發用，天地萬物，
俱在我良知的發用流行中，何嘗又有一物超於良知之外，能作得障礙？(106)

Innate Consciousness is the Great Void, which designates nihility and
nothingness. However, to the extent that it forms a harmonious synthesis with all
beings, including being-in-itself and others as being-for-itself, it bestows universal
harmony upon all beings. Here the image of the sage represents a moral ideal that
resembles what Sartre calls being “in-itself-for-itself” insofar as the saint elevates
himself up to the transcendence of the unobstructed Great Void. Despite all the
metaphysical postulations, at least we can be certain that Innate Consciousness is
nothingness, but as a moral ideal, it forms a synthesis with all beings and confers this
ideal of universal harmony to them. As nothingness, being for-itself initially imports
value into the world insofar as value is posited as a being that is lacking. Therefore
the harmony between sage and world can only come into being through the sage who
actualizes such an ideal.

Parallel to Wang Yangming’s claim, Sartre gives a very illuminating explanation
of the problem concerning nothingness and value:

Value is merely given with the non-thetic translucency of the for-itself, which makes
itself be as the consciousness of being. (95)

To the for-itself being means to make known to oneself what one is by means of a
possibility appearing as a value. Possibility and value belong to the being of the
for-itself. The for-itself is defined ontologically as a lack of being, and possibility
belongs to the for-itself as that which it lacks, in the same way that value haunts the
for-itself as the totality of being which is lacking. (565)

As Sartre states, since for-itself is the sole foundation of its own nothingness,
ontologically possibility and value as a lack or a non-being can only come into
existence through being-for-itself. Being-in-itself can neither have value nor
possibility, nor confer it to other beings. Let's use the example of investigating
bamboo one last time to clarify the crisis that Wang Yangming underwent in his youth: the knowledge of bamboo *per se*, however greatly and precisely it is accumulated, is completely irrelevant to his resolution to be a sage, which is a possibility that belongs to Da-sein itself. Similarly, Heidegger considers that resoluteness attuned with Angst discloses the “ownmost possibility” of Da-sein and that is the only path to authenticity of existence. Da-sein’s resoluteness can only authentically derive from itself, which is why Heidegger says, “the significance of the world disclosed in Angst reveals the nullity of what can be taken care of, that is, the impossibility of projecting oneself upon a potentiality-of-being primarily based upon what is taken care of” (316). Bamboo, as something we take care of, cannot give us any justification for projecting ourselves toward our potentiality of becoming a sage. If we resolve to be a sage, it can only be a value or a moral principle that we ourselves project to be our future *ekstasis*. It is futile in this way to accumulate external knowledge, even that of how to be a sage, without the resolution to become one. The reason for this is that the moral value of being a sage is and can only come into being through us as being-for-itself.
For Heidegger, the authenticity of Da-sein can only be disclosed in “anticipatory resoluteness” in Angst and guilt. This view is inherited by Sartre in a critical way. He preserves Heidegger’s Angst as what he calls “anguish” while omitting the attunement of guilt—“There is ethical anguish when I consider myself in my original relation to values…my freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation” (Sartre 38).

Wang Yangming also preserves the ethical “precaution and apprehension” expounded in the Confucian canon the *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, but on the other hand, he also considers Joy as an authentic attunement of Innate Consciousness.

Joy is the original structure of Innate Consciousness. Although this original Joy is different from joy as one kind of feeling in the seven feelings, the manifestation of the former does not arise outside of the latter.

樂是心之本體,雖不同於七情之樂,而亦不外於七情之樂。(70)

This Joy is considered to be the original essence of Mind toward which ethical precaution and apprehension are oriented. As Chen Lai explains, original Joy refers to an “ontological category” rather than a “psychological one” (78). Quite different
from Heidegger and Sartre, this resoluteness to one’s own authentic existence is a kind of primordial Joy in Wang Yangming’s philosophy. However, Heidegger also expresses a similar view in Being and Time, although his discussion of it is almost so brief as to be neglected:

Nor does anticipatory resoluteness stem from “idealistic” expectations soaring above existence and its possibilities; but also arises from the sober Angst that brings us before our individualized potentiality-of-being, goes the unshakable joy, in its possibility.

(286)

Here Heidegger also points out the “unshakable joy” of one’s authentic existence. Certainly it is to be distinguished from the pleasure and happiness we normally refer to in our inauthentic everyday life. Nonetheless, it resonates with Wang Yangming’s opinion that Joy is the original structure of our Mind.

**The Unification of Consciousness and Action**

How does value come into existence through our being? This question guides us to another crucial ethical claim that Wang Yangming upholds—the “unity of
consciousness and action.” This means that moral values have to be enacted, for otherwise they would be merely a phantasy in the mind without having true efficacy as values. As Wang Yangming puts it:

The most illuminating and delicate part of action is knowledge; the most sincere and solid part of consciousness is action. If someone acts without being illuminated and delicate, then it becomes reckless action. That is exactly what “learning without thinking makes one stray” means; thus we have to point out consciousness. If someone cognizes without being sincere and steadfast, then it becomes fantastical consciousness. That is exactly what “thinking without learning puts one in peril” means; thus we have to point out action. However, originally they are unified as one effort.

行之明覺精察處, 便是知; 知之真切篤實處, 便是行。若行而不能精察明覺, 便是冥行, 便是“學而不思則罔”, 所以必須說個知; 知而不能真切篤實, 便是妄想, 便是“思而不學則殆”, 所以必須說個行; 元來只是一個工夫. (208)

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8 For Jung, this priority of praxis over theoria gives Wang Yangming’s philosophy its existential character—“The philosophy of Wang Yang-ming, grounded in liang-chih, is, in the final analysis, more than a theory of knowledge; it is an ontology of man—man not as the disinterested thinker and spectator but rather primarily as actor and participant. It is thus substantively phenomenological and existential in its stress on liang-chih and the extension of liang-chih (chih-liang-chih). See “Wang Yang-ming and Existential Phenomenology” (Jung 48-49).
The whole argument arrives at the conclusion that consciousness and action are unified in one process, but this means more than the truism that consciousness and action always go hand in hand. The essential problem lies in the fact that consciousness and action as a unity arise from and project towards the self’s possibilities as values. For Wang Yangming, these possibilities are primarily ethical possibilities within the framework and legacy of Confucianism such as the deontic obligations to the prince and family. To bring these moral values into existence entails not merely consciousness of them, but also, in Heidegger’s terms, the “projection” of oneself upon these possibilities. In this way Wang Yangming’s view bears significant similarities to existentialism.

Despite the fact that the practical dimension is ambiguous in Heidegger’s Da-sein, we can still trace it in Heidegger’s discussions of care, existential potentiality and ekstasis. This is what Heidegger thinks about anticipatory resoluteness: “wanting to have a conscience, which we defined as being toward death…brings one without illusion to the resoluteness of ‘acting’” (Heidegger 286). Da-sein has to exist “out of itself” towards its possibilities, which means that it
always has to act in the world with its own facticity. Heidegger explicitly contrasts “possibility as an existential” with possibility as “a model category”: the fundamental difference is that existential possibility is the “most primordial and the ultimate positive ontological determination of Da-sein” while logical possibility is merely something “objectively present” (Heidegger 135). For Wang Yangming, values as possibilities have to be actions from the very beginning of their existence, precisely because they are not something objectively present like bamboo that can be grasped through a mere knowledge of it. The authentic consciousness of value already includes its own action as *ekstasis*, so authentically the possibility-of-being is always a resolute ecstasy. Only in the inauthentic mode, or what Wang Yangming designates as “reckless action” and “fantastical consciousness,” does consciousness separate from its own action.

Sartre pushes the existential exposition of action even further. In his analysis of the unity of end, motive and act, he says:
For as the resolute project toward a change is not distinct from the act, the motive, the act, and the end are all constituted in a single upsurge. Each of these three structures claims the two others as its meaning. (438)

And elsewhere, he says:

Thus human reality does not exist first in order to act later; but for human reality, to be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be. (476)

Action is what defines human existence as human existence. The separation of action from consciousness derives from the dualistic illusion that consciousness can be a wordless entity—thinking, cognizing, reflecting without its own facticity in the world. As long as being for-itself exists in the world, it always acts, even though as a particular possibility, it can act in tranquility and disinterestedness, as for instance in scientific observation. Yet still, it acts as a concrete phenomenon.

Similarly, Wang Yangming postulates that Innate Consciousness as a unity of consciousness and action has to be resolutely maintained whether in times of activity or tranquility—fundamentally there is no time when being for-itself undertakes no action at all. Even in times of tranquility its action is only tranquilized, rather than
entirely eliminated. Therefore meditation as a kind of tranquil action does not take ontological priority over other actions as a way to realize Innate Consciousness, although it has its own merit as a psycho-physical therapy to “quiet down our strayed consciousness” (Wang 144). Innate Consciousness is the sole being that brings moral values into existence, not through a mere consciousness of them as something objectively present, but through action toward these values.

Therefore we finally reach the point that mind is the principle of thing insofar as thing is the thing of action and action is the action of thing. The ethical significance of the Mind-Thing relation is fully disclosed here.
In this thesis, I have analyzed Wang Yangming’s thought from the existential-phenomenological perspective, and attempted to demonstrate three crucial points. First, Wang Yangming is not an idealist insofar as he believes that Mind and Thing are synthesized as a unity through intentionality; his claim that “nothing exists outside of mind” is to emphasize this unity rather than reducing things to the mind or rejecting the existence of inter-subjective world. Second, Wang Yangming’s claim that “Mind is Principle” is primarily an ethical axiom; Mind is the moral principle of things disclosed in moral action; moral principle and moral value originate from the innate consciousness immanent in human being. Third, for Wang Yangming, Mind has no essence, which means that it is nothingness, but it is at the same time the legislator of moral principle concerning good and evil. This last point is particularly complicated and might need further analysis.
In 1527, Wang Yangming elucidated his “Four Dictums” on Tianquan Bridge to his disciples Wang Ji 王幾 and Qian Dehong 錢德洪, in order to settle a disagreement between them:

Neither good and nor evil is the essence of Mind; either good or evil is the manifestation of intentionality; consciousness of good and evil is Innate Consciousness; doing good and annihilating evil is the rectification of things.

無善無惡是心之體，有善有惡是意之動，知善知惡是良知，為善去惡是格物。(118)

This definition of Mind as nothingness gives rise to prolonged debates in later Neo-Confucianism. Mou Zongsan believes that, on the one hand, Wang Yangming maintains the absolute goodness of the Mind that is beyond good and evil, and on the other hand saves Mind from the amoral nothingness by pointing out that it is the essence of the consciousness that is conscious of good and evil. Furthermore, Mou Zongsan compares these two aspects with Kierkegaard’s ethical stage and religious stage, concluding that Wang Yangming establishes an internal synthesis of these two stages (Mou 82-83). Okada holds a similar view with respect to this question, arguing that “one may call Wang Yang-ming’s substance of the mind either the
supreme good or something which is above good and evil” (de Bary 126).

Nothingness not only provides the existential ground for moral consciousness and moral value, but as absolute goodness it also indicates the a priori goodness of our consciousness and intentionality, which can only be corrupted a posteriori. However, unlike Mou Zongsan and Okada, Chen Lai believes that Wang Yangming’s notion of nothingness does not designate the absolute good in ethical sense, but solely the religious stage that is beyond the absolute good (Chen 203-204).

But can we separate the ethical stage from religious stage in Kierkegaard’s ethics? In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs, Kierkegaard further discussed the tripartite division of life stages that was expounded in Stages on Life’s Way. For him, although the ethical stage and the religious stage are distinct from each other insofar as the later has the “object of faith”—namely, God—as its absolute telos, the absolute God-man relationship is and can only be an ethical one such that there is “nothing between him and God except the ethical” (114). The transformative leap from the ethical to the religious does not mean to annihilate the conscience of good and evil insofar as the “only
actuality for someone existing is his own ethical actuality” (Kierkegaard 265) and the “ethical is and remains the highest task set for every human being” (Kierkegaard 126). The essential difference between the ethical and the religious lies in whether God plays the highest part in this ethical play of existence, as the absolute end that arouses infinite passion, guilt, love, interest and humor in human being. If we compare this with Wang Yangming’s notion of innate consciousness, I think they share a crucial similarity: the innate consciousness of Wang Yangming’s ethics and God of Kierkegaard’s ethics are not absolute because they are morally good, but morally good because they are absolute. However, this is not to ignore the distinction between Wang Yangming’s innate consciousness and Kierkegaard’s ethical-religious faith in God. For Wang Yangming this innate consciousness is not merely transcendently beyond us, but also immanent within us as our a priori essence and nature, whereas for Kierkegaard God is eternally a transcendent “another” such that a religious being “differs in turn from an ethicist through being infinitely interested in the actuality of another” beyond “his own actuality” (271).

However, Kierkegaard avoids the question of moral nihilism by positing a
transcendent God beyond good and evil. Wang Yangming, by contrast, attempts not
only to maintain the doctrine of good human nature put forward by Mencius, but
also to incorporate nothingness into his ontology of Mind. If nothingness is a pure
nothingness beyond good and evil, how can it be the ground for the consciousness
that is conscious of good and evil?

The atheist existentialists are also confronted with a similar question: how can
existentialism maintain the freedom of human being but also protect itself from
moral relativism and nihilism? In Being and Time Heidegger expounds the
authenticity of Da-sein disclosed through anticipatory resoluteness in Angst and
Guilt, but his priority was to establish an ontology of Da-sein rather than of an
ethical subjectivity. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre repudiates the bad faith that
tends to reduce being-for-itself to a mere being-in-itself, especially in psychology
and the life-view of the “serious man.” In his apology for existentialism,

“Existentialism and Humanism,” Sartre transforms the Kantian concept of
universalizability from an abstract principle to an existential one, under the
responsibility of which “his choice involves mankind in its entirety” (41); Simone de
Beauvoir carries Sartre’s implicit ideas further in her *Ethics of Ambiguity* with her more thorough exposition. In contrast to Kierkegaard’s faith in God, de Beauvoir claims that “the genuine man will not agree to recognize any foreign absolute” (14). For her, this is to critically inherit from Kant, Fichet and Hegel the understanding that “the source of all values resides in the freedom of man” (17) in the sense that freedom is not assumed by “impersonal universal” man but by “concrete particular man.” This emphasis on ethical subjectivity is very close to Wang Yangming’s stance, for his “innate consciousness” is not a transcendent absolute beyond human beings, but immanent within their minds.

The question that follows then is how to transcend this ethical subjectivity toward others, insofar as existentialist ethics wants to defend itself against egoism and solipsism? For de Beauvoir, “Ethics is the triumph of freedom over facticity” (44). This not only means that one should absolutely preserve one’s freedom, but also that one should recognize and preserve others’ freedom: the treatment of others’ freedom as brute facticity in order to fulfill one’s selfish desires is to make one’s freedom congeal into seriousness, which believes in the absolute value of objective
things such as nation, church, habits and individual pleasures. As de Beauvoir says,

“Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening into the absurdity of facticity” (71) because existentially “the individual is only defined by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others” (156).

This view is also intimated in Wang Yangming’s notion of “unity of all things as one” insofar as ontologically self, other and the world are not separable. I would like to conclude this thesis with a paragraph from Wang Yangming’s *Letter to Gu Dongqiao*, in which he describes the similar ideal of realizing one’s own freedom through others:

The sage’s mind treated Heaven, Earth and all things as one. The sage saw anyone under Heaven bestowed with blood and *qi* as brothers and sons in his own family, without differentiating whether they are interior or exterior, remote or close to his own kin. The sage endeavored to safeguard and nurture every one of them, in order to realize his ideal of all-things-as-one. Originally the mind of everyone under Heaven did not differ from that of the sage’s. However, because they were divided by selfishness
and restrained by material desires, the magnitude of the mind was reduced to pettiness
and the interconnections among minds became obstructed. Everyone cherished the
selfish mind so that some of them even treated their fathers and sons, elder brothers and
younger brothers as enemies. The sage was thus deeply concerned with this. Therefore
he extended his own benevolence of treating all things between Heaven and Earth as
one to educate all in the world, to make everyone capable of overcoming selfishness
and disclosing the veil, to restore the universality of their minds.

夫聖人之心，以天地萬物為一體，其視天下之人，無外內遠近，凡有血氣，皆其昆弟赤子
之親，莫不欲安全而教養之，以遂其萬物一體之念。天下之人心，其始亦非有異于聖人也，
特其間於有我之私，隔於物欲之蔽，大者以小，通者以塞，人各有心，至有視其父子兄弟
如仇醜者。聖人有憂之，是以推其天地萬物一體之仁以教天下，使之皆有以克其私，去其
蔽，以復其心體之同然。(Wang 54)
Glossary

*Chronological Biography of Wang Yangming* 年譜

*Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸

Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗

essence (ti) 體

*Four Classics* 四書

Fours Dictums 四句教

*Great Learning* 大學

Gu Dongqiao 顧東橋

*A History of Ming Confucian Scholars* 明儒學案

Hongzhi 弘治

Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲
Innate Consciousness (*liangzhi*) 意知

*Inquiry into the Great Learning* 大學問

Intentionality (*yi*) 意

investigation of things (*ge wu*) 格物/至物

Learning of Mind (*xin xue*) 心學

Longchang 龍場

Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵

manifestation (*yong*) 用

Mind (*xin*) 心

moral consciousness (*dao de yi shi*) 道德意識

precaution and apprehension (*jie shen kong ju*) 戒慎恐懼

Principle (*li*) 理
Qian Dehong 錢德洪

realization of innate consciousness (zhi liangzhi) 致良知

rectification of things (ge wu) 格物/正物

sincerity of intentionality (cheng yi) 誠意

Thing (wu) 物

unification of consciousness and action (zhi xing he yi) 知行合一

unity of all things as one (wan wu yi ti) 萬物一體

Wang Ji 王幾

Wang Yangming 王陽明

Zhan Ruoshuo 湛若水

Zhu Xi 朱熹
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