Practice by Unpractice: Taizhou Moral Philosophy Reconsidered

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Practice by Unpractice:

Taizhou Moral Philosophy Reconsidered

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Abstract

As followers of Wang Yangming, the Taizhou school places significant emphasis on the *body*, which has led to challenges concerning the potential dissipation of natural desires. Critics argue that Taizhou philosophy, while acknowledging human's natural state, fails to adequately address the existence of evil and tends to overlook the role of deliberate moral practice by idealizing the natural as morally perfect. This article employs the framework of *embodied cognition* to present a novel interpretation of Taizhou moral philosophy and to address critiques regarding its views on evil and moral practice. It explores Taizhou's holistic approach, integrating mind and body, self and others, to offer fresh insights into the balance between deliberation and spontaneity in moral practice. As a comparative and interdisciplinary endeavor, this article bridges Eastern and Western philosophies, connecting moral philosophy with empirical science. It aims to deepen understanding of Taizhou philosophy while highlighting its broader relevance for ethical behavior and moral reasoning in a global context.

Keywords

Moral Knowledge (*liangzhi*), Moral Expertise, Taizhou School, Neo-Confucian Ethics, Embodied Cognition, Moral Psychology

I. Introduction

The Great Ming philosopher Wang Yangming (Shouren, 1472-1529) revitalized the School of Mind with a profound focus on certain forms of mental exercise, such as correcting one's own thoughts. In contrast, his Taizhou followers expanded on his teachings by emphasizing the body as a foundational component in moral practice. This shift from mind to body does not enclose a theoretical contradiction, instead, it is an elaboration that sought to integrate Wang Yangming's insights with a more embodied approach to morality. In fact, there is a substantial body of existing work that explores the bodily dimension within Wang Yangming's philosophy and, more broadly, within Confucian thought. As Chen Lisheng points out, the body in Neo-Confucianism serves as an aperture (*qiao* 竅) that connects the inner mental state with the external world. This underscores the Confucian view that subjectivity is always embedded and manifested within the body (Chen 2008, 21-23). Chen (2004) also notes that the bodily metaphors in Wang's writings reveal a rich interpretation of the concept of the body, particularly on how its perceptual aspects are linked to the realization of the ideal self. Thus, the Taizhou school's emphasis on the body does not contradict Wang's focus on the mind but should be seen as a well-founded development of his philosophy. The Taizhou philosophers advocated for a holistic approach that integrates the mind and body, thereby connecting the self with others more profoundly. However, despite this integration, the practices and doctrines of the Taizhou philosophers have faced theoretical challenges, particularly criticisms that their emphasis on the body could lead to the dissipation of natural desires (蕩越).

Luo Jinxi (Rufang, 1515-1588), a prominent figure among the Taizhou philosophers, poetically expressed their integrated view: "In every act of lifting our heads and glancing with our eyes, the entirety of moral knowledge unfolds indivisibly; in every spoken word and utterance, we express the subtleties of this moral knowledge" (Luo 2007, 203). This statement illustrates how Taizhou

philosophers believed that moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) was not merely a mental exercise, but also manifested through physical actions and everyday behaviors. A founding scholar of the Taizhou school, Wang Xinzhai suggested a more radical and seemingly optimistic view of humanity, stating that "every person we meet on the streets is a sage" (Wang 1992, 116). Together, these philosophies affirm the moral and heavenly significance inherent in the body, our everyday lives, and by extension the essence of human nature. A pressing concern with this moral framework is the inherent difficulty in distinguishing moral and immoral actions in our lives. For instance, while we recognize that young children exhibit an innate capacity to connect with their parents, they also sometimes engage in conflicts with peers that can be somewhat violent. We often instinctively express disgust towards those who act violently, a reaction that can be seen as a moral sense that distinguishes right from wrong; however, that doesn't mean that our intuitive response system is infallible. At times, our immediate feelings of disgust towards individuals of different race or gender can lead to discriminatory behaviors that are fundamentally immoral. Mou Zongsan (2003a), drawing upon Liu Zongzhou's critical viewpoints, concludes that adhering to the style of Taizhou philosophy might mistakenly lead to the unbridled indulgence of emotions and feelings (情識而肆). Chen Lai (2004) also complains that Taizhou philosophy blurs the line between moral knowledge and natural impulse, and is thus prone to drifting into a state of unrestrained laxity. These challenges are perhaps best exemplified by the fact that in the *Scholarly Records of Ming Confucians*, the Taizhou branch is notably not classified under the Wang School. This categorization underscores its perceived deviation from the core doctrines of Wang Yangming's philosophy.

This article aims to shed light on the philosophical insights of Taizhou moral philosophy and address common criticisms concerning its approach to the problem of evil and moral practice (*gongfu* 工夫). I will specifically focus on Luo Jinxi, drawing on his extensive contributions to explore these

themes. Since Taizhou philosophy emphasizes the role of the body significantly, I will integrate ideas from *embodied cognition*, which offers valuable insights into how the body shapes human cognition, including moral cognition. At first glance, it might appear that a significant portion of this article seeks to undermine the role of reflection and/or rational thinking in moral cultivation. It is crucial to clarify, however, that this interpretation does not reflect the paper's intention. More precisely, Taizhou philosophy *only* opposes overthinking, but not the act of thinking itself. As explored in detail in the main discussion, Taizhou philosophers advocate for a harmonious balance between spontaneity and deliberate thinking. Paradoxically, their philosophical insights could be characterized as *thinking in an unthinking way*, thus illuminating the theme of this article: *practice by unpractice*.

The structure of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 interprets Taizhou philosophy through the lens of embodied cognition, exploring its philosophical implications. Section 3 tackles the challenges facing the embodied interpretation of Taizhou philosophy and defends it by clarifying its perspectives on evil and *Gongfu* practices. The concluding remarks will summarize the key points discussed in this article.

II. Embodied Ethics in Taizhou Philosophy

According to Mou Zongsan (2003b, 6-8), Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism primarily centers on the study of heart-nature (心性之學), emphasizing the heart-mind and human nature as its core focuses. This is particularly evident in Wang Yangming's school of heart-mind (心學), where the heart-mind serves as the foundation for moral practice. This approach posits that self-cultivation is revolving around the heart-mind, aimed at achieving an ideal mental state. Key practices in this tradition include reflexive observation (反觀), introspection (內省), seeking the lost mind (求放

心), preserving the mind (存心), correcting the mind (正心), examining the mind (省察), and the awakening of the mind (心悟), among others. However, in the earnest pursuit of the mind as the moral foundation, there lies a risk of becoming excessively enamored with the mind's *bright vision* (*guangjing* 光景). Taizhou philosopher Luo Jinxi highlights this peril, stating:

> Little do people know that when Heaven and Earth created humans, they were originally a mass of spiritual thing, capable of myriad sensations and responses, yet the root origins are elusive. In a state of total vagueness and obscurity, without name or form, even the very idea of "heart-mind" is but a forced construct. Later generations fail to realize this; hence, from this arises a thought, then a perception, revealing a *bright vision* (光景). They then believe that their heart-mind truly has such a substance, that its essence truly shines brightly, is truly clear and tranquil, and is truly comfortable and unconfined. They do not realize that such a *bright vision* originally arises from delusion and will also perish with it. When it comes to dealing with things and interacting with the world, they still use the heart-mind that is naturally spiritual and obscure. The heart-mind is fully engaged in taking charge of matters for them, but they resent it for not displaying a *bright vision* or form. Turning back, they only contemplate the previous state of their heart, even wishing to grasp it for a lifetime, thinking it to be pure and unceasing, hoping to manifest spiritual powers, thinking it to be a grand heavenly light. The harder they strive, the further they stray from their heart-mind (Luo 2007, 270).

According to Luo, the moral heart-mind inherently possesses the capability to engage with the world and handle everyday ethical situations. This heart-mind operates in a vague and obscure manner, yet is capable of manifesting moral and spiritual insights. However, dissatisfaction with its elusive nature leads people to reflectively search for and strive to grasp a more tangible vision or

form of the heart-mind. They fail to recognize that the very concept of the heart-mind is a contrived construct. Consequently, the more they strive to attain this vision, the more they drift away from the true essence of the heart-mind. In this context, Luo metaphorically advocates for *breaking the bright vision* (破除光景) in his moral teachings, emphasizing that one should not become enamored with visions of the heart-mind but rather allow the heart-mind itself to naturally manifest in our existential lives. This concept is eloquently metaphorized by Luo (2007, 62) as, "untie the moorings, release the boat, and with favorable wind, set the oars (解纜放船，順風張棹)."

Turning our attention to modern philosophical insights, we discover parallels in Hubert Dreyfus's work. In *Skillful Coping*, Dreyfus advocates for prioritizing the paradigm of skillful coping over deliberate action to better comprehend the nature of our everyday lives. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on mental deliberation, he observes that human actions tend to spontaneously interact with the environment through bodily engagement. Dreyfus characterizes *skillful coping* as an approach that illuminates "an analysis of the way man's skillful bodily activity as he works to satisfy his needs generates the human world," thus proposing a major "alternative conception of man and his ability to behave intelligently" (Dreyfus 2007, 3). Within this framework, Dreyfus notes that mindedness and thought are the "enemy" to our expert embodied coping. While we can step back and reflect on our actions, such reflection disrupts our natural, ongoing coping at that moment. An actor, for instance, might ponder on their acting methods and theories, but the more they or the audience are aware of the "acting," the further they are from peak performance. Therefore, even if reflection occurs occasionally, it is crucial to abandon deliberation and re-engage fully and spontaneously in the activity; only in a nonconceptual, non-minded state can one achieve true expertise and optimal performance (Dreyfus 2007, 355). This principle also applies to the Confucian understanding of moral expertise. The true knowledge of the moral self is not about

perceiving it as an objective entity, even in its most illuminated form. Instead, it is about allowing it to shine forth naturally, manifesting through our direct, bodily engagement with the world.

According to the embodied perspective, the mind-body-world connection is viewed as a single, holistic system. Insights from the Taizhou school align well with this perspective, particularly in their emphasis on *finding peace in the body* (安身) as a core principle (Huang 1985, 711). Unlike other Confucian thinkers who primarily focus on the heart-mind, Taizhou philosophers emphasize the *body* (*shen* 身), which is mutually foundational with the family (*jia* 家), the state (*guo* 國), and the world (*tianxia* 天下). Luo (2007, 288) articulates this concept clearly: "The body is not merely a body, as the heart-mind enlivens it; the heart-mind is not merely a heart-mind, as the body wonderfully substantiates it." This highlights the inseparable nature of the heart-mind and the body. In his statement, "in combining *seeing, hearing, speaking, acting,* and *thinking* (視聽言動思兼舉), one truly completes the whole heart-mind," Luo reminds us that to fully realize the heart-mind, one should not only focus on the function of thinking but also on an integrated process involving bodily actions (Luo 2007, 43). Furthermore, Luo (2007, 43) highlights the interconnectedness of the individual's body with their family — parents, siblings, and spouse — stating, "from where does my body originate? Is it not rooted in my parents, connected with my siblings, and accompanied by my spouse." He implies that the realization of benevolence must involve enhancing these interpersonal relationships. Luo (2007, 200) also observes that "the body does not exist independently but is completed by other things. Conversely, things do not exist independently but gain their significance through the active participation of individuals." This mutual interdependence suggests that the active body and its surrounding entities are reciprocally influential and structurally interwoven. Clearly, the concept of the heart-mind is not confined to an inner mental state; instead, it seamlessly coexists with the body and myriad things, and should therefore be regarded as a holistic

mind-body-world system. Drawing on Heideggerian terminology, we might suggest that the Taizhou philosophers embrace the concept of *mind-in-the-body*, which further evolves into *body-in-the-world*, ultimately culminating in a holistic notion of the *self-in-the-world*. Building upon this holistic perspective, Luo (2007, 340) insightfully redefines the heart-mind as the *virtue of creativity* (生德), moving beyond its traditional conception as merely a reflective faculty. He presents a novel perspective, suggesting, "to aptly describe the heart-mind, it is more fitting to substitute it with the notion of *creativity* (*sheng* 生)." According to Luo, the heart-mind primarily functions as a creative process that connects with others and fosters their well-being; its essence, therefore, lies not in reflective thinking but in creative engagement. It is important to note that by defining the essence of the heart-mind as the virtue of creativity, Luo is also emphasizing its metaphysical dimension. In this context, when he unifies seeing, hearing, speaking, acting, and thinking, Luo is not adopting a naturalistic standpoint that reduces the heart-mind to mere material or physical existence. Instead, he elevates seeing, hearing, speaking, and acting to a metaphysical level, suggesting that all these human activities may carry "heavenly" significance in our ethical lives.

For Taizhou and Confucian philosophers, the ideal model of human active engagement and skillful interaction with others and the environment is best exemplified by infants and young children. As Luo notes,

> When I was first born, I was merely an infant. *The heart-mind of an infant* naturally aligns with heavenly pattern-principles. Upon careful observation, its knowledge emerges without deliberation, its ability is uncovered without learning. Indeed, it naturally matches the image of "*acting without action, achieving without striving*." Thus, a sage becomes a sage simply by aligning the present state of *non-thinking* and *non-learning* with the original state of "*non-acting* and *non-striving*." Over time, one naturally becomes a sage who embodies the middle

way without thought or effort. When a newborn infant first cries out after birth, at that moment, it is simply *yearning for her mother's embrace* 愛戀母親懷抱. This yearning, this root of love, is referred to as *benevolence* 仁. Extending this foundational love is the way to be a human, it can be summarized as "benevolence is just being a human, loving one's family is of utmost importance" (Luo 2007, 74).

Dao as the Way does not descend from heaven nor does it emerge from the earth. It is close at hand and easy to perceive. This is evident at the moment a newborn cries out upon birth. Listening to this first *cry*, how urgent it sounds; thinking about this cry, how meaningful it is. In that moment, *the affection of flesh and blood is intense and longing* 骨肉之情，依依戀戀, *seemingly inseparable and cannot find rest even for an instant*. It truly embodies goodness in its inheritance, establishes nature in its completion, and directly reflects the heart of heaven and earth (Luo 2007, 73).

According to Tang Junyi, humans exhibit from infancy a "warm and pure feeling of indistinct unity and inseparability with others (渾然與人無間隔之溫純樸厚之心情)" (Tang 2016, 408). Parents will likely relate to their children's instinctive desire for hugs and close contact—a behavior that typically begins in infancy and often continues into early childhood. Tang suggests that before engaging in reflective rational moral thinking, humans are naturally predisposed to an ethical experience, as evidenced by the innate bonds formed between individuals and the natural urge for connection present since birth. For Confucian scholars, the purpose of reflective moral thinking is to transform barriers between individuals into interconnected unity. These pre-reflective ethical feelings align with what Tang describes as "*beyond-self-aware"* (超自覺) moral feelings, both aiming at reasonable behavior in our ethical lives (Tang 2016, 412-413). For example, a

professional tennis player's spontaneous response to a tennis ball is neither an unconscious reflex nor a deliberate action, but a harmonious blend of aware and beyond-self-aware elements, efficiently addressing the situation without explicit deliberation. This action is deemed "reasonable" in the sense that it effectively handles the challenge of returning the tennis ball to win a point. Similarly, the natural urge for connection combines both aware and beyond-self-aware elements, establishing a foundation for us to successfully develop our ethical lives. Tang regards these beyond self-aware feelings as foundational to moral experience, enabling the most fundamental expression of moral benevolence. It is worth noting that other Neo-Confucian philosophers also present similar insights associating knowledge with feelings. In a standout passage that is both intriguing and puzzling, Wang Yangming relates in poetic language that "human's innate knowledge is the same as that of grass, trees, tiles, and stones," thus offering a unique perspective on moral knowledge (Wang 1992, 107). According to Wang, entities such as grass, trees, tiles, and stones are considered to possess moral knowledge, not because they have the mental capacity to discern right from wrong, but because they are metaphysically interconnected with other beings in the world. All things under heaven exist not merely as isolated entities; rather, "they share the same vital energy, enabling intercirculation (只為同此一氣，故能相通耳)" (Wang 1992, 107). In this way, Wang redefines our understanding of moral knowledge, transforming it from merely a mental attribute to a profound connection among individuals. Following Wang, Luo emphasizes the "heavenly" significance of these feelings, suggesting that nurturing them is key to achieving goodness and human fulfillment.

Parallels can also be found between the Confucian and embodied perspectives. In terms of the embodied perspective, the *feelings of connectedness* observed in very young children not only carry moral significance but also reflect a form of *primary intersubjectivity* that is foundational to

our social and ethical lives (DeSouza, 2013). Recent research in child psychology has shown that newborns, even as early as 0-6 weeks old, engage meaningfully with their parents, facilitating their social learning. For instance, Colwyn Trevarthen (2002) notes that newborns exhibit social initiative through behaviors such as smiling, gaze approach/avoidance, coo vocalizations, and specific hand gestures, all of which convey emotions and prompt parental responses. In turn, babies imitate facial expressions, hand gestures, and head movements of others within hours of birth, displaying their capacity for social interaction and serving as an invitation for further interpersonal exchange. In related experiments, Marco Dondi (1999) found that newborns can distinguish between their own and other infants' cries; they can *feel* and respond to the cries of other infants with facial expressions of distress, showcasing their sensitivity to the emotional states of others. Through affective and bodily mirroring, newborn infants and young children actively engage and form connections with others, demonstrating meaningful primary intersubjective interactions (Colombetti and Torrance 2009).

Luo values deeply the beyond-self-aware nature displayed by very young children. He regards this original state of human beings as identical to the ideal image of sagehood. Defined by a blend of mindlessness and effortlessness, it paradoxically showcases a form of skilled ethical proficiency. He further asserts, "regarding the heart-nature of humanity, our concern should lie in its potential deficiency in the skill of knowing (不善知), but not its failure to recognize a specific good (不知某善某善)" (Luo 2007, 196). Contrasting with the reflective outcomes of deliberation, the natural, beyond-self-aware capacity to learn is indeed the essence of comprehending true goodness. Beyond-self-aware expertise is not only demonstrated in young children, it even manifests in the *everyday lives of common people*. As Taizhou philosopher Wang Xinzhai suggests, "the orderly manner observed in the everyday activities of the common people inherently mirrors

the orderly manner of the sages" (Huang 1985, 715). Luo illustrates his concept with an example: a child servant, navigating through multiple doorways and steps without breaking the tea set, respectfully and carefully presents the tea to his master. This, he asserts, is a clear demonstration of the sagely Way. Addressing the question of whether such respectful and cautious behavior reflects true moral understanding, Luo (2007, 45) emphasizes that "if he lacks knowledge, how could he properly present the tea? And in presenting the tea, how could he be vigilant and cautious (*jieju* 戒懼)." Clearly, what the Taizhou philosophers value is not reflective deliberation, but rather the often overlooked beyond-self-aware aspect of moral practice.

There is an echo of this perspective in the work of Hubert Dreyfus, who presents a similar analysis regarding expertise and skillful coping. Although Dreyfus was likely unaware of the Taizhou school, his conclusions resonate with their emphasis on non-deliberative aspects of moral action. He argues that an expert does not engage in reasoning, calculating, or deliberate actions based on concepts or rules. Instead, an expert performs tasks spontaneously and naturally, often achieving mastery effortlessly. This concept applies not only to highly *refined skills* like chess, dance, and sports, but also to *everyday skills* such as cooking, walking, conversing, and navigating daily life (Dreyfus 2006, 47-48). Effortlessly and without conscious reflection, I perform everyday tasks such as opening doors, brushing my teeth, and walking to my office, much like an expert in daily life. When I notice the old door lock has become rusty, I *know* immediately to apply more force turning it; When I encounter a stumbling stone on my way to the office, I *know* naturally to tense my foot muscles, lift one leg higher, and angle it just right to avoid colliding with the other leg, thus skillfully navigating around the obstacle. In short, the idea of mastery is the skillful and ongoing *body's attunement*, enabling an individual to continuously adapt to the ever-changing challenges presented by a dynamic world (Di Paolo et al. 2017, 41-42). In our ethical lives, we too

often perform *spontaneous ethical comportment*, as highlighted by Hubert Dreyfus (2014, 184) through examples such as: "I see a child in danger and catch hold of its hand; I hear a crash and become alert to help."

Numerous additional examples can be found in Confucian narratives that highlight an intuitive and unreflective ethical expertise. These include instances where a person immediately feels compassion upon seeing a child about to fall into a well (*Mencius*, 2A6); King Xuan of Qi spontaneously feels an unbearable sense of distress upon seeing an innocent ox being led to slaughter (*Mencius*, 1A7); a child servant intuitively maintains vigilance and caution while serving tea; and newborn infants naturally interact and engage with their surroundings. These examples illustrate an unthinking, yet masterful expertise in humanity, evident in our daily ethical interactions. These examples not only demonstrate an intuitive yet masterful expertise in humanity but also underscore a deep-rooted understanding of moral knowledge throughout the history of Confucian philosophy. Although a detailed exploration of the connections between general Confucian thought and embodied cognition is beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to recognize the parallels between the beyond-self-aware aspect of moral behavior emphasized by the Taizhou school and the concepts articulated by Mencius. Mencius famously posits that moral knowledge and capabilities are inherent in young children, who display these traits without the need for formal learning or conscious deliberation (*Mencius* 7A15). In this vein, Taizhou thinkers not only build on Wang Yangming's philosophy but also potentially reconnect with the foundational ideas of Classical Confucianism. While sharing a focus on the beyond-self-aware aspect of morality, Taizhou scholars further deepen the theory by elucidating the complex interplay between deliberation and spontaneity within moral practices.

The emphasis on spontaneous feelings leads to the exploration of emotional states in ethical

behavior and learning, a concept that Taizhou philosophers explore with particular attention to *joy* (*le* 樂). It is important to note that a distinct form of joy is integral to the learning process and peak performance in our beyond-self-aware social and ethical lives. Taizhou philosophers specifically highlight the intrinsic connection between "joyfulness" and "learning". In his *Song of Enjoying Learning* (樂學歌), Wang Xinzhai states, "joyfulness lies in the enjoyment of learning, and learning is about learning to enjoy. Without enjoyment, it is not learning; without learning, one cannot find joy" (Huang 1985, 718). Wang Dongya echoes this idea, observing that "when people nowadays speak of 'learning,' they often construct various artificial meaning, they overlook the fact that at its core nothing initially exists, yet it is inherently complete. Simply do not obstruct the natural flow of essence, true joyfulness reveals itself. The essence of learning is to maintain this joyfulness; without it, there is no genuine learning" (Huang 1985, 719). The ideal form of learning is inherently a process filled with enjoyment, or in psychological terms, a state of *flow*. One might consider, in a somewhat illustrative manner, the example of language learning: It is commonly observed that adults often face significant challenges when learning a foreign language through reflective methods. These methods typically involve memorizing vocabulary and analyzing grammatical rules—processes that occur predominantly in the mind. Such challenges are often exacerbated by adults' self-image concerns, leading to feelings of shame and reduced self-esteem when errors are made, which can significantly hinder their learning progress. In contrast, very young children typically lack a self-conscious "I" in the context of language learning. The absence of self-awareness can often lead to more effective learning. Engaging in an unreflective manner, children learn through playful activities that extend beyond textbook methods. Through affective and bodily interactions with teachers, friends, or other people they encounter, they effortlessly apply and absorb different vocabularies and excel in constructing structured sentences. This idea is equally relevant in moral learning. Wang Yangming astutely differentiated between the stages of *cannot but do* (不

得已) and *cannot stop doing* (不能已) in the cultivation process. *Cannot but do* refers to a moral practice where there is a dualistic tension between moral pattern-principles and human desires. In this stage, suppressing desires may not be pleasant, yet one feels compelled to adhere to pattern-principles due to the strong moral imperative. *Cannot stop doing*, on the other hand, refers to a stage of moral practice where moral pattern-principles and human desires are unified. By adhering to pattern-principles, one naturally aligns and harmonizes their human desires, attuning to a state of optimal expression. This alignment leads to finding joy in embracing these principles and fosters an irresistible drive to continuously realize them. As Wang (1992, 148) himself puts it, "what cannot stop on its own is that which *finds joy in following pattern-principles* (循理為樂)." In Mencius' philosophy, moral practice does not involve forcing the willow into cups and bowls, thus resistant to violating its natural form. Instead, we respect the willow's inherent nature and, from this foundation, craft cups and bowls (*Mencius,* 6A1). Viewing self-cultivation as mere self- repression is a misconception. At its core, self-cultivation is a path towards self-fulfillment, through which one achieves the profound *joy of self-attainment* (自得之樂). Much like peak performances expressed in other professional fields, characterized by a state of flow which sinks deep in in selfless enjoyment, Confucian philosophy similarly perceives the attainment of moral expertise as inherently joyful. As one's moral expertise unfolds, it enhances their ability to cope, enabling them to navigate successfully through the social world and the broader realm under heaven. A popular teaching from Wang Yangming (1992, 94), "sustaining joy is the essence of self- cultivation (常快活便是工夫)," resonates with the very first doctrine of the *Analects*: "To learn and to practice repeatedly what one has learned, is it not joyful" (*Analects*, 1.1).

III. Evil and the Moral Practice of *Gongfu*

A key insight from embodied ethics, as highlighted by Nigel DeSouza, is our innate capacity for *pre-reflective ethical know-how*, suggesting that we inherently possess a form of knowledge that enables us to navigate the complexities of the ethical world. However, humans are not morally perfect and occasionally make moral mistakes. This imperfection underscores why the Confucian tradition emphasizes moral learning from its very beginning. If, as Taizhou and the embodied perspective propose, humans inherently possess the capacity to navigate the ethical world, then how do these philosophies account for the existence of moral evil, and what is the need for moral practice? In fact, students of Luo have already raised questions regarding different aspects of the Taizhou doctrine. Concerning the nature of evil, they questioned whether Taizhou philosophy truly makes no distinction between good and evil (Luo 2007, 88); and how, without conscious self-regulation, wrongdoings might not multiply (Luo 2007, 58). In terms of moral practice, questions arose about whether there is no need to pursue good or to eliminate evil, and where one should begin their learning and cultivation (Luo 2007, 202, 207). Fortunately, Luo as a notable philosopher in Neo-Confucian history, was not that naive but provided insightful answers to these queries and doubts.

Although Taizhou philosophy upholds the inherent moral nature of our natural, beyond-self-aware life, it does acknowledge that people can deviate from this ideal state and commit wrongdoings. Luo (2007, 202) articulates this by stating, "in a state of *undifferentiated smooth adaptation* (渾淪順適), it is named as 'good', while in places where it *deviates and obstructs* (違礙), it is deemed 'not good'." Clearly, what is "not good" (不善) is identified as a departure from the state of natural coping exemplified in the effortless behavior of young children. Luo (2007, 37) furthered his observation, "infants and young children typically exist in a state of enduring joy and laughter, as their bodies and *heart-minds remain in a harmonious unity* (身心猶相凝聚).

However, as they grow and their thoughts become increasingly complex and chaotic, they start experiencing overwhelming anxiety and suffering." This resonates with a theme common in ancient Asian philosophy, as echoed by Laozi: "Those who possess profound virtue are like newborn infants... They can cry all day without becoming hoarse, reflecting utmost harmony... As things grow strong, they age, which is against the Way and leads to an early demise" (*Daodejing*, 55). By synthesizing both Daoist and Confucian insights, we can understand that humans, in their original state as seen in newborn infants—a stage where the body and heart-mind are harmoniously unified—inherently possess the capacity to regulate their emotions and desires spontaneously. However, as they grow older and develop more complex thoughts intertwined with their worldly knowledge from hearing and seeing, this harmony gradually diminishes. Their heart-minds begin to deviate from the natural needs of their bodies, becoming increasingly fixated and preoccupied in their minds with the allure of external pursuits. This divergence in human life—moving from a state of optimal, *integrated performance* to one of *mind-body separation*—represents, in terms of the embodied approach, *a disruption of flow*. When I become reflective about everyday actions, like brushing my teeth, I distance myself from the smooth, unthinking coping that characterizes daily life. Similarly, when people begin to contemplate a sense of "I" and overly deliberate over external things—the respective roots of which often lie in the pursuit of personal fame and wealth—they hinder their natural ethical coping mechanisms. This preoccupation with self-interest and material gains can lead to a degradation of the moral expertise that is innately embedded in human nature.

With this perspective in mind, we can reexamine the nature of wrongdoers and our moral reactions towards them. In answering the question of why he harbored no feelings of disgust and bitterness towards a student exhibiting violent and rebellious behavior, Luo wisely responded,

"when a person becomes violent and unruly, it often indicates that they have endured significant suffering. My heart is more inclined towards *transforming* them (轉之之心), which is why I do not feel disgust and bitterness" (Huang 1985, 805). Within the embodied framework, a wrongdoer exhibiting violent and rebellious behavior can be understood as experiencing a disruption of flow in their natural social coping mechanisms. Just as children naturally seek connections with their parents, humans have an inherent desire for intersubjective social bonds. However, when interpersonal conflicts arise from violent acts, the wrongdoer may undergo a form of discomfort or unease—a person prone to violence often faces disdain or disgust from other members of the moral community; in more severe instances of violence, such behaviors can even result in their isolation and separation (e.g. imprisonment) from society. In this context, the Confucian perspective prioritizes *compassion* over *blame* when responding to wrongdoers. Instead of directing attention toward the *wrongdoer* to affirm their moral responsibility and thus impose on them deserved moral blame or punishment, the Confucian reaction of compassion turns inward, focusing back on the *empathetic attitude* of the *moral practitioner* to transform the wrongdoer. It urges the moral practitioner to concentrate more on reforming the wrongdoer's moral character, rather than seeking their retribution. This idea aligns with Huang Yong's observation (Huang 2015, 229-230): our empathetic concern extends not only to the victims who are harmed but also to the "devils," assisting them towards realizing their internal moral wellbeing and maintaining their humanity. Huang's concept can be further enriched through the embodied perspective. As Wang Yangming (1992, 79) suggests, a great person is one who feels united with myriad things, operating from a heavenly heart-mind that discriminates between right and wrong. Crucially, without the *firsthand bodily experience of suffering and pain* (疾痛之切於吾身), the heart-mind cannot truly distinguish between right and wrong. Accordingly, Huang (2015, 231-2) points out that this form of *conscience pain*, rooted in our past experiences, forms the main source of our ability to empathize, even with

the devil.

This way, Taizhou philosophers do acknowledge the existence of evil and notice that its emergence often parallels the development of reflective thinking. Consequently, their approach to moral cultivation—pursuing good and eliminating evil—is centered on *modeling after the state of an infant*. This entails engaging in learning and deliberation through a process of *unlearning* and *unthinking*, suggesting a return to a more natural and beyond-self-aware original state of being. This leads us back to the critical challenge that persistently haunts us: how can one engage in self-cultivation without striving to illuminate and seek a moral *ground*?

> The moment you *become fierce in reflecting and seeking,* this knowledge and action belong to *humanity*. Sometimes you forget, then *suddenly remember*; sometimes you stop, then *suddenly become alert and vigilant* 有時忘記，卻忽然想起；有時歇手，卻惕然警醒 — this knowledge and action belongs to *heaven*. (Luo 2007, 31)

> The brightness of my awakened heart-mind is different from the brightness of a mirror. The brightness of a mirror and the dust are two separate entities, whereas my heart-mind, first deluded and then enlightened, is *one* and the same 吾心先迷後覺，卻是一個. When it is enlightened, the deluded heart-mind becomes the enlightened one. Similarly, when it is deluded, the enlightened heart-mind becomes the deluded one. (Luo 2007, 138)

These two passages collectively caution against approaching moral cultivation in a deliberate and reflective manner. In the first citation, Luo contrasts the practical efforts that belong to humanity with those that belong to heaven. For Luo, the more effort one puts into consciously grasping the moral heart-mind, the further they stray from its natural functions (also refer to the beginning of section 2). Conversely, moral cultivation should be seen as a *gentle reminder* when

one deviates from ethical living. When disturbances disrupt our beyond-self-aware state of moral flow, we remind ourselves, allowing the heart-mind to guide us back to a state of awareness, alertness, and vigilance. However, it is crucial that this reminder not become a point of fixation; it should quickly dissolve and seamlessly integrate into our daily life. In the second citation, Luo further cautions against misinterpreting this practice of reminding as a dualistic interaction between two selves or two minds. He critiques the binary view of moral cultivation, often depicted as a struggle between the mind-as-subject and desire-as-object. Contrasting this, he uses the example of a mirror and its dust, which are distinct entities, to illustrate that the heart-mind, in contrast, is always unified. From this perspective, morality and immorality are not about a dichotomy within our heart-mind or human nature—not as a battle between heart-mind and thoughts, nor between heavenly nature and material nature. Instead, they are understood as the enlightened and deluded states of the same heart-mind, paralleling the original and deviated forms of the same human nature. Integrating these insights, it is also useful to draw parallels with everyday expertise: In a tennis match, a player does not have the luxury of time to fixate on themselves as an object and engage in introspective reflection. Faced with any sudden challenge, they must quickly remind themselves and then immediately dissolve that reminder into the flow of the game. Thus, being alert becomes an *effortless effort* that maintains a state of *constant vigilance* (常惺惺), simultaneously engaging both mind and body to respond smoothly to the environment.

Luo brings his philosophy to life in a teaching session with his students, presenting them with a thought exercise: Initially, the students are asked to reflect and recall the details of their distant home—the doors, windows, people, and appliances. This reflective process leads to a clear formation of knowledge in their minds. Then, amidst the session, an announcement is made that a guest is arriving at the teaching venue. Luo seizes this opportunity to refocus the students' attention

on that precise moment. He points out that, in that instant, the knowledge of the guest's arrival also becomes vividly clear to them, yet it arises spontaneously and without the need for reflection. Luo concludes with a profound insight: Knowledge that forms spontaneously and without deliberate thought is of heavenly origin (天之知), while knowledge that emerges from reflective deliberation is human (人之知). The essence of becoming a sage, he teaches, lies in "blending these two forms of knowledge into one in every present moment" (今須以兩個合成一個). This synthesis involves "mysteriously merging the *aperture of self-awareness* with the *innate capacity for non-deliberation* (以覺悟之竅，而妙合不慮之良)," thus achieving a profound unity between conscious awareness and effortless intuition (Luo 2007, 45). In Neo-Confucian terms, there should be a harmonious balance between *ruler-like vigilance* (*longti* 龍惕) and *natural spontaneity* (*ziran* 自然).

The essence of moral cultivation now becomes clear: it is counterproductive to aggressively seek the heart-mind in a purely reflective manner, yet it is equally perilous to solely follow one's unreflective natural impulses, neglecting the significant capabilities of the heart-mind to think. The ideal approach to moral cultivation lies in harmoniously integrating these two aspects—the reflective and the beyond-self-aware—blending the dual capacities of humanity into a unified whole. In *Mencius* 1A7, the moral sensibilities of King Xuan of Qi were hindered by his material pursuits, leading him to overlook the fact that he possesses the innate heart-mind capable of guiding him towards true moral kingship. A notable instance of his latent moral intuition is his empathetic response to an innocent ox being led to slaughter, a clear demonstration of his beyond-self-aware ethical know-how. Mencius' role in his moral teachings is simply to remind the king of this inherent capacity and to guide him in reflecting upon, remembering, and re-engaging with his previously experienced embodied moral feelings. The critical task for the king, however, was not to linger on the heart-mind he had reflectively conceptualized, nor to dwell solely on its bright vision. Instead,

he needs to break this vision and apply his reflective ethical insights to his present circumstances. This involves extending the same heartfelt moral feelings, similar to those felt for the ox, further to the common people under his rule, and consistently incorporating them into his everyday political life. By doing so, the king can establish a governance characterized by benevolence. At this point, David Wong (2023) also believes that Mencius notes how people are sometimes more attuned to nonconscious, nondeliberative processes. Mencius, according to Wong (2023), advocates for a teaching method of *analogical reasoning*, guiding his audience to re-experience and apply a previously right experience to new, ethically similar situations. This reflection, while rooted in the experience of feeling, allows *feeling*, and *reflection and reasoning* to interweave harmoniously in the process of moral development. This idea is also applicable to the case of the child servant. Luo suggests that the child's beyond-self-aware, vigilant attitude while serving tea exemplifies the Way of sagehood. However, this does not imply that the child servant is an infallible, perfect sage at all times. Outside of his serving duties, the child may exhibit laxity in other aspects of life—perhaps showing less respect towards his parents or lacking diligence in his studies. Therefore, the child servant still requires some degree of reflective effort to integrate moral thinking into every aspect of his daily life.

Interestingly, the principles of the embodied approach align closely with Luo's insights. Francisco Varela (1999, 31) posits that "truly ethical behavior takes the *middle way* between spontaneity and rational calculation," which resonates with Luo's teaching about the integration of beyond-self-aware heavenly knowledge and reflective human knowledge. Take professional basketball players as an example, specifically a point guard whose primary role is to read the game and coordinate the team's play. Reflective thinking of some sorts certainly contributes to a better game: the player can prepare by reviewing video footage of opponents' past performances, discuss

potential strategies with coaches and teammates, and rehearse plays on the tactic board. Additionally, a positive self-image, characterized by pride and confidence, can be beneficial. However, the moment the player steps onto the court and the game begins, the player must let go of all reflective thinking that involves ideas of principles or self. Often, and perhaps as a continuous process, disruptions to the *flow* of the game occur—such as opponents performing in ways that diverge from their anticipated tactics, or teammates unexpected off-the-ball movements. In these critical moments, *overthinking* can exacerbate the *choking* phenomenon, detrimental to the player's optimal performance. Testimonies from professional athletes highlight the pitfalls of overthinking. Statements such as "I over think…about the other players, my team's reaction, the goalkeeper, the match situation…everything, rather than just trying to score," or "I think 'why did I do that'…I am very self-critical, so I then get really annoyed...and then go on to choke," and "as I was running up, I was thinking of my hand position. Then as I released the ball, I was thinking about where my arm should be…what my hand should be doing...I had no idea where the ball would go" (Hill and Shaw 2013, 105-106)—these testimonies reflexively illustrate the critical point of choking in sports, and by extension its common occurrence in daily living. In the high-paced and ever-changing environment of a basketball game, a point guard cannot afford the luxury to momentarily step back from the action to reflect and reassess the play. There is no time to pause and mentally devise the best contingency plan before transitioning those thoughts into action. Instead, the point guard must depend on bodily memory and the *sports intelligence* established through previous training. His embodied mind effectively becomes his on-the-spot tactical board, serving as the most reliable guide for his present actions on the court. The basketball player must think and simultaneously let go of any conscious thought, immersing himself in skillful coping that involves complex interactions with the environs and other entities on the court, including opponents, teammates, coaches, and fans. Gallagher (2017, 201) describes this as a form of *embodied coping* or *situated*

reflection, which creates a "continuity between the rational movement of the body and reflective thinking." NBA champion Stephen Curry perfectly illustrates this approach with his words: "*to think about nothing*. Which I was trying to do — don't worry about mechanics, don't worry about what's gone on the last two or three games. *Just shoot*." This *just-do-it* mentality shared by professional athletes is often pivotal to achieving optimal performance. It exemplifies what Gallagher (2017, 203) describes as *thinking-without-thinking-about-it*. It is noteworthy that the processes of thinking and unthinking can be seen as representing two equally significant aspects of human freedom. As Hubert Dreyfus (2007) highlights, on one hand, we have the capacity to step back and reflect, which presupposes one profound level of human freedom. On the other hand, we also possess another unique kind of freedom that allows us to immerse ourselves back into various forms of expert coping and engage in beyond-self-aware life. In such instances of skillful coping, we demonstrate what Dreyfus refers to as our *involved freedom*.

The same wisdom applies perfectly to our moral lives: much like a basketball player to his basketball game, somehow we can distance ourselves from our "*ethical game"* and engage in reflective cultivation—in Confucian terms, this involves extensive study (博學), accurate inquiry (審問), careful reflection (慎思), and clear discrimination (明辨). However, it is never truly possible to completely withdraw ourselves from our ethical lives and adopt a wholly detached perspective. Confucius' teachings offer profound guidance on this matter—"at home, be deferential; in handling affairs, be respectful; and in interacting with others, be devoted" (*Analects*, 13.19). This implies that our ethical living is not limited to interactions with others only; even when one is alone at home, they are still engaged in their ethical living. By declaring "the moment a thought arises, it becomes action," Wang Yangming deepens the Confucian practice of *maintaining vigilance in solitude* (慎獨) (Wang 1992, 96). This practice goes beyond the mere physical state of

solitude (獨處) to necessitate a deeper, more introspective, and persistent awareness of the mind's subtle dynamics (獨知). This highlights the continual presence of ethics in both of our inner and social lives, as emphasized in the *Doctrine of the Mean*: "The Way can never be separated from us for even a moment. What can be separated from us is not the Way" (*Zhongyong*, Ch.1). Similar to athletes, the key to moral training is to cultivate a form of embodied coping. Being vigilant and cautious (*jieju* 戒懼) and to think (*si* 思) are not functions fixed merely within the mind, but always involve the bodily dimension. Drawing from Francisco Varela (1999), the concept of *si* in the Confucian tradition is better understood as a kind of embodied *attententiveness*. This perspective also helps to clarify Luo's response to his student's puzzlement regarding the intermittence of moral practice. Luo explains that such intermittence arises from a lack of deep understanding of the essence of their learning. He emphasizes that the sagely Way is an inherent part of human nature, aiding us in skillfully coping with everyday life. Overtly seeking and guarding the Way can be futile or even obstructive to its mystical functioning. Luo advises setting aside the deliberate process of reflective thinking. When a moment arises where moral awareness naturally surfaces, one should simply pay attention to it and swiftly alter such thought (輕輕快快轉個念頭), allowing oneself to be drawn back into the engaged, beyond-self-aware moral coping, with reflective thought serving as a subtle backdrop. Only by recognizing that learning is inherently embodied (身在是而學即在是) and returning to a daily state of flow and enjoyment, can moral practice transcend intermittence and become densely continuous (安心樂意，豈止免得間斷，且綿綿密密) (Luo 2007, 46).

IV. Concluding remarks

The Taizhou embodied ethics redefines and enriches our understanding of moral cultivation by integrating both *thinking* and *unthinking* processes, warning against extremes: not just indulging in natural emotions and feelings (情識而肆), but also becoming overly enamored with reflective, bright vision (留戀景光), as both can impede moral development. While the embodied perspective indeed places fundamental emphasis on spontaneous intuitions, it also recognizes the importance of deliberation. The embodied perspective identifies two forms of freedom: one that allows for stepping back to reflect, and another that facilitates the dissolution of the self, enabling re-entry into the beyond-self-aware, everyday ethical life deeply engaged with one's surroundings. This approach mirrors Luo Jinxi's teachings, which integrate heavenly and human knowledge into a cohesive whole. As an endeavor in comparative and interdisciplinary studies, this article aims to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western traditions, and between moral philosophy and empirical science. The insights provided not only enhance our understanding of human existence but also illuminate ways to lead better ethical lives.

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