

Neo-Confucianism, Experimental Philosophy, and the Trouble with Intuitive Methods¹

Hagop Sarkissian

Department of Philosophy
The City University of New York
Graduate Center & Baruch College
hagop.sarkissian@baruch.cuny.edu

ABSTRACT: The proper role of intuitions in philosophy has been debated throughout its history, and especially since the turn of the twenty-first century. The context of this recent debate within analytic philosophy has been the heightened interest in (and use of) intuitions as data points that need to be accommodated or explained away by philosophical theories. This, in turn, has given rise to a sceptical movement called experimental philosophy, whose advocates seek to understand the nature and reliability of such intuitions (along with related judgements and behaviour). Yet such scepticism of intuition or introspective methods can be found in earlier periods and across philosophical traditions. Indeed, the Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song and Ming dynasties (ca. tenth to seventeenth centuries CE) seem to exemplify this very tension, as they can be divided into an intuitionistic school on the one hand and an investigative school on the other. In this paper, I argue that, notwithstanding some obvious differences, there are broad similarities between the dynamics at play across these philosophical traditions. Moreover, by comparing and juxtaposing them, we will come to appreciate the distinctiveness of each, as their attendant aims, weaknesses and strengths become more salient thereby.



The proper role of intuitions in philosophy has been debated at various points throughout its history, and especially since the turn of the 21st century. The context of this recent debate has been the prominence of analytic philosophy and, along with it, a heightened interest in (and use of) intuitions as data points that need to be accommodated or explained away by philosophical theories. This, in turn, has given rise to a skeptical movement called experimental philosophy, whose advocates seek to

¹This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, available online:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09608788.2018.1457510>

understand the cognitive mechanisms that underwrite such intuitions (along with related judgments and behavior) in domains of interest to philosophers (e.g. morality or consciousness) (Alexander, 2012; Knobe, 2016; Knobe et al, 2012). Experimental philosophers ask: Are the cognitive processes that generate intuitions reliable and sensitive to appropriate factors? Are the outputs of these processes shared by other language users, or are philosophers' intuitions idiosyncratic? What should we make of intuitional diversity? Experimental philosophers pursue these questions by extending, amplifying, and supplanting traditional armchair methods through systematic means. Indeed, some findings from this literature have been used to support a particular aim—namely, curtailing the ambitions of traditional philosophical theories, or discrediting the very methods of armchair philosophy (Alexander, Mallon, & Weinberg, 2010).

Experimental philosophy so described is a development of the last twenty years of Anglo-American philosophy, arising in opposition to many of the methods that gained prominence in analytic circles during the decades preceding it. Hence, it is both natural and appropriate to think of experimental philosophy as keyed to a particular context. However, if we generalize across the various motivations and projects in experimental philosophy today, we find a theme that both animates and transcends this context: namely, a skepticism of philosophical methods that rely, in a significant way, on intuition or introspective methods. This more basic theme might find expression in earlier periods and across philosophical traditions.

Indeed, the Confucian philosophical tradition seems to contain this very tension. Throughout its history, there have been those advocating intuitive or introspective methods on the one hand, only to be opposed by those who find such methods suspect on the other. Moreover, the latter often adopt methodologies that involve systematic study and investigation to serve as a check on the reliability of intuitive or introspective methods. I'm referring to the widely recognized division between an intuitionistic wing on the one hand, and an investigative wing on the other, a division which reached its most powerful expression during the Neo-Confucian debates of the Song and Ming dynasties (ca. 10th to 17th centuries CE) (e.g. Chan, 1963a; Cheng, 1991; Hansen, 1992; Ivanhoe, 2000). Could the basic dynamic at play in 21st century experimental philosophy be found in this rather remote tradition of thought?

In what follows I will pursue this hypothesis. I will argue that, despite some obvious limitations and caveats, there are broad similarities between the dynamics at play. Moreover, by comparing and juxtaposing the nature and role of introspective methods across these traditions, we will come to appreciate the distinctiveness of each, as some of their attendant aims, weaknesses, and strengths become more salient thereby.

II

Philosophers working within the Confucian tradition have long been divided on a number of topics, including how best to characterize human nature as well as the proper methods of cultivating oneself and gaining moral insight. Consider, for example, a particular moment in this latter debate.

In the summer of 1520, Luo Qinchun (1465-1547), a Neo-Confucian scholar and former government official, writes a letter to his contemporary Wang Yangming (1472–1529), a towering figure in Ming Dynasty intellectual circles. Luo and Wang both endured and passed the rigorous civil service examinations to achieve official posts. They studied and mastered the same Neo-Confucian curriculum in doing so. They drew inspiration from similar intellectual predecessors. At a more foundational level, they shared a broad metaphysical picture of how the universe works.

And yet, in spite of these commonalities, Luo was deeply troubled that his esteemed contemporary seemed to rely on a suspect philosophical method—namely, seeking to understand universal metaphysics by introspecting on the workings of one's own mind. The immediate prompt of this particular letter was Luo's receiving a pair of Wang's recently completed texts. After dispensing with pleasantries ('I am exceedingly grateful to you. I am indeed unworthy... What good fortune it is now to receive and read two more works from you') Luo gets to the heart of the matter.

I have repeatedly examined these texts [you sent me] without having been able to grasp their central meaning. Thus the doubts that I had heretofore, and that I once questioned you about in person, albeit inconclusively, have again accumulated and cannot be resolved. In the profound hope that your gracious willingness to instruct me will not be wasted, I dare to set forth one or two points, anticipating that in your great generosity you will make allowances for my indiscretion.

... you consider that when a person engages in study, he ought to seek only within himself... It is my humble opinion that in the teaching of the Confucian school learning and action should assist each other. There is the clear teaching that one should be broadly versed in learning. When Yan Yuan [a student] praised the 'skillful leading' of Kongzi [Confucius], he said, 'He broadened me with learning.' Is learning really internal or external? This is really not difficult to clarify...

If one insists that learning does not depend upon seeking outside the self and that only introspection and self-examination should be regarded as

fundamental, then why wouldn't... "rectifying the mind" and "making [one's] intentions sincere" be completely sufficient? Why would it be necessary to burden the student at the beginning with the task of "investigating things" [*gewu* 格物]?... even before you have gotten to the word "knowledge," your view has become convoluted, distorted, and difficult to understand....

What is of value in the investigation of things is *precisely* one's desire to perceive the unified pattern [*li* 理] in all of its diverse particular manifestations. (adapted from Bloom, 1995, pp. 176–177)

Luo here refers to *li* (理), variously translated as principle, pattern, or coherence. When one asks why things are the way they are, why things tend to follow (or conform to) certain patterns, or what explains the broad regularities one can observe in the human and natural world, the answer is that there are *li* that permeate everything in the universe (e.g. Graham 1992, Part I). At once, every thing in the universe is a particular expression of *li*, while also containing within it the entirety of the *li*, hence Luo refers to the *li* in its particular manifestations and also in its unity. An earlier thinker, Zhu Xi (discussed below), used examples such as woodgrain or the veins in marble, jade, or leaves as conspicuous manifestations of *li*. Here, Luo maintains that through *gewu* or 'investigating things' (diligent, committed study and observation of classical texts as well as the broader social, political, and natural world) one can come to know the *li* that underlies any particular object or phenomena and then analogize to related ones, eventually coming to see how each is interconnected with—and ultimately the expression of—a single underlying *li*.²

Permeating everything in the cosmos, then, are *li*. But if the *li* are ultimately unified, why are the things in the cosmos so *variegated*? The answer is that each particular thing has its own endowment of *qi* (氣)—vital, psycho-physical 'stuff'. In its most condensed, impure form, *qi* is what we would call matter, whereas in its most refined forms it is steam, mist, air, breath, and vital energy itself. Concrete things come into existence as *qi* condenses and settles, and then they dissipate as *qi* expands. *Qi* varies, then, both in its quantity as well as its particular qualities—either light or heavy,

² This brings to mind Wilfrid Sellars's famous characterization of the aim of philosophy as follows: 'The aim of philosophy is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under "things in the broadest possible sense" I include such radically different items as not only "cabbages and kings," but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death. To achieve success in Philosophy would be, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, to "know one's way around" with respect to all these things, not in that unreflective way in which the centipede of the story knew its way around before it faced the question, "how do I walk?", but in that reflective way which means that no intellectual holds are barred' (Sellars, 1991, p. 1). The Neo-Confucians would describe this as coming to understand *li* and *qi*.

clear or turbid, active or inactive. Any particular thing thus has two aspects: *li* as it inheres in *qi*. There cannot be one without the other.

Luo and Wang both accept this metaphysics. Where they differ is on their understanding of self-cultivation—a central (if not *the* central) concern with the Confucian tradition from its origins in the classical period (ca 6th to 3rd centuries BCE) through the Neo-Confucian debates and up until the present day. What are proper methods of learning and philosophical investigation? How does one get to know one's way around the social, political, and natural world? How does one harmonize with others and have positive effects? What are legitimate sources of normativity?

Wang Yangming had a clear answer to these questions: The chief (though certainly not only) method of self-cultivation involved *attentive introspection* to the activities of one's own mind. Since the mind is made up of *li* and *qi* just like everything else, one can (and should) understand *li* by carefully observing how one's mind reacts to, and resonates with, the phenomena of the world. Moreover, the human intellect, according to Wang, consisted of the most refined and excellent form of *qi*, and is thus uniquely positioned to grasp the *li* (Tien, p. 307). Wang was concerned that a broad and programmatic curriculum of study (such as the one advocated by Luo in his letter above) represented an overly rigid approach to self-cultivation that risked stagnating or inhibiting (as opposed to bolstering) a person's moral growth; indeed, he had a certain degree of animosity toward intellectual endeavors in general (Ivanhoe, 2002, p. 197). When Luo speaks of *gewu* or 'investigating things', he means studying classical texts, social and political history, as well as observing the human and natural worlds to understand the *li* or patterns within them, uncovering in a piecemeal fashion how they all cohere with or fit together. Wang, however, takes a markedly different approach.

Indeed, Wang's method was 'radically context-sensitive', whereby one was to monitor the movements of one's own mind when encountering the many and variegated circumstances of one's life, learning how to recognize the promptings of one's *liangzhi* (良知), an 'innate and ever-ready faculty of moral perception and guidance' (Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 102). *Liangzhi*, often translated as 'intuitive knowledge' or 'pure knowing', is a faculty that 'discerns flawlessly, naturally, and spontaneously between right and wrong', forming both correct beliefs and also, spontaneously, producing normative affective responses to one's immediate situation (Tien, p.310). On Wang's model, extensive study is unnecessary; one ought to understand *li* not by looking at external objects or phenomena, but by seeking it in oneself (Angle, 2009, p. 117). Indeed, Wang reinterprets the very notion of *gewu* as 'rectifying one's own thoughts' (Tien, p.303-304). Selfishness interferes with this task. However, a ceaseless process of introspection and self-scrutiny removes selfish desires and results in a

transformation, breaking down the barrier between the self and other and allowing *liangzhi* to guide one immediately and comprehensively. Wang reveals this epiphany about the proper method of self-cultivation in a poem to his students.

Everyone has within an unerring compass;
The root and source of the myriad transformations lies in the mind.
I laugh when I think that, earlier, I saw things the other way around;
Following branches and leaves, I searched outside! (Tiwald & Van Norden, 2014, p. 239)

Wang invokes images from classical texts in explicating this idea. For example, a passage from the classical Confucian text *Zhongyong* (中庸, commonly translated as *Doctrine of the Mean*) tells us that just as we spontaneously and appropriately *recoil* at offensive smells or *gravitate* toward physical beauty, so too Wang claims that a person free of selfishness responds spontaneously and appropriately to the world in its every particularity. Such cases represent the unity of knowing and acting, where what one spontaneously *does* is precisely how one *ought* to act. Intuition, in this sense, is an inclination toward normative action. However, such spontaneous action is not the result of training, habituation, or refinement over time; Wang's model is one of *discovery* (Ivanhoe 2000), whereby one comes to realize or discern something pre-existing in oneself, and not something one has cultivated in any substantive sense.³ One needs to foster commitment (*zhi* 志) to discovering *liangzhi*, not to developing it (Angle 2009, 115-117).

Wang was not the first Confucian thinker to make strong claims about innate knowledge. A few centuries before his time, Lu Xiangshan (1139-1192) advanced very similar ideas, discussing the clarity and power that lies in *liangzhi*.

Pure knowing lies within human beings; although some people become mired in dissolution, pure knowing still remains undiminished and enduring [within them]... Truly, if they can turn back and seek after it, then, without needing to make a concerted effort, what is right and wrong, what is fine and foul, will become exceedingly clear, and they will decide for themselves what to like and dislike, what to pursue and what to abandon.

(Tiwald & Van Norden, 2014, p. 252)

³ An edifying discussion of these two sense of intuition—namely, a ‘cultivated’ sense as opposed to an ‘untutored’ sense—focusing on the classical period of Chinese thought, can be found in Ivanhoe (2010b).

Like Wang, Lu describes self-cultivation as a process whereby one takes notice of one's own intuitive prompts and monitors their development within his or her own life contexts. As Ivanhoe writes, for Lu self-cultivation did not involve trying to understand the world through a set of categories or by observing it disinterestedly. Rather, for him it was 'a process of tallying or matching up the principles inherent in the heart/mind with the various phenomena of the world. Understanding always involves a subjective, introspective dimension: one discovers how things are by coming to see each truth *for oneself*' (Ivanhoe, 2010a, p. 254). If one is successful in understanding, if one's mind is properly aligned, then one 'will track and reveal the very same truths that the greatest sages first discovered' (Ibid). After all, the pure mind is common across all individuals, only occluded by the particularities of one's own *qi*. This immediately brings to mind the approach of Wang.⁴

Luo Qinshun, in his letter to Wang above, is clearly opposed to this general way of thinking of self-cultivation, and considers it a betrayal of the Confucian tradition.⁵ He aligns himself with Zhu Xi (1130-1200), who was a contemporary of Lu. Zhu Xi agrees that the heart-mind is made of *li* and *qi*, and can therefore resonate with everything else in the universe. However, for Zhu Xi, the *qi* of human beings—the psycho-physical stuff—is so turbid that it's practically a non-starter to seek to understand anything through introspection.

Instead, we must engage in *gewu*—that is, investigate the *li* of things with a reverential attitude, grounded in (and inspired by) the belief that the *li* permeate everything, offering the potential for universal harmony between all things (Angle 2009, chapter 4). The reverential attitude constitutes a sense of awe and wonder that impels one toward the tireless task of self-cultivation. Zhu writes that 'the words of sages have layer upon layer of meaning. You must enter deeply into them. If you only get to the surface, you will make mistakes. Only if you submerge yourself in them will you get it' (Tiwald & Van Norden, 2014, p. 178). He laments that 'when people study, of course they want to get it from their own mind, and embody it in their self. But if they do not read books, they will not know what getting it from their own mind is' (Ibid, p.180).

⁴ Although Lu and Wang are often (and rightly) paired as representatives of this particular wing of Confucianism (sometimes simply called the Lu-Wang wing), the former had no formative influence on the latter's thought. Instead, Wang discovered Lu relatively late in life, and saw in him a kindred spirit. My thanks to Steve Angle for alerting me to this.

⁵ Wang's letter in response to Luo's survives, and is translated in Chan (1963b, p.157-165). The gist of his response to Luo is to emphasize that since everything is made of *li* and *qi* then there can be no principled way of dividing self-cultivation into internal and external aspects. Grasping any one part entails grasping the whole. Thus, he favors focusing on the internal. This is in line with Wang's other thoughts on the issue—for example, that the external follows the internal when it comes to proper ordering (ibid, p.84; see also Angle, p.118). For more on the relationship between Luo and Wang, see Kim (2003).

Importantly, though, this kind of study was meant to cultivate one's *moral character*, even if it also lent one cultural or literary standing, or advanced one's career.

Investigating things involved gaining personal, intimate knowledge of social, political, historical, and natural phenomena in order to understand the *li* that may be discerned within them. *Li* is immanent and expressed in everything, it is best understood through careful observation, reflection, and hypothesis building across a wide range of domains as opposed to abstract thinking or introspective reflection.⁶ Zhu emphasized the need to sympathetically engage with the world thereby grasp 'the warp and woof of real daily human life', informed by Confucian ethical ideals of humaneness and fairness (Thompson, 2015). Indeed, the 20th century intellectual historian Hu Shi (1892-1962) characterized Zhu's approach as follows:

What Zhu Xi was saying amounts to a method of resolving doubt by suggesting a hypothetical view and then searching for more instances or evidences for comparison and for checking the hypothesis "which may not be correct" and which Zhu Xi sometimes described as a "temporary formed doubting thesis" (*quanli yiyi*). In short, the method of doubt and resolution of doubt was the method of hypothesis and verification of evidence. (Chou & Shih, 2013, p. 284)⁷

Along similar lines, Wing-tsit Chan argues that Zhu 'was careful to emphasize equally both the deductive and inductive methods and both objective observation and intuitive understanding' (Chan, 1963a, p. 591) in contrast to 'the intuitive tendency of Wang' (*ibid*, p. 686). Zhu's philosophy thus seeks to break free from precisely the moral intuitionism and resultant subjectivism typical of Neo-Confucians of his own generation (such as Lu) and, much later, Wang and his followers.

⁶ An anonymous referee points to the interesting question why Zhu thought the *qi* was so turbid so as to undermine introspection, but not so turbid so as to interfere with *gewu*. One could speculate that public, observable instances of *li*, especially the broad patterns that Zhu Xi found most interesting, might be confirmable or discussed by multiple individuals. Similar things could be said about the meanings of classical texts and the historical record—they are available for discussion. The subjective nature of introspection, by contrast, does not readily allow for such calibration or evaluation. Moreover, Zhu and all other Neo-Confucians took it for granted that there *were* sages in the past with the perfect *qi* to allow them penetrating insight into the *li*. *Gewu* emphasizes the need to engage with the fruit of their insights as preserved in the historical record. This, however, remains a topic in need of further research.

⁷ Romanizations here and elsewhere have been updated to the Pinyin standard for consistency.

School / Wing	Intuitionistic Neo-Confucianism	Investigative Neo-Confucianism
Key figures	Lu Xiangshan (1139–1193) Wang Yangming (1472–1529)	Zhu Xi (1130-1200) Luo Qinshun (1465-1547)
Central concepts	<i>liangzhi</i>	<i>gewu</i>
Cultivation method	introspection	investigation
Weakness (according to rival school)	overly subjective; denigrates traditional learning	ossified; divorced from lived experience

Table 1: Summary of the two wings of Neo-Confucianism

So, we have the Lu-Wang school on the one hand, and the Zhu-Luo school on the other.⁸ For Lu-Wang, *liangzhi* is innate and perfect; it is the original mind and thus available for examination through introspection. Moreover, it is unimprovable, and access to it is only impeded by selfish desires—if these are eliminated, one’s work is largely done.⁹ For them, the knowledge one gains through study of the kind advocated by Zhu and Luo risks having no connection with one’s lived experience and thus finding no application in one’s daily life. For Zhu-Luo, by contrast, the Lu-Wang approach was hopelessly subjective; trying to distinguish experientially and through introspective means the workings of one’s *liangzhi* as opposed to other activities of the mind is practically a non-starter. Instead, one should, with a reverential attitude, study and comprehend as much of the world as possible, generate predictions and hypotheses, and test them against the world. Each thing or event was a manifestation of underlying principle, so they were as much a source of knowledge as one’s own mind. Indeed, by understanding the *li*, one comes to understand *oneself* and thus refine one’s impure, obscuring *qi*, revealing the perfect *li* within.

⁸ The latter is commonly known as the Cheng-Zhu school, acknowledging the influence of the Cheng Brothers (Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao) on Zhu Xi.

⁹ Though see Angle (2005) for an argument that there is a more positive aspect to Wang’s project, focusing on the notion of commitment (*zhi* 志).

III

In the dynamic just sketched, do we find an analogue of the intuition skepticism found in contemporary experimental philosophy? At first glance, the Neo-Confucian debate may seem too far removed for fruitful comparison to be in the offing. However, while acknowledging some fairly obvious qualifications, I believe the answer is 'yes'; when we abstract away from the particular contexts, it remains the case that both philosophical communities are, among other things, engaged in a protracted debate on the reliability, appropriateness, and limitations of intuitive methods. In order to focus discussion, I'll consider the experimental philosophy critique of conceptual analysis in particular, and show how it parallels the investigative wing's critique of the intuitive wing.

Conceptual analysis is, at heart, an analysis of the meanings of concepts such as JUSTICE, MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, CONSCIOUSNESS, and BEAUTY. An assumption of philosophers engaging in conceptual analysis is that concepts have a definitional structure, with individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of application (Stich 1993). Mature users of these concepts can reflectively access this structure in their own minds, and so need not engage in systematic investigation of the external world to explicate them. Instead, they can do so from the armchair (Williamson 2005; 2007) for they possess the meanings of these concepts *before* embarking on the philosophical project of discovering them. Put another way, 'since meanings are what speakers know in understanding their language, any speaker of a language knows already, without looking beyond her own linguistic competence, what she needs to know to do the analysis' (Appiah, 2008, p. 11).¹⁰ Thus, there is little motivation to look outside one's own competence in conducting such an analysis.

In parallel fashion, the Lu-Wang school argues that since pure knowledge exists in human minds before any engagement with the world, there is no need to look to the external world in order to progress along the path to sagehood. Of course, the Lu-Wang school is not engaged in *conceptual analysis* from the armchair; neither Lu nor Wang are seeking to analyze the concept of *li* by understanding its semantic content. They both take themselves to be investigating *li* itself in its manifestation of *liangzhi*, which is a spontaneous inclination to normative action that harmonizes with one's immediate situation. Moreover, this method of self-cultivation cannot be pursued from an armchair alone; one must introspect on the reactions of the heart-mind as it encounters the myriad phenomena and events in the world.¹¹ In these regards, drawing analogies with armchair analysis is inapt. In both cases, though, one notices that *a shared assumption*

¹⁰ While conceptual analysis rests on the idea that we can access the meanings of concepts through introspection, it is not committed to any particular theory of concepts (e.g. nativist or empiricist).

¹¹ My thanks to PJ Ivanhoe for pressing this point.

about the structure of the object of inquiry encourages confidence in an introspective method of accessing it.

Relatedly, these shared assumptions about the structure of the object of inquiry lead not only to an advocacy of introspective methods, but also to an aversion to systematic investigation, which is thought to be unnecessary, difficult, and onerous, with no real promise of bearing fruit. Timothy Williamson, an advocate of armchair methods, observes that few philosophers who have the motivation, let alone the wherewithal, to generate hypotheses and then test them against observation, and characterizes such an enterprise as “risky” (2007, p.1). Wang, in parallel fashion, laments in the poem to his students cited above that he once thought it even necessary to investigate the world at all in order to understand *li*, finding the whole notion risible in hindsight; one’s mind is always at hand—an everpresent resource that contains within it the very thing that one wishes to seek.

Conversely, those on the investigative side of things are not deterred by the piecemeal, iterative nature of investigation. As Knobe and Nichols acknowledge in their ‘Experimental Philosophy Manifesto’, experimental investigation involves “the study of phenomena that are messy, contingent, and highly variable across times and places,” but this should not serve to deter this kind of observational and experimental research (Knobe & Nichols, 2008, p. 3). To the contrary, they argue that “many of the deepest questions of philosophy can only be properly addressed by immersing oneself in the messy, contingent, highly variable truths about how human beings really are”. And while Zhu Xi placed moral and philosophical problems in paramount position, he nonetheless maintained that it was imperative to understand the *li* in its myriad manifestations across a wide range of phenomena, for any insight into a particular manifestation might allow one to see *li* in other, unrelated areas as well. Indeed, Zhu Xi himself had a remarkable range of intellectual interests, and attained an advanced degree of understanding across a range of scientific and more technical subjects (Kim 2000, 6).

A final parallel lies in how the advocates of introspection in both these communities (Neo-Confucian and contemporary) are committed to a form of elitism.¹² Many who defend traditional armchair methods have argued that experiments recruiting ordinary folk as participants cannot yield any conclusions about the reliability of *philosophers’* intuitions which, unlike those of ordinary folk, have been subjected to intense philosophical training. This training renders philosophers’ intuitions about their own domain more reliable and accurate. This claim can be understood in a number of ways. For example, one can argue that philosophers alone are capable of understanding what it means, during conceptual analysis, to express one’s core competence with a

¹² My thanks to an anonymous referee for comments that lead to the discussion that follows.

concept (as opposed to, say, broader linguistic usage which might be sensitive to pragmatic factors), or that only philosophers can construct thought experiments that are perfectly structured so as to reveal their competence with the relevant concept, uncluttered with misleading or vague language and focused specifically on the concept at hand. Philosophers have this skill owing to their considerable prior efforts at mastering the relevant literature. Seeking, through systematic experiments, to uncover what ordinary, untrained folk would say in response to a thought experiment is therefore fundamentally misguided, as they have no expertise in conceptual analysis and can't possibly recognize the purpose of the thought experiment to begin with (Ludwig 2007). Non-philosophers are likely to be plagued with biases arising from conceptual incompetence, performance errors of various kinds, or sensitivity to pragmatic as opposed to semantic considerations in their responses (Kauppinen 2007). In order for participants to be considered reliable, one would need to educate them about the concept, engage them in dialogue, and otherwise provide them with the equivalent of philosophical training. In the absence of such training, their intuitive responses, it is argued, lack philosophical import.¹³

Similarly, those in the intuitive wing of Neo-Confucianism would deny that everyone's intuitive inclinations are equally warranted or accurate. Even though Wang famously maintained that 'the people filling the street are all sages' because they all possess *liangzhi*, he nonetheless believed it takes a prolonged and persistent process of self-cultivation to rid one of selfish desires and purify one's *qi* in order for one's *liangzhi* to operate unoccluded. This requires proper guidance by teachers and mentors, incessant scrutinizing of one's own thoughts, as well as various forms of meditative praxis. In the absence of such training, one can risk mistaking selfish motivations and inclinations as the workings of *liangzhi*. There is thus no inconsistency in claiming that a) everyone has the capacity to become a sage, while also maintaining that b) achieving such mastery, whereby one's immediate inclinations to everyday moral dilemmas are infallibly correct, will likely only be attained by a select few who can advance to rarefied heights of awareness that are difficult to sustain without enormous expenditures of effort (Graham 1990, 422). Thus, among advocates of armchair conceptual analysis as well as the Lu-Wang wing of Neo-Confucianism, appeals to intuition are couched in terms of *privileged access* via *proprietary means* developed through *specialized training*.

The concerns of those who question introspective or intuitive methods will not

¹³ Of course, as noted at the outset of this paper, many experimental philosophers are chiefly interested in understanding how the mind works with respect to philosophical cognition in general, and are not particularly interested in analyzing the nature or structure of concepts, or to analyze them as such (Knobe 2016).

be easily allayed by such training. Many experimental philosophers are animated by the concern that conceptual analysis relies on overly subjective practices pursued from the armchair and scrutinized by a largely homogenous, self-selected peer group of professional philosophers shielded from other competent users. Under such conditions, philosophical activity risks enshrining intuitions and analyses that are, in the words of Appiah, 'guild-specific' (2008, p. 18; see also Kauppinen 2007, section 5). Put another way, the worry is that philosophers do not represent a sufficiently representative class of language users, thus risking that they will a) bring to the analyses their own, idiosyncratic competence with some of these concepts, which will then b) become further entrenched when they train with, argue against, and enmesh themselves in a community of like-minded users, pursuing a largely insular project. While it *may* be the case that philosophers have more reliable competence with the relevant concepts, experimentalists would argue that this cannot be assumed, and ought to be verified through systematic means. Indeed, existing research suggests that experimentalists may have a point in this regard, as philosophers do not seem to be immune from the distorting effects of certain experimental paradigms (e.g. Machery 2012; Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2012, 2015; Tobia, Buckwalter, and Stich 2013; for a review, see Nado 2014).

It is, of course, doubtful that the Zhu-Luo wing had any interest in, or even the notion of, experimentation that we find in contemporary philosophy.¹⁴ For example, we have no real discussion of specialized methods for investigating the world, and no advocacy of what we would deem experimental methodology; study, learning, and observation—however diligent and thorough—are not the same as experimentation, especially when the primary aim is the cultivation of a moral sense. Nevertheless, the investigative wing of Neo-Confucianism shared a belief that one should avail oneself of plural ways of exploring philosophical questions, and be wary of insight that is not, in some way, checked or vetted through rigorous comparison with relevant observation points.

Finally, I think the comparison above also helps to highlight some features of both conceptual analysis, as well as the nature of *liangzhi*, that might otherwise not appear so obvious. This becomes salient when one focuses on what I will call 'success conditions' for each of these activities. Despite the fact that both conceptual analysis as well as the practice of self-cultivation favored by the Lu-Wang wing rely upon introspection, they diverge in striking fashion when it comes to the fruits of their activities; the former is intended to be publicly affirmable, whereas the latter can only

¹⁴ For a sustained argument against reading Zhu Xi as engaged in empirical investigation as we understand it today, see Kim (2000).

remain subjective.

Whatever one might think of conceptual analysis, there is at least a theoretical criterion to distinguish successful analyses from unsuccessful ones. Remember that conceptual analysis is premised on the idea that questions concerning the nature of concepts such as BEAUTY and JUSTICE can be answered solely by appeal to one's own competence with these concepts. One analyzes the concept and proposes individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for its application. A standard way to defeat such an analysis—to show that the analysis fails to truly capture these conditions for application—is to come up with a counterexample that a) seems to arise from true competence with the concept at hand, yet b) shows that some of the conditions are either not necessary or not sufficient for application. This usually results in a modification of the analysis to accommodate the counterexample. Eventually, this process might yield an analysis that is not subject to any further counterexamples. At that (theoretical) point, we will know that the analysis is complete.

Now, let us ask a similar question about introspective access to *liangzhi*—namely, what are its success conditions? Recall that *liangzhi* is pure intuitive moral knowledge, often occluded by selfish desires. According to the Lu-Wang wing, one can, through guided praxis and attentive introspection, uncover and eliminate one's selfish desires that serve to impede the workings of *liangzhi*, thus allowing one to be guided, infallibly, by *liangzhi* alone. Important questions arise, though: How can one know that one has successfully eliminated selfish desires? How can one be certain that one's impulses are the workings of *liangzhi*? How can one tell, here and now, in this particular situation, whether one is being guided correctly? It seems that, ultimately, there might not be wholly compelling answers to these questions. At a basic level, the only criterion to determine whether or not one is truly being guided by *liangzhi* is the qualitative nature of one's own subjective experience, which cannot be shared with others or brought under direct scrutiny or further analysis (Fung 2001). Thinking, reasoning, dialogue—these can all help in clarifying relevant factors and ascertaining what to feel or do. And attaining practical success in terms of resolving moral dilemmas or bringing about positive moral effects might be taken as indicative of correct guidance by *liangzhi*. However, given that one might simply luck into successful moral resolutions, or that one's selfish desires will coincidentally yield them (e.g. rescuing a person because one finds him or her physically attractive, or because one wants to be regarded a hero), such practical successes cannot guarantee that one was, in fact, subjectively prompted by *liangzhi*. A best case would be where practical success was paired with compelling subjective experience and also the assent of reliable peers, all of which might bolster one's confidence in having truly eliminated selfish desires and followed *liangzhi* alone.

But there will almost always be room for doubt. Ultimately, one must have the confidence in one's subjective experience to simply *act*, trusting that one has sufficiently controlled for selfishness and that one's immediate prompts therefore really are the workings of *liangzhi*.¹⁵

Thus, juxtaposing these two introspection driven methods allows us to see each in a clearer light. Whatever one might want to say about the shortcomings of conceptual analysis as a philosophical method (and experimental philosophers have plenty to say), the fruits of it are meant to be publicly disseminated, debated, scrutinized, and refined. Whether or not an analysis is successful hinges upon its acceptance by a broader community of users engaged in a shared project. The practice may be fraught with difficulties, but it remains a resolutely public one. By comparison, the orientation of the Lu-Wang school is to find ways of engaging with the world on a very personal level. Diligently (even *ruthlessly*) introspecting to uncover any and all selfish desires and motivations, purging one's mind of impure thoughts so that *liangzhi* alone guides—all of this is highly subjective. Indeed, it can't but be subjective (Nivison 1996, 51)

VI

Seen within its current context, experimental philosophy is a development in a particular time and place—namely, in analytic philosophy departments in the Anglo-American world at the turn of the 21st century. However, while the projects and motivations for experimental philosophy are diverse, one prominent theme is skepticism about philosophical methods (such as conceptual analysis or the use of thought experiments) that rely on introspection and intuition. And while it's true that appeals to intuition grew in prominence over the last half of the 20th century, intuitive or introspective methods have flourished in other places and at other times, including the Neo-Confucian debates of the Song and Ming dynasties.

This is especially true in the domain that's been the focus of this paper: morality, a domain where, as Knobe and Nichols note, 'it's much harder to maintain that the disputes are so disconnected from commonsense intuitions' as they are, say, in formal logic or theories of mental representation (2008, p. 9). As they put it,

for many standard philosophical problems—for example, problems concerning free will, personal identity, knowledge, and morality—if it weren't for

¹⁵ This aspect of the Lu-Wang school has been fruitfully compared and contrasted with existentialism. See, for example, Nivison (1973) and Ivanhoe (1996). My thanks to the editor and an anonymous referee for prompting me to further clarify this criticism of the Lu-Wang wing

commonsense intuitions, there wouldn't *be* a felt philosophical problem. The problem of moral responsibility, for instance, can't be read off of the biological or psychological facts. It arises because people think of themselves as morally responsible, and this seems at odds with other important and plausible world views... Philosophical discussions of moral responsibility are captivating precisely because they engage our everyday views of ourselves, by threatening, supporting, or exposing problems in those views. (Ibid)

So it shouldn't be surprising that appeals to intuition in certain philosophical domains would appear throughout history and across cultures, for these domains are keyed in important ways to ordinary views and usage.

This is certainly true of the Neo-Confucian philosophical tradition, which grappled with the idea that one's intuitive inclinations might be a source of objective moral knowledge. What's interesting to note, though, is that this tradition exemplifies the same impulse to test, question, or otherwise doubt intuitions with a drive toward investigation that is not dissimilar to the one we see in experimental philosophy. And while it's true that the particular methods of investigation differ, the drive to escape the confines of the subjective is the same. Taking note of how such general philosophical dynamics play out across various traditions of thought help us to understand how philosophical theories form and develop, and to search for common patterns and resources among them.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss these ideas with several audiences during 2016, including those at the "Experimental Philosophy Through History" Conference at New York University, the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting, the Columbia Neo-Confucian Seminar, and the Ethno-Epistemology Conference in Kanazawa, Japan. I am also grateful to Steve Angle, PJ Ivanhoe, Alberto Vanzo, and Anderson Weekes for comments and criticisms on an early draft, which resulted in considerable additions, corrections, and amendments. Finally, I am indebted to Michael Beaney and the anonymous referees for extensive and probing comments and criticisms throughout the submission process.

References

Alexander, J. (2012). *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Alexander, J., Mallon, R., & Weinberg, J. M. (2010). Accentuate the negative. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1(2), 297–314.

- Angle, S. C. (2005). Sagely ease and moral perception. *Dao*, 5(1), 31–55.
- Angle, S. C. (2009). *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Appiah, K. A. (2008). Experimental Philosophy. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 82(2), 7–22.
- Bloom, I. (1995). *Knowledge painfully acquired: the Kún-chih chi*. Columbia University Press.
- Chan, W.-T. (1963a). *A Source-Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chan, W.-T. (1963b). *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*. Columbia University Press.
- Cheng, C.-Y. (1991). *New dimensions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophy*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Chou, C. P., & Shih, H. (2013). *English Writings of Hu Shih: Chinese Philosophy and Intellectual History*. Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Fung, Y.-M. (2001). Three dogmas of New Confucianism: A perspective of analytic philosophy. In B. Mou (Ed.), *Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions* (pp. 245–266). LaSalle: Open Court.
- Graham, A. C. (1990). *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature: Logic and Reality*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Graham, A. C. (1992). *Two Chinese Philosophers*. La Salle: Open Court Publishing.
- Hansen, C. (1992). *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. (1996). “Existentialism” in the school of Wang Yangming. In P. J. Ivanhoe (Ed.), *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics* (pp. 250–264). LaSalle: Open Court Publishing.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. (2000). *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. (2002). *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. (2010a). Lu Xiangshan’s Ethical Philosophy. In J. Makeham (Ed.), *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (pp. 249–266). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. (2010b). The values of spontaneity. In *Taking Confucian ethics seriously: contemporary theories and applications*. State University of New York Press.
- Kauppinen, A. (2007). The rise and fall of experimental philosophy. *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action*, 10(2),

95–118.

- Kim, Y. (2003). Luo Qinsun (1465-1547) and His Intellectual Context. *T'oung Pao*, 89(4/5), 367–441.
- Kim, Y. S. (2000). *The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi (1130-1200)*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
- Knobe, J. (2016). Experimental philosophy Is cognitive science. In J. Sytsma & W. Buckwalter (Eds.), *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy* (pp. 37–52). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Knobe, J., & Nichols, S. (2008). An experimental philosophy manifesto. In J. Knobe & S. Nichols (Eds.), *Experimental Philosophy* (Vol. 1, pp. 3–14). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Knobe, J., Buckwalter, W., Nichols, S., Robbins, P., Sarkissian, H., & Sommers, T. (2012). Experimental philosophy. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63, 81–99.
- Ludwig, K. (2007). The epistemology of thought experiments: First person versus third person approaches. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 31(1), 128–159.
- Machery, E. (2012). Expertise and intuitions about reference. *Theoria. Revista de Teoria, Historia Y Fundamentos de La Ciencia. Segunda Epoca*, 27(1), 37–54.
- Nado, J. (2014). Philosophical Expertise. *Philosophy Compass*, 9(9), 631–641.
- Nivison, D. S. (1973). Moral Decision in Wang Yang-ming: The Problem of Chinese "Existentialism." *Philosophy East & West*, 23(1/2), 121–137.
- Nivison, D. S. (1996). Can virtue be self-taught? In B. W. Van Norden (Ed.), *The Ways of Confucianism* (pp. 45–57). LaSalle: Open Court.
- Schwitzgebel, E., & Cushman, F. (2012). Expertise in moral reasoning? Order effects on moral judgment in professional philosophers and non-philosophers. *Mind & Language*, 27(2), 135–153.
- Schwitzgebel, E., & Cushman, F. (2015). Philosophers' biased judgments persist despite training, expertise and reflection. *Cognition*, 141, 127–137.
- Sellars, W. (1991). *Science, Perception and Reality*. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company.
- Thompson, Kirill, "Zhu Xi", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/zhu-xi/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/zhu-xi/).
- Tien, D. W. (2010). Metaphysics and the basis of morality in the philosophy of Wang Yangming. In J. Makeham (Ed.), *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (pp. 295–314). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Tiwald, J. (2016). Xunzi among the Neo-Confucians. In E. L. Hutton (Ed.), *The Dao Companion to Xunzi*. Springer.

- Tiwald, J., & Van Norden, B. W. (2014). *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Tobia, K., Buckwalter, W., & Stich, S. (2013). Moral intuitions: Are philosophers experts? *Philosophical Psychology*, 26(5), 629–638.
- Van Norden, B. W. (2007). *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Norden, B. W. (2008). *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Williamson, T. (2005). Armchair philosophy, metaphysical modality and counterfactual thinking. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105(1), 1–23.
- Williamson, T. (2007). *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.