

## ***Liangzhi* and Conscience: Intercultural Grammars of Moral Knowing between China and the West**

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**ABSTRACT:** This study explores how moral understanding is shaped by language and culture, using the encounter between the Chinese concept of *liangzhi* and Western notions of moral conscience as a point of departure. It argues that these frameworks do not merely represent different ethical theories but sustain distinct ways of speaking, reasoning, and feeling about the moral life. The paper proposes that intercultural dialogue should therefore be approached as a process of linguistic clarification rather than conceptual translation. By examining how moral knowledge functions within different “forms of life,” it suggests that the work of intercultural philosophy lies not in reconciling traditions but in learning to communicate across their moral grammars. Such dialogue transforms ethical universality from a single system into a shared yet plural field of meaning.

**KEYWORDS:** Comparative Philosophy; Intercultural Studies; Moral epistemology; *liangzhi*; Cross-cultural dialogue

### **Introduction**

The contemporary debate about moral subjectivity remains suffused with implicit normative premises that are often treated as universal. Such is the case of an atomistic individual as the primary locus of moral agency, the primacy of discursive reason in moral justification, and a sharp public/private bifurcation separating moral conscience from social practice. These premises not only shape philosophical inquiry but also structure the kinds of empirical and hermeneutic questions deemed legitimate. The central question of this paper is whether the Chinese concept of *liangzhi* (良知) presents a challenge to Western moral philosophy. If this Chinese model of moral selfhood is

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systematically different, then Western theories may need to revise their universalist claims. Though diverse in its own right, this tradition is characterized by certain dominant strands that elevate the autonomous individual, privilege rational justification, and demarcate a clear boundary between the moral interior and the legal or political exterior.

This article uses *liangzhi* as a ‘cultural keyword’ for two purposes. First, to explicate this Chinese moral framework. And second, to perform a constructive intercultural interrogation that exposes the normative and conceptual limits of contemporary Western frameworks while avoiding facile relativism. This question, however, is not purely philosophical but intercultural in scope. The confrontation between *liangzhi* and the Western moral imagination exemplifies the transformative power of encounter, in which philosophical reflection becomes an act of cultural translation as defended by Fernet-Betancourt (2020, p. 28):

The encounter with the other is thus an interpellation; an interpellation from which our way of thinking ought to be rethought; for in that situation, we experience that there is another horizon of understanding that we did not find and which, for that very reason, challenges us as a possibility for re-perspectivizing our own original position.

Within this perspective, the paper contributes to intercultural studies by examining how moral knowledge operates as a culturally embedded grammar rather than a universally transparent faculty. The issue is therefore not only what *liangzhi* means in Chinese philosophy, but how its meaning illuminates the possibilities and limits of moral understanding across civilizations.

However, before embarking on this encounter, we must confront a prior, meta-philosophical challenge: is a dialogue between *liangzhi* and Western moral philosophy even possible under a shared category of inquiry? As Bryan Van Norden (1996, p. 225) asks, “to decide that Chinese thought is too different to be called “philosophy” would not be to disparage it; it would simply be to recognize that there has to be enough similarity between Western philosophy and any non-Western candidate for us to recognize (or sensibly decide) that they are engaged in the same activity”. He acknowledges the apparent ethnocentrism of this position, noting that “Philosophy is a Western word”, but counters that it is equally ethnocentric to ‘assume that every other culture must be engaged in what we call “philosophy.”’ Van Norden’s (1996, p. 225) solution is not to decide *a priori*, but to empirically investigate, which means “we should look at what other cultures in fact do”.

Following this insight, the present study adopts a constructive engagement model of comparative philosophy. Mou (2022, p. 5) defines comparative philosophy as “a general way of doing philosophy through cross tradition engagement toward world philosophy”. Deriving on this articulation, the investigation treats comparison as an argumentative, interpretive exchange rather than a catalogue of exotic contrasts. Mou's adequacy conditions, recognition of the same object as a whole,

sensitivity to eligible perspectives, openness to new perspectives, and pursuit of concordant complementarity, serve as safeguards against reductionism and parochialism (Mou, 2022, p. 17–18). I frame the comparative task as interpretive reconstruction, recovering how *liangzhi* is articulated in its native contexts, followed by critical philosophical testing of how these features interact with, correct, or supplement Western categories.

The study combines three interrelated strands. First, textual hermeneutic analysis anchors the inquiry in classical and subsequent articulations of *liangzhi*, particularly within the Wang Yangming lineage. Second, an anthropologically informed cultural reading situates *liangzhi* within what Sun (2015, p. 8) diagnoses as a Chinese “*liangzhi* system”, a deep cultural structure characterized by embodiment, heart mind logic, and relational personhood. This reading supplies the social practices and affective modalities that make the concept intelligible as lived moral knowledge. Third, the paper advances meta methodological reflection. It tests whether Western categories can adequately capture *liangzhi*, specifically conscience as inner judgment, autonomy as non-relational self-governance, and propositional moral reasoning. It also tests whether new categories are required, specifically embodied moral knowing, relational selfhood, and enactive moral epistemology.

I adopt three methodological safeguards. First, against essentialization, *liangzhi* is treated not as a timeless essence but as a historically variegated family of practices whose core feature is the inseparability of knowing and doing (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一). Second, against reductive assimilation, the approach resists forcing *liangzhi* into preformed Western categories by interrogating both Western presuppositions and *liangzhi*'s functional role in Chinese moral practice. Third, against relativistic dismissiveness, deploying Mou's (2022, p. 16–20) conditions allows normative evaluation without cultural condescension, seeking concordant complementarity where appropriate. The study thus aligns with intercultural philosophy (Panikkar, 1999, p. 10), which regards philosophical inquiry as a dialogical space where different worlds of meaning coexist without subsumption. The comparative method becomes intercultural hermeneutics, testing whether moral reason can be re articulated in plural idioms while retaining normative depth.

## **1. Liangzhi as a Cultural System: Holism and Relationality**

The term *liangzhi* first appears in the *Mengzi* as part of a broader moral anthropology that conceives human nature as innately oriented toward the good:

That which a person is able to do without learning it is called *liangneng* [innate ability]; that which one knows without deliberation is called *liangzhi* [innate knowledge]. There are no young children who do not know enough to love their parents, and none who, as they grow

older, do not know enough to respect their elder brothers. To be affectionate toward those close to one is *ren* [benevolence], to respect elders is *yi* [integrity]. (Mengzi, 1998)

Mencius's (Mengzi 孟子) (1998) passage encodes a moral epistemology in which spontaneous affect, 'the heart of compassion', functions as immediate moral cognition. *Liangzhi* here names an immediate, affectively charged knowing that precedes conceptual reflection. It is spontaneous and embodied rather than discursive, but it is also irreducibly relational. The paradigmatic expressions of *liangzhi* are not solitary acts of cognition but felt responses within the kinship network. To know is to feel rightly, and to feel rightly is already to know what ought to be done.

This early conception links moral knowledge to the structure of the mind that fuses cognition and emotion. For Mencius (1988, p. 328-329), the four beginnings (*siduan* 四端)—the heart of compassion, shame, deference, and right-wrong—are the sprouts of benevolence, integrity, propriety and wisdom respectively. These are not theoretical capacities but affective movements of the mind, as they constitute an epistemology of moral feeling. It is an optimistic view of human potential, asserting that our path to becoming good people lies not in imposing external rules, but in looking inward, identifying our natural moral inclinations, and diligently cultivating them. As Fathi (2024, p. 69) observed, the Mencian moral act is an act of "self-actualization" within a field of human relationships, rather than a deduction from principles.

Later Confucianism preserved this holistic logic. In the Song and Ming periods, *liangzhi* was given new metaphysical depth through the synthesis of *li* (principle) and *qi* (vital energy). Zhu Xi saw moral knowledge as participation in the universal *li* that structures all things, but Wang Yangming (2014, p. 5) radicalized the claim by collapsing the distinction between *li* and the human mind itself, when he affirmed that "the mind is principle". Moral knowing, therefore, is not an individual faculty interpreting an external order but the self-illumination of a world-mind continuous with nature.

Wang (2014, p. 10, 25) explicitly names *liangzhi* as the most virtuous moral compass: "The original substance of the mind is *liangzhi*, and it naturally knows (...) [and] the sage's heart is a clear mirror without a speck of dust lodged in it, so it requires no polishing." Here *liangzhi* is both epistemic and ontological, since it is how things are known and how reality itself is disclosed. The metaphor of the mirror underscores its reflexive clarity, as moral perception is the direct manifestation of one's participation in the cosmic pattern. When obscured by self-interest, the mirror is clouded, but never destroyed, for cultivation simply removes the obscurity. Knowledge, feeling and action form a single process of self-clarification. Wang's doctrine of the "unity of knowledge and action" elaborates this inseparability. In one of his best-known passages, Wang (2014, p. 101) writes: "When one knows filial

piety, he will be filial; when one knows brotherly respect, he will be respectful. Therefore, knowledge is the beginning of action, and action the completion of knowledge”.

In this light, *liangzhi* is not a static possession but a living event of enactment. Knowing is performative, it realizes itself through doing. Such an epistemology is inherently embodied, and moral cognition happens through comportment, gesture, and responsive attunement. Recent interpreters emphasize this dimension. Ping and Israel (2020, p. 74), for example, argue that *liangzhi* should be read as the originary reality of human moral being, luminous and affective rather than propositional: “As a human being’s originary reality, *liangzhi* is primordial, present from the beginning (...) the fundamental essence of mind (or *liangzhi*) is also at the same time the root cause by reason of which experiential acts conform with principle”.

The unity of knowing and acting is mirrored by a unity of self and cosmos. Wang (2014, p. 86) describes the relation as “Heaven, Earth, and everything are fundamentally one body with me”. Human *liangzhi* is continuous with the generative *qi* that constitutes the universe. The moral self is therefore coextensive with the world. In knowing rightly, one resonates with the rhythm of Heaven. *Liangzhi* thus fuses epistemology, cosmology, and ethics into a single ontological field.

This holistic structure stands in contrast not because it opposes analysis but because it refuses the dichotomies that underlie analytical separation: mind/body, cognition/emotion, theory/practice. The mind is simultaneously cognitive and affective, and moral understanding is inseparable from empathy and embodied sensitivity. Classical Chinese epistemology conceives the external world “as a network of relations forming a dynamic structure” in which the human mind is itself part of that structure (Rošker, 2014, p. 2). Knowing something, therefore, means participating in its pattern rather than representing it from outside.

Sun Longji’s analysis of Chinese culture’s deep structure reinforces this point by highlighting the relational ontology of the person. In Chinese cultural logic, a human being is realized only within networks of relationships. Sun observes that “only in social relationships can benevolence be realized; if these ties are removed, the person evaporates” (Sun, 2015, p. 16). The traditional Confucian expression “the humane one is human” (Mengzi, 1988, p. 1223) encodes this co-definition, for the character of the virtue *ren* (仁) literally conjoins two people. As Sun further notes, Chinese language and ritual erode the boundaries of the isolated self, emphasizing instead role-embeddedness: ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger, friend-friend. The subject of morality is thus always a relational self, and *liangzhi*, as the internalized awareness of these roles, is necessarily intersubjective. Sun also links this relationality to a broader cultural ideal of *tianren heyi* (天人合一), the unity of Heaven and human. The self’s moral awareness is a microcosmic reflection of cosmic

order, and the moral act is not obedience to an external rule but the spontaneous realization of harmony between the human heart-mind and the pattern of Heaven. This correspondence presupposes an embodied responsiveness, since as one's emotions and bodily comportments align with others and with nature, the moral world coheres. In this anthropological reading, *liangzhi* is the moral sense of this alignment, a mode of lived attunement to relational balance. The concept's richness stems from its capacity to integrate levels, such as cosmic, social or psychological, without compartmentalization.

The historical and cultural trajectory from Mencius to Wang Yangming and beyond thus reveals *liangzhi* as more than an ethical intuition. Moral awareness is not the application of universal rules but the dynamic enactment of harmony within a living network of relations. The child's spontaneous affection for parents in Mencius, the sage's luminous mirror in Wang Yangming, and Sun Longji's relational person all describe different facets of one pattern: the inseparability of cognition, emotion, and relation in Chinese moral life.

*Liangzhi* operates within a worldview that denies the autonomy of the moral subject in favour of embeddedness; it assumes that to know rightly is to feel and act in resonance with others and with the world. In this sense, *liangzhi* is the living heart of Chinese moral holism, a self-illuminating awareness that grounds ethical life in relational harmony rather than in abstract deliberation.

## **2. The Western Moral Tradition: A Contrasting Cultural System**

The Western moral tradition developed within a markedly different cultural horizon. It's a culture background that elevates the autonomous individual, privileges rational justification, and demarcates a clear boundary between the moral interior and the legal or political exterior. These are not simply philosophical abstractions but cultural structures of moral life that, over centuries, shaped how Western societies conceive responsibility, conscience, and virtue. As Charles Taylor (1989, p. 211) observes, Western modernity is characterized by "the affirmation of ordinary life", a moral field centered on self-articulation and rational autonomy.

The Western moral imagination begins with the Greek discovery of *logos*, which is the idea that reason is the defining human faculty and that moral inquiry proceeds through dialogue and argument. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates claims that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato, 1997, 38a), situating the moral vocation in a reflective, rational self. Socratic ethics depends on questioning received norms, exposing contradictions, and bringing implicit beliefs to conscious articulation. The point is not obedience to custom but the cultivation of self-knowledge through dialectical reasoning. As MacIntyre (2007, p. 112) notes, this inaugurates a tradition in which morality becomes a "task of justification", inextricably linked to rational discourse. Even Aristotle (1999, 1102b25-30), though more attuned to habituated virtue than to rational deduction, grounds the good

life (*eudaimonia*) in the actualization of the rational soul, as moral excellence consists in the right use of reason to guide desires. The moral agent, thus conceived, is an individual rational subject who deliberates, chooses, and assumes responsibility for his actions through reasoned understanding.

This rational-deliberative image of moral agency persisted, but it was transformed through Christianity, which relocated the moral center inward. In Augustine's (1838, p. 203) *Confessions*, conscience becomes the interior voice of God, an inner tribunal where the soul measures itself against divine law: "Thou wert within, and I abroad". The moral life now revolves around introspection and self-examination, a turn inward that prepared the conceptual ground for the modern "self". As Taylor (1989, p. 129) argues, this Augustinian interiority marks the emergence of the Western notion of an inward moral space, where authenticity and integrity become primary moral ideals. Yet even this inner domain retains the intellectualized cast of Greek rationalism, as the moral self discerns right from wrong through judgment, confession, and rational prayer, not through relational resonance or embodied attunement as in *liangzhi*. The moral subject becomes a solitary thinker addressing a transcendent authority rather than a participant in an immanent network of relations.

With the rise of humanism and the Enlightenment, this inward moral space was secularized and universalized. The early modern revolutions in epistemology redefined the moral agent as a self-transparent consciousness capable of rational autonomy. Descartes's (1998, p. 18) dictum "I think, therefore I am" established reflection as the foundation of certainty. On the other hand, Locke's (1999, p. 318) made self-awareness the seat of moral accountability, as to him 'person' stands for a "thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself". The moral self thus became a juridical and epistemic unit, endowed with rights, conscience, and freedom. Alasdair MacIntyre (2007, p. 32) notes that this individualism underlies both Kantian autonomy and liberal humanism, as the "democratized self which has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it is in and for itself nothing".

In Kant, this trajectory reaches its most systematic articulation. Kant's (2002, p. 37) ethics transforms moral life into an exercise of pure practical reason: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". The authority of morality arises not from divine command or social convention but from the rational will itself. Every rational being, as an autonomous law-giver, is a member of the kingdom of ends. This moral vision universalizes the structure of self-legislation: the categorical imperative requires that one abstract from particular attachments and emotions to judge by reason alone. As Barbara Herman (1985, p. 432) observes, for Kant, the 'good will' is an 'intellectual disposition', not a feeling or virtue of the heart. This is because "agents' maxims should conform to the principle of the Categorical Imperative (that

is, they should act from the motive of duty), and their maxims must satisfy the Categorical Imperative procedure (that is, they must not be contrary to duty)".

When actions are proposed under the authority of deontology, the self is bound not through relational harmony but through rational necessity. Whereas *liangzhi* integrates knowing, feeling, and acting into an embodied unity, Kantian morality isolates the cognitive moment as the site of duty's legitimacy. The moral law is inward, but its universality requires detachment from the contingent ties that define relational moralities.

From Socratic elenchus to Kantian deontology and, later, Habermasian discourse ethics, moral validity is a matter of public reason. As Habermas (1990, p. 66) formulates it, "only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse". The ideal moral community is a community of interlocutors governed by argument. Such a conception presupposes that moral disagreement can, in principle, be resolved by rational deliberation. Such is a presupposition that, while foundational to liberal democracy, differs markedly from traditions in which moral insight is understood as cultivated intuition rather than discursive consensus. The cultural valorization of reasoning thus functions as a moral pedagogy: to be mature, one must give reasons for one's convictions, articulate principles, and defend them in debate.

Closely linked to this is the Western conception of conscience as an interiorized rational witness. In the Thomistic synthesis, conscience was not a separate faculty but an act of the practical intellect, which Aquinas defined as "the application of knowledge to action" (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 79, a. 13). While for Aquinas this intellectual act was guided by the eternal law, the statement itself exemplifies the Western conviction that moral judgment is an inner rational process. The modern descendants of this tradition, the language of 'following one's conscience', the notion of civil disobedience, and the rhetoric of human rights extend a similar structure, which involves the conscience as the autonomous tribunal of the self.

The centrality of the individual moral subject gives rise to a distinctive architecture of social life. The liberal political tradition, from Locke to Mill, posits a sphere of individual liberty secured by rights, in which each person's moral conscience is protected from coercion. Mill (2001, p. 13) codifies this ethos: "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign". This principle expresses more than political philosophy, as it crystallizes a cultural intuition that moral worth resides in autonomy. Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985, p. 32), based on Alexis de Tocqueville's coined term, described this as the "habits of the heart" of individualism, a moral language centered on personal authenticity, choice, and self-reliance. In this cultural system, the highest moral achievement is not harmonious participation but principled independence.

From this individualism follows the Western differentiation between private morality and public law. Classical liberalism delineates two domains: an inner sphere of belief, conscience, and moral sentiment, and an external realm of political obligation. Law governs behavior, not motives; morality guides inner conviction. John Locke (1963, p. 70) insists that “the care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate”, thereby institutionalizing the idea that religion and morality belong to a private domain of conscience. This separation, amplified by the Enlightenment’s secularism, produced a conception of morality as a personal matter of conviction, while civic life is governed by neutral laws of reason. Max Weber (1950, p. 70) later described this as a “liberal enlightenment” of the world, as modernity dissects the unity of ethical and cosmic order into differentiated value spheres. The legal system enforces external norms; morality is relegated to the private conscience.

This public–private bifurcation has far-reaching consequences for Western moral psychology. It allows moral pluralism, which means that different individuals may hold incompatible moral beliefs without undermining the public order, but it also normalizes a form of compartmentalization. One may be privately virtuous yet publicly neutral, or publicly dutiful yet privately conflicted.

Modern moral philosophy continues to reflect this architecture. Even attempts to move beyond rationalism, such as Hume’s sentimentalism or the moral particularism of Williams and Nussbaum, retain the focus on the individual agent’s inner life. Hume’s (1896, p. 217) assertion that “reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions” shifts the ground but not the structure, as morality remains the domain of personal feeling and reflection. In all these variations, moral authenticity is defined in terms of inner sincerity rather than relational harmony.

Contemporary sociology and anthropology have underscored how deeply these assumptions permeate Western moral practice. Richard Shweder (2003, p. 163) distinguishes between “ethics of autonomy,” characteristic of Western societies, and “ethics of community” or “divinity,” more prevalent elsewhere. The former locates moral value in individual rights, harm avoidance, and personal choice; the latter in social roles and relational obligations. Western ethics, in this schema, privileges the self’s freedom to choose over the relational imperative to harmonize. Similarly, Nisbett (2003, p. 48) contrasts the “analytic” cognitive style of the West, which isolates objects and attributes causal agency to individuals, with the “holistic” style of East Asian thought, which emphasizes relations and context. These cultural logics underlie differing intuitions about moral responsibility. Westerners see wrongdoing as the failure of individual will, whereas Chinese traditions might view it as a disturbance in relational balance.

To characterize the Western moral system as individualist, rationalist, and dualistic is not to critique it but to situate it within its own cultural framework. It provides tools for self-critique, universal justice, and protection of conscience that have proved historically powerful. Yet it also

delineates the horizon within which moral discourse unfolds. On one hand, the assumption that ethics begins and ends with the deliberating individual, that rational articulation is the highest form of moral expression. On the other, that inner conviction may legitimately remain private.

### 3. The Intercultural Clash: Where the Models Diverge

Intercultural misunderstanding often begins not in doctrine but in language. When a Western moral philosopher invokes ‘conscience’ or ‘reason’, and a Confucian speaks of *liangzhi*, both may believe they are referring to a universal moral faculty. Yet the resemblance is deceptive. As Wittgenstein (1958, §43) famously observes, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. Words like ‘knowledge’, ‘feeling’, or ‘action’ do not carry their sense with them across cultures, as they are embedded in distinct forms of life, be it networks of practices, values, or tacit expectations that give them their moral resonance. The same term may belong to an entirely different ‘language-game’ (*Sprachspiel*), governed by its own rules of use. The Confucian concern for the rectification of names (*zhengming* 正名) converges with this insight. In the *Analects*, Confucius (2002, p. 352) asserts that social order depends on linguistic clarity: “If names are not correct, language is not in accord with truth; if language is not in accord with truth, affairs cannot be carried out successfully”. To understand another culture’s moral thought, therefore, is not merely to translate words but to enter the moral life in which those words live. This approach situates the analysis within an intercultural grammar of dialogue, where philosophical reflection must pass through translation and misrecognition before arriving at genuine understanding. Fernet-Betancourt (2020, p. 64) explains that this requires a shift in which the other “ceases to be perceived as the ‘interpretable,’ because they emerge as an ‘interpreter’; as a subject who offers me a perspective from which I can interpret and see myself”.

The friction between *liangzhi* and Western conscience is therefore not merely conceptual but communicative, as it shows how each moral world negotiates intelligibility when its basic linguistic and ethical assumptions are exposed to another. The stakes of this linguistic divergence are rendered with particular clarity by Heidegger (1971, p. 5):

Some time ago I called language, clumsily enough, the house of Being. If man by virtue of his language dwells within the claim and call of Being, then we Europeans presumably dwell in an entirely different house than Eastasian man (...) and so, dialogue from house to house remains nearly impossible.

Such an admission, from within the Western philosophical tradition, acknowledges what has been suggested: that the encounter between *liangzhi* and Western conscience is not a disagreement within a shared conceptual space but a meeting between different dwellings. To speak of ‘conscience’

is to inhabit a house built by Augustine, Kant, and the liberal tradition; to speak of *liangzhi* is to dwell in a house whose architecture is Mencian, Neo-Confucian, and relational. The difficulty of dialogue is not a failure of translation but the weight of dwelling.

Consider a scenario of a moral dilemma. Imagine a case familiar to both philosophical ethics and everyday life, in which a person must decide whether to tell a painful truth or preserve harmony by withholding it. In a Western framework, moral evaluation typically begins by abstracting from the situation to identify the governing principle. Should one act according to the rule of honesty or the duty to avoid harm? From Kant (2002, p. 42) to contemporary deontology, moral reasoning seeks universalizability, therefore, if truth-telling is a duty, it must be unconditional. The moral subject deliberates alone, consulting reason and conscience as inner tribunals. The ethical question is resolved when the individual reaches a decision consistent with a universal law of conduct.

Within a *liangzhi* framework, however, such abstraction already distorts the problem. The question is not “What rule should I follow?” but “What act restores relational harmony in this situation?” The feeling of moral rightness is not detached reflection but embodied attunement to relational equilibrium. The correct action arises when the agent’s mind is clear of selfish desire and responsive to the needs of others. As Wang Yangming (2014, p. 101) wrote: “When one sees a child about to fall into a well and feels alarm and compassion, this is *liangzhi* manifesting itself”. Moral insight is immediate, emotional, and enacted. To deliberate too long is already to have lost contact with the moral field.

This difference in moral grammar – that is, the underlying structure of concepts and norms that shapes how moral language functions within a form of life – principled reasoning versus relational responsiveness, illustrates the problem of translation that both Wittgenstein and Confucius warn against. Each system uses the word ‘know’, but ‘to know’ in the *liangzhi* sense (*zhi* 知) is to be moved. Contrarily, in the Western sense, it is to grasp and judge. To render *liangzhi* as ‘innate knowledge’ is therefore misleading if it implies propositional cognition. It belongs instead to a language-game in which knowledge and virtue are one, and where words like ‘truth’ and ‘feeling’ have inseparable meanings. Miscommunication arises not from bad faith but from divergent grammars. As Stanley Cavell (1979, p. 32) notes in his reading of moral language, “The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures”; to share words is not to share worlds.

Consider now, a second scenario, a figure of the hypocrite, to sharpen this contrast. In Western moral vocabulary, hypocrisy is a central vice, since to know the good and fail to act is the mark of

moral insincerity. It presupposes a bifurcation between inner conviction and outward behavior. Augustine's (1838, p. 149) confessional self is torn between will and action, "for if there be so many contrary natures, as there be conflicting wills; there shall now be not two only, but many", captures the moral drama of divided selfhood. Modern moral psychology retains this duality, as one can possess correct judgment but lack the strength to carry it out. The very idea of "weakness of will" (*akrasia*), from Aristotle to contemporary ethics, rests on the notion that knowledge and action can come apart.

In the *liangzhi* framework, such a separation is conceptually incoherent. If one knows the good but fails to act, then one never truly knew. As Wang Yangming (2014, p. 7) insists, "To know and not to act is not truly to know". *Liangzhi* collapses the Western distinction between conscience and conduct, intellect and volition. Moral failure is not a defect of will but a disturbance of clarity. This implies that the mind has been clouded by desire. A hypocrite, in the Confucian sense, is not one who fails to live up to inner conviction but one whose naming of himself, be it his roles, duties, or relations, is false. Moral order depends on rectifying these names, ensuring that language mirrors conduct.

Lastly, let's consider a third scenario, social harmony versus individual right, where we move from moral psychology to moral ontology. Western moral discourse, shaped by liberal and Christian humanism, often frames justice in terms of the rights and dignity of the individual. Kantian ethics and modern legal thought define moral obligation as respect for the autonomy of persons, as each rational being must be treated as an "end in itself" (Kant, 2002, p. 46). This grammar of rights has produced powerful moral achievements, with human rights law, equality before the law, and freedom of conscience. Yet it also presupposes that the moral subject stands apart from the social whole, negotiating obligations through contracts and principles.

In contrast, the *liangzhi* framework locates moral worth not in autonomy but in relational harmony. The paradigmatic moral act is not the assertion of right but the restoration of balance. As Sun Longji (2015, p. 23) notes:

Indeed, Chinese culture does not grant the "individual" legitimacy or spirituality, treating it merely as a "self" (a physical/relational entity). Thus, the "mind" that is determined by the individual oneself rather than constrained by others easily becomes a "selfish mind". Yet, this "selfish mind" must still operate within the magnetic field of human feelings, employing methods akin to "using another's force against them." In other words, actions that could otherwise be legitimate pursuits of one's own rights and interests, under this arrangement, become less than straightforward and upright. Moreover, under circumstances where the boundaries between self and others are unclear, they often end up infringing upon the rights and interests of others. Therefore, within Chinese culture, which harmonizes Yin and Yang and combines Confucianism and Daoism, we see on one hand the professed ideal of "selfless public spiritedness", and on the other hand, the existence of an ill-defined "selfish mind."

Sacrificing individual preference for collective harmony is thus experienced not as subordination but as moral maturity. To a Westerner, such deference may appear conformist. On the other hand, to a Confucian, insisting on one's personal right against the whole may appear immature or disharmonious. This is semantic misalignment, for the word 'freedom' in one language-game signifies independence; in another, the capacity to act in resonance with others. The task of intercultural ethics, then, is less to find equivalences than to cultivate what Mou (2022, p. 19) calls "constructive engagement", a dialogue in which each side learns the other's moral grammar without presuming universal translatability. This framework also explains why intercultural encounters often produce moral perplexity rather than mutual understanding. When Western human rights discourse criticizes practices justified by harmony, it perceives moral blindness. From the Chinese perspective, the critique reflects ethical fragmentation. Each side operates within a different linguistic conception of moral order. The point is not to relativize morality but to recognize that moral universals must be articulated through the clarity of their proper names.

The clash is therefore linguistic before it is ethical. As Cavell (1979, p. 208) insists, "the connection between "our words" and "what we mean" is a necessary one, this necessity is not established by universals, propositions, or rules, but by the form of life which makes certain stretches of syntactical utterance *assertions*". To understand another form of life is not to translate its words but to participate in its criteria. Intercultural ethics thus becomes a rectification of names in order to restore clarity to names by situating them within their rightful forms of life.

#### **4. Intercultural Productivity: What We Learn from the Friction**

The friction between *liangzhi* and Western moral thought reveals how intercultural misunderstanding can transform into knowledge, prompting each tradition to confront its own limits. As Panikkar (1999, p. 10) observed, dialogue is not an exchange of ideas but a communion of realities, "but this does not imply at all that the aim is a uniform unity or a reduction of all the pluralistic variety of Man into one single religion, system, ideology, or tradition". Intercultural understanding thus emerges not through synthesis but through what Raimon Panikkar (1999, p. 26-27) calls "diatopical hermeneutics", which is the work of interpreting cultures that originate from different conceptual worlds and share no common history. If *liangzhi* and Western moral rationalism represent distinct moral grammars, their productive friction lies in how each illuminates the blind spots of the other. This creates an epistemological tension that, far from needing resolution, may be the very condition of intercultural philosophy.

Wittgenstein's (1958, §19) late philosophy reminds us that "understanding a sentence means understanding a language" and that "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life". Moral terms,

likewise, cannot be abstracted from the ways of living in which they have sense. The recognition that “agreement in form of life” precedes “agreement in opinions” (Wittgenstein, 1958, §241) dissolves the illusion that universal ethical discourse could ever be achieved by translation alone. Yet, rather than lapsing into relativism, this recognition can be philosophically generative. This is because the limits of our shared language are not fixed; they can be extended through acknowledgment by learning to hear the moral words of another form of life. True dialogue requires a temporary suspension of the impulse to universalize, so that clarity can emerge from the patient reconstruction of meaning.

For the West, the encounter with *liangzhi* reveals the contingency of its moral individualism. As Taylor (1989, p. 185) observes, Western moral consciousness is deeply committed to the ethic of “self-responsible independence”, but this commitment can obscure the intersubjective and affective foundations of moral life. In the mirror of *liangzhi*, Western ethics sees its own abstraction as a rational self untethered from the body, the community, and the world that sustains it.

Conversely, the Western tradition offers to *liangzhi* a productive challenge of articulation and critique. If *liangzhi* risks dissolving individuality in relational harmony, the Western insistence on reason and principle provides a counterbalance, on which the capacity to universalize beyond context, to defend the individual against collective conformity, and to make moral accountability explicit. Mou (2022, p. 16) captures this complementarity when he writes that comparative philosophy should aim at “concordant complementary” rather than synthesis, which is a process where distinct perspectives engage, challenge, and supplement each other.

To learn from such friction, however, requires methodological humility. To impose a universal vocabulary of ethics, whether of rights or of harmony, risks silencing the local textures of moral life. Instead, intercultural philosophy must overcome what Lee (2018, p. 41) calls “habitual thinking”, in favor of a “situational” ethics grounded in contextual relations, yet open to reflective critique. From this standpoint, misunderstanding is not a failure to be eliminated but a site of insight. It discloses where moral languages stretch and strain, where meanings must be renegotiated. Each side thus learns to translate the other not into its own categories but into a space of mutual transformation. The intercultural philosopher’s task is not to choose between these poles but to hold them in productive tension through dialogue. As Tu Weiming (2013, p. 336) writes: “Dialogue, so conceived, is neither a tactic of persuasion nor a strategy of conversion but a way of generating mutual understanding through sharing common values and creating a new meaning of life together”.

At a deeper level, this dialogue forces a rethinking of what moral universality itself might mean. The Kantian image of the universal moral law assumes that rational structure alone can guarantee impartiality; *liangzhi* suggests instead that universality emerges from cultivated resonance, as an ethical attunement capable of encompassing all beings. Both are universal, but in different grammars:

one formal, one relational. The encounter between them thus pluralizes universality, transforming it from a single logic into a polyphony of moral voices. As William Connolly (1991, p. 166) argues, ethical universality today must be agonistic, forged through encounter, not imposed through system: “the universality of the struggle with mortality can (...) invoke an agonistic respect for difference through the self-experience of a life not exhausted by (...) one's official identity”.

What, then, does intercultural philosophy itself become in light of this friction? It becomes a discipline of translation. Not linguistic translation in the narrow sense but what Gadamer (2004, p. 305) called “fusion of horizons”, where understanding occurs through the interplay of differences rather than their subsumption.

In the context of an increasingly globalized moral landscape, this approach carries profound implications. The world's ethical debates on human rights, social justice and environmental stewardship are often framed in universalist terms that obscure their linguistic and cultural presuppositions. This view resonates with Fernet-Betancourt's (2020, p. 13) claim that intercultural philosophy must move beyond the mere comparison of systems toward a transformation of philosophical consciousness itself. To think interculturally is to let one's moral language be reshaped by the presence of another. In this sense, the dialogue between *liangzhi* and Western moral reason is not only a study in comparative ethics but an experiment in intercultural coexistence, an exercise in what de Mul (2011, p. 645) calls the “dissemination of horizons”. This concept means shattering the idea of a single, unified understanding. Instead of horizons merging or expanding to create shared meaning, they scatter into countless, ever-proliferating possibilities, preventing any final or definitive interpretation.

Intercultural philosophy, when guided by linguistic clarity and moral humility, becomes the very site where ethics renews itself, where naming and understanding, knowing and acting, converge. To borrow the Confucian image, when the names are correct, the world follows in order; when the words are attuned, so too are the hearts. The rectification of names, in this global age, may well begin with the rectification of our moral languages.

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