

# Perception and Genuine Knowledge in Wang Yangming

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## 1 Introduction

Wang Yangming (1472-1529) is widely recognized as the most influential philosopher of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and one of the most important philosophers in the whole tradition now called “Confucian”. His most celebrated doctrines concern the relationship between knowledge and virtuous action. Wang claimed that his predecessors had held that a person can act virtuously only if they first determine that their action will be virtuous by applying their knowledge of general moral laws to their predicament. Since on this picture, the person’s knowledge of these laws must precede their action (if it is to be virtuous), this view was associated with the slogan that knowledge comes first, and action later.

Wang rejected this picture. According to him, virtuous action requires an important cognitive achievement, but the relevant cognitive achievement – which Wang called “genuine knowledge” (*zhen zhi* 真知) – occurs *simultaneously* with virtuous action. Where his predecessors were associated with the slogan that knowledge comes first, Wang described his own view with the slogan, the “unity of knowledge and action” (知行合一). According to Wang’s position, a person has what he called “genuine knowledge” when and only when they are acting virtuously.

Wang’s reconceptualization of the connection between knowledge and virtuous action centered on his claim that there was an interesting cognitive achievement – genuine knowledge – which occurred when and only when a person was acting virtuously. To assess this claim – or even understand it – requires an understanding of what Wang meant by genuine knowledge. But if we turn to the literature on Wang in European lan-

guages for help, we will look in vain for a detailed analysis of this central notion. The literature has typically confined itself to broad remarks on the significance of Wang’s doctrine overall, without pinning down how those views fit with Wang’s detailed remarks about the psychology of virtuous people. This paper aims to fill this gap. I develop two possible views of the nature of genuine knowledge – the perceptual model, and the introspective model – and I argue for the latter.

Section 2 describes what Wang means by saying that knowledge and action are “unified”. Sections 3 and 4 consider what I take to be the orthodox view of the unity of knowledge and action, according to which Wang’s doctrine concerns a rich form of perception (Nivison (1973), Cua (1982) Angle (2005, 2009) Ivanhoe (2002, 2009, 2011)). Proponents of this orthodoxy have not always been clear in detail about what they take genuine knowledge to be, but they all advocate versions of what I call the *perceptual model*, according to which (very roughly; see below for a precise characterization) perception is a part of genuine knowledge. I consider two ways of developing this model. In section 3, I consider and argue against the idea that genuine knowledge is a form of perception. In section 4, I consider the claim that perception is merely a part of genuine knowledge. I show how this latter view can be developed in detail. Versions of the perceptual model are often motivated by the idea that Wang’s doctrine concerns a form of high-level perception of value qualities, which involves or requires an appropriate affective response to what is perceived (Cua (1982), Angle (2005, 2009)). But I argue that the best version of the perceptual model does not vindicate this idea: Wang does not highlight on the role of perception in virtuous action, or even have any distinctive views about the connection between perception and virtuous action; he merely allows (as everyone should) that perception can be part of the overall mental state of a virtuous person as they are acting virtuously. Section 5 then presents the introspective model, according to which genuine knowledge is a form of introspective knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Section 6 argues against the perceptual model and in favor of the introspective model. Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Unity

The introspective model and the perceptual model offer different interpretations of the metaphysical character of genuine knowledge. In this section I introduce constraints

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<sup>1</sup>Sometimes in ordinary English “introspection” describes an effortful process of directing one’s attention at one’s own mind, and considering its contents. I am not using the word in this way. Rather, I am following a standard philosophical usage according to which any knowledge of one’s own mind counts as introspective knowledge.

on an answer to this question by reviewing some background. I will be rehearsing conclusions about the structure of Wang's views about the unity of knowledge and action, which I argue for in detail in other places. I won't here repeat those arguments, and I will even keep citations to a minimum; the interested reader should consult sections 2-6 of "The Introspective Model of the Unity of Knowledge and Action" (hereafter "The Introspective Model").

The word I have followed tradition in translating as "unity" in Wang's slogan is better understood as "correspondence". Wang did not mean to claim that (genuine) knowledge and action are identical, but merely that the one occurs if and only if the other does. When Wang speaks of "genuine knowledge", he primarily speaks of various virtues as its objects: one has genuine knowledge of filial piety (*xiao* 孝 hereafter "filiality"), of fraternal respect (*ti* 悌 hereafter "respect"), and of compassion (*ce yin* 惻隱).<sup>2</sup> I argue elsewhere that Wang held that a person has genuine knowledge of filiality (for example) if and only if they are at that moment acting filially. In general, for all of these *F* (filiality, respect and compassion), Wang seems to have held that:

**Unity** A person genuinely knows *F*ness if and only if they are acting *F*ly.

Throughout this paper I will use "the relevant *F*" will be just filiality, respect and compassion. Wang presumably held that other examples of genuine knowledge were possible, the evidence is clearest for these examples, and I will focus on them.

Wang's endorsement of this principle shows that Wang's understanding of genuine knowledge differs in an important way from an ordinary way of thinking about knowledge. If one knows something, one typically knows it whether one is actively thinking about it or not. For instance, if Wei asks Xin whether Yun knows that Mencius was a philosopher, Xin can answer this question without checking whether Yun is at this moment asleep or preoccupied with some other topic. If Yun knows it, she knows it, regardless of what she is thinking about. But as it is described in Unity, genuine knowledge differs from knowledge in this respect. Even if a person is perfectly filial, there may well be times when they are not acting filially – perhaps their parents are thousands of miles away, and they are rightly preoccupied with whatever task is before them: there is no occasion right now for them to exhibit their filiality. Given Unity it would follow that, at that time, they do not have genuine knowledge of filiality. They would only have genuine knowledge of filiality when they are performing a filial action. This constraint on genuine knowledge – and the way it differs from knowledge as we ordinarily understand it – suggests that genuine knowledge is associated with

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<sup>2</sup>On the translation "compassion", see below, n. 18.

actively considering the aspects of the situation in question; one does not have genuine knowledge of filiality when in a dreamless sleep or preoccupied with some other question.

There is evidence, independent of the evidence for attributing Unity to Wang, that in his theoretical remarks about knowledge, Wang often thought of it as an episode associated with some form of active consideration or conscious grasp of its objects. I will still translate *zhi* as “knowledge” and *zhen zhi* as “genuine knowledge” throughout – *zhi* is in fact the word for knowledge – but in interpreting these expressions I will sometimes use the expression “episodes of (genuine) knowledge”, to highlight that in the relevant context Wang is discussing something which is a potentially short-lived episode. “Episode of knowledge” is a technical term without any significance on its own; it is just used to mark this important dimension of difference between these uses of the word for “knowledge” / “know” (*zhi* 知) and our words “knowledge” / “know”.<sup>3</sup>

Unity characterizes the central theoretical role genuine knowledge plays in Wang’s theory. But it tells us very little on its own about Wang’s views about how genuine knowledge fits into the psychology of a virtuous agent. Three further theses fill out Wang’s views about what it takes to act virtuously, and why virtuous action coincides with genuine knowledge.

The first of these three theses uses two important technical terms, which I will ex-

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<sup>3</sup>There are passages where Wang seems to be discussing episodes of this kind, there are also passages where he may be using *zhen zhi* (or related expressions) to describe a disposition. If he is describing a disposition in these passages, he presumably means a disposition to experience (what I call) episodes of genuine knowledge in the appropriate circumstances. If there are such uses, then there could be a disagreement about the sense in which “genuine knowledge” is used in the articulation of the unity of knowledge and action. If one thought that the “main” uses of *zhen zhi* denoted the disposition, and not the episode, then in place of Unity, one would instead consider:

**Dispositional Unity** A person experiences episodes of the exercise of the disposition of genuinely knowing *F*ness if and only if they are acting *F*ly.

An alternative, more eirenic position would hold that Wang could use “genuine knowledge” either to refer to episodes or to the disposition to experience such episodes. In that case, one would accept both Unity and Dispositional Unity, qualified so as to apply only to the appropriate uses of “genuine knowledge”.

My own preferred view is that Wang used *zhen zhi* only for episodes; in part for that reason, and in part because it will simplify the presentation greatly, I will exclusively discuss Unity (and not Dispositional Unity) in the main text. But my official stance in this paper is neutrality between the episodic and dispositional conceptions of genuine knowledge (and also the eirenic view which embraces them both). Nothing in my development of the perceptual model, or my arguments against it will depend on my use of Unity and the episodic conception of genuine knowledge in the main text; everything that I do below could be done with the dispositional conception of genuine knowledge and Dispositional Unity instead. For the most part, readers interested in the dispositional conception of genuine knowledge can construct the relevant arguments or principles by replacing “episode of genuine knowledge of” with “exercise of the disposition of genuine knowledge of” in the text below. For the most part I’ll leave that replacement as an exercise for the reader, but in a few key places (especially where this isn’t just a matter of “find and replace”) I’ll comment on the issue again explicitly in footnotes (nn. 7, 12, 20, 31).

plain before presenting the thesis itself. The first technical term is *yi* 意, which I will translate as “inclination”, throughout this paper.<sup>4</sup> There is an important difference between the mental events picked out by some of Wang’s key uses of “*yi*” and inclinations, which is roughly parallel to the difference between the mental events picked out by some of his key uses of “*zhi*” and knowledge. Inclinations can persist even when one is not considering the actions toward which they motivate one. If one has an inclination to go to the summer palace this summer, but is not yet decided whether to go, then even when one is asleep and not considering the issue, one may still have an inclination to go. But Wang does not always think of *yi* in this way; in his theoretical remarks on *yi* he often describes *yi* as arising and falling momentarily. This kind of remark suggests that the events denoted by these uses of “*yi*” are like the sensations associated with inclinations, the feelings related to wanting to perform an action, and are not the inclinations themselves. In the same way that, in the case of *zhi* (“knowledge”), Wang is focused on mental episodes as opposed to stable mental states (“episodes of knowledge”), so too in the case of *yi* (“inclinations”) Wang is often focused on mental episodes as opposed to stable mental states. For simplicity in what follows, I’ll assume that all of Wang’s uses of “inclinations” and episodes of this kind, and I’ll use the word “inclination” as a technical term standing in for Wang’s usage.<sup>5</sup>

The second technical term is “sincerity” or “wholeheartedness” (*cheng* 誠).<sup>6</sup> The *Great Learning*, a canonical text that will be important at numerous points in what follows, takes “making inclinations sincere” (*cheng yi* 誠意) to be one of four key aspects of personal ethical development. I argue elsewhere that Wang held that a person’s inclination is sincere (wholehearted) when and only when the person does not have any inclinations which conflict with it. For example, a person would not have a sincere inclination to cool their parents in the summer (a standard example of a filial action) if the person also has a conflicting (selfish) inclination to hike a nearby mountain and shirk their duty. In general, a person can have an inclination to do something but not try to do it. My inclination to keep my parents cool might be the gentlest tug, by contrast to the burning desire to hike the mountain, and I might go straight on the hike without

<sup>4</sup>I argue for this somewhat non-standard translation in detail in section 4 of “The Introspective Model”.

<sup>5</sup>It may be that for Wang’s the term “*yi*” is ambiguous and is sometimes used for a disposition, sometimes for an episode (presumably an exercise of the relevant disposition). But as in the case of “*zhen zhi*”, nothing important will turn on this in what follows: someone who thinks the more important notion is the disposition should take my discussion of inclinations as episodes to concern exercises of the relevant disposition. I won’t comment on this further below, even in notes, since inclinations are less central to the present paper than knowledge is.

<sup>6</sup>Although I believe “wholehearted” is a better translation, I will use the traditional translation of “sincerity” throughout, to make it easier to compare my remarks with standard translations.

making any attempt to cool my parents. But I argue that Wang held that if a person has a *sincere* or wholehearted inclination to do something, then they will try to do it. It's a natural thought: a person might have an inclination to do something but fail to try to do it if they have other conflicting inclinations; but if a person has a wholehearted inclination to do an action, they don't have any other inclinations which conflict with it, so they will try to perform the action. In fact, given that Wang sometimes seems to think of inclinations as mental episodes rather than states, it may be best to think of sincere inclinations themselves as episodes of trying. But even if we do not make this extra step of *identifying* the inclinations with the episodes of trying, it is clear that a person who has a sincere inclination will try to perform the action the inclination inclines them toward.

With these clarifications before us, the first of the three theses states that for the relevant *F*:

**Inclination Action** A person is acting *F*ly if and only if they have a sincere inclination to perform an *F* action.

The principle adds something important beyond the idea that a person who has a sincere inclination will try to perform the action that inclination inclines them toward. The further idea is that having a sincere inclination toward an *F* action *suffices* for acting *F*ly. Consider this claim in the case of filiality. Suppose that a person has a sincere inclination to cool their parents, so that the person tries to cool them. Suppose that in spite of trying to cool their parents, they fail – perhaps, for instance, they are captured by an invading army on the way to get the fan, or perhaps it is just too hot and the only tools available aren't enough to cool them down. Wang's thought – as codified in Inclination Action – is that in this case the bad fortune of being captured or of the temperature being too high has not prevented the person from acting filially, even though it has prevented them from performing the action they tried to perform. The fact that the person had a sincere inclination to perform a filial action was enough to determine that their action – regardless of the outcome of their attempts – was filial. In a slogan, if you try to act filially, you can't fail to act filially.

This style of position – according to which the physical consequences of a person's attempted actions cannot impugn their virtue – is familiar, and familiarly controversial. But scholars have not recognized that Wang endorsed this position, and as a result they have not recognized its importance to his thought overall. I defend the attribution of this principle to Wang, and explore issues connected to his adherence to it elsewhere. Here it will simply serve as the backdrop for our later accounts of genuine knowledge.

The second principle which characterizes the basic psychological mechanics of the connection between genuine knowledge and action concerns *liangzhi*, perhaps the signature notion of Wang's moral psychology. Although the issues surrounding the interpretation of *liangzhi* are complex, we can think of *liangzhi* here as a faculty somewhat like the conscience. *Liangzhi*, like the conscience, has two seemingly distinct aspects: one connected to affect and motivation (*liangzhi* can produce affective responses and also inclinations; the conscience can be a source of guilt); and one connected to knowledge (*liangzhi* recognizes the moral qualities of one's own mental events; the conscience can tell one what is right or wrong). The second of these features of *liangzhi* will be important here. Wang affirms again and again that *liangzhi* automatically and effortlessly recognizes the rightness or wrongness of one's mental events (sometimes he puts this point by speaking of goodness and badness instead of rightness and wrongness). For our purposes, we can restrict attention to inclinations:

**Knowing Right and Wrong** A person has a right/wrong (good/bad) inclination if and only if the person's *liangzhi* knows its rightness/wrongness.

If one has an inclination that is right or good, then one's *liangzhi* automatically recognizes its rightness or goodness. Moreover, if one's *liangzhi* recognizes the rightness or goodness of an inclination, then the person must have that inclination and it must be right or good.

Knowing Right and Wrong is a thesis about knowledge. But it doesn't yet tell us when that knowledge amounts to *genuine* knowledge. Our third thesis brings genuine knowledge into the picture. It says that for relevant *F*:

**Knowledge Inclination** A person genuinely knows *F*ness if and only if their *liangzhi* knows the rightness or goodness of a sincere inclination to perform an *F* action.

I will be assuming that a person can know the rightness or goodness of a sincere inclination only if they have that sincere inclination. Notice that like all of the principles of this paper I will be limiting examples to the "relevant" *F*, which are all good or right – I won't decide here whether Wang thought a person could have genuine knowledge also of bad qualities, or what form that would have taken. Everything I say is consistent with the idea that he thought there were some such examples, but I won't need the claim that there are any such examples in what follows.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>To illustrate how readily the claims in the main text can be extended to the dispositional conception of genuine knowledge described above in n. 3, here is the relevant modification that would be required to Knowledge Inclination:



I want to pause here to highlight the difference between genuine knowledge, *zhen zhi* (真知), which will be the main focus of this paper, and *liangzhi* (良知). These two technical terms of Wang's have the same second character, *zhi* 知 ("knowledge") and perhaps as a result of this, scholars have often run them together. But these two notions are crucially quite different. First, there is a contrast in the ways Wang uses these terms. "*Liangzhi*" (良知) is used most often to refer to a faculty, while "genuine knowledge" (真知) is not typically used to describe a faculty, but rather an elevated form of knowledge (or: episode of knowledge). There may be uses which reverse this pattern, where *liangzhi* is used to describe an episode and *zhen zhi* is used to describe a faculty. But the norm is the one I have just described. But second, and even more importantly, even when both are used for an exercise of a disposition (i.e. an episode) there is a contrast between them. Wang says again and again that even when people are corrupt they still exercise their *liangzhi*; their *liangzhi* still knows that what they are doing is wrong. But given Unity, since these people are not acting virtuously, they do not have genuine knowledge of a virtue that their action exhibits. While this distinction may be obvious when presented in this stark way, the tendency to conflate these notions is pervasive in the literature, so the reader should bear it in mind throughout. It is uncontroversial that *liangzhi* (the faculty) is responsible for some perception of the environment (in this sense it is quite different from the conscience) (e.g. *IPL* 168 (*QJ* 80)). It is also uncontroversial that *liangzhi* is responsible for some introspection. But whether genuine knowledge (*zhen zhi*) has an interesting relationship to perception is highly controversial. And I know of no other scholar who has proposed the conclusion I will be arguing for, namely, that genuine knowledge just is a form of introspection.

Knowledge Inclination connects a fact about a person's motivational state (the sincerity of their inclinations) to a fact about their epistemic situation (whether they have genuine knowledge). But what underwrites this connection? In a striking passage, Wang presents an argument that if a person has an inclination which conflicts with a good inclination, they cannot genuinely know the goodness of the good inclination. I will quote this passage at length here because I will refer to it repeatedly below. It is drawn from a text called the *Questions on the Great Learning* (大學問), a mature statement of Wang's views, in the form of a sort of commentary on passages from the *Great Learning*.<sup>8</sup> In the passage I will quote, Wang refers repeatedly to a famous part of the

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**Dispositional Knowledge Inclination** A person exercises their genuine knowledge of *F*ness if and only if their *liangzhi* knows the rightness or goodness of a sincere inclination to perform an *F* action.

<sup>8</sup>Chan translates the title of this work as "Inquiry on the *Great Learning*". For discussion, see [Nivison \(1964\)](#), [Chan \(1965\)](#), [Nivison \(1965\)](#).



*Great Learning* which had special significance for him, and which says:

- [T1] 所謂誠其意者，毋自欺也，如惡惡臭，如好好色  
What is called making the inclinations sincere is not deceiving oneself, like hating a hateful odor, like loving a lovely color.

In Wang's discussion he does not speak of inclinations (*yi* 意), but rather of "motivating concerns" (*yinian* 意念). For our purposes we can simply take these two notions to be equivalent (the first character of "motivating concerns" is the same as the character for *yi*). Nothing will hang on this simplifying assumption.<sup>9</sup>

- [T2] 故欲正其心者，必就其意念之所發而正之，凡其發一念而善也，好之真如好好色，發一念而惡也，惡之真如惡惡臭，則意無不誠，而心可正矣。。。。。。  
凡意念之發，吾心之良知無有不自知者。其善歟，惟吾心之良知自知之；其不善歟，亦惟吾心之良知自知之。。。。。。意念之發，吾心之良知既知其為善矣，使其不能誠有以好之，而復背而去之，則是以善為惡，而自昧其知善之良知矣。意念之所發，吾之良知既知其為不善矣，使其不能誠有以惡之，而覆蹈而為之，則是以惡為善，而自昧其知惡之良知矣。若是，則雖曰知之，猶不知也，意其可得而誠乎！今於良知之善惡者，無不誠好而誠惡之，則不自欺其良知而意可誠也已。

Therefore if you want to rectify your mind, you must rectify it in regard to the arousal of your motivating concerns. If, whenever a concern arises and it is good, you genuinely love it as you love lovely colors, and whenever a concern arises and it is hateful, you genuinely hate it as you hate hateful odors, then none of your inclinations will be insincere and your mind can be rectified...

Whenever a motivating concern arises, your mind's *liangzhi* automatically knows it. [If it is good] your mind's *liangzhi* automatically knows its goodness; [if it is evil], your mind's *liangzhi* also automatically knows its evil [hatefulness] ...When a [good] motivating concern arises, the *liangzhi* of your mind already knows it to be good. Suppose you do not sincerely love it but instead turn away from it and eliminate it. You would then be taking good to be evil [hateful] and obscuring your *liangzhi* which knows goodness. When an [evil] motivating concern arises, the *liangzhi* of your mind already knows it to be evil [hateful]. Suppose you do not sincerely hate it but instead backslide and promote it. You would then be taking evil [hatefulness] to be good and obscuring your *liangzhi* which knows evilness [hatefulness]. In such cases one says that you know it, but in fact you do not know. How then can incli-

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<sup>9</sup>For discussion of possible differences between inclinations and motivating concerns, see "The Intro-spective Model", Section 5.

nations be made sincere? If what *liangzhi* [regards as] good or evil [hateful] is sincerely loved or hated, one's *liangzhi* is not deceived and inclinations can be made sincere. (QJ 1070-1, cf. Chan (1963, p. 277-9))<sup>10</sup>

Wang does not speak of genuine knowledge, as opposed to knowledge, in this passage. But it is fairly clear he has an elevated form of knowledge in mind. Perhaps most notably, at the end of the passage he says that if a person has conflicting inclinations, then although we do *say* that the person knows, they do not know. A natural gloss on Wang's remark (especially in light of other passages where he draws this distinction more explicitly) is that the person knows in some sense, but they do not genuinely know.<sup>11</sup> Given this gloss, the passage advances the following argument. If one turns away from and removes a motivating concern, one takes it to be bad. If one takes something to be bad, one does not genuinely know its goodness. So, one genuinely knows the goodness of a motivating concern only if one does not turn away from it and eliminate it. Moreover (Wang seems to say), if one does not turn away from a good motivating concern (inclination) the good motivating concern (inclination) will be sincere. So, one genuinely knows the goodness of a motivating concern (inclination) only if the motivating concern (inclination) is sincere. Even if one quarrels in detail with this reconstruction, it is fairly clear that the passage explicitly affirms a part ("only if") of Knowledge Inclination.

We will return to this passage a number of times in what follows. For now, we can see how the three principles introduced here give a satisfying picture of the psychological mechanics which Wang believed underwrote the truth of Unity. By Inclination Action, a person is acting filially if and only if they have a sincere inclination to perform a filial action. By Knowing Right and Wrong, a person has an inclination to perform a filial action – which we may suppose is a right or good inclination – if and only if their *liangzhi* knows the rightness / goodness of this inclination. So, a person has a sincere inclination to perform a filial action if and only if their *liangzhi* knows the rightness of the sincere inclination. By Knowledge Inclination, a person's *liangzhi* knows the goodness

<sup>10</sup>Translations are mine, although I have always consulted Chan (1963) for selections from the *Instructions for Practical Living* and Ivanhoe (2009) for passages translated there. Passages from the *Instructions for Practical Living* are first cited by the section number of Chan's editions (Chan (1963), Chan (陳榮捷) (1983), abbreviated "IPL"), for ease of reference for those without Chinese. All quotations are followed by a page number either in Wu *et al.* (2011) (indicated by "QJ") or in Shu & Zha (2016) (indicated by "QJBB"). In the main text I will not mention issues about the dating of various passages, and how the passages might fit into the development of Wang's view. Where a known change of view or emphasis on Wang's part matters to the central argument I'll discuss this in the footnotes.

<sup>11</sup>Elsewhere, Wang ties the "extension of knowledge", or the "extension of *liangzhi*" (which is the explicit topic of this passage) tightly to the unity of knowledge and action (and hence to genuine knowledge). See, e.g. IPL 139 (QJ 56), IPL 321 (QJ 137).

or rightness of a sincere inclination to perform a filial action if and only if they genuinely know filiality. So, a person is acting filially if and only if they genuinely know filiality.

Knowledge Inclination tells us under what circumstances a person has genuine knowledge. But it does not tell us what genuine knowledge is, and for this reason it does not yet give us a satisfying interpretation of the unity of knowledge and action. Knowledge Inclination leaves open the possibility that Wang held that the event of genuinely knowing filiality just is the event of acting filially. But if Wang endorsed this thesis the whole doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action would be trivial. If Wang defined genuine knowledge as the event of acting filially, he would have stipulated the truth of his doctrine, and would have given no explanation of why these actions should count as a form of knowledge. He would have given no explanation of why this form of “knowledge” was elevated above other forms of knowledge. And he would have given no theory of the intellectual achievement associated with virtuous action; he would have just called it the action itself.

The remainder of the paper develops interpretations which solve these problems with Knowledge Inclination, by offering substantive theses about the metaphysical character of genuine knowledge, which rule out the claim that genuine knowledge was simply stipulated to be identical with virtuous action (or anything else). The interpretations explain how Wang understood genuine knowledge as something reasonably called “knowledge” (and indeed, an elevated form of knowledge). They also each provide different accounts of the new conception of the intellectual achievement associated with virtuous action Wang took himself to be advancing.

### 3 Is genuine knowledge a form of perception?

The most prominent interpretation of the unity of knowledge and action in the Anglophone scholarship takes Wang’s doctrine to concern a rich form of perception (Nivison (1973), Cua (1982), Ivanhoe (2002, 2009, 2011), Angle (2005, 2009)). On this interpretation, Wang held that appropriately acknowledging features of the world around one consists in part in having an appropriate affective response to them; and this appropriate affective response in turn results in an appropriate action. Proponents of this general interpretation of the unity of knowledge and action have typically not offered a detailed analysis of genuine knowledge. But they all endorse what I will call the *perceptual model*, according to which:

**Perceptual Part** Some episodes of genuine knowledge of  $F$ ness have episodes of per-

ceiving the environment as a part of them.<sup>12</sup>

Here *F* is as above restricted to filiality, respect and compassion. “Episode of perceiving” is meant to highlight the fact that “part” is meant literally. Events like parties have multiple parts: they have parts which are separated in time – the first part of the party, when only a few guests have arrived, and later parts when things are buzzing – and also simultaneous but distinct parts – the part of the party outside where people are playing lawn games, and the part inside, where people are talking quietly. In our thesis, the “episodes of perceiving”, are taken to be literally parts of the episodes of genuine knowledge just as the playing of lawn games outside may be part of a party. Moreover, I allow the special case where the party is a part of itself, namely, the part that makes up all of it. One way of endorsing Perceptual Part is to hold that episodes of genuine knowledge just are episodes of perceiving.<sup>13</sup>

The authors I’ve cited above have a wide range of views about the significance of the unity of knowledge and action. They disagree on important questions such as whether Wang thinks one can ever actually *perceive* qualities such as filiality, or whether the relevant form of perception is perception of some other aspects of the environment. But they all agree that Wang endorsed Perceptual Part (that is, they all advance some version of the perceptual model), and I will focus my attention on this thesis in what follows. The goal of this section and the next is to develop this perceptual model. In this section I’ll consider the simplest version of the model and argue it fails. In the next section I’ll present a better version and consider its merits.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>This characterization of the position does not cover the dispositional understanding of genuine knowledge described in n. 3. If genuine knowledge is understood as a disposition, then the relevant thesis would be that some episodes of the exercise of genuine knowledge of ethical qualities have perception as a part of them. Officially, to encompass both episodic and dispositional understandings of genuine knowledge, the perceptual model should be understood as characterized by adherence to the following disjunctive claim: either some episodes of genuine knowledge have perception as a component or part of them, or some exercises of the disposition of genuine knowledge have perception as a component or part of them. More generally, in what follows, proponents of the dispositional model should replace “episodes of genuine knowledge of” with “episodes of the exercise of genuine knowledge of”, and the main arguments should be unaffected. Below I’ll still comment on this issue where it’s most important (and once even in the main text) but for the most part I’ll leave it to the reader to see how to make these replacements.

<sup>13</sup>When I speak of perception here and throughout the paper, I mean perception, not something that could metaphorically be described as perception. An interpretation (like that of Liu (2018, p. 253-4)), which uses the word “perception” to describe the introspective knowledge of *liangzhi*, taking this latter to be something like an “inner sense”, would therefore not count as an instance of the perceptual model. For what it is worth I am unaware of any passages in which Wang uses the language of (for example) vision to describe *liangzhi*’s recognition of the ethical qualities of mental events, so I am unsure what the rationale would be for using “perception” for this kind of view. But in any case nothing will hang on this point in what follows.

<sup>14</sup>Shun (2011) does not emphasize this general picture of rich perception. But the conception of genuine knowledge suggested by his paper is close to the one I believe proponents of the perceptual model should

Before developing the model in detail, I want to pause to consider the main passages which have been taken to motivate it. The first is Wang's most famous discussion of the unity of knowledge and action, and arguably the most famous passage in the entirety of his writings. Xu Ai, the transcriber of this section of the work, asks about the unity of knowledge and action. In response, Wang asks him to give an example, and he does:

如今人儘有知得父當孝、兄當弟者，却不能孝、不能弟，便是知與行分明是兩件。

For instance, today everyone knows that they should be filial to their parents, and that they should be respectful to their older brothers, but they are unable to be filial, and unable to be respectful. So in this case, knowledge and action are separated, and are clearly two things. (IPL 5, QJ 4)

Wang then replies:

[T3] 此已被私慾隔斷，不是知行的本體了。未有知而不行者。知而不行，只是未知。聖賢教人知行，正是安復那本體，不是着你只恁的便罷。故《大學》指個真知行與人看，說『如好好色，如惡惡臭』。見好色屬知，好好色屬行。只見那好色時已自好了，不是見了後又立個心去好。聞惡臭屬知，惡惡臭屬行。只聞那惡臭時已自惡了，不是聞了後別立個心去惡。如鼻塞人雖見惡臭在前，鼻中不曾聞得，便亦不甚惡，亦只是不曾知臭。

In this case, knowledge and action have already been divided by selfish desires; they are no longer the original substance (*ben ti*) of knowledge and action.<sup>15</sup> No one has ever known but failed to act. If one knows but does not act, one simply does not yet know. The sages and worthies' teaching for people about knowledge and action, was to stabilize and restore their original substance, not just to do any old thing.

The *Great Learning* points to genuine knowledge and action for people to see. It says they are "like loving lovely colors and hating hateful odors." Seeing a lovely color belongs to knowledge, while loving a lovely color belongs to action. But once someone sees a lovely color, he already loves it. It is not that after seeing it he additionally makes up his mind to love it. Smelling a hateful odor belongs to knowledge, while hating a hateful odor belongs to action. But once someone smells a hateful odor, he already hates it. It is not that after smelling it he separately makes up his mind to hate it. It's like a

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endorse. I discuss the connection in n. 32. My arguments against that conception of genuine knowledge are therefore arguments against Shun's interpretation.

<sup>15</sup>I will use the traditional translation "original substance" for *ben ti* 本體 throughout the paper, although it is effectively meaningless on its own. Perhaps "original intrinsic condition" would be better; *ti* 體 – which has a very similar meaning on its own – could then be rendered "intrinsic condition". Since all of these translations are jargon which require further explanation to be comprehensible to the reader, it seemed better on balance to stick with tradition. For further remarks see my discussion of this passage in section 2 of "The Introspective Model".

person with his nose blocked: even if he sees something with a hateful smell in front of him, in his nose, he has not smelt it. So while he doesn't really hate it, this is only because he does not yet know the odor. (IPL, 5, QJ, 4)

The standard interpretation of this passage takes the sentence "The *Great Learning* points to genuine knowledge and action for people to see" to introduce examples of genuine knowledge. The word I have translated "like" (*ru* 如) in the sentence from the *Great Learning* can – just like the word "like" – be used either to introduce an example or to introduce a simile. The original text (quoted above as [T1]) does not settle whether these examples are to be taken as examples of sincere inclinations, or merely illustrations which are similar in some important respect to examples of sincere inclinations. Wang's quotation of the passage preserves this ambiguity. It does not force a reading as "for example", though it can be taken that way, and has been by many – perhaps most – interpreters.<sup>16</sup>

On this reading of the passage, the examples are examples of genuine knowledge. Genuine knowledge of the beautiful color is or leads to the affective response of loving the color, and (according to the way Wang understands the example here) this loving is a form of action. Wang says that seeing the color and smelling the odor "belong" (*shu* 屬) to knowledge. This remark could either mean that seeing and smelling are the relevant form of knowledge, or merely that they are parts of this knowledge. On the traditional interpretation, it would follow that sometimes perceptual knowledge can be genuine knowledge (i.e. an episode of genuine knowledge is identical to an episode of perceiving) or it can at least sometimes be a part of genuine knowledge (i.e. some episodes of genuine knowledge have episodes of perceiving as parts of them).

Proponents of the perceptual model claim that the relationship between perception and genuine knowledge exhibited in this example can be found in the more important, ethical examples of genuine knowledge. They typically take the following passage to support this idea:

- [T4] 知是心之本體，心自然會知：見父自然知孝，見兄自然知弟，見孺子入井自然知惻隱，此便是良知不假外求。若良知之發，更無私意障礙，即所謂『充其惻隱之心，而仁不可勝用矣』。然在常人不能無私意障礙，所以須用致知格物之功勝私復理。即心之良知更無障礙，得以充塞流行，便是致其知。知致則意誠。

Knowledge is the original substance of the mind.<sup>17</sup> The mind is automatically

<sup>16</sup>Cua (1982) presents a version of the perceptual model, but does not take these examples to be example of genuine knowledge.

<sup>17</sup>On the meaning of the expression I follow tradition in translating "original substance", see n. 15. The



able to know. When it sees one's parents, it automatically knows filiality. When it sees one's elder brother, it automatically knows respect. When it sees a child fall into a well, it automatically knows compassion.<sup>18</sup> This is *liangzhi*, and should not be sought outside. If *liangzhi* is aroused, and there is furthermore no obstruction of selfish inclinations, it will be like the saying "If one fulfills one's mind which is compassionate, then one's humaneness will function inexorably." But ordinary people are unable not to have the obstructions of selfish inclinations. That is why they must use the practice of the extension of knowledge (*zhi zhi* 致知) and the investigation of things (*ge wu* 格物) in order to conquer selfishness and restore *li*. Then the mind's *liangzhi* will furthermore have no obstructions and will be able to operate smoothly everywhere. This then is the extension of knowledge. And if one's knowledge is extended, one's inclinations will be sincere. (*IPL* 8, *QJ* 7)

Wang doesn't use the expression "genuine knowledge" here, but it is clear that he has in mind an elevated form of knowledge, and that the discussion concerns this elevated form of knowledge. He describes how ordinary people do not achieve full knowledge in spite of the automatic knowledge the mind is capable of. Proponents of the perceptual model take Wang's discussion of seeing one's parents, seeing one's brother, and seeing a child fall into the well all to support the idea that genuine knowledge is identical with perception, or at least that perception is a part of genuine knowledge. In particular, when Wang says the mind "automatically knows" (自然知) filiality or respect or compassion, they have either taken this to mean that this automatic knowledge is identical with the perception of filiality, respect or compassion, or that some perception is a part of that automatic knowledge of these qualities.<sup>19</sup>

most natural interpretation of "knowledge" here is as referring to a capacity or faculty, not as an episode of knowledge or something one knows.

<sup>18</sup>This passage alludes to a famous example of Mencius. In Mencius's example, the child was on the verge of falling into the well (將入於井), and it is plausible that, although Wang is recorded as saying "fall into a well", he meant "on the verge of" falling into a well, relying on the reader's knowledge of the original text. The expression I have followed tradition in translating "compassion" here does not mean "compassion". Unlike compassion (or empathy, or sympathy), the emotion described here is one that is directed at situations, not people, and it can even be directed at oneself, not others (see [Shun \(2018, p. 90\)](#) for these points). The expression might be even be better translated "being pained by" or "unable to bear". These alternative translations would not affect the arguments in the main text, although talk of "genuine knowledge of compassion" should be replaced with talk of "genuine knowledge of being pained by a situation" or something similar throughout. Thanks to PJ Ivanhoe for discussion.

<sup>19</sup>There is a third passage which, while not by Wang Yangming, has played an important role in scholars' understanding of what Wang himself might mean by "genuine knowledge". In a famous passage, Cheng Yi (程 頤, Yichuan 伊川, 1033-1107), is reported as saying fairly clearly that a fieldhand, who was previously harmed by a tiger, has genuine knowledge of a tiger's ability to harm people ([Wang \(2004, pg. 16\)](#)). This passage doesn't directly support the idea that episodes of genuine knowledge have episodes of perceiving as parts, rather than, for example, as preconditions. But it does strongly suggest that Cheng held that we can have genuine knowledge of objects or facts outside our minds. If Wang agreed with Cheng on this



These texts don't make it clear whether episodes of genuine knowledge are episodes of perceiving, or whether episodes of genuine knowledge merely have (or can have) perception as distinct, proper parts of them. In this section I'll explore the first idea, and argue that it is untenable. In the next section I'll show how the second idea can be developed in more detail than has been done before, to harmonize with the picture of the unity of knowledge and action presented in the previous section.

Let's start then with the idea that they are identical, i.e., for relevant  $F$ ,

**Genuine Perception** Some episodes of genuinely knowing  $F$ ness are episodes of perceiving  $F$ ness.<sup>20</sup>

Genuine Perception entails Perceptual Part. We should recall again at this point that genuine knowledge (*zhen zhi* 真知) is not *liangzhi*. Everyone should agree that *liangzhi* is sometimes responsible for perception of the environment. Wang says as much in numerous places.<sup>21</sup> The distinctive thesis of the perceptual model is a claim about the connection between perception and *genuine knowledge*, not a claim about the connection between perception and *liangzhi*. Even if there is genuine knowledge of colors or smells, Genuine Perception does not apply to those examples. The thesis is restricted to "relevant  $F$ ", i.e. the important ethical examples of filiality, respect and compassion.

The thesis Genuine Perception is consistent with quite different understandings of moral knowledge, depending on how one understands what it is to perceive ethical qualities such as filiality. To illustrate this point, I'll consider two developments of it.

On the first, *flashlight model*, the properties of filiality or respect are instantiated in the environment in a straightforward way just as properties like sizes or shapes are. Moreover, people perceive filiality and respect in the environment in the same straightforward way that people perceive sizes or shapes.<sup>22</sup> David Nivison (1973) is naturally read as endorsing this position, when he writes "My perception of a thing as having

point, then it would be natural for him to endorse the idea that perception can be a part of that knowledge.

For further English language discussion of other precedents see Shun (2010, p. 188), Angle (2018, p. 166).

<sup>20</sup>Those who advocate a dispositional conception of genuine knowledge should replace "episodes of genuinely knowing" in principles like this one with "exercises of the disposition of genuine knowledge of". The arguments I'll give against the official principles will work equally well against these variant principles.

<sup>21</sup>e.g. IPL 168 (QJ 80).

<sup>22</sup>I take it to be tolerably clear what's intended by a "straightforward way", though it's hard to make precise. It's possible one could hold that sizes and shapes aren't instantiated in the environment in a straightforward way, or that we don't perceive these properties in a straightforward way. In what follows, I'll continue to assume that sizes and shapes are examples of such qualities. The reader who has difficulty thinking of size or shape in this way should change the examples to ones which they think are instantiated in the environment and perceived there in a straightforward way. If they don't think there are any such examples, they should imagine that there are some, and use those.

visible and value qualities is total and unitary...Just as when I look at a tree I see not only a shape but a solid extended object with a front and a back side, so here I 'see' an object with a visible and a 'value side' " (Nivison (1973, 132); reprinted in Nivison (1996, p. 243)). The objects Nivison has in mind here are mind-external objects; in addition to their "value" sides, they have "visible sides". Thus, even though Nivison puts "see" in scare-quotes he seems to assume that this "seeing" involves perceiving objects in the environment, external to the mind. Indeed, he glosses this "seeing" earlier in the paper: "For Wang Yang-ming there is no effective difference between perceiving a sensible quality with a sense (for example, sight) and 'perceiving' a value-quality with the mind in the noninclusive sense of the mind that thinks and conceives" (Nivison (1973, 132); reprinted in Nivison (1996, p. 242-3)). Since Nivison takes Wang to hold that "there is no effective difference" between "seeing" and seeing, it is natural to see him as endorsing the flashlight model: according to Nivison Wang holds that we apprehend ethical qualities like filiality or respect outside the mind, much in the same way as we might perceive visible qualities.<sup>23</sup> Even if Nivison (or others) were thought not to have endorsed the flashlight model, it is a simple way of making sense of the idea that perception is or can be a component of genuine knowledge, and is therefore worth considering in its own right.

But the flashlight model is not a good interpretation of what Wang says. Wang repeatedly and strenuously argues that qualities such as filiality and respect are not external to the mind.<sup>24</sup> These passages show that Wang did not hold that filiality or respect are instantiated in the environment in the straightforward way that sizes or shapes are. So he cannot have believed that genuine knowledge of filiality or respect is identical with perception of qualities instantiated in the environment in the straightforward way that sizes or shapes are.

This argument against the flashlight model – which I take to be dispositive – importantly does not show that Genuine Perception itself is untenable. For there are alterna-

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<sup>23</sup>P. J. Ivanhoe, in introducing a spectrum of metaethical views writes that "Wang Yangming's view, which claims that moral qualities are out there in the world and available to us through a special faculty of moral sapience...defines the 'moral faculty' pole", which is opposed to the "projectivist" pole of his spectrum (Ivanhoe (2011) p. 274). On one natural reading of "out there in the world" – where the qualities are not merely objective but are instantiated by objects outside the mind – these remarks might also seem to suggest the flashlight model. But the passage should not be read this way. In the context of Ivanhoe's other writings on the topic, it is fairly clear that by "out there in the world" he means only that Wang is a realist about moral properties; he does not mean to be taking a stand on the physical location of the entities which instantiate these properties. (Thanks to PJ Ivanhoe for clarifying this point for me in correspondence.)

<sup>24</sup>*IPL* 3 (*QJ* 2-3), *IPL* 101, *IPL* 133 (*QJ* 48), *IPL* 135 (*QJ* 50-1); cf. *QJ* 175, translated in Ching (1972, p. 29-30).

tive, subtler conceptions of perceiving ethical qualities like filiality or respect that do not require that these qualities be instantiated in the environment in any straightforward way. According to a particular form of what is sometimes called “projectivism”, the mental states or events involved in perceiving qualities such as beauty or repulsiveness are not at all like the mental states or events involved in perceiving qualities such as size and shape. Instead, on these views, to perceive a quality like beauty or repulsiveness just is to have an appropriate affective response to an object. Moreover, for an object to instantiate these qualities is for it to tend to cause these affective responses in those who encounter it. The second development of Genuine Perception I’ll consider, the *affective perceptual model*, takes inspiration from this idea. It upholds Genuine Perception in the face of the objection to the flashlight model by offering a subtler conception of what it is to perceive qualities like filiality or respect: according to it, what it is to perceive these qualities in an object just is to exhibit a certain affective response to the object.

The affective perceptual model avoids the above problem with the flashlight model. If Wang endorsed the affective perceptual model, he might even have been expected to deny that filiality or respect are “out there in the world”. For even though the point of endorsing the affective perceptual model is to hold that people perceive such qualities, the relevant notion of perception would not be the usual one. One way someone might try to articulate the difference this view postulates between the perception of qualities like size and shape on the one hand, and the perception of filiality and respect on the other, would be to emphasize a metaphysical difference between the qualities. Wang’s remarks might be understood as intended to draw this distinction. For instance, one might think that in saying the qualities are “in the mind” Wang meant to say that the presence of the qualities in objects in our environment is rooted in (or “grounded in”) the ways in which we respond psychologically to those objects.<sup>25</sup>

As it stands the affective perceptual model is a somewhat abstract idea, not yet an interpretation of what Wang says. But it can be developed in more detail into a position which makes two main claims. Although I will ultimately argue against this development of the affective perceptual model, I will pause to develop this model, in part because I think it is interesting in its own right, but in part also to illustrate

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<sup>25</sup> Antonio Cua may come closest to the affective perceptual model. He writes: “As to the notion of knowledge, it is in some way related to the notion of ‘seeing as.’ Here knowledge would be a state of recognition – that is, direct awareness of an object as having a certain quality...Just as seeing an object *X* as beautiful is already to have a loving response to *X*, knowing filial piety or brotherly respect is already to have practiced filial piety or brotherly respect” (Cua (1982, p. 11)). Presumably “to have practiced” involves an affective response (although it may involve more).

what a solution to the problem with Knowledge Inclination mentioned at the end of the previous section might look like. The first of the two claims is a precise claim about the metaphysical character of genuine knowledge, designed to supplement Knowledge Inclination. There is some evidence that Wang believed that all episodes of knowledge are inclinations (*IPL* 201, *QJ* 103; *IPL* 174 (*QJ* 86-7). For the purposes of the next four paragraphs, let's assume that they are. Consider:

**Simple Knowledge** Something is an episode of a person's genuinely knowing  $F$ ness if and only if it is a sincere inclination of theirs to perform an  $F$  action.

Simple Knowledge says that episodes of genuine knowledge are episodes of a certain motivational kind ("affective" broadly understood); they are inclinations to perform various actions. The thesis on its own does not say anything about *perception*; someone could accept Simple Knowledge without endorsing Genuine Perception. But Simple Knowledge can be supplemented with a further, natural thesis, which gives voice to the core idea behind the affective perceptual model:

**Inclination Perception** Something is an episode of perceiving  $F$ ness in an object if and only if it is an inclination to perform an  $F$  action in response to the object.

According to this thesis, perceiving filiality in one's parents is having an inclination to perform a filial action in response to seeing them. Inclination Perception is the most obvious way of making sense of the affective perceptual model – and the projectivist background which one might take to motivate that model – in terms of Wang's views about the psychology of virtuous action. Moreover, given Inclination Perception and natural background assumptions, Simple Knowledge entails Genuine Perception.

To show how Simple Knowledge solves the problems with Knowledge Inclination, assume that a person genuinely knows  $F$ ness at a time if and only if something is an episode of that person's genuinely knowing  $F$ ness at that time. Given this assumption, Simple Knowledge entails Knowledge Inclination. But Simple Knowledge goes further than Knowledge Inclination. It identifies genuine knowledge with a particular mental event, a sincere inclination to perform an  $F$  action. So, for instance, in the case of someone who genuinely knows filiality, the proponent of this thesis would claim that the person's sincere inclination to perform a filial action is an episode of genuinely knowledge of filiality. Of course not all inclinations to perform filial actions are episodes of genuinely knowing filiality, since not all such inclinations are sincere.

Simple Knowledge and Inclination Perception make precise the ideas behind the affective perceptual model in a way which harmonizes with Wang's views about the

psychological mechanics of the unity of knowledge and action. But there is an important argument against Simple Knowledge, based on an independently supported, attractive claim about the metaphysics of genuine knowledge.

Knowledge Inclination says that a person has genuine knowledge if and only if their *liangzhi* knows a sincere inclination of theirs. But Wang's remarks in [T2] suggest that he held a stronger thesis than merely that the knowledge of *liangzhi* coincides with genuine knowledge. Wang says that if a person "takes good to be evil" (以善爲惡), then they are "obscuring their *liangzhi* which knows goodness" (自昧其知善之良知), and he repeats these formulae for taking a good inclination to be bad, and obscuring the *liangzhi* which knows badness. At the end of the passage, describing the condition when one's inclinations are sincere, he says that "one's *liangzhi* is not deceived" (不自欺其良知). These remarks strongly suggest that the ideal state of knowledge, i.e. genuine knowledge, does not merely coincide with *liangzhi*'s knowledge of the goodness of the relevant inclination, but that it has *liangzhi*'s (unobscured) knowledge of goodness as a part of it. This hypothesis would give a simple, natural explanation of why it is so important that one's *liangzhi*'s knowledge of goodness not be obscured, or subject to deception. So the independently supported, attractive claim is that episodes of genuine knowledge of qualities like filiality or respect have the relevant episodes of *liangzhi*'s knowledge of the goodness of a sincere inclination as a part of them. In this claim "part" is again meant in a straightforward way, as illustrated above using the example of a party: just as a party may have the playing of lawn games outside as one of its parts, episodes of genuine knowledge of filiality have the episode of *liangzhi* knowing the goodness of the ethical quality as a part of them.<sup>26</sup>

But Simple Knowledge is incompatible with this attractive claim, against the background of Wang's other remarks. Wang is clear that the event of *liangzhi* knowing the ethical qualities of inclinations is distinct from the event of having a (first-order) motivating concern or inclination.<sup>27</sup> If episodes of genuine knowledge of qualities like

<sup>26</sup>Notice that there isn't evidence that, if there is genuine knowledge of things like beautiful colors, *liangzhi*'s knowledge of inclinations would have to part of those episodes of genuine knowledge. I won't be assuming that it would have to be.

<sup>27</sup>In IPL 206 (QJ 105), for example, Wang clearly speaks of the knowledge of *liangzhi* as an event distinct from having a right or wrong motivating concern. In IPL 169 (QJ 81-2), after discussing thoughts that are the "aroused functioning" of *liangzhi* (良知之發用), Wang says that "*liangzhi* also is automatically able to know" (良知亦自能知得). This "also" strongly suggests that Wang takes the knowledge to be distinct from the thoughts *liangzhi* produces. Wang has ample opportunity to say that what it is to know the rightness of a right motivating concern just is to have that motivating concern. But he doesn't. On the natural assumption that Wang is talking about genuine knowledge in [T2], he connects the knowledge of *liangzhi* directly to genuine knowledge in that passage. There, he repeatedly speaks of a motivating concern arising on the one hand, and *liangzhi* automatically knowing that motivating concern on the other. His language again strongly suggests that these are distinct events. He says that (e.g.) turning away and eliminating a

filiality or respect have *liangzhi*'s knowledge of the goodness of the ethical quality of inclinations as a part of them, and if this knowledge of the goodness of the (first-order) inclination is distinct from that (first-order) inclination, then genuine knowledge cannot be identified with the inclination itself. So Simple Knowledge should be rejected.

The failure of Simple Knowledge undermines the attractions of the affective perceptual model as an interpretation of Wang Yangming. The strongest case that Wang identified episodes of knowledge with some kind of motivational or affective mental event is based on his discussions of the connection between knowledge and inclinations. Wang never says that knowledge is identical to an emotion or desire or other form of motivational state. So, since the affective perceptual model can't be made precise by invoking Simple Knowledge, it doesn't seem plausible that it can be developed into a reasonable interpretation of Wang.

Once again this argument does not show that Genuine Perception must be rejected. The trick I described above – of identifying perceiving an ethical quality with some other mental event – is very powerful. Given any characterization of episodes of genuine knowledge, we can always claim that those episodes are episodes of *perceiving* the relevant ethical quality, and thereby defending Genuine Perception.

But there is a powerful, direct argument against Genuine Perception. In the case of a beautiful color it is reasonable to say that we see the beauty of the color.<sup>28</sup> But it does not make sense to say that a person sees – or in any sense perceives – filiality or respect in the circumstances Wang describes in [T4]. I can imagine a position according to which, when a son responds correctly to his parents, his filiality is visible on the surface; by looking at him we can just see it. I can similarly imagine a position according to which when a younger brother responds correctly to his older brother, his respectfulness is visible on the surface; by looking at him we can just see it there. But these are not the circumstances Wang has in mind. He speaks of a son seeing his parents and, when he responds filially, knowing filiality. He speaks of a younger brother seeing his older brother and, when he responds respectfully, knowing respect. In these cases the son is not perceiving filiality or the younger brother perceiving respect in any natural sense. The parents may be worthy of filial responses, but the parents may well fail to be filial to their own parents. The older brother may be worthy of respectful responses, but the brother need not himself be respectful. Wang clearly says that when we see our parents or brothers we have (genuine) knowledge of filiality and respect, not that we

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good concern would obscure *liangzhi* which knows goodness. His point is that this distinct mental event of knowing goodness could not in the relevant circumstances lead to or constitute genuine knowledge.

<sup>28</sup>In [T3] Wang says only that we see the beautiful color, but we may suppose for the sake of argument that he could have said that we see the beauty of it instead.

have (genuine) knowledge of worthiness-of-filiality, or of worthiness-of-respect. The cases Wang has in mind are thus not the appropriate ones for a person to perceive filiality or respect. If Wang endorsed Genuine Perception, he should be expected to restrict his attention to qualities that can reasonably be said to be instantiated by objects in the environment – qualities like worthiness-of-filiality or goodness. But Wang just does not speak in this way, and the way that he does speak provides strong evidence against Genuine Perception.

This argument is independent of the earlier arguments I gave against the flashlight model, and against Simple Knowledge, but since it applies to Genuine Perception, it is a further argument both against the flashlight model and the affective perceptual model. The argument does leave it open that the example of seeing the lovely color is an example of genuine knowledge and that, in that case, the genuine knowledge is identical with seeing the beautiful color. But it strongly suggests that Wang did not take this line for the more important ethical examples of filiality, respect and compassion. No episodes of genuine knowledge of these qualities are identical with episodes of perceiving them.

The argument also shows that there is no simple connection between Wang's views and contemporary neo-Aristotelian discussions of moral perception.<sup>29</sup> Steve Angle (2005, p. 41) cites the following passage from Martha Nussbaum as part of his development of an interpretation of Wang's remarks:

Perception is not merely aided by emotion but is also in part constituted by appropriate response. Good perception is a full recognition or acknowledgment of the practical situation; the whole personality sees it for what it is. The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say, in addition, that a part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person doesn't really, or doesn't fully, see what has happened. (Nussbaum (1990, p. 79))

Consider Nussbaum's examples in this passage of what the person perceives: that a friend is in need, or that a loved one has died. These are facts that one naturally discerns in *the world around one*. They are quite different from Wang's examples, of

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<sup>29</sup> Angle (2005, 40-44) draws heavily on an Aristotelian tradition in contemporary discussion, citing Murdoch (1970), Wiggins (1975), McDowell (1979), Nussbaum (1990) and Blum (1991). Ivanhoe (2011) is explicitly an investigation into the relationship between McDowell and Wang Yangming.



the son who knows filiality or the younger brother who knows respect, each of which is presumably internal to oneself. Nussbaum is happy to endorse a kind of affective perceptual model for the facts she considers. Making the full parallel to the Aristotelian tradition would require attributing a similar position to Wang. But Wang's examples – of filiality, respect, and compassion in the circumstances he considers – show that he is not focused on perceiving facts or qualities in the environment. It may be that Wang believed perception was relevant to genuine knowledge – we'll examine this idea further in the next section – but he did not endorse Genuine Perception. Accordingly, he did not advocate the importance of the kind of moral perception Nussbaum describes here.<sup>30</sup>

## 4 Perception is a part of genuine knowledge

The failure of Genuine Perception leaves us with the idea that perception is not identical to genuine knowledge, but is instead a “proper” part of it, that is, a part which is not identical to it.

**Perceptual Proper Part** Some episodes of genuine knowledge of *F*ness have episodes of perceiving the environment as a proper part of them.<sup>31</sup>

If an episode of genuine knowledge of filiality has an episode of perceiving as merely a proper part of it, that episode of perceiving need not be an episode of perceiving filiality; it could be an episode of perceiving something else. For this reason, Perceptual Part escapes the arguments I gave against the flashlight model and against Genuine Perception: it does not entail that filiality, respect or compassion are instantiated in the environment; it also does not entail that we *perceive* filiality when we see our parents. (I'll come back to how it escapes the argument against Simple Knowledge in a moment.)

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<sup>30</sup> Antonio Cua takes genuine knowledge to involve a rich form of perception, which he connects to a Wittgensteinian notion of “seeing as”. He takes this seeing as to include an acknowledgement that the object falls under a particular category – an acknowledgement which involves an affective response of what one sees (Cua, 1982, p. 7). Cf. Cua (1998, p. 181-3). This position falls to the same objection: Wang is clearly not describing acknowledging one's parents as falling under the category of filiality.

<sup>31</sup> As above, proponents of a dispositional conception of genuine knowledge should replace “episodes of genuine knowledge of” with “exercises of the disposition of genuine knowledge”.

Genuine Perception and Perceptual Proper Part do not exhaust the positions covered by Perceptual Part. I have not here considered views on which Wang held that genuine knowledge of ethical qualities is identical with an event of perceiving something in the environment which is not the ethical qualities themselves (as it was in Genuine Perception). But I don't know of anyone who has considered this position, and it seems to me that the spirit of such a view would be better captured by Perceptual Proper Part.

P. J. Ivanhoe is the most eminent, explicit proponent of Perceptual Proper Part. Describing genuine knowledge as “true seeing” and “true perception”, he says that according to Wang: “the necessary and sufficient condition for moral action is *true perception* of a situation. When we truly see, we don’t just believe – we act. For Wang, true perception involves an understanding not only of what is being perceived but how it relates to the greater context of the Way. This larger understanding in turn entails the appropriate affective reaction to such a state of affairs, and this sets into motion a proper response or action” (Ivanhoe (2002, p. 99), emphasis his). In this passage, Ivanhoe doesn’t elaborate on what he means by “entail”, but his remarks strongly suggest that perception of a situation is a proper part of the psychological response to the situation that constitutes what he calls “true perception”. Elsewhere Ivanhoe writes that “genuine knowledge...is substantially constituted by a disposition to attend and respond affectively to ethical situations and act properly and without hesitation” (Ivanhoe (2009, p. 113)). The “ethical situations” which Ivanhoe says we “attend” to are clearly mind-external, and he says explicitly that genuine knowledge is “substantially constituted by” a disposition to experience such episodes of attention. In this second quotation, unlike in the first, Ivanhoe clearly understands genuine knowledge as a disposition. As I emphasized in n. 12 (cf. 3), my official understanding of the perceptual model encompasses dispositional conceptions of genuine knowledge: to be committed to the perceptual model it suffices to hold that for relevant *F* some episodes of genuine knowledge of *F*ness or exercises of the disposition of genuine knowledge of *F*ness have episodes of perceiving as a part of them. Since Ivanhoe clearly holds that exercises of the disposition have perceptual attention to aspects of the environment as parts of them, this passage too commits Ivanhoe to the perceptual model.

I argued earlier that Simple Knowledge failed because it was incompatible (against the background of others of Wang’s commitments) with the claim that the introspective knowledge of *liangzhi* is a part of episodes of genuine knowledge of filiality or respect. To avoid this problem, the proponent of Perceptual Proper Part must hold that episodes of genuine knowledge of filiality or respect are complex events consisting of this introspective knowledge and (at least sometimes) of perception of the environment. There are many different positions one could develop that take genuine knowledge to be a complex event, consisting of perception of the environment together with knowledge of the quality of an inclination. But the most attractive of these takes the event of genuine knowledge to be a *total mental event*, the event composed of all mental events ongoing for a person at a given time (I discuss other such positions in n. 34 below). The idea is that for relevant *F*:

**Total Knowledge** Something is an episode of a person's genuinely knowing *F*ness if and only if it is a total mental event which has an episode of their *liangzhi*'s knowing the rightness or goodness of a sincere inclination to perform an *F* action as a part of it.<sup>32</sup>

Let us again assume that a person genuinely knows *F*ness at a time if and only if something is an episode of that person's genuinely knowing *F*ness at that time. Given this assumption, Total Knowledge entails Knowledge Inclination. Accordingly, the thesis together with Knowing Right and Wrong and Inclination Action, entails Unity.

Let us assume moreover that events of perceiving can be parts of the total mental events of people who genuinely know filiality.<sup>33</sup> Given this assumption, Total Knowledge entails Perceptual Part. Total Knowledge thus allows us to make sense of the idea

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<sup>32</sup>In his magisterial paper Shun (2011)) Shun focuses on giving an interpretation of Wang's views of "the investigation of things" (*gewu*), and does not discuss genuine knowledge thematically. But, interestingly, although he does not explicitly discuss the connection between perception and genuine knowledge, he does seem to endorse Total Knowledge, on independent grounds. He writes:

It follows from Wang's teaching that knowledge and action are not separate when the heart/mind responds in its original state. While one might have the thought that one should so respond and in that sense have knowledge, that knowledge is part of and does not guide the response. Action is constituted by that response, which also includes the thought of so responding. Thus, the terms *zhi* (knowledge) and *xing* (action) are just two different ways of describing the same response, one emphasizing the thought that is part of the response and the other emphasizing the actualization of the response. Thus, for Wang, the terms *zhi* and *xing* refer to the same thing, the former emphasizing the conscious discernment (*ming jue jing cha chu* 明覺精察) and the latter the intimate actualization (*zhen qie du shi chu* 真切篤實處). ((Shun, 2011, p. 99-100), Chinese added by me)

Later in his paper, Shun begins translating *yi* (my "inclination"), by "thought". It seems plausible that when he uses "thought" here he also means an inclination, *yi*. The knowledge that Shun takes to be a "part of the response" presumably is *liangzhi*'s knowledge of the ethical quality of an inclination; the action is identified with the whole psychological response, of which this knowledge is just a proper part. Shun doesn't here talk about genuine knowledge explicitly, but the closing sentences suggest Total Knowledge. For when Shun concludes ("thus") that "the terms *zhi* and *xing* refer to the same thing" he cannot any longer have in view the relationship between the response (the total mental event) and the knowledge which is its proper part (since by definition nothing is identical to a proper part of it). Instead, Shun is best understood to have shifted his attention to genuine knowledge, and to be taking genuine knowledge not merely to be a part of the response, but to be identical with the person's total mental event. (The shift is suggested by his citation of passages like IPL 133 (QJ 47-8) in the final sentences, since there Wang explicitly discusses genuine knowledge. For citation and discussion of this and further related passages, see "The Introspective Model", Appendix A.) Shun's discussion thus suggests an independent route to Total Knowledge; my later arguments against Total Knowledge will be arguments against his position, as much as they are arguments against the more common position which places emphasis on the role of perception more specifically.

<sup>33</sup>This assumption might be rejected. Some reject the claim that perceiving is a mental event or state, and hold that only perceptual seemings or appearances (and not perceiving itself) are mental events or states. If Wang thought that only perceptual seemings and not events of perceiving were mental events, then he would have accepted that the seemings would be part of certain episodes of genuine knowledge, but rejected the claim that events of perceiving could be.

Indeed, the difference between perceiving and perceptual seemings might make one hesitate to endorse

that perceiving could be a part genuine knowledge, while respecting the constraint that *liangzhi*'s knowledge of the ethical quality of one's mental events must *also* be a part of it.<sup>34</sup>

But there is an important remaining challenge to this interpretation: in what sense is having a total mental event which includes an event of *liangzhi*'s knowledge along with other mental events, an instance of *knowing* filiality? It might seem an arbitrary terminological stipulation to call a total mental event *knowledge*. Total Knowledge thus might seem to fail to address the challenge it was designed to address: the fact that Inclination Knowledge fails to rule out stipulative or arbitrary redefinitions of "knowledge".

But a reply is available. Consider the expression "know happiness". It is plausible that to say that someone knows true happiness is to say that they are truly happy; on

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Perceptual Part in the first place. Suppose a person seems to see their parents before them (but their parents are not there); perhaps they are suffering from an illusion or hallucination. Suppose, however, they respond perfectly to what they seem to see. Does this person count as acting filially in this situation, or not? If they do, then by Unity they genuinely know filiality, and genuine knowledge of filiality can arise even though they do not *perceive* (but only seem to perceive) their parents. Moreover, if we give this verdict in the case of illusion, then it might be natural to think that even in the case where the person's parents *were* before them, *seeing* one's parents is not what it is important to genuine knowledge; all that matters is *seeming to see* one's parents. This line of thought might lead us to replace Perceptual Part with the claim that, for relevant *F*:

**Appearance Part** Some episodes of genuine knowledge of *F*ness have perceptual appearances as a part of them.

While I think this issue is interesting and important, I won't discuss it further here. The reason is that those who have endorsed the perceptual model in the literature have not considered the difference between perception and perceptual seemings, and I think they would hold that, if Wang endorsed Appearance Part, then the core idea of their interpretation would still be vindicated. So the difference won't matter to my main project here, which is to undermine the Perceptual Model. I'll continue to speak about Perceptual Part in what follows, though my discussion could be suitably rephrased to fit Appearance Part instead, and the interested reader is welcome to rephrase it in this way.

<sup>34</sup>As noted above there are other ways one could try to vindicate Perceptual Part. A perhaps more straightforward way would be to hold that, for relevant *F*:

**Complex Knowledge** Something is an episode of genuinely knowing *F*ness if and only if it is an event composed of a person's *liangzhi* recognizing the *F*ness of a sincere *F* mental event *and* of the person's perceiving relevant features of the environment.

There doesn't seem to be textual evidence which directly decides between Complex Knowledge and Total Knowledge. But I believe Total Knowledge is more attractive, for two reasons. First, I can't imagine Wang believing that his hearers or readers would understand him to be endorsing Complex Knowledge, without his making any explicit comment on the matter. The thesis is just too complex to expect that people would infer it from what he did say. By contrast, Total Knowledge seems to me a natural idea that one could naturally expect to be implicit in Wang's discussions of knowing cold or knowing the bitter melon (see below, [T5] and [T6]). Second, it's not clear that Complex Knowledge can be supplemented with a claim saying why this complex mental event should be understood to be a form of *knowledge*. (See the next four paragraphs in the main text for the way in which the proponent of Total Knowledge responds to this challenge.) Thanks to Justin Tiwald for discussion here.

occasion, Wang himself appears to use the word “know” in this way, to indicate being in the state described by its complement.<sup>35</sup> The proponent of Total Knowledge might invoke a parallel between these uses and the way they understand genuine knowledge. According to them, to genuinely know filiality just is to have a filial total mental event, i.e. to be filial at that moment. Since knowing happiness is clearly a form of knowing (they might argue), knowing filiality is, too.

The idea that genuine knowledge is called knowledge because it is associated with the experience of a total mental event fits with some others of Wang’s examples:

- [T5] 就如稱某人知孝、某人知弟，必是其人已曾行孝行弟，方可稱他知孝知弟，不成只是曉得說些孝弟的話，便可稱為知孝弟。又如知痛，必已自痛了方知痛，知寒，必已自寒了；知饑，必已自饑了；知行如何分得開？此便是知行的本體，不曾有私意隔斷的。

Suppose one says that someone knows filial piety or that someone knows fraternal respect. They must have already enacted filial piety and fraternal respect, and only then can they be said to know filial piety or fraternal respect. If they only understand how to say some filial or respectful words, one shouldn’t straightaway say that they know filial piety or fraternal respect. Or, again, consider knowledge of pain. Only after one has been pained can one know pain. One can know cold only after one has been cold. One can know hunger only after one has been hungry. How then can knowledge and action be separated? This is just the original substance of knowledge and action, which selfish desires have not yet divided. (*IPL* 5, *QJ* 4)

We might say that Wang’s point is that being moral has a particular feel, like being cold. But according to the proponent of Total Knowledge, he does not hold that knowing this particular feel is due to a special form of introspection, or a quality of the mental event itself; he holds rather that to know the feel just is to be in the relevant state. For instance, to know cold is to be cold. Similarly, to know filiality to be filial, and being filial (at a time) might be identified with having a total mental event which includes a sincere inclination to perform a filial action.<sup>36</sup>

Or consider the following passage, which describes a conversation after Wang is asked to describe the condition of an ideal state of virtue:

- [T6] 先生曰：「啞子吃苦瓜，與你說不得。你要知此苦，還須你自吃。」時曰仁在傍，曰：「如此才是真知，即是行矣。」一時在座諸友皆有省。

<sup>35</sup>In passages where Wang says that one “knows the mean before the emotions are aroused” (知此即知未發之中 *IPL* 101, *QJ* 34, cf. *IPL* 158, *QJ* 73), he seems to mean simply that one is in the state of the mean before the emotions are aroused.

<sup>36</sup>Note that this also fits with the passage from Cheng Yi discussed above in n. 19.

The teacher [Wang] said: "It is like a mute person who eats bitter melon; I can't describe it to you. If you want to know this bitterness, you still have to eat it for yourself."

At that time Xu Ai was by his side, and said: "If [you do] this, only then will it be genuine knowledge, which is action." At this time, the friends present all achieved some understanding. (IPL 125, QJ 42)

Someone can only know the state of the virtuous person in the relevant way by being in it, just as one can only know the taste of the melon by eating it. According to the proponent of Total Knowledge, experiencing the relevant mental event is genuine knowledge. In calling a total mental event "genuine knowledge" Wang indicates not so much that it is knowledge like these other forms of knowledge, only better, but that it is its own class of knowledge, and that *it* by contrast to the other kinds of knowledge, is associated with virtuous action. The important kind of knowledge is like the kind of knowledge we have when we "know happiness".

Total Knowledge vindicates Perceptual Part, and as a result it vindicates what I have been calling the perceptual model. But it is worth pausing to note how far we have come from the original motivations for the perceptual model. When scholars speak of Wang's emphasis on perception, they tend to emphasize the importance of a special form of perception of the situation around one to the virtuous person's behavior. The virtuous person is a "connoisseur"; they enjoy *true perception*; they have a special sensitivity to their environment. But given Total Knowledge, the doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action is not a doctrine about the virtuous person's sensitivity to the environment. Rather, it is best understood as a thesis about the experience of acting virtuously. Wang says that the distinctive cognitive achievement of being virtuous just is the total mental event associated with being virtuous. Sensitivity to the environment is a part of that, but no special status is accorded to perception as an ingredient in the overall mental state that constitutes genuine knowledge.

Many scholars have made remarks in the vicinity of the perceptual model before, expanding on what Wang says in [T3] and [T4]. But they have not clearly stated how that thesis would relate to what Wang elsewhere says about the unity of knowledge and action. I have tried to show that the perceptual model can be developed into a precise thesis which fits with the rest of what Wang says, but that doing so takes us far from the original understanding of what was at stake in the perceptual model's overall interpretation of the unity of knowledge and action.



## 5 The introspective model

The perceptual model has been motivated by passages in which Wang seems to emphasize the role of perception in virtuous action. A different approach starts from [T2]. In that passage, Wang argues that a person cannot have genuine knowledge if they suffer from motivational conflict, i.e., do not have sincere inclinations. This passage suggests that Wang's doctrine centered on the idea that the barriers to having sincere inclinations are exactly the barriers to truly recognizing the ethical qualities of those inclinations. A person has a sincere inclination, according to Wang, if and only if they genuinely know the ethical qualities of the inclination. According to this alternative approach, the unity of knowledge and action does not center on the importance of sensitivity to the environment, but rather on the fact that having a sincere inclination to do a filial or respectful action coincides with clarity about the goodness of that inclination. In our own slogan, we might say that motivational harmony coincides with introspective clarity.

A natural hypothesis to make on the basis of this passage is that Wang identified genuine knowledge with *liangzhi's* introspective knowledge of the rightness or goodness of sincere inclinations, i.e. for relevant  $F$ :

**Introspective Knowledge** Something is an episode of a person's genuinely knowing  $F$ ness if and only if it is an episode of their *liangzhi's* knowing the rightness or goodness of a sincere inclination to perform an  $F$  action.

To see the contrast between the three theses about the character of genuine knowledge that we have considered so far (Simple Knowledge, Total Knowledge, and Introspective Knowledge), consider the following example. Suppose someone has a sincere inclination to perform a filial action. Let us suppose further for simplicity that their total mental event is composed of only two smaller mental events: the inclination to do the filial action, and their *liangzhi's* recognition of the goodness or rightness of the filial inclination. Everyone should agree that this person is experiencing an episode of genuine knowledge. But our three theses disagree on what that episode of genuine knowledge is. According to Simple Knowledge, it is the inclination to perform the filial action itself. According to Introspective Knowledge, it is the event of *liangzhi's* recognizing the goodness or rightness of the inclination to perform the filial action. According to Total Knowledge, it is the event composed of both of these other events.

Introspective Knowledge neatly solves the problems we started with, related to the weakness of Knowledge Inclination. First, on the assumption that a person genuinely knows  $F$ ness if and only if something is an episode of their genuinely knowing  $F$ ness,



Introspective Knowledge entails Knowledge Inclination. So, like that thesis, it suffices together with Inclination Action and Knowing Right and Wrong to entail Unity. But unlike Knowledge Inclination, Introspective Knowledge tells us which event is genuine knowledge, and thus rules out the claim that Wang stipulatively redefined action as genuine knowledge. Moreover, it identifies episodes of genuine knowledge with something which is very naturally thought of as *knowledge*: *liangzhi*'s recognition of the rightness or goodness of inclinations. (Indeed, in this regard, it is more natural than Total Knowledge.) Finally, it offers us a natural story about why this form of knowledge is elevated above other forms of knowledge, i.e. why Wang calls it *genuine*. In [T2] Wang admits that one can know the goodness of a good inclination/ motivating concern even when one also takes that inclination/ motivating concern to be bad. But there is a clear sense in which a person's epistemic state is overall less ideal if they know the goodness of an inclination and also take it to be bad, than if they know the goodness of an inclination, and have no such conflicting "taking". According to the introspective model, Wang marks this difference by calling the latter achievement "genuine" knowledge.

On the introspective model, Wang held that virtuous action is associated with clear-eyed appreciation of *the qualities of one's own inclinations*. The virtuous person has clear-eyed recognition of these qualities because they do not suffer from motivational conflict, and this leaves their *liangzhi* free to recognize those qualities fully. The virtuous agent clearly recognizes the quality of their inclinations; this is the knowledge they have that others lack.

According to Introspective Knowledge, no episode of perceiving is a part of any episodes of genuine knowledge: episodes of genuine knowledge are identified with events of *liangzhi* knowing the goodness or badness of certain mental events, and those events do not have perception as a part of them.<sup>37</sup> But this feature of the introspective model might seem to present a problem for it. As we saw above there are some passages where Wang seems to say that perception *is* importantly connected to genuine

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<sup>37</sup>This conclusion is of course consistent with a number of other claims which might tie perception to genuine knowledge. Perhaps most obviously, one might hold that perception of the environment is a precondition of genuine knowledge. To illustrate the idea, consider first an analogy. Suppose that, necessarily, any party must be preceded by some form of invitation. Plausibly the invitations – unlike the lawn games or the conversations – would still not be parts of the party, even though they are required for the party to take place. Similarly, the idea would be that it is only when one perceives the environment around one that one can have an inclination which is filial or respectful. This perception would be like the invitations, not part of the episode of genuine knowledge, even though it is required for that episode to occur. Even if we had argued that Wang held such a view about genuine knowledge (I believe he did not), it would not mean that these events of perceiving the environment would be *parts of* genuine knowledge. Genuine knowledge is identified with the introspective knowledge of *liangzhi*, not with any perception of the environment.

knowledge. How does the introspective model make sense of these passages?

Before turning to the passages, I want to dismiss one style of response that a proponent of the introspective model might be tempted by. They might be tempted to say that genuine knowledge comes in a variety of forms, and that, while genuine knowledge of filiality is to be understood as *liangzhi's* knowledge of the ethical quality of an inclination, there still can be genuine knowledge of colors or smells, even though those examples of genuine knowledge would have a very different psychological character. But this kind of split verdict is unattractive. While it may allow for a straightforward account of some passages which seem to relate perception to genuine knowledge, it would do so at the cost of the key explanatory insights of the introspective model. Any interpretation of the unity of knowledge and action should aim to answer two questions: how is genuine knowledge related to action? what makes examples of genuine knowledge have the elevated status Wang thinks they have? The introspective model offers clear, powerful answers to both questions. But if we were to allow the perceptual examples, too, to count as genuine knowledge, these answers would no longer be available. For we cannot say that the examples of perceptual knowledge are connected to action via the same mechanism that the introspective examples are. Nor can we say that they have an elevated epistemic status for the same reason the examples of introspective knowledge do. But the answers to our two leading questions – and especially the second question, as to why something has an elevated epistemic status that allows it to count as genuine knowledge – should apply *to all* examples of genuine knowledge. And if the perceptual examples are examples of genuine knowledge, then the explanation the introspective model gives of why the introspective examples count as genuine knowledge can no longer be accepted: it does not explain why these events are episodes of genuine knowledge, since there are some episodes of genuine knowledge to which it does not apply. So while one could move to this style of hybrid view in response to the passages that seem to be about perception, the move should not be seen as a friendly modification of the introspective model, but rather a move that would require a whole new explanation of the elevated status of genuine knowledge altogether. This response should therefore be adopted only as a last resort.

Now on to the passages. First, as we saw above, [T3] can be read in two different ways. On the reading preferred by proponents of the perceptual model, the examples of loving a lovely color or hating a hateful odor are presented as *examples* of genuine knowledge. But there is another reading available – which is equally natural linguistically – according to which Wang there merely gives illustrative analogues for genuine knowledge, and not examples of it. Having genuine knowledge is *similar to* loving a

lovely color or hating a hateful odor, insofar as action and knowledge are in certain respects continuous in both cases, but that is not to say that seeing a lovely color or smelling a hateful odor are examples of genuine knowledge.

According to the introspective model, Wang's examples in this passage do not illustrate the role of perception in genuine knowledge. But they do illustrate an important aspect of the mechanics of genuine knowledge. In the key passage [T2], Wang uses the example of loving a lovely color and hating a hateful odor to illustrate the way in which *liangzhi* loves good motivating concerns and hates bad ones. He is explicit here that the example applies to the internal responses of *liangzhi* (and not to a person's overall responses to the color). In fact, Wang does not merely hold that there is a rough parallel between the ways in which a person who loves a lovely color enjoys a correspondence between perception and affect and the ways in which *liangzhi*'s introspective knowledge is in correspondence with *its* loving and hating of inclinations. The following passage suggests that Wang held that to love good motivating concerns, and to hate bad ones *is what it is* for *liangzhi* to know their goodness and badness:

[T7] 良知只是個是非之心，是非只是個好惡，只好惡就盡了是非，只是非就盡了萬事萬變。

*Liangzhi* is just the mind which [judges] right and wrong (*shi fei*). [Judging] right and wrong (*shi fei*) is just loving and hating. If you have just loved and hated, then you have exhausted [judging] right and wrong (*shi fei*). If you have just [judged] right and wrong (*shi fei*), then you have exhausted the ten thousand affairs and changing [circumstances]. (IPL 288, QJ 126)

If we take this passage at face value, it says that what it is to know the goodness of a good inclination is to love it. It may be helpful to think of this claim as a version of Simple Knowledge, transposed to the key of introspection. Simple Knowledge could be thought of as saying that a person's responses to the environment count as knowledge of qualities instantiated there. Here Wang says instead that a person's *liangzhi*'s responses to their mental events count as knowledge of qualities they instantiate. *Liangzhi* thus unites recognition and affect.<sup>38</sup>

There is thus a natural reading of [T3] on which it is consistent with the introspective model. And indeed, one might prefer this interpretation of the passage, in the

<sup>38</sup> Even if one held that, on balance, Wang should not be taken to identify *liangzhi*'s knowledge of the goodness or badness of an inclination with its loving or hating, the passage clearly shows that he held there was an important relationship between them. Given this important relationship, the example of loving a lovely color has an important role in Wang's overall theory. The spontaneous way in which a person loves a lovely color is exactly analogous to the spontaneous way in which *liangzhi* loves a good inclination.

context of Wang's other writings. As in [T2], Wang's most prominent uses of the very same quotation from the *Great Learning* describe *liangzhi*'s internal recognition (and loving/hating) of the goodness and badness of mental events. These uses of the passage strongly suggest that Wang's point in discussing it is to highlight the close connection between knowledge and affective response which *liangzhi* exhibits, *not* to emphasize the role of perception in particular.

Our second text, [T4], will turn out to be even worse for the perceptual model than this first one was: it will turn out on inspection to be better evidence for the introspective model than for the perceptual model. In this passage, Wang does make a series of claims which might seem to relate perception to genuine knowledge. He says: "The mind is automatically able to know. When it sees one's parents, it automatically knows filiality. When it sees one's elder brother, it automatically knows respect. When it sees a child fall into a well, it automatically knows compassion." These remarks on their own are consistent with two different views: first, that the knowledge of filiality, respect or compassion has perception as a part; and, second, that perception is a precursor to the separate, automatic achievement of genuine knowledge. The first of these is what proponents of the perceptual model have taken from this passage. But what Wang says immediately following these remarks strongly suggests that he has the second view in mind. He says: "this is *liangzhi* and should not be sought outside". The most natural reading of this remark is that the genuine knowledge he is describing is due to *liangzhi*, and that its object is not external to the mind. On this very natural reading, Wang suggests that perceiving one's parents or brothers is an *occasion* for having genuine knowledge, and that this genuine knowledge arises smoothly in those cases (provided one does not suffer from the obscuration of selfish desires). But he emphasizes that the perception is not a part of genuine knowledge. He seems to be cautioning us almost explicitly about taking perception to have too important a role in the achievement of genuine knowledge.

While I think this is the most natural reading of the passage – and that it is therefore evidence in favor of the introspective model, rather than, as has often been thought, a point in favor of something like the perceptual model – there is a reading of Wang's remark that the knowledge "should not be sought outside" which is compatible with the perceptual model. One might think that Wang means to describe *liangzhi*'s role in the apprehension of the ethical qualities, and perhaps also the fact that *liangzhi* is the source of any filial or respectful inclinations one might have, and that these in turn are part of what it is to know filiality or respect. (Remember that *liangzhi* can be a source of affective / motivational responses: it is not implausible that it could be taken to be

the source of all *good* responses of this kind.) On this reading, Wang is simply saying that the way to gain this knowledge is via the operation of *liangzhi*. So [T4] is consistent with both the perceptual model and the introspective model. With that said, it certainly does not tell against the introspective model; if anything it supports it.

This brings us, finally, to [T5] and [T6]. These passages were cited as supporting the overall picture suggested by Total Knowledge, but not the idea that perception is a component of genuine knowledge. They therefore do not pose any direct threat to the introspective model. And there are many ways that a proponent of the introspective model might make sense of them. One would be to hold that, just as in the case of loving a lovely color, these examples are merely meant as illustrations of certain aspects of genuine knowledge, not as examples of genuine knowledge. A different approach – and my preferred one – is to hold that they are examples of genuine knowledge, but to note that the examples are carefully chosen to be examples which involve sensations that are naturally thought of as apprehended through some kind of inner sense. The way in which recognize our hunger, our pain, our feelings of cold, or a bitter taste are, Wang might be saying, analogous to the ways in which *liangzhi* recognizes the ethical qualities of our inclinations. In all of these further examples, the relevant terms (“cold”, “hunger”, “pain”, “bitterness”) may be (or in some cases must be) used to describe properties of sensations as opposed to properties of the objects which cause those sensations. If Wang is talking about knowledge of properties of sensations, there is an exact parallel between the objects of this knowledge and the objects of the core examples of ethical knowledge that have been my focus. These examples – which Wang chose himself, rather than inheriting from a classic text – would be Wang’s attempt to make more precise the nature of the genuine knowledge that is most important for the ethical examples.<sup>39,40</sup>

The introspective model runs counter to a long tradition of understanding these passages as drawing a close connection between perception and genuine knowledge. But on inspection the passages do not support the perceptual model – which vindicates

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<sup>39</sup>How should we understand the relationship between Wang’s notion of genuine knowledge and the example of genuine knowledge which Cheng Yi uses described in n. 19? The introspective model – unlike the perceptual model – is clearly committed to denying that Wang held that this example was an example of genuine knowledge. But there is no obvious problem for the introspective model here. Cheng lived four centuries before Wang, and while there was undoubtedly a preference for conforming with the remarks of eminent predecessors in Wang’s tradition, a divergence on this example does not seem a serious cost to the view.

<sup>40</sup>Yet another passage sometimes invoked to support the perceptual model is IPL 39 (QJ 18), where Wang says that one’s vigilance in seeking out one’s bad thoughts must be like a “cat catching mice”. But this passage is in fact support for the *introspective* model; the perceptual example is clearly meant as an analogy for the kind of seeking out of one’s *thoughts* Wang recommends.

this connection – as opposed to the introspective model – which does not. Wang never clearly says that perception is part of genuine knowledge.

## 6 Arguing against the perceptual model

In the previous section, I was content to show that the texts are consistent with the introspective model; I did not attempt to compare the introspective model with the perceptual model. In this section I will switch gears and offer two arguments that in fact we should prefer the introspective model over the perceptual model.

My first argument against the perceptual model rests on the observation that proponents of Total Knowledge will have difficulty explaining the connection Wang draws between *liangzhi*'s knowledge of the ethical quality of mental events and an elevated form of knowledge in [T2]. To see this, consider first what a proponent of Total-Knowledge should say about Wang's discussion of *liangzhi*'s recognition of the ethical qualities of mental events in the passages which support the attribution of Knowing Right and Wrong to Wang.<sup>41</sup> They should say that Wang emphasizes this capacity of *liangzhi* because the key to virtuous action, i.e. to having a virtuous total mental event, is achieving overall harmony in one's inclinations, and that this can only be achieved if one has a mechanism for recognizing which events are bad and which are good. On this picture, *liangzhi*'s recognition of these ethical qualities does not directly relate to genuine knowledge. But in [T2], Wang discusses an elevated form of knowledge, and specifically describes a barrier to that elevated form of knowledge as "obscuring one's *liangzhi* which knows goodness". By far the most natural reading of this discussion takes it to say that *liangzhi*'s knowledge of goodness would be the elevated form of knowledge (i.e. genuine knowledge) were these obstacles absent. On this reading Wang essentially asserts Introspective Knowledge. Proponents of the perceptual model would have to make sense of the passage by adopting an alternative, contorted reading, where the point is that *liangzhi* is responsible for an important part of the total mental event which constitutes genuine knowledge. But it is hard even to see how Wang could be understood to be making such a weak claim there.

My second argument is more amorphous, but perhaps even more compelling. Instead of focusing on a particular passage, it focuses on the overall tenor of Wang's remarks on the topic. Start by considering the passages which support attributing Knowing Right and Wrong to Wang.<sup>42</sup> In these passages, Wang again and again empha-

<sup>41</sup>Most obviously: QJ 242 (Ching (1972, p. 114)), IPL 206 (QJ 105), cf. IPL 290 (QJ 126), IPL 169 (QJ 81-2)).

<sup>42</sup>See above n. 41 for references.



sizes the introspective knowledge *liangzhi* has of the ethical qualities of mental events. Clearly, he takes this introspective knowledge to be central to the possibility of virtuous action, and to play an important role in the realization of the ideal forms of knowledge and action. There isn't comparable emphasis on the role of perception in virtuous action. This lack of emphasis doesn't show that Wang thought perception was never required for virtuous action. But it does make Total Knowledge seem out of place in his overall thought: why does Wang emphasize the knowledge *liangzhi* has of these ethical qualities if he believes there is a more important theoretical notion of knowledge of which this is only a constituent?

Turn now to Wang's writings more generally. If we consider all of the passages except [T3] and [T4], the evidence is clearly in favor of the introspective model. Indeed, if Wang had never written (or said) the remarks contained in those passages, I think it is fair to say that the perceptual model would have had no currency at all. Wang speaks often of *liangzhi*'s knowledge of mental events, and comparatively rarely of perception as an input to virtuous action. Scholars have given huge weight to a particular reading of the passages [T3] and [T4]. But can they bear that weight? As I've argued above, neither of these passages univocally supports the claim that perception is part of genuine knowledge. Indeed, on the most natural reading of [T4], Wang explicitly says that the knowledge he describes is not perceptual, but internal. So, in fact we can strengthen my earlier claim: if we consider everything Wang wrote *with the exception of* [T3], the introspective model would be unquestionably preferable. But this passage on its own cannot bear any weight in supporting the perceptual model. As I have said, there are two equally natural readings of the passage, one supporting the perceptual model, and one consistent with the introspective model. We must choose between these readings on the basis of Wang's other remarks on the topic. And the choice is an easy one.

## 7 Conclusion

The first aim of this paper was to develop the perceptual model in more detail than has been done before. I argued that Total Knowledge was the best hope for making sense of the claim that perception is a part of some episodes of genuine knowledge, and I showed how, given Total Knowledge, we could make sense of Unity, which I take to be the core of the unity of knowledge and action.

This result is already surprising. Proponents of the perceptual model have spoken in quite different ways about the supposed role of perception in genuine knowledge. They have not taken perception to be merely a side-light of the total mental event which



is genuine knowledge. Rather they have focused on a value-laden form of perception, and seen their interpretation as making Wang's doctrine centrally about how we should *perceive* the world around us. But I argued that no such interpretation could be squared with Wang's examples of the qualities we genuinely know, and that Total Knowledge was the best hope for the perceptual model.

I then presented the introspective model, and argued that it was a more natural interpretation of what Wang wrote than the perceptual model. Wang doesn't speak very much at all about the role of perception in virtuous action; by contrast he constantly emphasizes the role of *liangzhi* in recognizing one's good inclinations and fostering them. Aside from two passages, the evidence points firmly toward the introspective model. Even those two passages, on inspection, do not clearly favor the perceptual model – one of them ([T4]) tells against it. So we should prefer the introspective model.

The unity of knowledge and action is not a doctrine about a rich form of perception. Rather, it concerns the conditions under which the conscience-like faculty of *liangzhi* could fully recognize the ethical qualities of one's own mental events. Wang believed that people could achieve this full recognition – genuine knowledge – when and only when they were acting virtuously. In this sense, he believed, knowledge and action are one.

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