

Article

East Meets West: The New Gnoseology in Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming

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Abstract: This study examines the various explanations of the deliberative humanity, regarding a new gnoseology in the intellectual contexts of Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming during the 15th and 16th centuries. In a similar way to Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno for the European Renaissance, Wang Yangming is the enlightener among the representatives of Neo-Confucianism in early modern China. Each of these three takes an individual's mind as the point of departure. They then modify the traditional theory of gnoseology, in search of the good and principle. Nevertheless, behind these similarities on the surface, the metaphorical and theoretical interpretations follow different directions. Marsilio Ficino translates hierarchic Platonism as a transcendent norm. Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming, however, seem to liberate the individual's humanity from the traditional norms of gnoseology. In their methodologies, they both have developed a generative gnoseology that differs from the orthodox pattern of knowledge in their respective traditions.

Keywords: gnoseology; mind; Giordano Bruno; Wang Yangming



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1. Introduction

This paper explores the gnoseological and historical insights of Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno, who construct an independent humanity at the individual level. In my view, Wang had a similar impact on Chinese heresy as that of Bruno on Western civilization in the early modern period. Considering Wang Yangming as a reformer of the Neo-Confucians' path of knowledge, I am seeking to identify the Chinese counterpart to the Italian Renaissance experience that would facilitate Sino-Western intercultural exchanges, as well as learning from both cultural and historical traditions (Lu 2014a). They both established new paradigms for successive intellectual movements, while, at the same time, drawing on a great deal of information and inspiration from their respective traditions. Thus, the emergence of their "heretical" thought should not be perceived as a simple disruption of the previous cultural contexts.

In the fifteenth century, during the Renaissance, there was an intense and ubiquitous enthusiasm for classical research. Along with the consistent enthusiasm for the translation of and commentary on *Prisci Theologi* (pristine theologians), the discovery of ancient text was the common vocation of Christian humanism (Borghesi 2019). Thanks to the laborious and excellent work of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), European intellectuals confronted, for the first time, the fully-fledged genuine doctrines of the "heretical" Greek classics, particularly the significant corpora of Plato and Plotinus (Di Dio 2016).

In recent years, Bruno has often been redefined as the philosopher of a vision of occultism, of the absolute One, as the substratum that, with the Neoplatonic tradition of Ficino, lies behind his "heretical claim" of infinity. This is only true, however, of the metaphysical principle—the divine paradigm of which the infinite universe is the image or shadow. Bruno's infinite universe itself is based on the idea of individuality and homogenous potency between the species. Unlike Ficino in the preceding century, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) did not call himself a *pious* (pious) Christian Platonist. His approach was similar to that of the naturalistic philosophers who upheld independent investigation

against religious authority. His thought derived a great deal from the humanists of the preceding century and a half: a belief in the primacy of the power of the intellect, idea that true wisdom is rooted in the doctrines of the ancients, naturalness of religion in man (who himself is a microcosm in which divine and earthly elements are conjoined), and desire to revise and systematize ancient wisdom (Celenza 1999). Such naturalistic ontology and generative gnoseology lie behind Bruno's contribution to the scientific revolution, which is not of secondary importance (Z. Wang 2022).

In a similar way, there was great emphasis on the gnoseological interaction of *nei sheng* 内圣 (inner sageliness) and *wai wang* 外王 (outer kingliness) in ancient Confucian thought, and this paper will focus on the humanity and individuality in the implicit interconnections between the two terms (C. Chen 1986). Firstly, the acquisition of inner sageliness consists in individual cultivation, metaphysical intuition, cosmological intelligence, an ultimate religious orientation to wisdom, the gnoseological view that there is a perceptible "way" of how the cosmos works, and an ethical theory of the human mind–heart (Angle 2009). Secondly, the accomplishment of outer kingliness is manifested in social and political governance, along with the application of gnoseology and ethics (W. T. Chan 1963).

During the fifteenth century, as well as the beginning of the sixteenth, in China, when Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472–1529) was alive, Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) Neo-Confucian doctrine was dominant in Chinese epistemology and generally recognized as the authority of Neo-Confucianism (Cheng 1970). However, Wang preferred the doctrine of Lu Jiuyuan 陆九渊 (1139–1192), a contemporary rival of Zhu during the Song period (960–1279), who is considered as one of the founders of the Learning of the Mind–Heart (*xinxue* 心学) (Tillman 1992). Against the dualist pattern of "*li*理" (principle) and "*qi*气" (material), Wang posits that mental or emotional structure is identical with the pattern of the universe and, as such, forms "*yi ti*一体" (one body, or one substance) with "*tian di wan wu*天地万物" (heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures of the world). Wang's philosophy has a considerable inclination to liberate an individual's mind from the force of exterior authority (Chou 2008).

In Wang Yangming's philosophical terminology, the intelligent and emotional aspects of an individual's mind co-constitute *tian li* 天理 (heavenly principle or principle of the universe) and authentic human nature. The "genuine" mind–heart as *ti*体 (substance) is not different from *liang zhi* 良知 (innate knowing) as its materialization, or *yong* 用 (function). Compared to Confucius, who emphasizes *ren*仁 (humaneness), and Mencius, who highlights *yi*义 (righteousness), the foundation in Wang Yangming's ontology is *zhi*智, which creatively refers to "knowledge" or "wisdom". Another core concept of Wang Yangming is the "unity of knowing and acting" (知行合一), which means that knowledge and action are one simultaneous gnoseological process, not two separated paths. Still, if learning and practicing are one act, then the learner is a practitioner in learning, and the practitioner is learning in practicing. That is to say that, in learning, a learner is not merely an objective investigator, but also a subjective participant. Equally crucial is that a learner's activities cannot be limited to discovering existing knowledge, but also to relating himself to actively generating or producing knowledge (Chen 2019). Hence, "innate knowing" in Wang's gnoseological framework relates to the embodiment of various practices, ethical acts, and value judgments, indicating the genuine intuition of supreme good.

As a modern historian, Hou Wailu 侯外庐 (1903–1987) constructed the history of the Renaissance in China. He maintained that, in the middle and late Ming period (from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century), there was an intellectual movement similar to the European Renaissance (Hou et al. 1984; Li 2013). Though my description and methodology are different from his, my philosophical study will share some similarities with his historiography. By aligning the gnoseological models of Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming, I will attempt to demonstrate that both of them have proposed a generative gnoseology that initiated an epistemic turn against their respective despotisms for subsequent ideological movement.

In this paper, I want to argue that Wang Yangming is the initiator of self-emancipation for the Chinese early modern (Ming–Qing) period, in a similar way to how Giordano Bruno

is for the European. Wang Yangming's impact on the modern transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties is as tremendous as the scientific revolution. As Huang Zongxi 宗羲 (1610–1695), the Chinese pioneer of democratic thought, described it, it was similar to 'Thunder that wakes people from sleep, and lightning that clears away bewilderment' (Z. Huang 1986). It is at this point that we can find the gnoseological consonance between Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno, because both assert an independent human mind that becomes aware of the immanent nature of its founding and unifying one-body. This point can be labeled as 'heretical individualism' against abstract dogmas and transcendental authorities. Other similarities between these two thinkers lie, firstly, in their common strategy in defending the spontaneity of innate knowing and feeling: both provided a psychic explanation by analyzing the gnoseological relationship between intellect and will; secondly, in their gnoseology: both asserted the generative and interior path for attaining the Heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理) or divine truth, and both emphasized that one should initially pay attention to the obscure and insignificant beings and then incorporate them conscientiously with myriad things in the universe.

In our current investigation, I will refrain from two improper considerations, which take the conventional generalizations in European ideologies of Chinese traditions. The first inappropriate opinion claims that there is no philosophical system in Chinese thought, and the traditional European field is the only authentic source of theoretical philosophy. The second one concedes the legitimate status of Chinese philosophy, but it can be represented only through the lens of western paradigms. These foregoing views treat Chinese culture as auxiliary material for the existing philosophy in western society (Lu 2014b). By comparing Renaissance gnoseology to the Neo-Confucian tradition, I attempt to clarify the experiential structure of Wang Yangming's renovation but, at the same time, set it within its specific intellectual and historical context.

2. The Gnoseological Relation between Intellect and Will

Which is the reliable spiritual "light" for man's faculty of judgment? The medieval theologians have two dominating interpretative paths, with respect to the *intellectus-voluntas* debate (Cottingham 1988). The first path, regarded as the "intellectualistic", was emphasized by Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Dominican Order; the second, "voluntaristic" in nature, is represented by its apologist John Duns Scotus and the Franciscan school (Davies 2014; Derry 2006).

The dilemma of scholasticism became a purely theoretical one: whether *priori status* should be ascribed to the speculative area (represented by the internally operating *noesis*) over the appearances of objects (the concern of the externally stirring will) or, in other words, whether outward phenomena should be afforded primacy over the innate intellect of mankind (Terracciano 2011). Compared to the traditional paradigm adhered to by medieval theologians, Ficino emerges as an early modern interpreter of the gnoseological mechanism for attaining knowledge. Ficino expresses his views in a passage of *Theologia Platonica* (Ficino 2011):

"In a graphic picture and the structure of a building, there reflects the design and the genius of the artist. Moreover, one inwardly catches sight of the disposition and somehow the form of the soul itself. Nevertheless, the soul of the artist reaches light most explicitly in speaking, singing, and sounds. Through the whole disposition of the mind, the will is completely revealed". (Ficino 2011)

The gnoseological and hermetic attempts in Ficino's commentaries on the pages of Platonic works deeply inspired Giordano Bruno. Despite his naturalistic philosophy, especially in the metaphorical and philosophical poem *Gli eroici furori* (*The heroic frenzies*), which is known for its passionate character, Bruno chose a different way from Ficino's Platonic theology). He integrated intellect and will as two complementary efficacies in the same process for his interior praxis. Bruno defined and described heroic desire in the third dialogue of Part I:

“These passions which we are discussing are not a forgetting, but a memory; they are not the negligence of oneself, but love and desire of the beautiful and good through which one tries to perfect himself by resembling it and transforming himself into it. It is not a rapture under the laws of an unworthy fate with the snares of feral affections; but a rational impetus that pursues the intellectual apprehension of the good and beautiful which it knows, which it would likewise please by conforming to it. In this way, it comes to be kindled and imbued with quality and condition that make it appear illustrious and worthy”. (Bassi 2004)

Thus, its substance lies in its intellectuality as a passionate will. Furthermore, the heroic desire grants “enlightened a double joy” (Bassi 2020), which seeks the structural parallelism in the dual goal of his *nova philosophia*: the good and beauty. There is no superiority between intellect and will in Bruno’s heroic lover. Without the stimulus of cognition, the affections would be impotent; however, without the incessant passion for union with the divinity, man would never realize his capacity for knowledge (Bassi 2004).

Similar to Bruno, who sets an individual’s mental structure and emotional code as the starting point, Wang also changes the traditional Chinese cognitive pattern in searching for the gnoseological good (*liangzhi* 良知, original knowing of the good) and ontological principle (*tianli* 天理, Heavenly principle) of Neo-Confucianism. Based on an empirical investigation of nature (*xing* 性), Zhu Xi asserts that feelings generated by the human mind are not a reliable source. How do we acquire the knowledge of the Heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理)? According to Zhu, one can approach the principle of the universe through the learning of classics and investigation of things in nature.

Wang’s concept of *xing* is markedly different. Wang is opposed to Zhu’s theory that the principle of the universe is merely transcendental and abstract. For Wang, the general term “principle” (*li* 理) is often interchangeable with “Heavenly principle” (*tianli* 天理, namely the “principle of the universe”). Therefore, Wang’s gnoseology has two connotative meanings, cognitive and ontological, and both are intertwined. According to Wang’s cognitive pattern regarding the organic universe, *tianli* should be connected with the heart-mind (*xin* 心), since the heart-mind is the substance of human nature, myriad beings, and even the principle of the universe (W. T. Chan 1998). Accordingly, Wang treats his innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) as the ontological creative power of myriad things in the universe. Wang claims: “Innate knowledge is the spirit of creation. These spirits create heaven and earth, become demons and gods” (W. T. Chan 1998). For Wang, innate knowledge becomes the creative power that ontologically works in the universe.

In Confucian orthodox tradition, the only way to understand the notions of “Dao道” (logos) and “Ren仁” (benevolence) was through the mediation of classic works, or to depend on the Confucian cultural hierarchy, which is based on the degree of refinement of knowledge (Cheng 1997). However, in certain ancient books of Confucianism, such as the *Da Xue* 大学 (Great Learning), social ethics and political governance could be also built on nondistinctive self-cultivation. Consequently, when the above pre-Qin Confucian text was consecrated as a part of the elemental classics of literati’s pursuit from the Song Dynasty (960–1279), Neo-Confucian philosophy began to lay much emphasis on the humanistic value of inner sageliness (N. S. Chan 2011).

Following this revival of the learning faculty at an individual level, Wang says in *Chuan xi lu* 传习录 (Instructions for Practical Living), “The succeeding Confucians did not understand the doctrine of the sages, and did not realize that *liang zhi* 良知 (innate conscience) and *liang neng* 良能 (innate abilities) are attained in their hearts through an individual experience; instead, they tried to know what cannot be known and to do what cannot be done” (Lu 2014a; Peng 2003).

The theory of “*liang zhi* 良知” (innate or intuitive knowledge) is perhaps the most unique conception of Wang’s, which is markedly distinguished from the Confucian tradition in his time, which was dominated by the doctrines of “*xing ji li* 性即理” (the nature is Principle). On the one hand, it affirms the equality of all human beings, with respect to society and culture; on the other hand, it attributes a subordinate position to the canonical

doctrine. For the individual, as the indisputable protagonist in the reflection of “*liang zhi* 良知”, the value of the Confucian classics will be considered as less important than self-cultivation.

Wang claims further in his work *Da xue wen* 大学问 (Inquiry of Great knowledge) that, once we realize that good is rooted in our mind, which it does not rely on any external research, “the will follows a certain direction” (*zhi you ding xiang* 志有定向), without the danger of dispersion and confusion in a thousand details (Lu 2014a). In the absence of this danger, the mind will be in a state of quiet, our choices will be perfect and correct, and the highest good can then be obtained. However, Wang points out that our quiet state is acquired through “*kuang* 狂” (frenzy, unshaken, fierce, or ambitious), namely striving with passion and will.

Therefore, Wang states that:

“Now I believe in my innate intellect, and for me, it is just what is right, and wrong is what is wrong. I act spontaneously without worrying about hiding anything. Only now have I started to feel free and without restraints. Let the people say that my actions do not match my words, I do not care”. (Peng 2003)

We notice here the phrase “*feel free and without restraints*”, literally “*the free mind without restraints*”, which refers to an episode mentioned in both *Mencius* (孟子) and the *Analects* (论语): when Confucius (551–479 BCE) found his disciples were not able to practice “moderation and balance” (*zhong yong* 中庸), he was contented with the ambitious and irreversible ones (Chu 1988). On the other hand, the use of the emotional concept “*kuang* 狂” in Wang has no negative meaning, not even imperfection, compared to those who can be moderate, according to the words of the classics (W. T. Chan 1962). Instead, it is the character of a sage in the process of self-cultivation, because it reflects the spontaneity of innate conscience. In addition, the “*bu yan* 不掩” (undisguised) used by Mencius indicates the inadequacy of frenzied behavior, but in Wang’s philosophy, this criticism was ignored (Y. Wang 1963; X. Zhang 2021).

3. The Ontological Debate between *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and *Creatio In Situ*

Both Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno assumed the individual mind as their starting points in gnoseology. Interestingly, their beliefs in innate knowledge or abilities both drew on a great number of resources from their ontological discussions. In my opinion, both of the two philosophers’ gnoseologies possess a dual cognitive-ontological character. Cognitively, their doctrine teaches us that one should know myriad things (which means the plurality of the Universe), in terms of the principles of the universe; ontologically, their philosophy indeed teaches about the expanding and cultivating of one’s mind, as an act of participation in the creation of the world.

As a general principle, the genesis of the world can be reduced to two ontological paradigms: *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) and *creatio in situ* (creation within context). Here, I will present a brief overview of the differences between Renaissance and Confucian viewpoints on creation or generation (Ge 2018).

Historically, Ficino represents a Christian humanist position that develops the concept of creation in the Judeo-Christian religion, while reconciling it with the eschatology and ontology of Neoplatonism (Howlett 2016). Should the shadow be regarded as a stray from or approach to the sun? It is a classical Platonic metaphor that concerns how we should treat the relationship between a reflected world and the absolute One.

As previously mentioned, Ficino emphasized that the will’s nature of action is entirely focused on the external world. It is consequently better equipped to return to the *summum bonum* (which, by definition, is external to itself) than the intellect, which exactly reshapes the world in its own image (Di Dio 2016). Consequently, Ficino shifted his focus from the contemplation of wisdom to the *gaudium* (joy) approachable by the will: “We want strongly to see to be ecstatic with joy; we do not seek happiness for the sake of seeing. For us, it is not enough to simply observe, but rather to see the things that bring us joy” (Ficino 2011)

and “Joy is richer than cognition, for not every man that knows rejoices, but those who rejoice necessarily know” (Ficino 2011).

This kind of joy is passive, which depends on the grace of God with a pious love. Ficino’s humanism, therefore, identifies the heretical rationality with Christian morality and spirituality. Goodness, therefore, is an attribute of divine creativity. Meanwhile, an antithesis, which has its origin in the renaissance, as well, argues that Nature is its own creator, in the sense that everything has its own ultimate purpose. In Italy, process philosophy emerged with the naturalistic studies of atheistic philosophers, such as Leon Battista Alberti, Pietro Pomponazzi, and Giordano Bruno (Hendrix 2002).

On the other hand, Bruno criticized it as a donkey’s worship, used as the carrier of the sacrament without self-consciousness. Bruno’s work was the opposite of Ficino’s: he wished to completely disaffiliate his philosophy from the dogmas of Christianity. Unlike Ficino, Bruno put contemplation and free philosophical inquiries above revelation from the transcendent God. He was fully conscious of his own phantasmatic and speculative ability; that is to say, the preference for following God within himself (Dougherty 2012).

The dialogue *De la causa, principio ed uno* provides a logical and metaphysical basis for the distinction made in *Gli eroici furori* between the immanent and transcendent aspects of God. Accordingly, since God was the first cause of the one and infinite universe, Bruno’s concept of the universe was intertwined with the all-pervading divinity, which is intelligible and comprehensible to the human mind. Hence, the human mind should be emancipated from unnecessary dogmas and intermediaries and attempt heroically to explore and penetrate the secrets of the universe. Even though Bruno’s intelligible universe corresponds to the Neoplatonic *anima mundi* (world soul), the total explication consists in the infinite universe itself, rather than emanating from a transcendental and abstract God. For Bruno, the ultimate knowledge of the principle of the universe in Neoplatonism is inaccessible and indirect. As in *Gli eroici furori*, it is stated that God is known in nature, rather than in himself. In other words, Bruno’s divine truth is to be recognized as the natural discourse of the “*sommo bene in terra*” (ultimate good on earth) and not as a theological intuition of a mystical transcendence.

Actually, from Bruno’s early mnemonic work *De umbris idearum*, which still conveyed a Neoplatonic flavor with a Platonic metaphor of light and shadow, he had already realized that the human intellect is to ideas as the eye is to light. The first truth and goodness are hidden from rational search. The nature of man’s knowledge of ideas is always *umbratile* (shady); hence, he provides the title *De umbris idearum*. “Our nature is not such that by its ability it can inhabit the very field of truth . . . Thus, it is sufficient and much for it to sit in the shade of the good and the true” (Borghesi 2019).

In this method, Bruno denied the supernatural or superadded gift of grace from God (*donum superadditum*). He realized that the distinction between the nature of humanity and the grace provided by God is incompatible with his interpretation of nature as an image of God. According to his intellection, a supernatural state of perfection through God’s divine grace is redundant and unnecessary.

“*Creatio in situ*”, according to Chinese philosophy, is a holistic process. It is not an orderly theological hierarchy, but instead a process of dynamic transformation. In light of this tradition, a metaphysical question arises: how can the multitude of a phenomenal world persist, given that plurality is perishing constantly? The universe embodies itself as myriad beings, but it cannot be manifested through its “plurality” because, without an organic context, things are fragmented everywhere, and it is impossible to recognize and define them. As a contemporary representative of the Chinese-Western comparative philosophy, Wen Haiming 温海明 points out, “Chinese philosophy has a principle of generating meaning by juxtaposing two antithetical terms against each other” (Wen 2010).

Accordingly, we can elucidate this gnoseology and ontology within a larger historical context of the Confucian intellectual tradition. There are two principal paths that were raised by classical Confucian philosophy during its historical development (Kupperman 2010). According to Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), the classical canons *Zhong Yong* 中庸

and *Yi Zhuan* 易传 indicate a process of idea from transcendence to immanence, considering that these texts are ontologically based on Heaven; the concept of Heaven influences an awareness of authentic humanity and, finally, culminates in a conscious interior mind–heart (Mou 2003b). Conversely, the approach of the *Meng Zi* 孟子 is from immanence to transcendence, insofar as its theoretical processing is derived from a reflection of mind–heart, and it is based on that to make deductions about the internal sincerity by cultivating the supreme actualization of moral feelings and gaining access to Heaven only in this way.

Hence, “Heaven”, in Wang’s term of “knowing Heaven”, could seem to be a conception that is both gnoseological and ontological. Moreover, Wang Yangming asserts that “*zhi tian* 知天” is not only “knowing Heaven”, but also “participating in Heaven,” which means being merged with Heaven (M. Zhang 2022).

This character is demonstrated intensively by recognizing the mind–heart structure of Wang’s ontology. The principle of Neo-Confucianism, which Wang accepted, is that we and the universe “share the same body” (*yi ti* 一体). As opposed to Zhu, in Wang’s principle, nature and the mind–heart are unified. The fundamental assumption behind this metaphysical teaching has already been introduced: we and the universe are subordinated to the same mechanisms. Thus, we and myriad beings are equally endowed at birth with a pure and perfect emotional and mental deposition. In its original and innate structure, our minds correspond to “principles” (*li* 理) that manipulate normative paradigms and the generation of the universe. Furthermore, while human nature in Zhu is relatively static, the mind in Wang is active, as it is identical to the continual influx and perpetual creativity of the universe.

This psychic and cosmological correspondence provided Wang with a means of explaining the various phenomena and resolving metaphysical and ethical dilemmas (Tien 2010). Consequently, Wang indicates that we and the world share a common innate mind or instinct. The practical effect of this shared mind or principle is that we feel attached to and affected by every existing being in the universe, just as we realize ourselves connected to every organ of our physical bodies (Ivanhoe 2011).

We can detect great confidence in Wang’s holistic cosmology, which leads toward developing a coherent process philosophy, based on the most insignificant mind. However, as the Chinese contemporary New-Confucian philosopher Yang Guorong 杨国荣 observes, what Wang emphasizes is not a belief in the existence of a physical world beyond the mind, but rather “creating a world that has its own meaning” (*yi yi shi jie* 意义世界), which is internal to our mind (Yang 2016; Chen et al. 2020). Therefore, what we see is a complete reflection of reality. So, for Zhu, the world is not an external reality to human nature, but the mutual interaction between the subject and object.

4. Against External Authority: Bruno and Wang Yangming on the Relationship between Transcendence and Immanence

As a commentator on Platonism and Neoplatonism, Ficino considers the ancient doctrines not only as archaic sources of philosophy but also as prophetic interpreters of Christianity (Meng and Boyd-Wilson 2018). The respect for ancient authority was too great to permit more than a reworking and reconciliation of classical and Christian doctrines. Ficino tries to keep this separation between the immanent mind and transcendent world: the intellect makes the world “mind like”, while they will guarantee that the mind becomes “world like”. World and mind, accordingly, keep moving towards each other, without ever coinciding. There will always be a cognitive mind aware of an external reality, and there will always be a phenomenal world of things awaiting its perception. To weave the gap of the two worlds, in some of his celebrated and oft-cited phrases from the *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino stresses the importance of an intermediary function of the *anima mundi* (world soul) between the two separated worlds. He describes the soul as the “center of nature” (*centrum naturae*) and “the copula of the cosmos” (*copula mundi*) (Ficino 2011; Lazzarin 2011). Ficino depicts the “world soul” as a divine track of the Spirit, which can descend into the human

mind and, from there, ascends back again to the absolute One. It is a kind of reflection that makes the soul the mirror of God.

Unlike Ficino, who provides a metaphor of man as the obscure *image* of the transcendent God, Bruno, as a naturalistic philosopher, treated individual minds as an infinite *simulacrum* of the principle of the universe (Z. Wang 2022). Bruno clarified these attributions when he explained his statement that the universe is “all infinite”, rather than, similar to God, “totally infinite”, in which God is totally present. Thus, this is why Bruno will not need the soul as the celestial quintessence for mediating the principle of God.

In his cosmological work *Cena de le ceneri*, Bruno strongly exalted the dispersion of divinity, emphasizing the immanence of the dispersion of God in all things. Furthermore, in *Gli eroici furori*, Bruno pointed out that our knowable object, even though it is not identical with the ultimate cause of the universe, is exalted to a position of equality with that hidden principle. In *Furori*, the symbolized figure of Actaeon was adapted from Greek myth to illustrate the philosophical quest for the immanent potency. Upon seeing the resplendent beauty of the nude Diana, he is changed into a deer (Bassi 2020). The meaning of this myth is that, when the lover beholds and receives the divine beauty and goodness of his object, i.e., the hunter’s prey, he is transformed into his beloved (Davies 2014). This “object” is fully capable of satisfying the subject of heroic love. In this ethical poem, he describes the process by which the heroic lover comes to know his exalted object. The supreme happiness, which the subject of this love seeks, is found in his satisfaction by his object.

By following this path, the sixth dialogue of Part II brings us to what Giordano Bruno calls “a natural contemplation”. According to the last part “Canzone degli illuminati” (Song of the Enlightened), those enlightened and renovated philosophers are ready to probe into “those eternal laws” that govern “the blazing sky, where lies that luminous area in which the prominent Chorus of your planets can be seen” (Bruno 2000, pp. 958–59). This concept of the transcendental immanence of the objects of knowledge is celebrated at the epilogue of *Furori*, where the “the ultimate good on earth” represents an entirely new approach to addressing this subcelestial particularity. As Gatti pointed out, it is what distinguishes him from the shadow of Ficino, who had encouraged the philosophical mind to look away from the world of multiplicity, in order to contemplate the absolute One (Gatti 2011, p. 153).

What is noteworthy here is that Bruno’s description of the transcendence and immanence of human mind, which is both an effector and receptor, reminds us of the characteristic ancient Confucian instruction that a human being should constantly expand his own mind to the realm of the extensive (博), vast (大), perfect (精), and profound (深), so that even a single mind can be combined with myriad beings in the universe. Accordingly, Wang practices his transcendental “monist doctrines” (*wan wu yi ti* 万物一体) in addressing the problem of acquiring holistic consciousness and universal empathy (Chen 2019). In the *Great knowledge*, one of the fundamental classics for Confucianism, the opening sentence is “the way of ultimate wisdom is the comprehension of absolute integrity, genial development of the common people and endless pursuit of the perfection of humanities” (Chu 1988; Zheng 2021), which is very famous and often quoted by Zhu Xi. Wang Yangming disagreed with Zhu’s interpretation on the priority between immanence and transcendence. In *Inquiry on the Great Learning* (*da xue wen* 大学问, 26: 4–5), Wang points out,

“In the phenomena, there is what is fundamental and what is secondary. In the past, a Confucian thinker (Zhu Xi) considered the *ming de* 明德 (brilliant virtue) as the fixed *a priori*, and the *qin min* 亲民 (love or empathy for the people) as secondary; he saw the two things in opposite relation, being an interior and an exterior”. (Y. Wang 1992; Ivanhoe 2009)

In short, Zhu Xi claims that human nature limits the direct contact with “*ming de* 明德” (brilliant virtue), since it is inaccessible and incomprehensible through our senses. Wang denied that Zhu substituted “*qin* 亲” (love or empathy) with “*xin* 新” (renovate), which means reformation of the people in Zhu’s doctrine and neglects the meaning of “love” in the original text. According to Wang, the revised sentence cancels an individual activity

of integration and combination with the people. The defect remains that there is always a separation between the subject and object in the ethical aspect.

Wang's argument was based on his belief that the common people can make the right moral judgments by themselves. Wang claimed, "The virtues that can be acquired and practiced by individuals of simple intelligence are referred to as universal virtues. Heterodoxy is the term used to describe what men and women of ordinary intelligence cannot understand or practice". (Y. Wang 1963).

Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), as an important forerunner of Jesuits to China, translated some extracts of the *Great Learning*, one of the central classics for Confucianism, into Latin. Interestingly, according to the translation of Ruggieri, the interpretation of *ming de* 明德 (brilliant virtue) is correlated with the concept of *lumen naturae* (light of nature), which is in contrast with the light of religious revelation in a Renaissance context (Zheng 2021). This distinction between the light of nature and that of religion by Ruggieri has been designedly misinterpreted. It was a pragmatic strategy for the Jesuits' missionary work in China, since they maintained that the later Chinese Neo-Confucians were deceived by the dissimulation of natural phenomena, rather than the light of the Divine. However, when their message about China was spread in Europe, it is equivalent to suggesting that an atheistic nation can cultivate virtues without religious belief and revelation, and a pagan community can flourish in a manner that is even comparable to Europeans. The message was expressed by Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), a follower of the heretical tradition, similar to Giordano Bruno. To demonstrate his atheist theory, Bayle famously cited contemporary China as an example.

Similar to the ideological transformation of the Confucian doctrine elaborated by the Jesuit Ruggieri, as the mentor of Lorenzo de' Medici, Ficino's *Prisca Theologia* (pristine theology) has the same responsibility to convert Platonic philosophy as a Christian ethical and legitimate norm. Ficino is conscious of writing for aristocratic audiences and infuses a courtly atmosphere and attitudes into his dialogues. Bruno and Wang, however, each see themselves as the teachers of the masses in ordinary life. They wish to enlighten secular men, who would listen in the face of the institutionalized "ignorance" and mediocrity of schools or churches. Even though the "heretical" men could never capture the ultimate truth, they can still approach it by incessant participation or practice in the progress of evolution through liveliness and vicissitude.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, nuanced study reveals that the transformative meaning of Wang Yang-ming's gnoseology to Chinese humanistic enlightenment is similar to that of Giordano Bruno to European early modern renovation. It has been shown that the study of 'heretic' mentalities can be crucial to understanding the mental similarities among various comparative studies in Sino-Western modernization. In *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel considers Giordano Bruno's philosophy to be "a bold rejection of all Catholic beliefs resting on mere authority" (Hegel 2009). By challenging the truth and value of the entirety of Christianity, in his *De la causa, principio et uno*, Bruno claims that the individual is capable of intuiting the universal principle in an infinite universe (Bruno 2000). Similar to Bruno's heretical doctrines against the Catholic Church, Wang also dared to criticize the external authorities of his time by introducing a new significance to the value of a concrete individual. According to Zhu Xi's orthodox criterion of "nature is principle" (*xing ji li*, 性即理), one can approach the Heavenly principle by learning the classics and investigating the empirical things in nature. Compared to Zhu's gnoseology, that was merely transcendental and abstractive, and Wang's redefinition of human nature was markedly rebellious. For Wang, Heavenly principle (*tianli*, 天理) can be generated and intuited by means of concrete individual knowing and feeling. Accordingly, Wang's ontology was grounded in his immanent philosophy of "one-body humaneness", which was famously expressed in *Questions on the Great Learning*: "Great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad things as their own bodies" (Ivanhoe 2009). Similarly, Bruno's infinite universe was also a new organic

one, in which the individual soul searches for unity with the *anima mundi* (world soul). The world soul is “all in all and in every single part” (Bruno borrows Plotinus’s conception in *Enneads*, VI.4.12), that is, present wholly and indivisibly in each and every thing to the degree that it is capable of receiving it. Although Bruno does believe in a world soul of Neoplatonic source, he denies any kind of mystical inspiration and divine grace. According to his anti-Catholic position, a rational principle of the universe always works within the infinite vicissitudes of the natural world.

According to Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno, will and intellect are two operationally related facets of the independent mind responding to the holistic principle in the universe. Although, sometimes the correlation between intellect and will presents an asymmetrical state in the gnoseological process, the two immanent faculties of the mind are never considered as parallel, nor is there a disparate approach to the transcendent good and principle in Wang and Bruno’s ontological levels. Thus, a “heretic mind” refers to the gnoseological and ontological forms of various spiritual and practical facets that constitute “mental and emotional structure”, which are embodied in common sense and social behavior (Santangelo 2018). However, notably, the principle of the universe and the supreme good cannot be understood exhaustively, but only to the extent of the individual’s dynamic mind; in both of their views, only the genuine human nature can get access to Heaven or macrocosms, and so “exhausting the heart, knowing genuine nature and joining in Heaven” are not guidance for mediocre people in either rational inquiry or emotional practice (Zheng 2021).

Consequently, the significance of their renovated gnoseology should not be disparaged as an agitated heresy against authority. Both of them proposed generative gnoseologies that differ from traditional authoritative pattern; therefore, even though the human intellect has a finite nature and ability, there is no limit to our happiness during the process of pursuing good and principle (Z. Wang 2022). Wang claims in *Instructions for Practical Living*, “Pure knowing is nothing other than the clear awareness that spontaneously reveals Heavenly principle”. (Y. Wang 1963). Compared with previous Confucian philosophers, Wang’s pursuit of the Heavenly principle relied on the mental awareness of the original heart in concrete conduct, not abstract human love (Mou 2003a). In other words, human intellect and feeling are the generative insight of the Heavenly principle. Wang explains this generative gnoseology as follows (*Instructions for Practical Living*: vol. 1):

“Knowing is the original substance of the heart-mind. When it sees the parents, it spontaneously knows that one should be filial. When it sees the elder brother, it spontaneously knows that one should be *ti* 悌 (*substance*). And when it sees a child fall into a well, it spontaneously knows that one should be commiserative. This is pure knowing and need not be sought outside. If what emanates from pure knowing is not obstructed by selfish ideas, the result will be like the saying “If a man gives full development to his feeling of commiseration, his humaneness will be more than he can ever put into practice”. (Y. Wang 1963)

According to the renovated gnoseology of Wang Yangming, knowing and feeling are not only individual and daily experiences, but they are also moral and social phenomena, since even minor minds contain symbols, motivations, beliefs, and values that are shared by the “collective unconscious” of a specific tradition. Thus, we can posit the human mind–heart or “*liang zhi* 良知” as possessing a finitely infinite potency. This is the reason why personal commiserations of mind should be taken into consideration; they are not pure knowing in the strictest sense, as they are reflections of long duration or gnoseological complexes.

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