Can Wang Yangming's Theory of Conscience and The Unity of Knowledge and Action Qualify as A Kind of Knowing-How?

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Abstract. This paper explores whether Wang Yangming's concept of "conscience" can be classified under Ryle's epistemological category of "knowing-how." It first clarifies that Yangming's conscience constitutes a transcendental, intrinsic, and proactive moral intuition, characterized by the core tenets of "the mind is the principle" and "the unity of knowledge and action." Conscience emphasizes the inseparability of moral judgment and behavioral inclination. Subsequently, the paper introduces Ryle's distinction between "knowing-how" and "knowing-that," noting that the former represents an observable, disposition-based capacity manifested in practice. It argues that conscience structurally aligns with knowing-how, which must actualize itself through moral practice, and as a dispositional excellence, it manifests as stable yet flexible moral wisdom. By addressing objections such as whether conscience inherently involves behavioral inclinations and whether well-intentioned but ineffective actions constitute counterexamples, this paper emphasizes that true knowledge necessarily includes behavioral inclinations. Even under external constraints, conscience remains identifiable through its preliminary behavioral inclinations. Ultimately, this paper not only argues for the legitimacy of conscience as a moral form of knowing-how but also uses this framework to reflect upon and expand the moral dimensions of the concept of disposition within Ryle's theory.

Keywords: Conscience, Unity of knowledge and action, Knowing-how, Dispositional excellence.

1. Introduction

Whether Wang Yangming's "conscience" constitutes a knowing-that problem is a debate grounded in Ryle's classification of knowledge types. While some scholars have challenged conscience's epistemic status as knowing-how from various positions, this paper does not regard these arguments as successful. It will first explain Yangming's concept of conscience and Ryle's distinction between knowledge types. Through argumentation, this paper demonstrates that conscience does not fail to meet Ryle's requirements for knowing-how, clarifying this point by addressing several objections. It supports the view that conscience can be regarded as a moral version of knowing-how. Conscience does not fundamentally conflict with Ryle's definition of knowing-how, as conscience must also be realized through practice and constitutes a dispositional excellence.

2. Yangming's Conscience and Ryle's Knowing-how

Yangming's concept of conscience is a transcendental moral intuition—an innate moral judgment capacity inherent in human beings, not acquired through external learning. This stems from his proposition that "the mind is the principle" (Wang, 2014). He asserted that the supreme law of the universe resides not in the external world but within each individual's original mind. The path to truth lies not in outwardly investigating things to exhaust their principles, but in inwardly reflecting upon one's original mind. The source of morality is internal and spontaneous, not external or imposed. The moment a thought arises, the conscience discerns and judges right from wrong, good from evil, which is a judgment beyond human control. Thus, the conscience's foundation lies in one's own "original mind," not in external objects (Tang, 2024). Reason itself does not exist; it is endowed by the mind. Things themselves also have no inherent meaning. It is only when the mind places reason upon them that they acquire significance (Zhao, 2025).

In terms of morality, virtues such as filial piety, loyalty, trustworthiness, and benevolence all originate from the "original mind." Even when the object is not present before someone, its principle remains within their original mind. When one thinks of one's father, ruler, friends, or subjects, the original mind spontaneously manifests the corresponding qualities of Heavenly Principle. This is a natural, effortless unfolding. As for the principles of knowledge, though they objectively exist in the external world, they require people to discover and realize them through their original mind. The original mind serves as the subject of cognition; without it, principles cannot manifest. In this sense, humans endow knowledge with reality through the original mind; thus, it remains true that "the mind is the principle." When one sees a father, filial piety arises naturally; when one sees a child falling into a well, compassion arises "naturally"—this is conscience, requiring no external prompting. The term "natural" is crucial here, signifying the original unity of the original mind and heavenly principle, where its expression remains unobstructed by selfish desires. If one sees without feeling, it signifies the true mind obscured by selfish desires. Only when the true mind manifests naturally, without affectation or artifice, is the principle "mind is principle" truly embodied (Shi & Wu, 2025). Moreover, he further supports this proposition with the concept of "the unity of knowledge and action," which can also be considered the most essential characteristic of conscience. Knowledge and action are, in fact, two sides of the same coin in conscience, essentially one and indivisible. As Wang Yangming taught, "Knowing is acting, and acting is knowing." Merely "knowing" without acting, or acting blindly without "knowing," cannot be called conscience (Wang, 2014).

This explanation may intuitively mislead one into thinking the process involves knowing before acting, but that is not the case. Wang Yangming used the analogy "loving beauty as one loves beauty, hating foul odors as one hates foul odors" (Wang, 2014). When encountering beauty or perceiving foul odors, humans instinctively experience attraction or repulsion—not by first acquiring knowledge of "what constitutes beauty or foulness" and then deciding whether to like or dislike. Conscience operates similarly: knowing good and evil is akin to encountering beauty or foulness, inevitably accompanied by a tendency to do good or avoid evil. Therefore, if one "knows but does not act," it is "merely a matter of not knowing" (Wang, 2014).

Ryle criticized traditional philosophy's equating of intelligence with theoretical thinking. He proposed two fundamentally distinct cognitive modes: knowing how and knowing that. Knowing how is a dispositional excellence manifested through practice, centered on the ability to internalize rules or demonstrate flexible practical skills in action—that is, abilities directly exhibited in action without relying on knowing-that through thought. For example, a person "knows how to play the piano" without first needing to reflect on "knowledge about how the piano should be played"; they can simply play. Knowing-that, grounded in practical ability, involves discovering, verifying, and flexibly applying truths through knowing-how. For instance, someone "knows that the capital of China is Beijing." Furthermore, a deeper understanding emerges through further explanation of their relationship. This relationship exhibits two key characteristics. First, the former cannot be reduced to the latter. If every intellectual act required prior contemplation of knowing-that knowledge, then contemplation itself would demand another layer of knowing-that, such as "how should I contemplate?", which leads to infinite regression. Second, the former logically precedes the latter. Ryle contends that scientists are primarily knowers-how and only secondarily knowers-that. Knowing-how is discovered through intelligent operations and validated through practical application, which is the refinement of practical methods rather than a prerequisite for guiding thought (Ryle, 1945).

This paper argues that conscience can be regarded as a moral version of knowing-how, as it does not fundamentally conflict with Ryle's definition of knowing-how. First, conscience must be realized through practice. Merely possessing the knowledge that "one should honor one's parents" without taking any action violates the principle of the unity of knowledge and action and cannot be considered an expression of conscience. This aligns with Ryle's emphasis on observable actions or practices in his conception of knowing-how. Secondly, conscience also constitutes a dispositional excellence. Yu Zhenhua characterizes conscience as "stable yet dynamic practical wisdom." The ability to flexibly

perform morally right actions across diverse situations demonstrates intelligence in contextual judgment within concrete practice (Yu, 2014). Yangming similarly stated, “True and solid knowledge is action itself; clear and precise action is knowledge itself.” Consider someone who cannot swim: upon seeing a drowning person, they would instinctively attempt rescue while simultaneously employing ropes or flotation devices to avoid endangering themselves. Thus, from both perspectives, conscience does not contradict knowing-how.

3. Two Challenges and Responses

However, some may question this. In Ryle’s description of knowing-how, the applicability of “disposition” is contentious (Huang, 2018). Ryle characterizes it as a persistent, observable behavioral pattern rather than a hidden mental state (Ryle, 1945). This implies that knowing-how manifests solely through externally observable actions. This raises two questions. On the one hand, can disposition encompass not only a “disposition to do something well” but also a “disposition to do something”? On the other hand, there seem to be cases of willing but unable, where the lack of action or practice contradicts knowing-how. Yet people do not seem to regard this as an expression of a lack of conscience. Therefore, conscience is not knowing-how. This paper will address these two objections in turn later.

3.1. The First Challenge

First, if supporting conscience as knowing-how is equivalent to arguing that disposition should be understood here as an observable behavioral pattern that “tends to do something and tends to do it well.” Moreover, this tendency itself is already included within the conscience. Therefore, if this is the case, conscience could be considered moral knowing-how. However, opponents do not agree with this view. For instance, Huang Yong contends that conscience does not fall under the category of knowing-how, necessitating the creation of a separate type of knowledge termed “knowing-to.” It is defined as “knowing to do a specific thing at a specific moment,” or “the inclination to do something.” This is because he contends that the inclination aspect of knowing-how refers to “the tendency to do something well while doing it,” without requiring “the inclination to do the thing itself” (Huang & Cui, 2016). For example, saying someone possesses the ability to play the piano refers to their demonstrated skill. However, this does not encompass the motivation driving them to play. In other words, a person capable of playing the piano may not necessarily wish to play. Conscience, however, clearly and necessarily involves the inclination to perform moral actions. Therefore, it is not knowing-how.

So, let us temporarily isolate the driving force and attempt to discuss the composition of moral capacity. First, neither this paper nor Ryle denies the existence of “moral capacity,” that is, the ability to flexibly practice morality. If a person possesses “moral capacity,” based on the above understanding of knowing-how and disposition, this person would possess the ability for flexible moral practice but lack the inclination to practice morality (here, inclination refers to the tendency to do this thing). One might perceive a disconnect here. It is inconceivable that someone capable of flexible moral practice would lack the desire to do so. While a skilled pianist may lack the inclination to play, a person possessing the capacity for moral practice must first possess the inclination to act morally. This is because the inherent goodness of moral action intrinsically includes the motivation to “do what ought to be done.” Learning how to act morally inherently involves recognizing that one ought to act thus and developing the corresponding inclination. This is both unnecessary and inseparable, aligning with the core principle of the unity of knowledge and action—that is, the inseparability of knowing (motivation) and acting (practice). Therefore, the greatest flaw in viewing conscience as knowing-to lies in its separation of motivation from capability. Isolating knowing-to leads to a separation between motivation (knowing) and action (doing), reducing knowing-to to a form of “being-informed” that is closer to propositional knowledge (knowing-that) and does not

necessarily lead to action. This contradicts Yangming's principle of the unity of knowledge and action. Even if knowing-to exists, it is no longer the conscience as Yangming intended it.

Furthermore, this paper argues that Ryle's notion of knowing-how may actually encompass a disposition to perform certain actions. For instance, in explaining knowing-how, he cites knowing how to tell a good joke as an example (Ryle, 1945). The ability to tell a good joke necessarily implies that the individual possesses a capacity for humor. However, flexibly applying this ability, such as making jokes at the right moment or telling appropriate jokes, first requires the person to recognize that humor is either appropriate or desired in the situation. It is this kind of knowledge that drives them to take action and tell the joke. At this level, such an ability differs from a skill like playing the piano. A skilled pianist may play without necessarily desiring to do so at that moment; they might simply be asked to demonstrate their ability. Humor differs from such pure skills; it is an ability that must be activated by emotion. When people describe someone as humorous, it is invariably because they have sensed the emotion that person is attempting to convey. Therefore, a humorous person will not lack the inclination to engage in humorous acts. This characteristic bears a striking resemblance to the nature of conscience. Consequently, if Ryle were to classify this ability within the category of knowing-that, then the acceptance of conscience would be equally justified.

3.2. The Second Challenge

Building on this, another objection can be raised: there are indeed situations where one "wishes to act but lacks the capacity." A person may intend to do something yet ultimately fail due to internal or external factors (lacking the flexibility to put it into practice). Several scenarios exist. One involves a person claiming to know what should be done, yet lacking the actual intention or inclination to act upon it. This counterexample has already been addressed in the preceding explanation of "true knowledge." When one lacks true knowledge, any endeavor may become difficult or obstructed. This paper contends that such a state represents an incomplete or false form of knowing—merely an abstract, superficial moral delusion rather than the motivating force of genuine knowledge. Moreover, it does not correspond to the conscience referred to by Wang Yangming.

Another scenario involves conflicting motivations, where the impulse or intention to do good is counteracted by opposing intentions. For example, suppose someone sees a child fall into a well. They feel anxious and sympathetic, believing they "should" rescue the child. Yet, unable to swim, they become afraid, tense, and frozen in place, ultimately failing to take effective action. According to Ryle's definition of knowing-how, this person's moral capacity cannot be observed through external actions and thus lacks this ability. Yet such an individual would not be considered devoid of conscience. Is conscience, then, not a form of knowing-how? This paper argues that failing to take effective action does not equate to a complete absence of externally observable behavior. In fact, genuine intent (what Wang Yangming termed "true knowledge") inevitably compels one to act morally. This remains unaffected because anyone genuinely desiring to save a life will inevitably attempt to find a way or overcome obstacles to do so. If one merely harbors thoughts without attempting action, others would not recognize this as genuine intent to save—that is, true knowledge. True knowledge must be acted upon. Thus, the "intention" in "intention without power" is not true knowledge if it fails to lead to action. Whether one ultimately succeeds or how well one performs does not affect the principle that an individual with true intention will inevitably strive toward moral practice.

Furthermore, the very act of attempting to do moral things is itself an expression of moral capacity. This is because moral capacity differs from ordinary specific skills. Similar to the aforementioned debate over "disposition," for moral capacity, the inclination to act is itself an expression of that capacity. For instance, one can imagine that this person would at least exhibit signs of urgency—furrowing their brow, looking around anxiously, and so on—which are also manifestations of the action "inclined to do moral things." Even if they feel fear for other reasons that conflict with the motivation to save someone, this does not negate the fact that they must possess a genuine inclination to save. Wang Yangming shares a similar consensus on this point, stating, "The moment a thought

arises, it is both knowledge and action." This paper argues that Wang Yangming intended to emphasize the unity of knowledge and action, that the very moment a thought (especially a moral thought) arises, it is simultaneously both knowledge (moral cognition and judgment) and action (the beginning and intrinsic component of action). Knowledge and action are two sides of the same coin, where "knowledge is the intention of action, and action is the practice of knowledge." Furthermore, this is not a static object but a dynamic unfolding process (Zhang, 2022). Knowledge and action are fundamentally and ontologically completely unified and inseparable. This actually aligns with Ryle's critique of mind-body dualism in his concept of knowing-how.

Additionally, the assumption of conflicting motivations is too demanding. For instance, the human desire for survival is one of the most fundamental instincts. If abandoning this survival instinct to save others is deemed moral, the very morality of such a demand becomes questionable. It seems to presuppose an opposition between survival and conscience, as if only one could exist. Yet survival and conscience are not contradictory; rather, they may be complementary, two sides of the same coin. First, conscience is the capacity for self-reflection, behavioral awareness, and value judgement, which is the foundation of personal identity. It is precisely through this capacity for self-reflection that individuals can continually pursue moral self-improvement and make sound value choices. Conversely, the absence of conscience signifies the loss of judgment, which deprives so-called "freedom" of its fundamental direction and basis for realization, reducing it to an empty possibility. Second, conscience is not a passive discipline but an active driving force, the wellspring of responsibility. It manifests as an internal command of "oughtness" and a proactive sense of duty. Just as a soldier's bravery stems not from fearlessness but from conscience internalizing the duty to defend the homeland into an irresistible, imperative force for action. Moreover, conscience constitutes a commitment to moral identity. The vitality of moral norms embodied in various social roles (such as doctors, teachers, or children) stems from the subject's internal conscience recognizing and committing to their value. This commitment constitutes an individual's moral integrity. Fulfilling one's duty is, in essence, fulfilling this moral commitment to oneself, guaranteed by conscience (Qiu, 2023). It can be said that conscience facilitates an individual's existence at various levels rather than conflicting with it.

Moreover, there is a simpler, more intuitive solution to the aforementioned problem. Suppose we relax the conditions and lower the conflict threshold. For instance, if the drowning person had just engaged in a heated argument with you. In such a scenario, people intuitively tend to believe that an individual with a conscience should exhibit a more pronounced inclination to act. However, the more complex ethical issues this raises are beyond the scope of this paper. This hypothetical case serves only to highlight the harshness and unreasonableness of the aforementioned counterexample. Therefore, this paper argues that this objection also fails to hold.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this paper analyzes Wang Yangming's concept of conscience and Ryle's theory of knowing-how, demonstrating that conscience—as a form of a priori moral intuition and practical inclination—meets Ryle's fundamental requirements for knowing-how in both structure and function. Conscience manifests not only as a stable, contextualized moral capacity for practice—dispositional excellence—but also inherently incorporates a motivational propensity toward "ought-to-do." These two aspects are inseparable within the unity of knowledge and action. Addressing objections regarding whether propensity inherently includes motivation and whether "willing but unable" constitutes a counterexample, this paper argues that true knowledge of conscience necessarily leads to the manifestation of practical inclination, and any effective moral capacity intrinsically contains a motivational dimension. Even under externally constrained conditions, conscience remains identifiable through preliminary action inclinations and internal moral judgments. This does not contradict Ryle's rejection of psychologism and his emphasis on "observability through practice." Consequently, conscience can be understood not only as a moral version of knowing-how. It also

enriches Ryle's theory of disposition, particularly highlighting the inseparability of motivation and practical wisdom within moral capacity.

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