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# AN ACTION-ORIENTED ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO THE GETTIER PROBLEM BASED UPON WANG YANGMING'S PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

The Gettier problem for the classical analysis of knowledge (also known as the *JTB theory*) arises from scenarios where a justified true belief is true by chance, and as a result is not plausibly taken to be an instance of knowledge. Epistemologists often address the Gettier problem by positing extra conditions to construct a stable connection between the subject and truth. However, they tend to overlook the dynamic and practical aspects of knowledge, focusing instead on providing a 'static' reductive analysis that captures the fixed essence of the concept of knowledge. I critique such limitations and argue that knowledge resists static and fixed definitions, requiring a more dynamic and practice-oriented perspective. In this essay, I provide an alternative approach to understand knowledge with respect to the Chinese philosopher Wang Yangming's theory of the unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一).

**Keywords:** Gettier problem; truthmaker theory; substance–function (*ti-yong* 体用); the unity of knowledge and action

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## 1 Introduction

In this essay, I aim to demonstrate the shortcomings of static and representational theories of knowledge and argue that it is impossible to solve the Gettier problem and set boundaries for knowledge under the dichotomy of thinking and being. I draw on Wang Yangming's perspective to elucidate the nature of knowledge through its activity and function. This approach views knowledge as dynamic and action-oriented and as interconnected with action and practice. Notably, this kind of perspective is not novel. What is genuinely innovative, however, is Wang Yangming's interpretation of the dynamic structure and interrelatedness of being, which serves as the metaphysical foundation for the doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action.

The structure of this essay is as follows. In the next section, I present the Gettier problem. In the third section, I sketch out the metaphysical presuppositions on which Wang Yangming's account of knowledge is based upon. In the fourth section, I elucidate Wang Yangming's theory of knowledge and how it structurally excludes the Gettier problem, and demonstrate that Wang Yangming's theory can be used as an alternative framework for understanding the nature of knowledge.

## 2 The Gettier problem

One classical analysis of the nature of knowledge is that knowledge is justified true belief (I will refer to this as the *JTB theory*). This perspective "presents what it regards as being three individually necessary, and jointly sufficient, kinds of condition for having an instance of knowledge that *p* [proposition],"<sup>2</sup> i.e., belief, truth, and justification. That is, it maintains that someone *S* knows that *p* if and only if they exhibit the following conditions:

- (i) *S* believes proposition that *p*;
- (ii) The proposition that *p* is true;
- (iii) *S* is justified in believing that *p*.

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<sup>2</sup> Hetherington, Stephen, *Gettier Problems*, Dec 30, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/gettier/>.

However, Edmund Gettier argues that the JTB theory “does not state a sufficient condition for someone’s knowing a given proposition.”<sup>3</sup> Gettier noted that, under certain circumstances, an epistemic agent holds a justified true belief, but he does not have knowledge, as his belief is true by chance; i.e., it is analogous to a lucky guess. This has become known as the Gettier problem.

Gettier provides two counterexamples in which the epistemic agent has a justified true belief that happens to be true so that intuitively, it is not conceived as knowledge. Here, is a brief overview of one of the counterexamples. Suppose that Smith applies for the same job as Jones does and that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:

(d) “Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.”<sup>4</sup>

Smith’s evidence for proposition (d) includes the following:

- (1) The president of the company assured Smith that Jones will get the job in the end;
- (2) Smith had counted ten coins in Jones’s pocket.

On the basis of proposition (d), Smith further reasonably accepts the following proposition:

(e) “The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.”<sup>5</sup> Smith is justified in believing proposition (d), and (d) logically entails (e). If Smith deduces (e) from (d) and accepts (e) as a result of logical deduction; then, Smith is justified in believing (e).<sup>6</sup>

However, unknown to Smith, he is the person who gets the job in the end, and he had ten coins in his pocket, too. Thus, even if proposition (d) is false, (e) is still true. In other words, Smith is justified in believing

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<sup>3</sup> Edmund L. Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *Analysis* 23, no.6 (1963):123.

<sup>4</sup> Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” 122.

<sup>5</sup> Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” 122.

<sup>6</sup> Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” 121.

(e), and (e) is true, but the evidence that Smith relies upon in inferring proposition (e) is false. In this case, all the following conditions are true:

- (i) Smith believes proposition (e),
- (ii) (e) is true,
- (iii) Smith is justified in believing (e).

However, does Smith *know* the truth of proposition (e)? Gettier denies this counts as knowledge, “for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith’s pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith’s pocket.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Smith formed a true belief accidentally; i.e., it is analogous to a lucky guess. The facts that render proposition (e) true are as follows:

- (3) Smith is the person who will get the job, and
- (4) Smith has ten coins in his pocket.

These facts are completely unknown to Smith. Smith’s evidence for proposition (e) is based on (1) and (2), and it turns out that they are false. Therefore, Gettier argues that Smith’s justified true belief in proposition (e) does not, in itself, amount to knowledge, even though it satisfies all the conditions (belief, truth, and justification) of the JTB theory. Consequently, Gettier concludes that the JTB conditions for knowledge (justified true belief) are *insufficient* for someone to have knowledge of a proposition. Gettier’s critique poses a significant challenge to the JTB theory’s definition of knowledge, thereby introducing the problem of epistemic luck in knowledge justification—now known as the Gettier problem.

The Gettier problem has spurred extensive debate within epistemology, leading to a variety of theoretical solutions proposed by epistemologists. These theories can generally be divided into two paths: a fact-based account of knowledge and a virtue-based account of knowledge. The former focuses on the objects of knowledge—viz., the facts known—and their relationships with us. Typically, these methods involve introducing crucial ontological apparatuses into knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” 122.

theories, specifically, ontological accounts of the nature of the facts known and how they relate to us and our beliefs, which are meant to shed light on what it is to know something. Examples of this approach include various fact-oriented accounts of knowledge that seek to eliminate epistemic luck by appealing to objective relations between belief and reality. Such accounts emphasize causal connections, reliable belief-forming processes, counterfactual dependence, or fact-based metaphysical grounding as the basis of knowledge, rather than merely the possession of justified true belief.<sup>8</sup> More recently, the updated version of the fact-based approach is truthmaker theory, which is based on the fundamental idea that truth depends on being, and not vice versa. Heathcote argues for the addition of a fourth condition (the truthmaker condition) to the traditional JTB framework to redefine knowledge. The truthmaker condition is that the facts that justify S's belief that P must be identical with facts that make the proposition that P true. As Heathcote puts it, "the evidence that S has which constitutes the justification is the evidence of the very state of affairs that makes p true."<sup>9</sup>

Another prominent approach is the virtue-based account of knowledge, which argues that there is a valuable relationship between the knower and truth, so intellectual competence and virtue deserve an important place in epistemology. Thus, some epistemologists shift the focus from the facts known to the knower, specifically, from the epistemic justification of belief to the characteristics of the knower, such as their character traits, abilities, and intellectual virtues. Virtue

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<sup>8</sup> Representative fact-oriented approaches to knowledge include causal theories of knowledge (Dretske 1970), reliabilism (Goldman 1979), fact-based and truthmaker-inspired accounts grounded in states of affairs (Armstrong 1994, esp. pp. 28-45), Nozick's truth-tracking theory employing counterfactual dependence (1981, esp. pp. 670-690), and Lewis's possible-worlds semantics for counterfactuals, which provides an important formal background for later epistemological applications (1973, esp. pp. 1-35).

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Heathcote, "Truthmaking and the Gettier Problem," in *Aspects of Knowing: Epistemological Essays*, ed. Hetherington S. (Sydney: Elsevier Ltd, 2006), 165.

epistemology<sup>10</sup> stands as a prominent representative of this approach; it examines the kinds of virtues, character traits, or abilities an epistemic agent should possess to attain knowledge and tries to address the Gettier problem by ensuring that knowledge results from intellectual competence and intellectual virtue, not chance. Sosa upholds virtue reliabilism and proposes a structure of knowledge characterized by “AAA” (accuracy, adroitness, aptness), defining the acquisition of knowledge from three perspectives: aim, skill, and epistemic process. He writes that “knowledge is true belief that is *virtuously formed*.”<sup>11</sup> Zagzebski advocates virtue responsibilism and asserts that “knowledge is a state of belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue.”<sup>12</sup> She further claims that epistemic agents are responsible for their epistemic states, meaning that they hold a form of epistemic responsibility regarding whether they possess knowledge. For proponents of virtue epistemology, the challenge in analyzing knowledge is not to identify the causal and evidential features shared by all instances of knowledge but rather to identify the elements that constitute epistemic virtue. Once we understand this challenge, we will have everything necessary to comprehend what knowledge is. These two approaches are attractive and intuitively plausible. However, neither of these approaches offers a definitive solution to the Gettier problem.

The persistent failure of existing approaches suggests that the Gettier problem is not merely a technical difficulty within epistemology, but reflects a deeper tension embedded in the metaphysical framework that structures the relation between knower and the facts known. Since Descartes, much of modern epistemology has been developed against a

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<sup>10</sup> For an overview of virtue epistemology, see Turri, Alfano, and Greco, “Virtue Epistemology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Linda T Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 271.

broadly representationalist metaphysical background, according to which external objects exist independently of the mind and are known through mental images, ideas, or representations that purport to represent external reality.<sup>13</sup> Many influential post-Gettier theories of knowledge have been developed within this broadly dualistic framework, which presupposes a distinction between the epistemic subject and an independently existing reality. Within this framework, knowledge is typically conceived as a relation between a knower and mind-independent facts, whether through justificatory conditions, reliable belief-forming processes, counterfactual relations, truthmaking structures, or the successful exercise of epistemic abilities or virtues.<sup>14</sup> However, if the nature of knowledge is a relationship between the knower and the facts known, but they are ontologically independent of each other, it follows that an insurmountable gap exists between subjects (the mind) and objects (things), and epistemic luck will always exist. In other words, the dualism of thinking and being inherently precludes the possibility of resolving the Gettier problem. Thus, I believe that the root of the Gettier problem lies in its metaphysical foundation. Without a metaphysical fundamental shift, any attempt to solve it would merely involve struggling within the confines of the existing epistemological predicament. Additionally, I contend that attempting to define all types of knowledge within a fixed definition is unrealistic. Instead, it is better to understand the nature of knowledge from a holistic, dynamic and action-oriented perspective. In this regard, introducing the

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<sup>13</sup> For representative discussions of a broadly representationalist conception of mind-world relations in modern epistemology and philosophy of mind, see Dretske, 1981; Fodor, 1987; Lycan, 1988; Papineau, 2002; Putnam, 1975; Burge, 2010; Zagzebski, 1996; and Heathcote, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Representative theories developed within this broadly dualistic and subject-object framework include the no false lemmas approach (Lehrer & Paxson, 1969), internalist accounts of justification (Bonjour, 1985; Feldman, 1985), externalist and reliabilist theories (Goldman, 1979, 1986; Dretske, 1981), Nozick's truth-tracking account (1981), truthmaker-based approaches to knowledge (Armstrong, 2004; Heathcote, 2006, 2008), and virtue-theoretic accounts that analyze knowledge in terms of epistemic abilities or intellectual virtues (Sosa, 2007; Zagzebski, 1996).

dynamic process-oriented ontology found in Chinese philosophy may offer a new perspective. Specifically, according to Wang Yangming, it is better to view knowing as a dynamic activity, asserting that knowledge originates from action and practice rather than from technically precise definitions.

### 3 Metaphysical Presuppositions of Wang Yangming's Philosophy

#### 3.1 Oneness of everything and the unity of Substance (*ti* 体) and Function (*yong* 用)

In contrast to the representationalist framework dominant in much of modern Western epistemology, many strands of Chinese philosophy conceive of existence not as a static domain of independently subsisting entities, but as embedded within a dynamic, generative, and continuously transformative process that both gives rise to and encompasses all things.<sup>15</sup> It constitutes a cosmic system that is both productive and reproductive, in which all things are interconnected and interdependent. The existence of any entity is contingent upon its interrelations with other entities within this system. To become something is to become part of this creative system and to be unified with it, including the human being. This proposition is understood as *the oneness of everything* (*wanwu yiti* 万物一体), which maintains that “the self is inextricably intertwined with the rest of the world and everything is part of the same whole.”<sup>16</sup> The premise conceives all existences (being) as part of the dynamic and creative transformation

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<sup>15</sup> This broadly processual and dynamic conception of being is a recurring theme across major traditions of Chinese philosophy. It is articulated in classical Daoist texts such as the *Daodejing* (Laozi, 1997) and the *Zhuangzi* (Zhuangzi, 2006), in early Confucian thought (Confucius, 1989), and is further developed in Neo-Confucian and modern philosophical reflections, including Wang Yangming's metaphysics of mind and reality (1963), Mou Zongsan's interpretation of moral metaphysics and immanent transcendence (2004), and Feng Youlan's systematic reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics (1952).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Ivanhoe, Owen Flanagan, Victoria Harrison, Eric Schwitzgebel and Hagop Sarkissian (Eds.), *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundary of Self* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), Introduction.



within the grand cosmic system. This implies that there is no static external world awaiting human recognition or representation. Rather, knowledge arises from the creative activity of human participation in this process of production and reproduction of the universe. Accordingly, within many strands of Chinese philosophy, existence is not primarily understood in terms of static substance but is instead articulated through its dynamic activity or functional manifestation.<sup>17</sup>

The categories of *ti* and *yong* are essential and play a fundamental role in Chinese philosophy. In the most fundamental sense, *ti*, refers to the concrete physical body and the entity-in-itself, while “*yong* is its characteristic or appropriate activity or manifestation.”<sup>18</sup> At a deeper philosophical level, *ti* refers to the cause or origin of things, namely, the ultimate reality (*benti* 本体). *Yong*, refers to the activity, function, or utility of the ultimate reality. *Ti* reveals itself through its *yong*, and *yong* expresses the essential attributes of *ti*. The relationship between them is inseparable and interdependent. For any entity, there is a corresponding *ti-yong* relationship, such as a lamp and its light, eyes and its vision, water and its waves, or feet and its walking, and they are inseparable, that is *the unity of ti and yong* (*tiyong heyi* 体用合一). Thus all existences are defined and understood through its *yong*, meaning its activities and functions, and this principle applies even to the ultimate reality (*benti*). Importantly, although *ti* participates in countless activities and its functions (*yong*) are constantly changing, its essence remains constant and unchanging, this constancy in the essence of *ti* makes its understanding possible.

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<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on *yong* (Function or activity) as a primary mode of articulating existence recurs across different periods of Chinese thought. Early naturalistic and cosmological accounts can be found in Wang Chong’s discussions of *qi* (material force) and natural transformation, and in Dong Zhongshu’s correlative cosmology (Wang Chong 2019; Dong Zhongshu 2019). This functional and dynamic orientation is further systematized in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, particularly in Zhu Xi’s articulation of *li* (principle) and *qi*, and in Wang Yangming’s integration of *ti* (Substance) and *yong* (Function) within the heart-mind (*xin*) (Zhu Xi 2024; Wang Yangming 1963).

<sup>18</sup> Bryan V. Norden, *Wang Yangming*, Jan 1, 2026. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wang-yangming/#InteGreaLear>.

### 3.2 The unity of heart-mind (*xin* 心) and things-event (*wu* 物)

The relationships of *ti-yong* constitute the core of Wang's epistemological thought. For Wang, the relationship of *ti-yong* represent two aspects of the same thing. While not completely identical, these aspects are inseparable, interdependent, and mutually transformative, thus forming a state of being that permeates itself. According to Wang, all things, including human beings, exist as part of a unified whole. The appeal of the idea that everything is unified and in dynamic balance lies in its ability to connect all things, rendering them interdependent and thereby dissolving the tension between subject and object and between mind (thinking) and things (being). Therefore, Wang asserts that the relationships between the mind and things are unified, that is the unity of heart-mind and things-event. Regarding to the concept of heart-mind (*xin*), the following should be noted that "the Chinese metaphorical understanding of this notion not only denotes this organ as the center of emotions, but also as the center of perception, understanding, intuition and even rational thought."<sup>19</sup>

In Wang's theory, the mind [*xin*] is the source and principle of all human activity. Hence, Wang further claims that "what is called your mind is that which makes seeing, listening, speaking, and moving possible. It is the nature (*xing* 性) of man and things, it is the Principle of Nature (*tianli* 天理). Only with this nature can three be the principle of regeneration, which is call[ed] *ren* (humanity)" (Wang, 1963, 80). Thus, Wang holds that heart-mind and things-event (*wu*) are unified and that there is no thing that has nothing to do with the human heart-mind. In other words, Wang reckons that "the heart-mind as the inherent organ of perception was continuously integrated with the phenomena of the external world that manifested themselves in the notion things-events".<sup>20</sup> However, Wang's understanding of things-event (*wu*) differs from the

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<sup>19</sup> Jana Rošker, *Epistemology in Chinese Philosophy*, Dec 30, 2025. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-epistemology/>

<sup>20</sup> Rošker, *Epistemology in Chinese Philosophy*.

conventional notion of existence or being, as he employs the concept of *wu* in a broader sense. Wang writes,

The master of the body is the mind [heart-mind hereafter].  
What emanates from the mind is the will. The original  
substance of the will is knowledge [innate moral  
knowledge], and wherever the will is directed is a thing  
[things-event].<sup>21</sup>

Wang holds that *wu* (things-event) is wherever the will is and that wherever the will resides is the object to which the will is directed. The will refers to consciousness, desires and intention; it refers primarily to a purposeful, active, and proactive intent aimed at achieving something *in practice*. Will is always an awareness of an object and never exists in a vacuum. The object to which the will is attached can be either a tangible entity or an event. Therefore, the concept of *wu* has the same meaning as the word ‘events’ (*shi*). The definition of *wu* suggests that *wu* does not exist completely independently of the heart-mind or human consciousness. Rather, *wu* can be defined only within a structure related to consciousness and intention; as an aspect of human intentionality, *wu* cannot be separated from the subject. Both the heart-mind (thinking) and the things-event (being), as components of the cosmic whole, are inherently interconnected and form one body (oneness), which is the unity of heart-mind and things-event (*xinwu yiti* 心物一体).

The mediator connecting these two is *innate knowledge* (the original substance of the will) of human heart-mind. This is because humans occupy the supreme subjectivity position (the master) among heaven, earth and all things by virtue of this innate knowledge. The will (or innate knowledge) generated from the human heart-mind, it is also the spirit and rationality of the cosmic whole and serves as the mediating principle that unifies all things. Thus if a person can preserve and extend

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<sup>21</sup> Yangming Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-confucian Writings*. Wing-Tsit Chan (trans.). (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 14.

this innate knowledge to all things, they can form one body (oneness) with the entirety of the universe, achieving a state where “spirit ran through and permeated all and their will prevailed and reached everywhere. There was no distinction between the self and the others, or between the self and things.”<sup>22</sup> At this point, the opposition and dichotomy between subject and object, as well as between thinking and being, are no longer sustained, and all things exist as an interrelated and integrated whole. Indeed, this interpretive approach inevitably faces the challenge posed by things-in-themselves. In other words, when human will is not directed toward an object, does the object still qualify as *wu* (things-event)? If so, how does it exist? Could we say that to be is to be perceived?

In fact, Wang Yangming does not completely deny the existence of things-in-themselves; they can be understood as *potential existences*, which become manifest as specific perceptual objects when consciousness is directed toward them. Things in existence remain in a state of silent potential when they are not perceived by the human mind. It is only when they are perceived that these things can *manifest their existence and meaning* to human consciousness. That is, the manifestation and meaning of existence depend on the intentionality of consciousness of the subject. In other words, all things in the world are related to the heart-mind through the intentional structure of the will, and thus, there are no things-event that are entirely independent of the heart-mind. This understanding is fundamentally different from the Berkeley view that “to be is to be perceived”. Wang’s theory of the mind-things relationship emphasizes the continuity and interconnection between the inner and outer worlds. This approach preserves the objectivity of things while highlighting the dominant role of consciousness in the cognitive process, thereby builds a bridge between the mind and things through the mediation of the will (innate knowledge).

In brief, Wang Yangming espouses a metaphysical view of holism and dynamism, asserting that all things are interconnected, forming a unified whole within a creative and dynamic cosmic system. As

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<sup>22</sup> Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-confucian Writings*, 120-121.

integral components of the cosmic whole, the heart-mind (thinking) and things-event (being) stand in a relation of mutual correlation rather than oppositional dualism; mediated by innate knowledge, they are unified as one—that is, the unity of heart-mind and things-event. Furthermore, all existences are in a state of constant change rather than being static and unchanging. Therefore, only through the activities, functions, and utility (*yong*) of existences can their nature be understood. This approach determines that the acquisition of knowledge necessarily derives from dynamic practical activity; that is, knowledge is gained by engaging in the activities and functions of existence, and thus, knowledge arises from action.

## 4. Wang Yangming's Theory of Knowledge

### 4.1 Genuine knowledge requires action

Wang holds that knowledge and action are inherently unified. Genuine knowledge (*zhen zhi* 真知), which includes moral and other forms of knowledge, necessarily involves action. Without action, knowledge is insufficient. While the concept of genuine knowledge does not *directly* entail action, it inherently assumes the quality of *being bound to act*. When Wang Yangming articulates the unity of knowledge and action, the type of knowledge he refers to is this *genuine knowledge* that *necessarily prompts action*. As he put it, “knowledge [moral knowledge and other types of knowledge] in its genuine and earnest aspect is action, and action in its intelligent and discriminating aspect is knowledge. True knowledge is what constitutes action and that unless it is acted on it cannot be called knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, the “extension of knowledge necessarily consists in action, and it is clear [that] without action there can be no extension of knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> In the moral domain, true knowledge signifies that a person has attained a high level of moral awareness. Therefore, one who possesses genuine knowledge will inevitably translate their

<sup>23</sup> Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-confucian Writings*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-confucian Writings*, 109.

understanding of moral principles into actual conduct, thus preserving the connection between knowledge and action.

The driving force of action inherent in true knowledge comes from innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) or the heart-mind, from the pursuit of the highest good and truth. Driven by this force, the heart-mind (or innate knowledge) *naturally knows*, that is, the subject will spontaneously take all necessary actions for the attainment of the supreme good and the pursuit of truth. Thus, Wang asserts that there is no one who *knows* the knowledge (general knowledge) but does not act upon it. Someone who claims that he *knows* it but does not act upon it is someone who has not yet obtained genuine knowledge, as *genuine knowledge necessarily leads to action*. That is, in the case of genuine knowledge, the original substance of knowledge and action are oneness rather than two separate things; they coexist and advance simultaneously and appear as two sides of knowing activity. There is no question regarding which comes first and which is more fundamental between knowledge and action; their relationship is the same as the relationship of Substance (*ti*) and Function (*yong*), they are two sides of the same thing. If knowledge is understood as the original substance (*ti*) of cognitive activity and action, as the application (*yong*) of knowledge, then from the perspective of a dynamic process ontology, the acquisition of knowledge can be realized only through its *yong*—through activity, function, and practice—just as existence or being (*ti*) can be defined and understood only through its *yong*, i.e., in terms of activity and function. Therefore, Wang argues that the acquisition of genuine knowledge, even abstract knowledge such as mathematics, requires action.

## 4.2 The structure of knowledge is the unity of knowledge and action

Wang understands the concept of action and the knowing process from a broader perspective. He holds that the desire for knowledge is already the beginning of action. Specifically, when a desire arises in the heart-mind, that desire, which he refers to as will or intention, is the beginning of action. For example, “A man must have the desire for food before he knows the food. This desire to eat is the will, it is already the beginning of action.”<sup>25</sup> Wang Yangming’s point here is clearly not to equate consciousness or intention with action. Rather, he views the knowing process as a *continuous, holistic process* in which knowledge and action are interwoven, with no sharp boundary dividing the two. Another example that may more clearly demonstrate the simultaneity of knowledge and action is the following: “Seeing beautiful colors (knowledge by perception) appertains to knowledge (*zhi* 知), while loving beautiful colors appertains to action. However, as soon as one sees that beautiful colors, he has already loved it. It is not that he sees it first and then makes up his mind to love it.”<sup>26</sup> That is, knowledge (*zhi*) is the beginning of action, and action is the completion of knowledge. Generally speaking, the Chinese word *zhi* refers to knowledge or theory, but in Wang Yangming’s philosophy, it also refers to forms of perception such as consciousness, intention, and will.

Certainly, consciousness falls within the domain of *zhi* (knowledge), but since conscious activity marks the beginning of external behavior, consciousness or thought is the first stage of the process of action. In this sense, consciousness is part of the action process and can thus be considered an action itself. Similarly, while action typically belongs to the realm of practice since action is the realization of thought and practice is the fulfillment of a concept, action can also be seen as the culmination of the entire knowing process—i.e., the final stage. In this respect, action is also knowledge. In other words, the desire for knowledge is the starting point of action, while action is the fulfillment of that desire for knowledge.

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<sup>25</sup> Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-confucian Writings*, 92.

<sup>26</sup> Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-confucian Writings*, 10.

Therefore, Wang argues that genuine knowledge necessarily arises from action. Even the acquisition of abstract knowledge, such as mathematics, requires action. As Wang Yangming writes,

In learning, one cannot help having doubts. Therefore one inquires. *To inquire is to learn; it is to act.* If there is still doubt, one thinks. *To think is to learn; it is to act.* If there is still doubt, one sifts. *To sift is to learn; it is to act.* If the sifting is clear, the thinking careful, the inquiry accurate, and the study competent, one goes further and continues his effort *without stopping*. This is what meant by *earnest practice* [*duxing* 笃行]. It does not mean that after study, inquiry, thinking, and sifting one then takes steps to act.<sup>27</sup>

In this cognitive process, learning is a dynamic and continuous activity. Action does not begin only after learning, questioning, contemplating, and reasoning are completed; rather, action is already present within the process of learning, questioning, contemplating, and reasoning. These activities themselves are driven by the desire for truth and are, in essence, forms of action. In specific cognitive activities, the desire for truth and understanding does not always lead directly to action because that desire can be interrupted by other desires, such as the desire for leisure, entertainment and even laziness. However, this possibility does not prevent the desire for truth and understanding from being the beginning of action. The desire for truth and understanding is an indispensable part of action. As long as that desire is not interrupted, it will inevitably trigger the corresponding action aimed at truth. Therefore, we can say that all the cognitive structures of knowledge, whether moral knowledge or other types of knowledge, are unified in knowledge and action. Although there are differences between various types of knowledge, these differences do not lie in the cognitive structure but rather in the application and source of the knowledge.

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<sup>27</sup> Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-confucian Writings*, 100.



I find that understanding being from the perspective of holism and dynamism—that is, defining and understanding existence through its Function (*yong*)—is a plausible approach that is more in line with reality. According to this view, cognitive activity itself is a processual, dynamic endeavor, and cognition is essentially a dynamic interaction between a subject and reality. This interactive process aims to understand being through participation in the dynamic movements of the cosmos and being, with knowledge originating in this dynamic interaction. Thus, the cognitive activity of the subject is a continuous, dynamically changing process in which cognitive beliefs evolve as the subject's intentional actions deepen. In other words, the cognitive subject adjusts their beliefs according to the progress of their inquiry, forming different beliefs along the way. This ongoing intentional action provides the cognitive subject with a higher cognitive status, greater credibility, and a stronger ability to avoid epistemic luck. Therefore, through the dynamism and continuity of intentional action, we can reason that the cognitive subject is truly capable of knowing the truth of a proposition. Given the complex and dynamic nature of reality, it is unrealistic to define the boundaries of knowledge with a fixed definition. I contend that the best approach is not to define knowledge but to engage in the dynamic flow of reality through action, continuously refining one's beliefs through sustained intentional acts in that flow to acquire knowledge.

#### **4.3 How Wang Yangming's theory structurally avoids the Gettier problem?**

Gettier cases presuppose a structural separation between epistemic justification and truth, such that a belief may be justified independently of the actual state of affairs that makes it true. Within Wang Yangming's metaphysical framework, this separation does not arise. First, the claim that the unity of heart-mind and things-event does not entail a denial of objective reality, but rather rejects the assumption that objectivity requires an external standpoint independent of the heart-mind. Accordingly, knowledge (*zhi*) is not conceived as a representational state that stands apart from reality, but as an expression of innate knowledge (*liangzhi*)

that is already continuous with the normative and ontological order of the world. Namely, innate knowledge is not introduced as an additional justificatory condition, but as the underlying ground that integrates normative and ontological aspects of knowing. As a result, knowledge is not treated as a merely representational state that stands apart from the world, but as an achievement arising from an internally structured relation between mind and reality, thus there is no logical space for the kind of epistemic luck characteristic of Gettier cases. Furthermore, since genuine knowledge necessarily manifests itself in action, the possibility of a subject possessing a merely accidental true belief—detached from lived engagement with the world—is structurally excluded.

It should be emphasized that this discussion is limited to the conditions under which Gettier-style epistemic luck arises. This analysis does not claim to provide a comprehensive solution to the Gettier problem, nor to supplant standard analytic approaches to knowledge. Rather, it illustrates how a particular metaphysical framework—here exemplified by Wang Yangming’s thought—affects the structural assumptions that make Gettier cases intelligible. By rejecting the rigid separation between mind and things, and by grounding knowledge in innate moral awareness that is simultaneously ontological and epistemic, Wang’s account dissolves the structural conditions that make Gettier-style epistemic luck possible. The significance of this approach lies not in supplementing existing epistemological theories, but in rethinking the relationship between being and knowing at its most fundamental level.

## 5 Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that viewing the cognitive process as a holistic and intentional process is beneficial for epistemological inquiry. It offers the advantages of dynamism and flexibility while avoiding the infinite regress that arises from attempting to situate the nature of knowledge within a rigid definition. In reality, the acquisition of knowledge—even abstract knowledge—necessarily occurs in the

dynamic and continuous practice of scholarly inquiry and contemplation. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest the existence of an objective, preexisting reality waiting to be discovered by humans. Instead, knowledge is a theoretical system constructed through human engagement in practical activities within the world. Knowledge itself is dynamic and evolves through practice, and truth, likewise, is not static. Therefore, I argue that it is fruitful to understand knowledge from a dynamic, action-oriented perspective.

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