

Plotinus and Wang Yangming on the Structures of Consciousness and Reality: A Transversal Prospection in View of the Affinities of Their Positions

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Abstract

In this paper, particular key aspects of the philosophies of Plotinus and Wang Yangming have been analysed comparatively on the basis of important passages of their works. The method used for this investigation can be defined as that of transversal comparative induction, in which the focus is more on working out the details of affinities and similarities. As this means a first step in an encompassing systematic context, differences will be introduced more briefly. The present investigation aims to provide a foundation for a more differentiating and therefore complementing second part, which will consider other contents and topics in both philosophies. The present analysis is performed in three systematic steps and with regard to three basic philosophical ideas: (1) the idea that human consciousness is a central medium in the universal process and interrelatedness of (biological) life as a whole; (2) the idea that the self-unfoldment of reality represents a meta-cognitive process beyond the limits of subjectivity and finite consciousness; and (3) the idea that it is our major task to perfect and know ourselves by means of a “return” to the highest underlying foundation of this universal process. In their own ways, Plotinus and Wang Yangming both show that by enfolding human reflexivity toward the ineffable source of all reality in thought, feeling, human activity, and natural processes, namely by actively pursuing the path of moral and intellectual perfection, we become fulfilled mediators of a universal process and of that which all of it represents.

Keywords: Plotinus, Wang Yangming, transcultural philosophy, transversal analysis, consciousness

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Plotin in Wang Yangming o strukturah zavesti in stvarnosti: transverzalni pogled z vidika sorodnosti njihovih stališč

Izvleček

V prispevku je zajeta komparativna analiza ključnih vidikov Plotinove in Wang Yangmingove filozofije na osnovi pomembnih odlomkov iz njihovih del. Metodo za to raziskavo lahko opredelimo kot metodo transverzalne komparativne indukcije, pri kateri je poudarek na iskanju podrobnih sorodnosti in podobnosti. Ker je to prvi korak v vseobsegajočem sistematičnem kontekstu, bodo najprej na kratko predstavljene razlike. Namen te raziskave je torej zagotoviti osnovo za bolj diferenciran in zato dopolnjujoč drugi del, ki bo obravnaval druge vsebine in teme obeh filozofij. Pričujoča analiza je izvedena v treh sistematičnih korakih v povezavi s tremi temeljnimi filozofskimi idejami: 1) idejo o človeški zavesti kot o osrednjem mediju v univerzalnem procesu in medsebojni povezanosti (biološkega) življenja kot celote; 2) idejo, da samorazkritje resničnosti predstavlja metakognitivni proces onkraj meja subjektivnosti in končne zavesti; in 3) idejo, da je naša ključna naloga, da se kultiviramo in spoznamo s pomočjo »povratka« k najvišjemu dejanskemu temelju tega univerzalnega procesa. Plotin in Wang Yangming sta pokazala, da postanemo z razvojem našega reflektiranja neopisljivega vira vse resničnosti v svojih mislih, občutkih, dejavnostih in naravnih procesih, torej z aktivnim sledenjem poti, ki vodi do moralne in intelektualne popolnosti, izpolnjeni posredniki univerzalnega procesa in vsega, kar le-ta predstavlja.

Ključne besede: Plotin, Wang Yangming, transkulturna filozofija, transverzalna analiza, zavest

Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of particular aspects of two “paths of thinking” (German: *Denkwege*),¹ the respective pioneers of which differ greatly in historical positions and geographical locations: Plotinus (Πλωτῖνος, c. 205–270) and Wang Yangming (王陽明, also: Wang Shouren 王守仁, 1472–1529). Neither share any traditional backgrounds or cultural-historical contexts in philosophy, and the current systematic analysis mainly relates to the contents of their thinking, which are collected in a more inductive and therefore also more detail-oriented fashion on this occasion.

In this sense, the present investigation is to be understood as a systematic *transversal* reflection (Bartosch 2022a) in transcultural comparative philosophy (also Bartosch 2015b). The term “transversal” was first introduced into this field under the following premise: “Today, and in terms of plurality, we regard reason precisely as a capacity for connection and transition between forms of rationality. No longer cosmic, but earthly, no longer global, but linking functions shape its

1 Heidegger’s word has been used in comparative contexts before, e.g. Elberfeld et al. (1998).

image” (Welsch 2008, 295, tr. DB). To track these “linking functions” between particular problems, thoughts, and concepts of the philosophies of Plotinus and Wang Yangming in methodologically reduced scopes of particular topics is the major task of this article.

The philosophical use of the adjective “transversal” derives from the metaphor of a transversal in geometry, that is, a line that passes through two other lines at one distinct point of each of these, thereby making it possible to define their relationship by measuring the angles at each point. Transversal comparison in transcultural philosophy conjoins and attempts to systematically determine the contentual relationship of philosophical lore that neither stands in one and the same historical cultural space nor can be viewed as being related across cultures and civilizations due to being part of a particular history of reception or shared history of concepts in the more general sense.² The working terminology, and thus the concepts that are the focus of these transversal comparisons, is developed in a rather *inductive* fashion, that is, rather context-related from *particular* point-for-point perspectives and from the comparative textual milieus themselves. In these more inductive contexts of transversal analysis, one is to avoid *unmediated* applications of existing (in these cases often overtly general, overtly vague comparative) categories, like, for example, “metaphysics”, “Idealism”, “Materialism”. Their rather deductive application can be considered as unmediated if they are used without the preceding methodological reflection and in the sense of exterior “imports” to categorize any pre-existing simplifications³ of the philosophies in question⁴ and to “box” these materials into pre-fabricated frameworks and synopses, which lack detail.

In contrast to this approach, transversal induction has the advantage that it is easier to avoid the loss of possible detailed insights. Point-for-point inductions, provided in the form of detailed transversal prospections like the present one, allow for new insights and the development of more secure foundations for the transcultural dialogue of traditions of thought. It is, of course, not the only possible method in the context of transcultural philosophy, and it can also be complemented by others (e.g. Kwee 1953; Smid 2009). Transversal analytics starts (1) directly from the

2 Like, for example, in the case of the Central Asian thinker Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037), who wrote most of his works in Arabic, and Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), who published most of his texts in Latin. Cusanus was influenced by some of Avicenna’s thoughts.

3 For example, in the sense of the German term “*Vulgärplatonismus*”.

4 Such necessary preceding consideration would have to include a solution to the problem that the scope of the application of these philosophy-historical categories has mostly been restricted to Western Eurasian traditions of thought, and that in many cases prior attempts to extend their scope, such as, for example, toward the Chinese horizon, have not been based on a thorough background analysis of the more basic differences of certain concepts in their historical developments on both sides.

correlating, parallel discussion of *particular* source passages and in view of their related, *more narrowly* encircled topics as well as by the correlating application of methodologically restricted inductive approaches. Thus, the working terminology of transversal comparison is *developed in the context of the transversal analysis itself* to measure the particular scopes of the chosen topical frameworks.⁵ Therefore the inductive approaches with regard to the three particular topics that are a focus in the present article are *not to be misunderstood* as attempts to provide a whole-scale comparison of the thought of Plotinus and Yangming. Such a “holistic” attempt would either imply a to-be-avoided, “quasi-deductive” approach, which would be unmediated—it would not have resulted from an actual present process of philosophizing itself (and its categories would be merely implemented)—or it would necessitate an investigation and an account that would bring together, *in a mutually complementary fashion*, several more transversal-comparative reflections on particular comparable aspects in the philosophies of Plotinus and Yangming than is the case in this investigation. The first attempt would have to be declined for philosophical reasons, while the second could not be realized sufficiently here due to the space constraints which the limited form of the academic article entails.⁶

This presents us with a certain restriction of the transversal method—a self-imposed restriction which is an advantage in the long run: by working inductively and “point-for-point”, we have to put certain aspects that we might already know or anticipate “into brackets” (to use Husserl’s terminology in the transferred sense here). To avoid premature conclusions, one has to accept that every content “has its time”. This relates to the question of what the present article should and can accomplish—and what is not intended, and thus what is kept pending on the present occasion for methodological reasons. First of all, the present article is *to be read within the specific parameters* which have been set for it. For the abovementioned reasons, the author decided for a more detailed, more induction-based, yet at the same also more restricted, partial framework, namely in terms of topical and methodological scope. A further criterion was that this perspective should provide a foundation to add future *complementary* outcome in a systematic fashion (see “Conclusion and Outlook”). The aim is to provide a first—foundational—“building block”, that is, a component or “module” which, in view of the nevertheless more comprehensive scope that is possible, could and should be complemented further in terms of both content and research focus.

5 Cf. also the methodological considerations in Bartosch (2015b, 18–22).

6 The author of the present paper has already delivered a valid example for such a transversal, respectively, transcultural comparison in view of the philosophies of Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464) and Wang Yangming. However, to fulfill this task of a more holistic and yet also detailed study in an adequate way, a book format was required (Bartosch 2015b).

This brings us to the following questions: (1) Which kind of possible (sub-)method of transversal reasoning should be emphasized here? And (2), which of several possible comparable topics in the thought of Plotinus and Yangming are the most feasible ones in correlation to that? Then again, these questions are related to problem (3), how to set this framework for the present investigation in such a way that it also provides a complementary base in relation to further possible comparable topical fields and methods of transversal investigation, and thus so its results can be added to the present perspective and help create a whole-scale *transversal* picture in the aforementioned sense.

With regard to point (1), it is worthwhile to start from questions related to the criterion of comparability (German: *Vergleichsfähigkeit*). One of these questions is that of the third of the comparison (Latin: *tertium comparationis*), that is, the binding element that allows systematic transversal comparison in the first place. And the term “comparability” has to be clarified itself (which then also relates to points (2) and (3), mentioned above): to be able to compare something should not be confused with the meaning of “leveling existing differences” (Bartosch 2010, 7). “Comparability” (in general: “the possibility to compare something”) is given, if we can find particular *permeable* “problem horizons”, shared basic problems and topics which then not only enable us to search for possible affinities of positions (despite different linguistic and conceptual or concept-historical contexts, etc.) but to possibly analyse content-related differences as well. That is to say, comparability in the sense of certain shared problems (as starting points) can also lead to the discovery of very different solutions to these problems in the philosophies that are analysed in this way.

As for the sub-question of the *tertium comparationis*, I have already provided a detailed explanation in a recent article. It can also be applied in view of a transversal analysis of aspects of the philosophies of Plotinus and Yangming (Bartosch 2022a). In short: both thinkers have reached a level of formal understanding which represents the conditions of the possibility of all reasoning itself. I have referred to the expression of this most basic level of “meta-reason” (*ibid.*, 110, 112–16, 118–22) as “implicate logic” (*ibid.*, the whole article), in earlier works also as “*Grundlogik*” (Bartosch 2015b, 14–15 et al.) or “foundational logic” (Bartosch 2021, 130, 134–35, 139). To understand what is meant here, one has to grasp the “metaparadoxical type of” (Gloy 2001, 170) self-reflective *intellection* which is expressed by the term “unity of unity and difference” (e.g. Bartosch 2015b, 14, 16, 19; 2021, 134, 139; 2022a, 110 et al.), which (so much in passing) means the cognitive precondition of dialectical logic and two-valued Aristotelian logic (Bartosch 2022a, 113, 115, 119). All structured thinking in the form of (finite) concepts and logical progressions unfolds from this foundation of (transversal) meta-reason.

The author has already exhaustively shown on several occasions that Yangming has expressed the implicate logical formal insight throughout all of his philosophy, such as in the more content-specific reflection of a “unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through (something)” (*zhi-xing he yi*), or in the sense of his view that the “heart-mind’s root-system of vitality” (*xin zhi bentu*) and “Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*tianli*) seem to be distinct (subjective vs. objective sides) but spring forth from the same *undivided* origin, the “true self” (*zhen ji*) (for a very systematic and extensive approach: Bartosch 2015b, see also here, chapters 2 and 3), or in the context of a model of consciousness, which is also briefly discussed here (chapter 1). In this article, the *formal* understanding of such a “unity *through* difference” (to use an alternative expression to “unity of unity and difference”) is also discovered and explored in view of the “theoretical apex” of the “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis νοήσεως νόησις*) in Plotinus’s philosophy, where thinker and thoughts, subject-object, coincide in a unity which is not a unit besides another unit (that is, non-countably unity), namely *by integrating the difference* which, as a constant cognitive emergence of this (non-conceptualizable) unity, enables us to differentiate, to think, at all (Bartosch 2015b; 2021; 2022a).

As this will also be discussed in the main part of the article, I would like to return to the methodological question under point (1) here: I have already said that “comparability” refers to the shared basic problem horizons which are “permeable” in the sense that they allow us to determine possible affinities or possible differences in the solutions in view of the related problem fields or philosophical topics. As for the present investigation, I would like *to put emphasis on the task of determining certain correspondences and congruences of particular ideas in both philosophies*.

This, of course, is not to neglect existing differences, which there certainly are and which will also be examined (to a lesser extent) here, but to develop a methodologically supported foundation to put more emphasis on these differences in future (complementary) attempts. So, the task is to provide one side of a complementary approach, which, as a whole, will represent the affinities and the differences⁷ in those major aspects of the philosophies of Plotinus and Yangming that are comparable with regard to the topics they cover. From here, the earlier-mentioned questions (2) and (3) can be approached: we have to find those (comparable) topics and views in both philosophies, which have been solved in a way that at least partial “resonances” and affinities in the points of views can be traced.

The general direction of this paper is also expressed in the subtitle “A Transversal Prospection in View of the Affinities of [Plotinus’s and Wang Yangming’s]

7 For comments on this, see the end of this segment and the last segment “Conclusion and Outlook”.

Positions”. The term “prospection” alludes to the fact that while the systematic, methodological perspective as well as the scope of both philosophies’ investigated contents had to *be narrowed down to particular restricted approaches as well as topical “encirclements”*, other possible topics had to be “put into brackets”, namely to stay pending in view of the complementary analyses mentioned earlier. On the other hand, and as the important aspect of contentual differences cannot be neglected even from the perspective of the present emphasis, some differences have also been already problematized in the present paper. These are also to be read as a basic preparation for the above-mentioned complementary second step.

Regarding the second question—which particular permeable problem horizon or general topic to focus on—I would like to start from Plotinus’s work *Ennead* 3.8. It presents us with the philosopher’s views “On Nature, Contemplation, and the One”.⁸; ⁹ In my view, this chapter of Porphyry’s (Πορφύριος, c.234–c.305) edition of his master’s works is one of the most promising parts to initiate a systematic transversal reflection perspective—especially in view of Wang Yang-ming. It presents us with the main aspects of Plotinus’s philosophy of nature, his views on the role of consciousness in relation to the structure of life and reality, on the particular and eminent position or function of human consciousness as well as his reflection on an indivisible foundation of human consciousness, life, and the cosmos itself. I will introduce and discuss some key points of Plotinus’s thoughts in this text, complement these with passages of other books from the *Enneads* (*Enneádes* Ἐννεάδες), and then intertwine this in a transversal fashion with comparable reflections by Wang Yangming, mostly from his magnum opus *Chuanxilu* (傳習錄, *Records of the Transmission of the Practice*), as well as a few other texts.

Under the background of the binding element of the “implicate logic” (see further above, also Bartosch 2022a), the method of this article is to be understood as a sort of superimposition of “encirclements” of respective basic positions that both philosophers have developed toward an ineffable “blind spot” of absolute originality, which they both respectively viewed as the source of all thoughts and (conscious) deeds. On the whole, various advances are made, as it were, from different directions, which, in their encirclement of that which is to be shown, exhibit the central point of the underlying affinities in three different topical segments of the comparison. The three chapters form a sort of ascending transversal path toward the aforementioned major philosophical motivation of both thinkers:

8 Source text: “Περὶ φύσεως καὶ θεωρίας καὶ τοῦ ἑνός” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] ἡ’ [8]).

9 I have to thank Wolfgang Christian Schneider for directing my attention to this chapter of the third *Ennead*, cf. also Bartosch (2022b).

The first segment “The Role of Human Reflective Consciousness and the Levels of Universal Life” starts from the shared and permeable problem horizon of Plotinus and Yangming, how human (self-)consciousness relates to non-human life and the natural environment. It will become clear that both philosophers have developed a comparable and often partly resonating understanding, namely in the sense that non-human life forms are participating in the structure that is expressing itself in the most self-reflective way in the form of human consciousness, and that the self-knowledge of the latter fulfils a kind of “mediating” function in the whole of life and its universal context. In the context of transcultural or transversal working categories like “consciousness” or “empathy”, I will discuss key-terms in both philosophies, like “contemplation” (*theōria*), “nature” (*phýsis*), “spiritual brightness” (*lingming*), “inter-humaneness” (*ren*), etc. From a transversal angle in view of Plotinus’s understanding of “intellect” (*noûs*), the *tertium comparationis* of the implicate logic (Bartosch 2022a) is shown as being the inherent foundation of an implicit Yangmingian model of the structures of consciousness.

The second segment “The Self-Unfoldment of Reality as a Meta-Cognitive Process toward Self-Knowledge” provides a more general and foundational background for the prior findings in the first chapter. The philosophical foundations of Plotinus’s concept of “contemplation” in the sense of a universal process of the unfoldment of reality itself are analysed in the context of his views on “intellect” (*noûs*), “soul” (*psychē*), “nature” (*phýsis*), the later Neo-Platonic conceptuality of *monē*, *próodos*, and *epistrophē*, and more. These contexts are systematically interwoven with Wang Yangming’s reflections on the self-realization of “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wanwu*) and his views on “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), the “unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through (something)” (*zhi-xing he yi*), the “heart-mind’s root-system of vitality” (*xin zhi bentí*), “Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*tianli*), “true self” (*zhen ji*), and so on. The major thesis is that, *mutatis mutandis*, both thinkers have understood reality as a self-unfolding meta-cognitive process toward human self-knowledge.

The third and last segment, “Oneness and Goodness as the Core-Insight of True Humanity”, develops a final transversal reflection in view of Plotinus’s and Wang Yangming’s related approaches to human moral self-perfection and self-knowledge toward an absolute origin, the philosophical problems of good and evil, and, very importantly, that of ineffability in this respect as well. Terms, like “Good” (*agathón*), “One” (*hén*), “Way” (*dao* 道), “root-system of the vitality of good-knowing” (*liangzhi bentí*), etc. are discussed as important (cataphatic) terms in this regard.

I have made use of the following sources: (1) Lloyd P. Gerson’s 2018 English edition of *The Enneads*, translated by George Boys-Stones, John M. Dillon, Lloyd

P. Gerson, Richard A. H. King, Andrew Smith, and James Wilberding (hereafter: Plotinus 2018), (2) an electronic version of the source text (after the edition by P. Henry/H.-R. Schwyzer, Leiden 1951, hereafter: Plotinos n.d.), and, occasionally, (3) Arthur H. Armstrong's (1909–1997) translation from 1967 (reprinted in 1980, hereafter: Plotinus 1980). With regard to Wang Yangming, I have chosen to refer to the Chinese edition of *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄 and some other texts in the 1933 complete edition by Wang Yunwu (王雲五) (hereafter: Wang Shouren 1933a–e), which I prefer over more recent editions.

The Role of Human Reflective Consciousness and the Levels of Universal Life

For both Plotinus and Yangming, what is thought of as the “human being” (*án-thrōpos* ἄνθρωπος, (*mutatis mutandis*) *ren* 人) fulfils a kind of *mediator-function* between the levels of non-human (animal and plant) life and that which is reflected as the inherent spiritual and all-encompassing creative foundation of the “world” (*kósmos* κόσμος, *tian-di wanwu* 天地萬物¹⁰) as a whole.

Because of this mediator-function, and although “the heavenly bodies are still more honorable, as they are in the universe [...] [and] because they provide order and ornament” (Plotinus 2018, 2.9.13, 226–27), “human beings occupy an honorable rank in comparison to other living beings” (ibid., 226).¹¹ Humans have the ability of reasoning in correlation with their manual or technological capabilities, and can reflect the (higher-valued) *contemplative-effective* mode of nature in transference from there (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.2, 357). And they have insight into the workings of “nature” (*phýsis* φύσις), because “thinking in the intelligible world is different in human beings and in other animals”¹² (ibid., 6.7.9, 813), and the former can actualize self-reflection and infer from themselves to “nature” (*phýsis*):

And my contemplating produces an object of contemplation, just as geometricians draw lines as they contemplate. But without my drawing [because nature is “the power that produces not by means of hands” (see

10 Literal translation: “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things”. The term “things” (*wu* 物) might include living beings, objects, and situations, occurrences. Cf. also the reflections on the origin of the term “*wu*” in Bartosch (2018b, 363–68).

11 Source text for both quotes (with context): “Εἰ δ’ ἄνθρωποι τίμιόν τι παρ’ ἄλλα ζῶια, πολλ[ῶ] μᾶλλον τὰῦτα οὐ τυραννίδος ἔνεκα ἐν τῷ παντὶ ὄντα, ἀλλὰ κόσμον καὶ τάξιν παρέχοντα” (Plotinos n.d., B’ [2] θ’ [9], brackets DB).

12 Source text: “Ἡ διαφόρου ὄντος ἐκεῖ τοῦ νοεῖν ἐν τε ἀνθρώπ[ῳ] καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ζῴοις, [...]” (Plotinos n.d., C’ [6] ζ’ [7]).

the quote at the beginning of chapter 2)], while I contemplate, the lines of bodies come to exist as though falling out of me. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.4, 358–59, insertion in brackets DB)¹³

From the perspective of this *elevated* correlation of the “human being” (*ánthrōpos*) and “nature” (*phýsis*) (in the sense of a possibility which has to be actualized by means of philosophizing), the term “contemplation” (*theōria* θεωρία) attains a universal meaning for Plotinus, because

[...] all things aim at contemplation [*theōria*] and look to this goal, not only rational but also *non-rational animals and nature in plants and the earth which produces them*, and that all things achieve it as far as they can in their natural state, but contemplate and achieve it in different ways, and some in a genuine manner, others by acquiring an imitation and image of it [...]. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.1, 356, italics, insertion in brackets DB)¹⁴

According to this, all life actualizes subordinate forms of processes *in the image of the self-referential, intention-based, and self-iterating patterns of human consciousness and self-knowledge*,¹⁵ namely in the sense of “contemplation” (*theōria*), to use Plotinus’s term (see chapter 2 in addition to this). Plotinus clearly envisions this self-evocative, reality-unfolding *theōria* of our world-experience in the form of a *hierarchy of life-forms*. There is even a lower form of organic *theōria* that plant-life and non-rational animals are receiving and *expressing in their forms of striving and growing and even feeling*; these forms of life are thus absorbed and uplifted in their lower non-rational (*álogos áλογος*) manifestation of the cosmic principle of “contemplation” by the higher-ranking, self-unfolding *theōria* of human rational and, what’s more, *self-knowing thinking*.¹⁶ The *levels of living organisms* are distinguished in relation to their “distance” from this highest form of contemplation:

Whenever, then, [the World-] Soul [*psychē* ψυχή] comes to be in a plant,

13 Source text: “Καὶ τὸ θεωροῦν μου θεώρημα ποιεῖ, ὥσπερ οἱ γεωμέτραι θεωροῦντες γράφουσιν· ἀλλ’ ἐμοῦ μὴ γραφούσης, θεωρούσης δέ, ὑφίστανται αἱ τῶν σωμάτων γραμμαὶ ὥσπερ ἐκπίπτουσαι” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

14 Source text: “[...] πάντα θεωρίας ἐφίεσθαι καὶ εἰς τέλος τοῦτο βλέπειν, οὐ μόνον ἔλλογα ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλογα ζῶα καὶ τὴν ἐν φυτοῖς φύσιν καὶ τὴν ταῦτα γεννώσαν γῆν, καὶ πάντα τυγχάνειν καθ’ ὅσον οἶόν τε αὐτοῖς κατὰ φύσιν ἔχοντα, ἀλλὰ δὲ ἄλλως καὶ θεωρεῖν καὶ τυγχάνειν καὶ τὰ μὲν ἀληθῶς, τὰ δὲ μίμησιν καὶ εἰκόνα τούτου λαμβάνοντα [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

15 A methodological remark: I am using the expressions “consciousness” and “self-knowledge” as overarching transversal/comparative working categories of the reflection from here.

16 If he were alive today, Plotinus might refer to the astonishing scientific observation that “[i]ngenious, perceptive and intelligent behaviour is apparent in a single living cell” (Ford 2017, 282) in addition.

it is like another part of it, a part that is most audacious and unintelligent [...]. And, then, whenever Soul comes to be in a non-rational animal, the power of sense-perception becomes dominant and brings it there. But whenever Soul comes to be in a human being, Soul's motion is either entirely in the faculty of calculative reasoning, or it comes from Intellect, since an *individual* soul has its own intellect and a will of its own to think or, generally, to move itself. (Plotinus 2018, 5.2.2, 550, italics and insertion in brackets DB)¹⁷

From his own perspective, and being situated in a completely unrelated historical discourse and Chinese context, Yangming has taken into consideration the same basic topics: Like Plotinus, he sees the important, “all-mediating” function of what he thinks of as human self-reflexivity in the reality of the world, that is, “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wan wu*) as a whole. Much like Plotinus, Yangming has pointed out the *limited* character of the special status and did not overestimate the general capabilities of the “human being” (*ren*):

Heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things originally form “one system of vitality” (*yiti* 一體) all together with the human being. The location of its most extreme and strongest emergence and self-unfolding is the “*little bit of spiritual brightness*” (*yi dian lingming* 一點靈明) of the human “heart-mind” (*xin* 心). (Wang Shouren 1933c, 17, tr., italics DB)¹⁸

Unlike Plotinus, Yangming does not refer to technological (crafts) or geometrical practices to infer to the mode of natural self-production in the sense of the abstract conceptual form of “contemplation” (*theōria*). However, the “levels of the organic”—fellow humans, animals and plants (and even stones) are directly and intuitively included in the aforementioned human “little bit of spiritual brightness” (*yi dian lingming*) as well. This presents us with a certain transversal contentual analogy to Plotinus's views noted above. By applying the term “consciousness” in the sense of a “customized” transversal “comparative category” (Neville 2009, 37–38; Bartosch 2015b, 18) here,¹⁹ we can say that also in Yangming's view, animals, plants and even stones participate in the structure of human consciousness.

17 Source text: “Όταν οὖν ψυχὴ ἐν φυτῶι γίνηται, ἄλλο ἐστὶν οἷον μέρος τὸ ἐν φυτῶι τὸ τολμηρότατον καὶ ἀφρονέστατον καὶ προεληλυθὸς μέχρι τοσοῦτον· ὅταν δ' ἐν ἀλόγωι, ἢ τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι δύναμις κρατήσασα ἤγαγεν· ὅταν δὲ εἰς ἄνθρωπον, ἢ ὅλως ἐν λογικῶι ἢ κίνησις, ἢ ἀπὸ νοῦ ὡς νοῦν οἰκεῖον ἐχούσης καὶ παρ' αὐτῆς βούλησιν τοῦ νοεῖν ἢ ὅλως κινεῖσθαι” (Plotinos n.d., E' [5] β' [2]).

18 Source text: “蓋天地萬物.與人原是一體.其發竅之最精處.是人心一點靈明.”

19 For a more extended and diversified application of this comparative category see also the use of the terms “*Bewusstheit*”, “*Bewussthaben*”, and “*Bewusstsein*” in Bartosch (2015b, 123–90, 301–424).

Actually, there are *two* aspects to compare here, and *the first one* is rather close to Plotinus's meaning of "contemplation" (*theōria*) in *Enneads* 3.8. Here, after his student's following question, Wang Yangming makes a highly relevant statement:

"The human being possesses an 'empty [that is, undetermined/free] spirit' (*xu ling* 虛靈), (and) thereby has 'good-knowing' (*liangzhi* 良知). Do trees and grass, bricks, stones, etc. also have good-knowing?" The gentleman [Yangming] replied, "The good-knowing of humans is exactly the good-knowing of grass and trees, bricks and stones, inasmuch as grass and trees, bricks and stones *cannot enter into existence*²⁰ as grass and trees, bricks and stones without the human being's good-knowing." (Wang Shouren 1933c, 17, tr., italics, and insertions in brackets DB)²¹

In view of Plotinus's understanding of higher "contemplation" (*theōria*), it is important to note here that the *self-referential form* of this statement by Yangming itself presents a *more or less implicit example* of the *implicate logical form* of the same self-knowledge that Plotinus's understanding of "thinking of thinking" (*noēseōs nóēsis* νοήσεως νόησις) represents in a somewhat more explicit, more direct way (and in a totally different concept-historical context, of course). This *same* implicate-logical (*meta-*)*form of an all-including unity of unity and difference of the (subjective) knower and the (objectively) known* (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.6, 361), which Plotinus has made explicit in the sense of the *conditio sine qua non* to enter the highest stage of self-knowledge on the plane of "intellect" (*noūs* νοῦς), is at least implicitly represented in a model of the structures of consciousness by Wang Yangming.

In a sort of underlying allusion, this model implicitly inherits the implicate-logical unity of unity and difference of *yin-yang* 陰陽 (which Yangming also alludes to by the term "*li* 理" in the focal passage) as well as an additional hidden

20 In this regard, one can also think of the following, very famous passage: "先生遊南鎮。一友指巖中花樹問曰。天下無心外之物。如此花樹。在深山中自開自落。於我心亦何相關。先生曰。你未看此花時。此花與汝心同歸於寂。你來看此花時。則此花顏色一時明白起來。便知此花不在你的心外" (Wang Shouren 1933c, 18). ["While the teacher [Yangming] was strolling in Nanzhen, a friend pointed at a blossoming tree, asking: 'Under heaven there are no things outside of the heart-mind (*xin*). But how does the blossoming tree, opening up its blossoms in the midst of the deep mountains all by itself relate to my heart-mind?' The teacher said: 'When you haven't yet seen these blossoms, these blossoms in the same way (as the heart-mind in itself) relate to a stillness of your heart-mind. When you come along and see these blossoms—this is when the colours of the blossoms (suddenly) appear clearly [enter actual existence]. Therefore you have to understand that these blossoms are not outside of your heart-mind.'" (tr., additions in brackets DB)]

21 Source text: "人有虛靈。方有良知。若草木瓦石之類。亦有良知否。先生曰。人的良知。就是草木瓦石的良知。若草木瓦石無人的良知。不可以為草木瓦石矣。"

indication of the aspect-systematic functional structure of the five agents (*wu xing* 五行). The model has already been introduced and discussed in great detail and at length by the present author (for a very detailed analysis and interpretation cf. Bartosch (2015b, 390–424); for a shorter explanation in English cf. Bartosch (2021, 137–40)).

According to this, the “knowing” (*zhi* 知) is a central aspect in the unbound efficacy of the “(self-)organizing principle” (*li* 理).²² As such, “knowing” (*zhi*) is the conversion or crossing of two more “subjective” aspects, amongst which one exerts a more active influence than the other, in correlation with two more “objective” aspects—one of which can be interpreted as taking a more passive function than the other. Knowing (a process of self-reflective awareness) thereby permanently results from “perceiving and responding” (*gan-ying* 感應) to a (respective situational) “thing” (*wu* 物), while the “clear awareness” (*mingjue* 明覺) of the knowing is *at the same time* also the permanent (processual) foundation of the (subjective) “heart-mind’s” (*xin*) “(self-)mastering” (*zhuzai* 主宰) of the “will(ing)’s” (意) “emitting-moving” (*fadong* 發動)—which, in turn, is “becoming apparent/manifesting” (*ningju* 凝聚) by way of the unfolding “character(izing)” (*xing* 性) in the (ever-present) formation of the aforementioned (situational) “thing” (*wu*) (for the initial quote cf. Wang Shouren (1933b, 70–71),²³ see also the references to my works in the last paragraph).

In analogy to Plotinus’s elucidation on pure “contemplation” (*theōria*) as the (1) unity of the (2) knower (more active, subjective side) and (3) the known (more passive, objective side)—which includes the roots of all experience, all lower non-human beings (see the quote further above), and of all things—the (1) “knowing” (*zhi*) mirrors the *unity of the unity and difference* of (2) the intention-emitting and formation-motivating (more active, subjectively self-experiencing) heart-mind and its intentionality (willing) and, on the other hand, (3) the (more passively receiving) formation process of the “character(izing)” (*xing*) (from formless *qi* 氣) of the “thing” (*wu* 物, in the sense of a situation or a person, living being, or an object “in respective focus”) in its (permanent circular) resonance (“perceiving and responding”, *gan-ying* 感應) again with the (1) “knowing” (*zhi*) (in and of itself, if I may say so). As the “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs noēsis* νοήσεως νόησις) is a *permanent processual form* in which both aspects can only be distinct, because they form a unity and *vice versa*, so is the circular relatedness of the five functions of (1) knowing (clear awareness), (2) heart-mind (controlling), (3) willing

22 In an implicit analogy to the five agents (*wu xing* 五行)-schematic diagram, one could say that it takes a functional position in analogy to the effective agent “earth” (*tu* 土).

23 Source text: “理一而已。以其理之凝聚而言。則謂之性。以其凝聚之主宰而言。則謂之心。以其主宰之發動而言。則謂之意。以其發動之明覺而言。則謂之知。以其明覺之感應而言。則謂之物。”

(intention-emitting), (4) characterizing (manifesting), (5) thing (resonating, being perceived). In this context, the knowing (1) represents the *coincidence* of two related, more active aspects (2, 3) and two related, more passive aspects (4, 5); it represents that which goes through all of the other 4 aspects and that which makes the “heart-mind” (*xin*) as the subjective manifestation of the objective “(self-)organizing principle” (*li*) of “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wanwu*) an identical aspect of the latter in an implicate-logical sense.²⁴

Under the background of this transversal implicate-logical, *formal* “resonance” in this particular respect, the last indented quote by Wang Yangming can be re-read and compared to a further statement by Plotinus: in parallel to the “clear awareness” (*mingjue*) of “human” (*ren*) “knowing” (*zhi*), Plotinus identified the implicate-logical self-knowledge of the philosopher (as the unity of unity and difference of knower and the known) in the sense that “every animal and plant and anything that appears to be soulless²⁵ are within me”²⁶ (Plotinus 2018, 3.2.3, 255).

On the one side, we can view the content of this statement in its general original context of a *cosmological* meaning of *theōria* in Plotinus’s philosophy (see the first three indented quotes of this chapter). At the same time, it is also to be considered from the transversal perspective of the implicate-logical foundation of the (*self-*) *reflective* reality-emerging level of Yangming’s “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), which “is exactly the good-knowing of [other humans, animals] grass and trees” (see the indented quote above, insertions in brackets DB). In the sense of Yangming’s understanding in the mature phase of his philosophy (Bartosch 2015b, 69–70, fn. 141 et al.), it does not just mean an intuitive moral conscience; “*liangzhi*” became a term for an all-encompassing transformational origin of all reality and experience in extension.

The “knowing”, respectively, “good-knowing”—or, to use another and later alternative term: “root-system of the vitality of the good-knowing” (*liangzhi benti* 良知本體)—is to be viewed as the convergence of all functions of consciousness in the sense of (to stay with our earlier example) “clear awareness” (*mingjue*) of all

24 Again, for more details cf. Bartosch (2015b, 390–424).

25 “A distinction between inanimate things which depend entirely on the soul of the universe or cosmos and things with their own souls (including plants and animals)” Plotinus (2018, 4.4.32, 452, fn. 94) is provided in the following statement: “And those that partake only of this soul [of the universe] are parts in all respects, but those that have a share in another soul thereby also have the status of not being altogether parts [...]” (ibid., 4.4.32, 452). Source text: “καὶ τὰ μὲν μόνης ταύτης μετέχοντα κατὰ πᾶν ἐστὶ μέρη, ὅσα δὲ καὶ ἄλλης ταύτ[η] ἔχει τὸ μὴ μέρη πάντη εἶναι [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Δ’ [4] δ’ [4])

26 Source text: “[...] ὅτι πάντα ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ φυτὰ καὶ ζῶια καὶ συμπάντων τῶν γενητῶν φύσις [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] β’ [2]).

“knowing” (*zhi*) and thereby as nothing short of a *conditio sine qua non* for grass and trees (and animals, societies, heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things)²⁷ to appear as what they are to us in an “anthropocosmic” (Tu 1973, 202) universe, which is carried through and constantly elevated into (self-)reflective forms in the process of human existence.

The shared implicate-logical foundation (Bartosch 2022a) of all “under-standing”, namely (to activate the etymology of “under-”) as a logical “inter-standing”, a “standing-in-between”, that is, dividing and thereby connecting *at the same time*,²⁸ does not contradict the fact that Yangming somehow put more emphasis on the aspect of a sort of empathizing or sympathizing responsiveness of (holistic) awareness.

Wang Yangming emphasizes that when we see a child in danger,²⁹ we naturally find ourselves in the state of a “fearfully alert, compassionate heart-mind” (*chu ti ce yin zhi xin* 怵惕惻隱之心), because we are related to the child in the context of “one (and the same meta-)system of vitality” (*yiti*) and in the sense of the related inborn “inter-humaneness” (*ren* 仁). However, according to Yangming, we do not only feel this kind of compassion with beings who, like the human child, are “of the same kind” (*tong lei* 同類), as the fear and suffering of animals naturally evoke our compassion, and our “inter-humaneness” (*ren*) is thus effective.³⁰ Like Plotinus, Yangming emphasizes that we share consciousness and sense perception with the animals. Furthermore, he also stresses that our compassionate “inter-humaneness” is even activated when we see the destruction of plant-life. According to Yangming, we share *the same urge to live* with plants. Therefore, we are in empathic resonance even with plants, and their destruction and death results in a “compassionately empathizing heart-mind” (*minxu zhi xin* 憫恤之心). For Yangming, even natural rock formations and stones are within the scope of the possible actuality of our inter-humaneness,³¹ compassion, and the one (meta-)system of vitality

27 Cf. also the quotes toward the end of chapter 2!

28 Cf. Bartosch (2021, 127–32) my analysis of the “original metaphor of ‘understanding’”, including the respective etymological background and also with comparative remarks in view of ancient Chinese thought.

29 This is related to Mengzi’s (Mencius 372–289 BCE) famous image of the situation faced by someone who sees a little child falling into a well.

30 A good example is provided by Mengzi: “[...] he is drawing the picture of a ruler who sees an innocent cow being led to a sacrificial site, and who, overcome by his compassion for the animal, is then faced with the dilemma of not being able to abolish the state-supporting rites involving animal sacrifices (which are his duties as a ruler) and of wanting to save the animal’s life at the same time” (Bartosch 2015a, 453, tr. DB). Cf. also Mengzi (n.d., chapter “Lian Hui Wang I”).

31 Stones and minerals are included, because they are an aspect of the “one (indivisible) fluidum in circulation” (*yiqi liutong* 一氣流通). It constitutes the solid, liquid, or gaseous “forms” (*xing* 形) of

that we form with other humans, animals, and plants (Wang Shouren 1933d, 36, tr. DB; cf. also Bartosch 2015b, 694–95).³² (All of this includes the possibility and thus the “freedom” to ignore or suppress the empathic self-evidence, which is declared as “evil” (*e* 惡) by Yangming.)

The idea of an *empathic resonance* between human consciousness and other forms of life is at least implicitly present in Plotinus’s point of view, as well. It is *as* implicitly present as the aforementioned implicate-logical *form* of the unity of unity and difference marks the implicit foundation in Yangming’s model of self-conscious *yin-yang*-like subject-objectivity (also in the sense of a general implicate-logical *tertium comparationis*, see introduction) as well as in his philosophy as a whole (Bartosch 2015b).

Put simply: Plotinus, too, was not simply a hard-hearted “theoretician”. As a human being striving for the “(highest) Good” (*agathón* ἀγαθόν) (see chapter 3), Plotinus himself showed great empathy with animals as well.³³ “He would not agree to take medicines derived from wild animals [...] [or] to derive nourishment from the bodies even of domesticated animals” (Porphyry of Tyre 2018, § 1, 17). Plotinus developed a strong argument that it is fair “to endow with happiness even the basest living beings, and plants, too, since they are themselves alive, that is, they have a life that also unfolds in the direction of a goal”³⁴ (Plotinus 2018, 1.4.1, 71). In passing, it might be noted in advance (for more, following 2) that *both* Yangming and Plotinus thereby understood life as a processual unfolding. However, Plotinus’s explicit reflection of an inherent goal-driven nature is

all appearing living beings and objects. Wang Yangming points to the fact that medicinal minerals (*yaoshi* 藥石) can only heal illness, because the “matter-energy” (Joseph Needham’s translation for “*qi* 氣”) of the stone and our bodies represent “this same one (and only) fluidum” (*tong ci yiqi* 同此一氣) (Wang Shouren 1933c, 17).

- 32 Source text to this paraphrased passage in the present and the second to the last paragraphs: “是故見孺子之入井.而必有怵惕惻隱之心焉.是其仁之與孺子而爲一體也.孺子猶同類者也.見鳥獸之哀鳴顰蹙.而必有不忍之心焉.是其仁之與鳥獸而爲一體也.鳥獸猶有知覺者也.見草木之摧折.而必有憫恤之心焉.是其仁之與草木而爲一體也.草木猶有生意者也.見瓦石之毀壞.而必有顧惜之心焉.是其仁之與瓦石而爲一體也.是其一體之仁也.” Cf. also Bartosch (2015b, 694–95).
- 33 Apart from “the assignment of evils to men of opposite kinds, the good being poor, the wicked rich, and the bad having more of those things that those who are human beings ought to have and being in power and in charge of nations and cities” (Plotinus 2018, 3.2.7, 260), Plotinus states that the “(highest) Good” (*agathón*) “also reaches the earth is attested by the expressed principle of the other things that come about. For animals and plants both share in this expressed principle, and in soul and life” (ibid.). Source text: “Ἀλλὰ τῶν ἄλλων γινομένων λόγ[ω] μαρτύριον τοῦτο καὶ μέχρι γῆς ἰέναι· καὶ γὰρ ζῶια καὶ φυτὰ καὶ λόγου καὶ ψυχῆς καὶ ζωῆς μεταλαμβάνει” (Plotinos n.d., Γ´ [3] β´ [2]).
- 34 Source text: “[...] τὸ τῆς εὐδαιμονίας καταφέρειν εἰς τὰ ζῶια τὰ ἄλλα – οὕτω γὰρ ἂν καὶ τοῖς ἀτιμοτάτοις αὐτῶν μεταδώσειν· μεταδώσειν δὲ καὶ τοῖς φυτοῖς ζῶσι καὶ αὐτοῖς καὶ ζῶην ἔξειλιττομένην εἰς τέλος ἔχουσι – [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Α´ [1] δ´ [4]).

mirrored rather *implicitly* in Yangming’s line of thought: it has to be remembered that Yangming said that we share *an urge to live* (which implies an immanent goal) with plants (see above, second last paragraph).

From a more differentiating angle, it can be added that Yangming didn’t make a distinction comparable to that between “rational” (*logikós λογικός*) and “non-rational” (*álogos άλογος*) animals. This difference can be viewed as an implicit manifestation of the *general* differences between a Neo-Platonic (implicate, Bartosch 2022a) “logic of theoretical knowledge and insight” and Yangming’s (implicate) “logic of situational cognition and insight”, which the author has analysed extensively and very much in detail, albeit by referring to Nicolaus Cusanus instead of Plotinus (Bartosch 2015b, 425–590). At this point, I would only like to say that while the same implicate logic can be detected in Yangming’s model of consciousness, he doesn’t actually understand the aspects of thoughts and feelings as separate dimensions that would exist in a hierarchical order. From the (Neo-)Platonic perspective of Plotinus, the self-knowing evidence of the implicate logic (self-enfolding “meta-reason”, Bartosch (2022b, 110)) and also the descending or deriving faculty of concept formation (unfolding reason, “downstream” of thinking, *ibid.*) are reflected as superordinate to sense perception and feelings (for example, the happiness of plants). In the case of Plotinus, the anthropocentric hierarchy that has already been introduced at the beginning of this chapter is established on the basis of the finite representation of the exceptional human capability for intellection, and thus the actualization of pure “contemplation” (*theōria*)—a self-evidence which actually cannot be mediated in a conceptualizing manner (see also the last main segment of chapter 3 on ineffability).

In the case of Yangming’s (Neo-Confucian) anthropocentrism, an implicit hierarchy of the living is established in another way, that is, on the foundation of the aspect of “inter-humaneness” (*ren*). For Yangming, this aspect counts as the manifestation of the empathizing responsiveness which is at the root of the unity of the system of vitality of my heart-mind with heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things (see an exact quote with source text in chapter 2).

On the one hand, *ren* 仁 also represents the implicate-logical (meta-)form of the *unity of unity and difference* of “you” (*er* 爾) and “I” (*wo* 我) (Wang Shouren 1933d, 35; also quoted in Bartosch 2015b, 692) as the basic manifestation of universal love (Wang Shouren 1933d, 36–37; also quoted in Bartosch 2015b, 736–37), which is originating from the “caring love between father and son” (*fu-zi zhi ai* 父子之愛) (*ibid.*, 729–42).

In view of Plotinus, we have already seen that the same underlying implicate-*logical* (meta-)form (Bartosch 2022a, 110, 118) is also represented in the sense of

the *unity of unity and difference* of the knower and the known in the sense of the notion of “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis*). It comes with the *exclusion* of feelings and sensations on the related onto-hierarchical, highest level of human existence of the Plotinian “intellect” (*noûs*). In view of the other side of the “transverse”, it might not be all too surprising that the *inclusion* of feelings and sensations in the Yangmingian “heart-mind” (*xin*) has led to a more down-to-earth, alternative representation of a hierarchical superordination of (empathic) human consciousness. Because of the origin of all “inter-humaneness” (*ren*) in one’s family context, Yangming envisioned a hierarchy of empathy, love, and care as a core aspect of reality. It is manifested by the (organic) necessity of having to eat or to provide one’s family with food (to sustain their lives) in the following sense:

Animals and plants are both equally loved. Plants are used to feed animals. This can still be tolerated. People and animals are both equally loved. Slaughtering animals to feed the next of kin [when plant-based food sources are not sufficient] [...]: the heart-mind can just about bear this. (Wang Shouren 1933c, 18, tr., insertions in brackets DB)³⁵

Plotinus, on the other hand, is very well aware of the same dilemma. Although he seems to have followed a vegetarian way of life to minimize the suffering of animals in this regard, he does not explicitly relate the problem to the question of human consciousness, and he did not come up with the idea of an anthropocentric hierarchy of empathy and care. In his case, the hierarchy of living beings is related to the ability to engage in the abstraction of thought and the explicit self-application of the principle of thinking (*theōria*) to oneself/itself. With regard to the situation of a self-consumption of life on the animal plane, he stated that

th[e] eating of each other is necessary. These transformations from one animal to another come about because they would be unable to continue on in existence the way they are, even if no one were to kill them. And if at the time when they leave the world, they leave it in such a way that others find some use from them, why must we begrudge that? What does it matter if they are consumed to be born as other living beings? (Plotinus 2018, 3.2.15, 267)³⁶

35 Source text: “禽獸與草木同是愛的。把草木去養禽獸。又忍得。人與禽獸同是愛的。宰禽獸以養親[...].心又忍得。”

36 Source text: “Ἡ ἀλληλοφαγία μὲν ἀναγκαῖα, ἀμοιβαί ζώων οὔσαι οὐ δυναμένων, οὐδ’ εἴ τις μὴ κτιννοῖ αὐτά, οὕτω μένειν εἰς αἰεῖ. Εἰ δὲ ἐν ᾧ χρόν[ω] δεῖ ἀπελθεῖν οὕτως ἀπελθεῖν ἔδει, ὡς ἄλλοις γενέσθαι χρειαῖα παρ’ αὐτῶν, τί φθονεῖν ἔδει; Τί δ’ εἰ βρωθέντα ἄλλα ἐφύετο” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] β’ [2]).

More generally speaking, and despite the differences that have just been outlined, we can say that in both philosophies the elevated status of what is conceptualized as a “human being” (*ánthrōpos, ren* 人) results from the ascription of a much higher qualitative level of human self-knowledge, that is, the highest intellectual form of “contemplation” (*theōria*), as well as the exclusive features of the “spiritual brightness” (*lingming*) and “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), which are expressions of the self-reflective actualities of human consciousness. We have already seen that these central terms are not confined to subjective cognitive processes, but that they suggest that the human being is participating in that which these terms allude to in the sense of being a central cosmological agent.

The Self-Unfoldment of Reality as a Meta-Cognitive Process toward Self-Knowledge

In this segment, the last-mentioned similarity will be further explored: in both philosophies the respective understanding of the “human being” (*ánthrōpos, ren*) characterizes the latter as an eminent or central being. Both ascribe human consciousness a central role in the *self-unfoldment of reality as an all-encompassing meta-cognitive process*. The reason is, generally and comparatively speaking, the feature of *self-knowledge*.³⁷ The implicate-logical *reflection of the reflection* (which implies the synthetic absorption in the unitive relationship of subject and object of the reflection that has already been indicated in view of both philosophies)³⁸ enables the human being to fully integrate itself into the whole of everything there is, to relate to the overall process(es) of universal life by means of cognition and feeling, and to empathize with it to an extent that the whole is viewed *as an expression of an all-encompassing, universal goodness*. In the sense of the respective implicate-logical self-knowledge (as a foundation), the human mind (in the sense of the Plotinian *noûs* and, as we have seen, *mutatis mutandis*, also of the Yangmingian model of consciousness) is itself *geared toward this integration*: it can reflect back onto itself in a way so that it can fully be absorbed in the self-evident insights that to realize absolute unity (and therefore absolute freedom), *difference as such cannot be excluded, because otherwise one would just have mistaken non-countable boundless unity for a mere unit which still is distinct from something else*.³⁹ In the following, we have to explore how both philosophers have envisioned the realization of this integration.

37 This term means an overarching comparative/transversal working category of the reflection here.

38 In passing, it might also be noted that it has also been expressed by way of comparable (in the sense of the possibility to compare) *mirror metaphors* in both cases (Bartosch 2015b, 651–56 et al.; 2018, 94).

39 This is not just a “remote” or “lofty” theoretical problem of philosophical contemplation or academic “ivory towers”. On the contrary, it is actually the root cause of what Hegel has called “negative freedom” (*negative Freiheit*) (Hegel 2003, §5, 38).

Plotinus's "nature" (*phýsis*) means an "expressed principle"⁴⁰ (*lógos* λόγος) (e.g. Plotinus 2018, 3.8.3) that produces animals and plants, which then themselves express the same principle (*lógos*) in a derived, "lower" sense, that is in the particular forms of their psychophysical generativity. The *form* of the "expressed principle" (*lógos*) that descends in declining qualitative steps from the (world-) "intellect" (*noús*) and thereby connects the (world-) "soul" (*psychē*) with "nature" (*phýsis*) in such a (descending) fashion is that of "contemplation" (*theōria*), because

all the power that produces not by means of hands must remain and remain entire. For there is, indeed, no need for it [power] to have some parts that remain and others that are in motion, for matter is what is in motion, but nothing in power is in motion; otherwise, it [power] will not be the prime mover, nor will nature be this [the prime mover], but that which is unmoved in the whole [of nature]. (ibid., 3.8.2, 357)⁴¹

For Plotinus, everything that is effective and part of the world-process means an appearance of a *meta-cognitive principle*: "nature" (*phýsis*) is deriving "entirely from contemplation [*theōria*]"⁴² (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.3, 358, insertion in brackets DB) and "every life is intellection [*nóēsis* νόησις] of a sort, but one kind more obscure than another, just as life is, too" (ibid., 3.8.8, 363, insertion in brackets DB).⁴³ How does the obscurity come into play? Here, we have to discern between "pure" "contemplation" (*theōria*) and its lowering "copies" or steps toward the realm of (physical) "matter" (*hýle* ὕλη).⁴⁴ The former only takes place in the realm of

40 This translation term is used in Plotinus (2018). A. H. Armstrong's translation in Plotinus (1980) is more nuanced: he is translating "*logos*" as "principle", "forming principle", and "rational principle" even in one and the same paragraph (8.3.3, 367).

41 Source text: "ὡς μένειν δεῖ καὶ ἐνταῦθα τὴν δύναμιν τὴν οὐ διὰ χειρῶν ποιοῦσαν καὶ πᾶσαν μένειν. Οὐ γὰρ δὴ δεῖται τῶν μὲν ὡς μενόντων, τῶν δὲ ὡς κινουμένων – ἢ γὰρ ὕλη τὸ κινούμενον, αὐτῆς δὲ οὐδὲν κινούμενον – ἢ ἐκεῖνο οὐκ ἔσται τὸ κινοῦν πρότως, οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις τοῦτο, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀκίνητον τὸ ἐν τ[ῷ] ὄλ[φῳ]" (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8]).

42 Source text: "Πάντως μὲν ἐκ θεωρίας" (Plotinos, n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8]).

43 Source text: "Καὶ πᾶσα ζωὴ νόησις τις, ἀλλὰ ἄλλη ἄλλης ἀμυδροτέρα, ὥσπερ καὶ ζωὴ" (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8]).

44 In passing, I would like to mention that we have to discern between two forms of matter in the case of Plotinus, who "[...] turned the Platonic μὴ ὄν into τὸ κακόν, that is, evil par excellence. This is more than an ascetic determination, as it did not occur up until then, and as it also had been lifted a hitherto merely 'disturbing' aspect in matter into the realm of the devilish, the inferno" (Bloch (1972, 149, tr. DB). However, "with Plotinus, the full Tohu wa-bohu is and remains only in the invisible abyss of the lower darkneses, which, due to original evil, have not conceived the light. But strangely enough, Plotinus not only inserts matter in this abyss but in the heights as well, albeit a completely different one, certainly, but nevertheless one that shares the name with the 'matter—Satan' (*Stoff—Satan*): he called it ὕλη νοητή, *intelligible matter*" (ibid., 150, tr. DB; cf. also Plotinus 2018, 2.4, 164–83).

“intellect” (*noûs*), that is, by way of an absolutely self-reflective “thinking of thinking” (*noûseôs nóësis*).⁴⁵ On this level of *intellective contemplation*, in which the absolute source of the “(highest) Good” (*agathón*), respectively, the “One” (*hén év*) is “shining through” the intellective form of a unity through the difference of the knowing and the known (see chapter 3), the human being is able to self-*knowingly* reflect the cosmic life principle of (self-)“contemplation” (*theōria*) as being *effective* in non-rational animals, plants, and the earth in the form of (partly unconscious) after-images as reflections of reflections of reflections and so on—namely in the myriads of *ways* of sustaining life, of growing, of regenerating it in the form of offspring (ibid., 3.8.5, 360: “generation is contemplation”⁴⁶). In this sense, one can also say that nothing which is derived from *theōria* can be disconnected from the “intellect” (*noûs*) (ibid., 3.8.8, 363–64), because the lower manifestations still participate the former (see also the last indented quote in this chapter). Like in the case of two parallel mirrors, which reflect each other ad infinitum *in mere theory* but become increasingly fainter reflections in reality,⁴⁷ the forms of the unfoldment of life of non-rational animals and plants are fainter after-images of the perfect *theōria*, that is, the perfect immaterial reflection of that which cannot be thought of as an image but only as an absolute origin.

The word “contemplation” is the term that has been used to render the Greek “*theōria*” in both English translations of the *Enneads* (Plotinus 1980; 2018).⁴⁸ It is important to note that although our modern word “theory” is derived from it, Plotinus’s understanding of the term cannot be confused with concepts of modern scientific theories, which are finite semantic frameworks superimposed on selected sets of aspects of an infinite reality and can be validated/verified or falsified by experiments in relation to data.⁴⁹

In my opinion, the translation term “contemplation” can also be misleading on occasion, because the word might possibly shroud the implications *of the processual nature, the inherent motivation or intentional moments, and the related emergences, which are also implied* in Plotinus’s original use of the Greek term “*theōria*”: in

45 Cf. also the detailed overview by Mazur (2021, 26–62).

46 Source text (with context): “Ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν φύσεως εἰπόντες ὃν τρόπον θεωρία ἢ γένεσις, [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ´ [3] ἡ´ [8]).

47 “[I]n reality, the images [of the mirrors] would become increasingly fainter and would no longer be recognizable from a certain image onwards.” (Geiger und Scheel, 1927, 67, tr., insertion in brackets DB)

48 We will see that the word “contemplation” (which has been used in both Plotinus (1980) and (2018)) might not have been the absolute best choice to translate “*theōria* θεωρία” in this context. Maybe it is better not to translate it at all?

49 Cf. also Bartosch (2019, 47–50) on scientific belief-structures versus religious belief.

the initial pre-philosophical context, “*theōria*” signified a completion of a process of becoming aware of divine principles in a sanctuary *to which one had to journey beforehand from another city and as a chosen ceremonial envoy in this regard* (Rausch 1982, 70–71; Bartosch 2015b, 494). The “encounter” of the mortal (human) envoy with the “immortals”, that is, with the mathematical proportions, geometric-harmonic principles of temples and sculptures of gods, actually were meant as a conscious return, as a reminiscent awakening in view of the very principles that were behind the motions of the celestial bodies and even of the beauty of human bodies, etc.⁵⁰ In this sense, again, *the travel to the sanctuary*, that is, the *intentional movement toward the divine principles*—in other words: the effort to move toward *the source*—had its own symbolic meaning, namely that of a “return” to the highest principles that the gods represented.

The later *philosophical* rendering of the term “*theōria*” conveys the meaning of (self-)reflection in the sense of what Plotinus’s follower Proclus (Προκλος Διαδοχος, 412–484) conceptualized as “*epistrophē* ἐπιστροφή”—the *active (path of a) return to the one and indivisible source of all thinking and world-experiences (including their sense-perception-conveyed “things”)*.⁵¹ The origin of the English philosophical term “reflection” still hints at this original (Platonic) meaning of “*theōria*” (which, as mentioned, also finds a transversal counterpart in Neo-Confucian mirror metaphors). It is derived from the Latin “*reflectere*” in the sense of “bending back (on itself/oneself)”. Furthermore, *theōria* thereby not only includes the vision⁵² but—please note—also the *active process* of realization and an inherent “source-relatedness” (Bartosch 2022a: 114, 119): Plotinian “*theōria*” therefore also conveys the meaning of an *inherent “motivation”/“intentionality”*—(self-)organizing *directionality*—and a related *process of movement or transformation* in relation

50 Cf. also Kayser (1950).

51 *Mutatis mutandis*, one can think of Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s (1762–1814) “seeing (of) seeing” (*sehendes Sehen*), or Nicolaus Cusanus’s (1401–1464) “*visio intellectualis*”.

52 The word “*theōria*” has also been translated into Latin “*visio*” (vision). “*Theōria*” is related to the “*theōros* θεωρός”, the “spectator”. The word “*theōria*” is also the precursor of philosophical meanings of “speculation”. The latter is deriving from Latin “*speculari*” (to peer around from an observation point, *specula*) and, alternatively, from “*speculum*” (mirror) (Ebbesmeyer 1995, 1355). In the latter sense, it is related to the philosophical mirror-metaphor which has been unfolding since the times of Plato, has been intensely cultivated by Plotinus, and finds its counterpart in the Chinese traditions since Zhuangzi (莊子, 3rd cent. BCE) and especially in the thought of Wang Yangming as well (Bartosch 2015b; 2017); it also forms the background for the conceptual history of “(self-) reflection” (Zahn 1992, 396). “*Speculatio*” has been used to translate “θεωρία” in the Aristotelian sense, that is, “as an opposite term to ‘practice’, and it is as such relevant for the classification of the sciences as well as for the distinction of the cognitive faculties” (Ebbesmeyer 1995, 1355, tr. DB) and in the sense of “a specific form of cognition as reflection, in which the subject of reflection [...] and the object of reflection [...] are posited in a mutually clarifying relation” (ibid.).

to a particular “final goal” (*télos τέλος*): “for all things their starting point is their goal” (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.7, 363).

The process of unfoldment toward the inherent goal is the central aspect of *theōria*, because “all of it is contemplation”⁵³ (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.5, 360), possibly leading to its own inherent “apex-event”,⁵⁴ that is, a fully self-reflective realization of an indivisible, boundless unity in the highest actuality of *epistrophē*. The latter is to be understood as a circular return: it means the “event”, when A and Ω of the process of cosmic life (via human intellection) “in an un-reaching way touch”⁵⁵ (Bartosch 2015b, 285) the One (*hén*)—of which the whole process of the cosmos is the appearance, which is the indivisible root of all cosmic forms of becoming (as the One’s manifestations) while they exist (logically)—and which is preceding all number, even “substantial number”⁵⁶ (Plotinus 2018, 5.5.4, 587–588). The One cannot be “touched” by separation from finiteness but *through* finiteness.⁵⁷

Proclus’s concept of *epistrophē* has to be understood in the context of three inseparable steps: *monē* μονή, *próodos* πρόοδος, *epistrophē* ἐπιστροφή. This means the third and final, the all-including, all-elevating (ab)solution of the finite state of existence. The term “*próodos*” is made up of the prefix “*pro-* προ-” and “*hodós* ὁδός”. While the former can mean “forth” or “un-” (in the sense of “unfolding”), the latter means “way” or “path”. (One might already anticipate the potential for discussion in regard to the Chinese term “*dao* 道” at this point.) In German, “*próodos*” can be rendered quite literally as “*Hervorgang*” (Bartosch 2015b, 319). “*Próodos*” means the “way” in which things are proceeding forth, the process of an emanation of consciousness in finite perspectives, aspects, and situations. All of these processes are unknowingly springing forth from their origin,⁵⁸ that is, their

53 Source text (with context): “ἦκει δὲ ἡ ἐνέργεια ἐκ θεωρίας ἢ πράξεως, πράξις δὲ οὕτω ἦν—οὐ γὰρ οἶόν τε πρὸ θεωρίας – ἀνάγκη ἀσθενεστέραν μὲν ἕτεραν ἕτερας εἶναι, πᾶσαν δὲ θεωρίαν.” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

54 This term alludes to Nicolaus Cusanus’ term “*apex theoriae*” (Nicolai de Cusa 1982).

55 With Nicolai de Cusa (1944, 8.30, 18): “Since this is an insight above all human cognition, it is not being touched in human cognition other than negatively.” Source text: “Quae quoniam supra hominis cognitionem est cognitio, non nisi negative in humaniter cognitio attrahatur.”

56 Plotinos (n.d., E [5] ε’ [5]): “οὐσιώδης ἀριθμὸς”.

57 It would also be fruitful to explore Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s term “*Durch*” from a transcultural perspective.

58 To generate an image, one can also think of the ancient city-environment that the ceremonial envoy is leaving, without the latter knowing about the fact, the place that he is leaving is expressing “immortal” cosmic principles, for example, in the form of underlying mathematical proportions of its temples, or its grid, etc. (The history of this understanding reaches back to the Mycenaean era, cf. Sparavigna and Baldi (2016), and to early phases of cultural exchange with the Mesopotamian region and Egypt.)

original “dwelling” or “abode” (*monē*),⁵⁹ and turn into self-knowledge in the sense of an *epistrophē*, that is, as the conscious, knowing, and uncovering return to the hidden principles of the *monē*.

In later Latin terminology, “*monē*” has been translated as “*principium*” (principle), “*próodos*” as “*medium*” (medium), and “*epistrophē*” as “*finis*” (end/goal). The Neo-Platonic thinker Nicolaus Cusanus, who was directly influenced by Proclus (and in a roundabout way by Plotinus), has provided the image of a spoon-carver, who is *in the process* of polishing his creation, and who—by actively going through this phase with his intention in mind—creates a “mirror spoon” (*coctear specularē*). The process itself means the emergence of a *symbol* for his mirror-spoon-creating “mind” (*mens*) to attain *self-knowledge* (Bartosch 2015b, 317–19). Due to his creation proceeding forth in this way (*próodos*), the craftsman attains the “epistrophic” (Schäfer 2006, 111) wisdom of self-reflexivity.⁶⁰ In accordance with this image of “self-production”, Cusanus derives the term for “deity”, “god” (*theós* θεός), which is also directly related to “*theōria*”,

from “*theoro*” [θεωρώ], that is, “*I see*” and “*I walk/move fast*” Consequently, *the seeker must walk/move fast by means of (mental) vision*, so that he may be able to reach out toward the all-seeing *theon* [θεόν, accusative singular of “θεός”]. Thus, the vision shows a *likeness of the way*, on which the seeker *must walk* along (to get) closer. (Nicolai de Cusa, 1959, 15, tr., insertions in brackets, italics, tr. DB)⁶¹

Proclus’s metaphor of the “processional *path*” (*próodos*) or Cusanus’s of the “*way/road*” (*via*) provide the opportunity of a transversal reflection. The finite processes in the sense of *próodos* are the *medium* of returning to the source. They correlate to Laozi’s “*name-bearing*” (*you ming*) “*ways*” (*dao* 道) (those which can be communicated) in view of their “*ineffable*” (*wu ming* 無名) origin and end: *Dao* 道 (here *with a capital “D” to discern the function* of this expression from the former) (also Bartosch, 2022a).⁶²

59 Hence the word “monastery”.

60 From a further comparative perspective, the figure of the god Krishna in Indian spirituality, represented in the literature and in forms of sculptures and paintings, is likewise to be understood as a symbolic *projection*, which is supposed to “mirror” and therefore to “awaken” its own creative origin in the sense of *self-knowledge*.

61 Source text: “Theos dicitur a theoro, quod est video et curro. Currere igitur debet quaerens per visum, ut ad omnia videntem theon pertingere possit. Gerit igitur visio similitudinem viae, per quam quaerens incedere debet.”

62 Cf. also the source text to this paraphrase in *Daodejing*: “無名天地之始;有名萬物之母。”(n.d., § 1)

Taken in *the most general comparative sense* here, we can reflect upon that semantic “pointing rod” (*Zeigestab*) (Scheler 1921, 546) “Way” (*Dao* 道) in the transverse, namely in view of the *ineffable* “One” (*hén*), in terms of the (*ineffable*) “(highest) Good” (*agathón*) (or together as the “the One-Good” (Aubry 2020, 211)) (as well as with Proclus’s self-reflection of the “*monē*”, in the sense of its revealing self-knowledge as “*epistrophē*”). I hasten to say that this finding around the philosophical metaphors of “way” or “path” (Proclus’s “*próodos*”, Cusanus’s “*via*”, and—*mutatis mutandis!*—*dao/Dao*) itself provides a “path” for further transversal references. In the present paper, this can only be followed through to a certain extent. At this point, I would like to go only this far as to not transgress the scope of the topical field of the present chapter:⁶³

For Yangming, the “Way” (*Dao*), the “heart-mind” (*xin*) (primarily expressing the “little bit of spiritual brightness” (*yi dian lingming*) of humanity), and “Heaven”⁶⁴ (*tian*) are aspects of *one and the same meta-cognitive process*: “The heart-mind is the Way; the Way is Heaven. *To know the heart-mind is the measure to know the Way and to know Heaven*” (Wang Shouren 1933a, 20, tr., italics DB).⁶⁵

On the one hand, the “heart-mind” (*xin*) carries (out) the subjective, unique, finite, respectively, “mortal” experience of each living human individual: “Now consider a deceased human: his ‘spiritual agent’ (*jingling*) ‘drifting and scattered’ (*you san le*). Where should his heaven, (his) earth, (his) spirits, (his) gods (and his) ten thousand things still exist?”⁶⁶ (Wang Shouren 1933c, 33, tr. DB). However, this subjective/finite “surface level” must not obscure the fact that, on the other hand, the “heart-mind” (*xin*) bears a certain comparability to the *objective* dimension of the (world-) “soul” (*psychē*) in Plotinus’s philosophy. *Mutatis mutandis*, both terms refer to the idea of a universal/cosmic dimension in which everything, to borrow Hegel’s expression, is “translated” into existence: in this sense *also the heart-mind is “throughout all ages one [human] inhaling-exhaling”* (*yi xu-xi* 一嘯吸)⁶⁷ (Wang Shouren 1933e 47, tr., italics DB). And as Plotinus’s

63 Many possible points of interest must be kept pending. They will be addressed in a contentually and methodologically complementing attempt (as mentioned in the introduction).

64 I am not using *tian* in the sense of “heaven and earth” (*tian-di*) but in the sense of the other possible meaning of the “whole of everything”. Hence the capitalization of the translation term on these occasions.

65 Source text: “心即道。道即天。知心則知道知天。”

66 Source text: “今看死的人。他這些精靈游散了。他的天地鬼神萬物尚在何處。”

67 Source text with context: “此心還此理。寧論己與人。千古一嘯吸。誰為嘆離群。浩浩天地內。何物非同春。相思輒奮勵。無為俗所分。但使心無間。萬里如相親。不見宴游交。微逐胥以淪。”

nature-evoking “contemplation [*theōria*] does not have a limit nor does the object of contemplation” (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.5, 361),⁶⁸ so “there are [also] no things outside of the heart-mind under heaven”⁶⁹ (Wang Shouren 1933c, 18, tr., insertion DB). Not even “heaven and earth” (*tian-di*) could manifest without the “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) (ibid., 17),⁷⁰ *permanently realizing itself through the human heart-mind*, that is, in a self-processing meta-collective network of all finite perspectives of all individual human life past and present (as a sort of integrated “monads” of life-experiences, if I may say so).⁷¹

In this context, it is highly interesting to compare Wang Yangming’s notion of the “unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through (something)” (*zhi-xing he yi* 知行合一) with Plotinus’s notions of “contemplation” (*theōria*) and its “expressed principle” (*lógos*).

Like in Plotinus’s active *process* of the expression of the principle (*lógos*), for Wang Yangming the understanding that *permanently realizes* the “good knowing” (*liangzhi*) (as the self-reflective manifestation of the “(self-)organizing principle” (*li*)) is not confined to individual perspectives. It can rather be understood as a complementing objective characteristic of the self-unfoldment of reality (here: heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things (*tian-di wanwu*)) as a *meta-cognitive, transpersonal, universal process*. In analogy to the aforesaid immanent intentionality of the “processional path” (*próodos*) or, in Latin Neo-Platonic terminology, the *medium* in the self-unfoldment of all finite human perspectives of the (world-) “soul” (*psychē*), the “heart-mind” (*xin*) is inherently driven by an intention to know (at least situation-wise) and understand; and it demands having “a heart-mind, which is eager to actively pass through (all experiences). Only after that one knows the road. This

68 Source text: “Καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἔχει πέρας ἡ θεωρία οὐδὲ τὸ θεώρημα” (Plotinus n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]). For the background of this thought in the philosophy of Plato as well as for an overview of the following development in the European Neo-Platonic tradition of the Middle Ages see the overview in Bartosch (2015b, 64–65, fn. 126). In Plotinus’s sense, *theōria* is the direct effective form of that which encompasses all beings. According to Plato’s *Timaios* Τίμαιος, “[...] that which comprises all conceivable beings *could never exist as a second next to another*, because in this case there would have to be another being again which comprises those two, of which those two would be parts [...]” (Platon 2003, 31a, 43, italics DB). Source text: “τὸ γὰρ περιέχον πάντα ὅποσα νοητὰ ζῶα μεθ’ ἑτέρου δεύτερον οὐκ ἂν ποτ’ εἴη· πάλιν γὰρ ἂν ἕτερον εἶναι τὸ περὶ ἐκείνων δέοι ζῶον, οὗ μέρος ἂν εἴτην ἐκείνων [...]” (ibid., 42).

69 Source text: “天下無心外之物。”

70 Source text: “豈惟草木瓦石為然。天地無人的良知。亦不可為天地矣。蓋天地萬物。與人原是一體。”

71 The reader should also keep in mind the Yangmingian model of subjective consciousness presented in ch. 1. Here, the “heart-mind” (*xin*) is rooted in and being nurtured by the all-encompassing “knowing” (*zhi*) which represents the implicate-logical unity of the unity and difference of all functions of experience and at the same time also the connection with the *objective*, all-unifying “(self-)organizing principle” (*li*) of “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wanwu*). For more on this, see also further below in the present chapter.

is (called) the ‘intentionality/will(ing)’ (*yi* 意); this is already the beginning of ‘actively passing through’ (*xing* 行)” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 38, tr. DB).⁷²

This does not only address the manifestation of subjective dispositions but, in inseparable correlation with the former and in the sense of an existential realism, the *objective process* of the emergence of all things (through the centre of the heart-mind, through our “little bit of spiritual brightness” (*yi dian lingming*):⁷³

This inference is confirmed by [Wang Yangming’s] famous analysis of the [“unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through” (*zhi-xing he yi* 知行合一)]. When I see a beautiful color, I do not first see it with my eyes (a kind of “knowing”), with liking it (a kind of “action”) coming afterwards as the result of a mental decision to like it. My perception of a thing [in the sense of Wang Yangming] as having visible and value qualities [which are known in the sense of an “immediate reflexivity” (Aubrey 2020, 212)] is *total and unitary*. As Husserl might say, it seems to be one unitary “constituting” intentional act of consciousness—just as when I look at a tree, I see not only a shape but a solid extended object with a front and a back side, so here I “see” an object with a visible and a “value side”. (Nivison 1973, 132, insertions in brackets, italics DB)

The immediacy of knowing “along the Way” or *through the act itself* (which represents a universally *creative principle of implicate-logical meta-cognition at the same time*) at least partly resembles the Plotinian understanding how an “expressed principle” (*lógos*) is self-unfolding the cosmic principle of “contemplation” (*theōria*). The function of Plotinus’s “expressed principle” on the levels of “soul” (*psychē*) and “nature” (*phýsis*) is at least partly resonant with what Wang Yangming viewed as the “heart-mind” (*xin*) activating the “characterizing nature” (*xing*) by means of “intentionality/will(ing)” (*yi*). *The only major functional difference* is that Yangming did not contemplate the correlation of these terms in analogy to Plotinus’s *hierarchy* of qualitative dimensions of reality (nature “below” soul etc.). We have seen (see chapter 1) that intentionality/will(ing) and the characterizing nature appear to be juxtaposed aspects of *one and the same “level-free” dimension of a meta-cognitive subject-objectivity* (also analysed in Bartosch (2015b, 390–424)).

Besides, the aforesaid also includes the reason why I am refusing to translate “*xing* 行” as “action”.⁷⁴ To show the inseparability with the “knowing” (*zhi* 知), it is better

72 Source text: “必有欲行之心.然後知路.即是意.即是行之始矣.” Cf. also Bartosch (2015b, 586).

73 Cf. also the detailed analyses in Bartosch (2015b, 184–90, 390–424).

74 Unfortunately, the expression “*zhi-xing he yi*” is often translated as “unity of knowledge and action” in English. In my opinion, this unrefined mode of expression obstructs access to the subtlety of

to translate “*xing*” (in a more pronounced way) as “actively passing through”. This also helps to show transversal correspondences with Plotinus’s understanding of the unity of “contemplation” (*theōria*) and its “expressed principle” (*lógos*) in the active process of the self-realization or unfoldment of everything. Also in Plotinus’s view, the knowing (implicit or explicit *theōria*) is inseparable from its “actively passing through”, namely in the sense of a self-expressing principle which is at the core of all life:

How, then, while the expressed principle [*lógos*] produces that is, produces in this way, could it attain to any kind of contemplation? In fact, if it produces while remaining, that is, both remaining in itself and an expressed principle, it would itself be contemplation. For action [*práxis* *πραξις*] would occur in accordance with an expressed principle being clearly different from it; but the expressed principle, which accompanies action and looks after it, would not be action. Then, if it is not action but an expressed principle, it is contemplation. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.3, 358)⁷⁵

Also in the sense of Wang Yangming, “*xing* 行” cannot of course merely be viewed as “action” in contrast to cognitive processes. On the contrary, the “integrated activity” (another possible translation term for “*xing*”) is expressing the “knowing” (*zhi* 知, see also chapter 1) in the form of “actively passing through” (*xing*) “things” (*wu*) (to be taken as situations and processual affairs which might or might not include (processual) objects)—without being “exterior” to, respectively, without ever being apart from the knowing. As in the process of a master-calligrapher at work, the knowledge and its realization perpetually coincide in the act. While, to explicitly think in the transverse here, the calligrapher and his knowing (as the condition of the possibility of his performance) represent the aspect of (1) “*monē*” (the “dwelling”⁷⁶) or “*principium*” (principle), (2) the integrated realization or actualization of (1) represents the “*próodos*” (processional path) as the *medium*—which nurtures the self-knowledge of the calligrapher in the act, namely in the sense of the “return” (*epistrophē*), respectively, as the “*finis*” (end/goal), which is, to switch back to Chinese terminology, permanently reached *as long as one is in touch with the deepest core of the “self”* (*ji* 己). From this transversal angle, one might also add that the implicate-logical unity of knowing and the known (Plotinus: thinking of

Wang Yangming’s understanding in this context. The German translation of “*xing* 行” as “*tätiges Durchlaufen*” (Bartosch 2015b, 529) provides an example of a better solution.

75 Source text: “Πῶς οὖν ποιῶν καὶ οὕτω ποιῶν θεωρίας τινὸς ἂν ἐφάπτοίτο; Ἡ, εἰ μένων ποιεῖ καὶ ἐν αὐτ[ῷ] μένων καὶ ἐστὶ λόγος, εἴη ἂν αὐτὸς θεωρία. Ἡ μὲν γὰρ πράξις γένοιτ’ ἂν κατὰ λόγον ἑτέρα οὕσα δηλονότι τοῦ λόγου· ὁ μὲντοι λόγος καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ συνὼν τῇ πράξει καὶ ἐπιστατῶν οὐκ ἂν εἴη πράξις. Εἰ οὖν μὴ πράξις ἀλλὰ λόγος, θεωρία.” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] ἢ [8], brackets DB).

76 In this context, Heidegger’s remarks on “the dwelling” also come to mind.

thinking) comes about more “colourful”, practical, and less abstract on the Chinese side. The body is more involved.

This leads us to the following question: If the “heart-mind” (*xin*) and its world-emerging meta-cognitive productivity can be compared to the dimension of “soul” (*psychē*), what could then be viewed as the “functional equivalent” to the more “pre-somatic” “intellect” (*noûs*) and the “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs noēsis*)? In my opinion, we can draw insight from the following passage in this regard:

This “heart-mind’s root-system of vitality” (*zhe xin zhi bentì*) is the (undivided) “source of Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*yuan zhi shì ge tianlì*)—(it presents) an *origin* which is never without appropriateness. This indeed is your “true self” (*zhen jì*). This true self is the master of the [living and mortal] body-shell. If there were no true self, indeed there would be no body-shell. True is this: to have it means to be alive, to be without means death. (Wang 1933a, 34, tr., italics, insertions in brackets DB)⁷⁷

In contrast to the aforementioned “surface-level” of finite experience, which is constantly being actualized by the heart-mind (*xin*) in the sense of a subjective mode of reflexivity, the term “Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*tianlì*) illustrates its objective aspects, for example, manifesting itself as the movement of the celestial bodies or in the sense of seasonal changes (e.g. Wang Shouren 1933b, 59–60). It is well known that Wang Yangming’s opponent Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) had separated those two aspects. In short: he had subordinated that which he confined as a purely subjective element of the “human heart-mind” (*renxin* 人心) to the objective process(es) of the “self-organizing principle(s)” (*lì*) in all things and situations (Bartosch 2015b, 164–73).

For Wang Yangming, the “root-system of vitality” (*bentì*) of each *subjective* “window” of the “heart-mind” (*xin*) (as an unfolding process) and the “source” (*yuan* 原) of the *objective noumenon*⁷⁸ of an all-pervading “self-organizing principle of Heaven” (*tianlì*) are *identical* (see the first sentence of the passage). Wang Yangming has also put this in the more commonly known following short formula: “The heart-mind is exactly the self-organizing principle (*xin jì lì*)” (Wang Shouren 1933a, 2, tr. DB).⁷⁹

77 Source text: “這心之本體。原只是箇天理。原無非禮。這箇便是汝之真己。這箇真己。是軀殼的主宰。若無真己。便無軀殼。真是有之即生。無之即死。”

78 Wang Yangming also defines the reality of *lì* 理 as the appearance of an all-pervading unity in the self-organizing process of consciousness and world-experience (as a particular structure of subject-objectivity): “理一而已。以其理之凝聚而言。則謂之性。以其凝聚之主宰而言。則謂之心。以其主宰之發動而言。則謂之意。以其發動之明覺而言。則謂之知。以其明覺之感應而言。則謂之物” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 70–71; also Bartosch 2015b, 390–424).

79 Source text: “心即理也。”

As already stated in view of Yangming's model of consciousness in the preceding chapter, this expresses the same implicate-logical form as the Plotinian "thinking of thinking" (*noēseōs nóēsis*). As in Plotinus's reference to intellection, the subject and the object in the unity, the knowing/the knower and the known, are *self-reflected as identical*: the mere objectivizing reflection of the difference between the two aspects turns into the more profound self-reflection of the underlying uniting connection that enables the reflection of difference. The foundational level ("root-system of vitality" (*benti*)) of the *thinking and perceiving subject* ("heart-mind" (*xin*)) and the "source" (*yuan*) of the respective *object* of the finite, personal perspective on the "surface"⁸⁰ of the heart-mind (which is perceived and known as a representation of its "self-organizing principle" (*li*)) are intuited as *identical through their difference*: the self-reflecting consciousness is elevated into its original state — subject-objectivity. In the sense of Plotinus, this means perfect *epistrophic* "contemplation" (*theōria*).

Historically speaking, Wang Yangming had a first insight of this⁸¹ during one historical moment of the year 1508. This happened during a phase of his life when he was forced to live in a remote place in Guizhou province in southwest China. This existential "aha-experience" is known as his *wu Dao* 悟道, his "finding of the Way"-moment, as *the original unity of the unity and difference* of the subjective and the objective, *xin* and *li*, knower and known (situation, process).

In the last quote further above, Yangming also referred to this same foundation of heart-mind and (self-)organizing principle as the "true self" (*zhen ji*), and he has identified it as *the life-providing origin* per se. From our perspective this is important. In a transversal view of Plotinus, this universally life-bearing "true self" provides an exact *functional* equivalent to the highest form of pure "contemplation" (*theōria*) of the (transpersonal/cosmic) "intellect" (*noús*). As it is indirectly receiving the One, the (cosmic) "intellect" is not only viewed as the *conditio sine qua non* of all living processes, "[b]ut [as] [...] a contemplation that is alive, not an object of contemplation like that in another" (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.8, 363, italics, insertions in brackets DB).⁸²

This life [...] is more clear and is the primary Life and primary Intellect, and these are one. And so the first life is intellection [*nóēsis*], and the

80 I have discussed this topic in Bartosch (2015b, 88–91). One can also infer the two major levels or dimensions of the "heart-mind" (*xin*) from the expression "*xin zhi bent* 心之本體".

81 This moment could also be explained "translatively" as a self-manifestation of the same implicate-logical (meta-)form that underlies the Plotinian "thinking of thinking" (*noēseōs nóēsis*). In Yangming's case, it is of course displayed in the form of Neo-Confucian terminology.

82 Source text: "τοῦτο δὲ ἐστὶ θεωρία ζῶσα, οὐ θεώρημα, οἶον τὸ ἐν ἀλλ[ω]" (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8], insertion in brackets DB).

second life is a second kind of intellection, and the last life is a final form of intellection. And so all life is of this kind and is intellection. People might perhaps say that there are different kinds of life, though they do not say these are different kinds of intellection, but rather that some are instances of intellection, others not intellection at all, doing this because they do not investigate what life in general is. But we really must point out the following, that our argument demonstrates once again that all beings are a by-product of contemplation [*theōria*]. So, if the truest life is life with intellection, and this is identical with the truest intellection, then the truest intellection is alive, *and contemplation and the object of the highest kind of contemplation are alive and are life, and the two are together one.* (Ibid., 3.8.8, 364, insertion in brackets and italics DB)⁸³

The “true self” (*zhen ji*) is identical with the “root-system of vitality of the heart-mind” (*xin zhi benti* 心之本體)—which is identical with the “source” (*yuan* 原) of all (living and non-living) forms, things, and situations brought forth in the omnipresent transformations of the “(self-)organizing principle of Heaven” (*tianli*). Therefore, it is the general life principle.

While the “heart-mind” (*xin*) is the “master of the body” (*shen zhi zhu* 身之主) in the sense of our own respective body and our subjective perspective on it (Wang Shouren 1933b, 44, tr. DB),⁸⁴ the “true self” is the master of the “body-shell” (*quqiao* 軀殼) in the most universal (subject-object-related) sense. In this regard, the mastery of the true self (as the implicate-logical unity of unity and difference of the subjective, respectively, objective “surfaces” of the heart-mind and the (self-)organizing principle of Heaven) over the living processes resembles that of the highest form of intellection (*noēsis*). The *subordinate* mastery of the heart-mind over the individual’s “body” (*shen*), respectively, all living “things” (*wu*) implies a certain “vicinity” to the functional status of the Plotinian “soul” (*psychē*), at least in this life-bestowing perspective.⁸⁵

83 Source text: “Ἡ δὲ ἐναργεσττέρα· αὐτὴ καὶ πρώτη ζωὴ καὶ πρῶτος νοῦς εἷς. Νόησις οὖν ἡ πρώτη ζωὴ καὶ ζωὴ δευτέρα νόησις δευτέρα καὶ ἡ ἐσχάτη ζωὴ ἐσχάτη νόησις. Πᾶσα οὖν ζωὴ τοῦ γένους τούτου καὶ νόησις. Ἀλλὰ ζωῆς μὲν ἴσως διαφορὰς τάχ' ἂν λέγοιεν ἄνθρωποι, νοήσεων δὲ οὐ λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὰς μὲν, τὰς δ' ὅλως οὐ νοήσεις, ὅτι ὅλως τὴν ζωὴν ὃ τι ποτὲ ἐστὶν οὐ ζητοῦσιν. Ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνό γε ἐπισημαντέον, ὅτι πάλιν αὖ ὁ λόγος πάρεργον ἐνδείκνυται θεωρίας τὰ πάντα ὄντα. Εἰ τοίνυν ἡ ζωὴ ἡ ἀληθεστάτη νοήσει ζωὴ ἐστὶν, αὐτὴ δὲ ταῦτόν τῃ ἀληθεστάτῃ νοήσει, ἡ ἀληθεστάτη νόησις ζῆι καὶ ἡ θεωρία καὶ τὸ θεώρημα τὸ τοιοῦτο ζῶν καὶ ζωὴ καὶ ἐν ὁμοῦ τὰ δύο.” (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8])

84 Source text: “心者·身之主也。”

85 I am putting the transversal problem horizon of subjectivity into brackets here, it is part of another, upcoming investigation.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Wang Yangming chose the term “*ji* 己”, because, in view of ancient sources, “the *ji* [己] self is one of the least somatic aspects of a person’s identity, and it is far less material than, for example, the *xing* 形 form, which is the physical frame, shape, or mass of the body” (Sommer 2012, 19).

At least in view of basic differences, it is important to note that Yangming is *not* an “Idealist” in the (Neo-)Platonic sense: what takes the place of the *explanatory function* of the “matter” (*hylē*) of existing things and objects here, that is, *mutatis mutandis*, “fluidum”/“matter-energy” (*qi* 氣) is thought of as the *inseparable* “inverse” or “carrying flux” of organized thought (the two aspects being thought of as *two sides*, two opposite ends of a spectrum of *the same*)⁸⁶ and not as an evil “reverse”, which is not reached by thought, light, and therefore by the extensions of the “One-Good” (*agathón*) (in its hierarchical emanations of *theōria* declining in purity), as in the case of Plotinus’s views of physical matter.⁸⁷

On the other hand, however, one also has to take notice that the “good-knowing” (*liang zhi*), which matches the level of the “true self”, is defined as an “empty spirit” (*xu ling*) (see the respective quote in chapter 1). From our transversal angle, this leads us to a further, more “resonant” aspect:

“Good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) is the spiritual agent (*jingling*) of (an all-encompassing process of) “creative transformation” (*zaohua*). This spiritual agent brings forth heaven, gives birth to the earth, generates (earthly) “spirits” (*gui*), and is the cause of (heavenly) “deities” (*di*). Everything emanates from that: truly related to (all) things, but with no counterpart. (Wang Shouren 1933c, 15, tr. DB)⁸⁸

Although the “good-knowing” (*liang zhi*) is effective within everything, it is (in a logical sense) *before any experience*. In this sense, it stands in a certain *partial*⁸⁹ functional parallel to the explanatory function of the pure “contemplative dimension” of the Plotinian “intellect” (*noús*). Like the latter, the former has no limit and nothing besides itself, because it includes the possibility of all perfect developments. Even the “heart-mind” (*xin*) as a whole is still characterized by “[...] ‘emptiness’ (*xu*), [it is] ‘spiritual, bright, (self-)conscious’ (*lingming jue*). This is what is called the ‘root-condition’ (*benran* 本然) of its ‘good-knowing’ (*liangzhi*)” (Wang

86 For the background in the history of Chinese philosophy during the Song dynasty cf. also Bartosch (2015b, 182–83).

87 Regarding these, see fn. 44.

88 Source text: “良知是造化的精靈。這些精靈。生天生地。成鬼成帝。皆從此出。真是與物無對。”

89 I am putting the aforesaid difference into brackets here, of course.

Shouren 1933b, 44, tr. DB),⁹⁰ and “at [this] (very) root, heaven, earth, then ten thousand things and myself are one (meta-) system of vitality (*tian-di wan wu ben wu yi ti*)” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 76, tr. insertion in brackets DB).⁹¹

The non-manifest is the driving agent within all transformation. Apart from the aforesaid difference that Wang Yangming does not think in terms of an onto-noetic hierarchy (intellect, soul, nature, physical matter) and a related value-based vertical circle of self-realization (Proclus: *monē, pródos, epistrophē*), but (implicitly) in the sense of circularly coordinated model of consciousness (see chapter 1), there is another partial resonance of meanings: As “nature” (*phýsis*) (as an emergence of cosmic *theōria*) produces “not by hands and must therefore remain entire” (see the first quote in this chapter), so is the “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), or with an alternative term, our “spiritual brightness” (*lingming*) actual *within that* which springs forth from it. “(If) heaven, earth, spirits, gods (and) the ten thousand things were to split apart (and) to withdraw from my spiritual brightness (*lingming*), there would be no more heaven, earth, spirits, gods, ten thousand things”⁹² (Wang Shouren 1933c, 33, tr. DB).

In this sense of the eminent function that consciousness plays in Yangming’s philosophy for the manifestation of all world-experience as such, the following passage therefore also transcends the realm of a mere “phenomenological” allusion to the problem of moral responsiveness.⁹³

The centre of (that which is) “not yet emerging” (*wei fa*)—this is the “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*): “no before (and no) after, (no) inside (and no) outside” (*wu qianhou neiwai*) “and thereby indivisibly representing one (meta-)system of vitality” (*er hunranyiti*)—[...] That (which is) not yet emerging “exists in the centre of that (which is) already emerging” (*zai yi fa zhi zhong*); and in the centre of that which is “already emerging” (*yi fa*), that which is not yet emerging never exists in distinction from it. That (which is) already emerging exists in the centre of that (which is) not yet emerging; and in the centre of that which is not yet emerging, that which is already emerging never exists in distinction from it: never being without movement and stillness and yet non-distinguishable in terms of movement and stillness. (Wang Shouren 1933b, 59, tr. DB)⁹⁴

90 Source text: “而心之虛靈明覺。即所謂本然之良知也。”

91 Source text (with context): “夫人者。天地之心。天地萬物本吾一體者也。”

92 Source text: “天地鬼神萬物離卻我的靈明。便沒有天地鬼神萬物了。”

93 Cf. also my comparative investigation on Yangming’s foundational, respectively, “implicate logic” (Bartosch 2022a) of a transformational creativity in Bartosch (2015b, 68–114).

94 Source text: “未發之中。即良知也。無前後內外。而渾然一體者也。[...]未發在已發之中。而已發

We can also say that least in a partial *functional* (transversal) resonance⁹⁵ with Plotinus's view,⁹⁶ Yangming also expresses the higher reality of an enlightened self-knowledge, which is unfolding, experiencing, while actively “bending itself back” (the original meaning of “reflexion”) to a universal source, the “true self” (*zhen ji*), at the same time:

The “emptiness of good-knowing” (*liangzhi zhi xu*) is precisely the “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*). The “formlessness” (*wu*) of the good-knowing is exactly the “formless appearance” (*wu xing*) of the great void. Sun, moon, wind, thunder, mountains, rivers, peoples, the (the living and non-living) entities: all have appearance, form, shape, colour and all remain in the formlessness of the great void, emerging from its centre—effective, flowing, operating—never causing disruptions (or) blockages of the sky. (Wang Shouren 1933c, 16, tr. DB)⁹⁷

The philosophical enigma of the same “emptiness” (*xu* 虛) as the foundation of “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), which is also inherently present in *subjective* experience in an eminent way, and the unlimited, all-emanating *objective* “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*) points towards the logical form of the *identity* of subject-object. Plotinus somehow alludes to this in his own affine way as well: “Intellect is not the intellect of one particular thing, but Intellect as a whole. And being Intellect as a whole, it is the Intellect of everything. And so since it is all Beings and belongs to all Beings even its part must possess all Beings” (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.8, 364).⁹⁸ And *vice versa*,

[...] there is nowhere where it is not, for those able to partake of it. For wherever you place that which is able to possess what is omnipresent, it is from there that you possess it. Just as when a voice fills an *empty space* or human beings, too, as well as the *space*, in *whatever part of the empty space*⁹⁹ [*erēmīā ēρημία*] *you place your ear you will receive the*

之中。未嘗別有未發者在。已發在未發之中。而未發之中。未嘗別有已發者存。是未嘗無動靜。而不可以動靜分者也。”

95 That is, with the above-stated general difference remaining.

96 Namely that of a superordinate non-materiality of “contemplation” in the sense of the subject-objective, intellective “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis*).

97 Source text: “良知之虛。便是天之太虛。良知之無。便是太虛之無形。日月風雷。山川民物。凡有貌象形色。皆在太虛無形中發用流行。未嘗作得天的障礙。”

98 Source text: “Καὶ ἄλλως δὲ ὁ νοῦς οὐχ ἑνός τινος νοῦς, ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶς· πᾶς δὲ ὄν καὶ πάντων. Δεῖ οὖν αὐτὸν πάντα ὄντα καὶ πάντων καὶ τὸ μέρος αὐτοῦ ἔχειν πᾶν καὶ πάντα: [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] ἡ’ [8]).

99 I agree to the decision of the translators of Plotinus (2018) to use the expression “empty space” in

voice as a whole and yet not all of it. (ibid., 3.8.9, 365, italics, insertion in brackets DB)¹⁰⁰

Wang Yangming’s identification of the “emptiness of good-knowing” (*liangzhi zhi xu*) and the “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*) allude to the same *ineffable sameness* that Plotinus’s philosophical image of “empty space” (*erēmía*) is alluding to on this occasion—namely the very foundation of everything: an infinite unity *that is effective in all distinctions*,¹⁰¹ because it is the connection of all possible distinction at the same time, and because the *distinction is in itself without any distinction*: “*The line or boundary which draws all individual forms is in itself without any limit; it is in [itself] undivided*” (Bartosch 2021, 136, insertion DB).

This “implicate logic” (Bartosch, 2022a) of “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis*), namely the application of the distinction to itself, or, “containing itself” (Luhmann 2001, 245), which can also be formulated as the “unity of unity and difference” (Bartosch 2015b, e.g. 19), is implicitly hinting even beyond the logical position of Plotinus’s “intellect” (*noús*)—it is alluding to the same foundational dimension, *the same boundless sameness*, here expressed in the (implicitly negating) meaning of an “emptiness of good-knowing” (*liangzhi zhi xu*) and (the *implicit* negation) in the term “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*). This is because, with regard to grasping a further implication of Wang Yangming in this context, we have to think one step further: an emptiness within a great void is an “empty” opposition (of subject-object). It therefore only alludes toward an *absolute* sameness, that is, a highest foundation, which, as it is to be conceived of as boundless, all-encompassing, cannot be reached by means of mere conceptual (finalizing, definition-based) thinking.—Plotinus alludes to “this” *same* ineffable foundation in an absolute sameness by using the terms “*hén*” (the One) or “*agathón*” (the (highest) Good).

this particular philosophical context. More literal translations wouldn’t make any sense here.

100 Source text: “ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν, ὅπου μὴ ἔστιν, οἷς ἔστι μετέχειν αὐτοῦ. Τὸ γὰρ πανταχοῦ παρὸν στήσας ὅπου οὖν τὸ δυνάμενον ἔχειν ἔχεις ἐκείθεν· ὥσπερ εἰ φωνῆς κατεχούσης ἐρημίαν ἢ καὶ μετὰ τῆς ἐρημίας καὶ ἀνθρώπους ἐν ὅτι οὖν τοῦ ἐρήμου στήσας οἷς τὴν φωνὴν κομπεῖ πᾶσαν καὶ αὐτὸ οὐ πᾶσαν” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

101 Cf. also the following statement by Niklas Luhmann: “[The form] ‘is’ in any case *not only the boundary, it also contains the two sides that are separated by it*. It has, one could say, an open world reference, and perhaps this is underlying the enigmatic phrase ‘distinction is perfect continence’” (Luhmann 2001, 245, insertions, italics DB); cf. also Bartosch (2022a).

Oneness and Goodness as the Core-Insight of True Humanity

Another topical field to explore in a transversal-analytical perspective with regard to Plotinus and Wang Yangming is that of an absolute oneness in relation to morality in the sense of human self-perfection and the related self-knowledge. In comparison to earlier Greek thought, Plotinus's views on self-knowledge are rather special. Also under this background, they provide a great entrance point for transversal analysis of his and Yangming's thought. As Gwenaëlle Aubry has stated, earlier Platonic thinking and ancient Greek philosophy in general had nurtured the notion of a "self [which] was to be found not as much in the dimension of interiority and self-consciousness as in that of exteriority and manifestation" (Aubry 2020, 210).¹⁰² Plotinus, on the other hand, represents, as stressed by Aubry, a "singular position [...] in this context (ibid., 211)", because for him, "the precondition of self-knowledge is the conversion to [a form of] interiority[, which] [...] is not 'subjective', much less, 'intimate' [but] bears or contains the very principles of reality, from the One-Good to Nature" (ibid., 211, insertions in brackets DB). Furthermore, "Plotinus *does accept an immediate reflexivity*" (ibid., 212, italics DB).

Mutatis mutandis, very similar words can be used to describe Wang Yangming's general understanding of the foundations of self-knowledge. Recall the short passage that was quoted earlier, where the heart-mind is identified with *Dao* 道 as well as an entrance point "to know Heaven" (*zhi tian* 知天) (see footnote 65). And in one of the passages cited in the last chapter, we saw that the conversion to a form of interiority (the subjective "surface-level" of the heart-mind) is a precondition to establish and practice an insight, in which subjective *and* objective aspects of the "self" (*ji*) permanently coincide. For Wang Yangming, this "true self" (*zhen ji*) is not only the foundation for a higher experience of the world in the sense of a sort of self-processing subject-objectivity—*but of life* and of the related whole of "heaven and earth" (*tian-di*) itself.

The term "*zhen ji*" reflects the truth of a "known-and-practiced"¹⁰³ sameness and unison of "I" (*wu* 我, *wu* 吾) with "heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things" (*tian-di wan wu*) (see footnote 91). "To know Heaven" (*zhi tian*) in this sense can be understood in parallel to Plotinus's description of the "contemplation" (*theōria*) of the "intellect" (*noûs*), that is, as a form of true self-knowledge, namely, to say it again, as "*a contemplation that is alive*, not an object of contemplation like that in another" (see footnote 82). Plotinus emphasized that "[...] one should not be

102 Christopher Gill therefore characterized "the ancient [Greek] self as 'objective-participant' rather than 'subjective-individualist'" (quoted in Aubrey 2020, 211, insertion in brackets DB). One might also think of the famous analysis of ancient Greek literature by Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) in this regard.

103 In the sense of "*zhi-xing he yi*". See further above.

focused on one's heart's [selfish] desires but on the whole universe. Such a man gives other individuals the honour due to them and always strives for that object towards which all things capable of striving are directed [...]" (Plotinus 2018, 2.9.9, 222).¹⁰⁴

In parallel to this understanding of the possible self-perfection of consciousness that is mediated via the "intellect" (*noûs*), we have seen that the "origin is never without appropriateness (*yuan wu fei li*)" (see the quote in chapter 2). If the "willing/intentionality" (*yi*) that is emitted by or radiating (*fadong*) from the heart-mind (see chapter 1) is congruent with *the immediate and intuitive directionality of its inherent and innate "good-knowing" (liangzhi)*, it is expressing its "root-system of vitality" (*benti*), respectively, the origin of the "self-organizing principle of Heaven" (*tianli*), and therefore: the universal "true self" (*zhen ji*). This is affine to the aforementioned "immediate reflexivity" (Aubrey 2020, 212) that Plotinus is emphasizing, when he says that the "Good" (*agathón*) is to be attained "by knowing it through immediate contact with it"¹⁰⁵ (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.10, 367). If the "willing/intentionality" (*yi*) is not congruent with the "good-knowing" (*liangzhi*) that all other life forms are participating as well, that is, if we are getting lost in "selfish desires" (*zisizili* 自私自利), our willing/intentionality is evoking "evil" (*e* 惡) (Bartosch 2015b, 679–706).¹⁰⁶

A comparable distinction with regard to the problem of good and evil can be made with regard to Plotinus's "soul" (*psychê*). It has already been compared to Wang Yangming's notion of the "heart-mind" (*xin*) further above. At this point, it can be added that Plotinus's "soul" is divided in an "upper" and "lower" part (Plotinus 2018, 2.9.2, 210–11).¹⁰⁷ The latter is related to the typical "entanglements" of human life, and it also includes the possibilities and actualities of immoral or evil human deeds. To become a better and happier human being (ibid., 1.4), one has to actively retreat to, that is, to focus one's consciousness in the "upper" echelons

104 Source text: "οὐ γὰρ πρὸς τὸ ἐκάστ[ω] καταθύμιον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸ πᾶν δεῖ βλέπειν· τιμῶν δὲ ἐκάστους κατ' ἄξια, σπεύδον δ' αἰεὶ οὐ πάντα σπεύδει τὰ δυνάμενα [...]" (Plotinos n.d., B' [2] θ' [9], brackets DB). Armstrong translates this passage as follows: "For one must not look at what is agreeable to the individual but to the All. A man who does this values individuals according to their worth, but presses on always to that goal to which all press on that can [...]" (Plotinus 1980, 263).

105 Source text: see fn. 81.

106 For an extended source passage in this regard cf. Wang Shouren (1933c, 7–8: "問. 先生嘗謂善惡只是一物. 善惡兩端. 如冰炭相反. 如何謂只一物. 先生曰. 至善者. 心之本體. 本體上才過當些子. 便是惡了. 不是有一箇善. 卻又有一箇惡來相對也. 故善惡只是一物. 直 因聞先生之說. 則知程子所謂善固性也. 惡亦不可不謂之性. 又曰. 善惡皆 天理. 謂之惡者. 本非惡. 但於本性上過與不及之間耳. 其說皆無可疑.")

107 I am working on a further article to compare this with Wang Yangming's understanding of the terms "*daren* 大人" and "*xiaoren* 小人".

of the “soul” (*psychē*). Here one is able to “mirror” (Bartosch 2018a, 94) the higher constitutive principle of the “intellect” (*noûs*), which is, so to say, filtering and mediating the absolute goodness of the “One” (*hén*) (or the “One-Good”, to use Aubrey’s term).

Plotinus’s encouragement to “[c]ast yourself towards [the One] and [to] encounter it taking rest within it[, to] unite your thought with it more and more [...] by beholding its greatness through what comes after it and is caused by it”¹⁰⁸ (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.10, 367, insertions in brackets DB)—which, please note, doesn’t mean to retreat from one’s social environment and social activities here—sounds like a perfect supplement for Wang Yangming’s description of the practice of the “extension of good-knowing” (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知): “The phrase ‘to always be involved in a situation’ means to ‘gather sincerity’ (*ji yi* 集義); ‘gathering sincerity’ means the ‘extension of good-knowing’ (*zhi liangzhi*)” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 76, tr. DB).¹⁰⁹ (The good-knowing is thereby at the same time also to be understood in the sense that has been analysed in the last section of the second chapter.)

It is highly important to note that Plotinus’s use of the two terms “Good” (*agathón*) and “One” (*hén*) resonates with the later Wang Yangming’s understanding of the “root-system of the vitality of good-knowing” (*liangzhi bentí* 良知本體) not only as the source of all good events and activities of human beings, *but also as the foundation of the unity of the universe itself*. Thereby, “the root-system of vitality of the good-knowing is without movement and without stillness”¹¹⁰ (Wang Shouren 1933c, 15, tr. DB). In this trans-rational, “metaparadoxical” (Gloy 2001) *imply-cate-logical* (Bartosch 2022a) sense, the source of “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) cannot be thought of by means of a simple either-or-distinction between “good” (*shan* 善) and “evil” (*e* 惡). Like Plotinus’s “Good” (*agathón*) (Plotinus 2018, 5.5.13, 596), Yangming’s “good-knowing” is good in a supra-ethical way (Schweitzer 2002, 274).¹¹¹ While the “Good” (*agathón*) or, as it is possible to speak interchangeably in this particular respect, the “root-system of the vitality of good-knowing” (*liangzhi bentí*), is always providing the *same absolutely good directionality*—and like the Neo-Platonists, Yangming has made use of the metaphor of sunlight in this regard! (Bartosch 2015b, 336, 339)—the *distinction* between “good” (*shan*) and “evil” (*e*) comes into play only *in a derived (and different) sense here*, namely as soon as

108 Source text: “Καὶ βαλὼν πρὸς αὐτὸ καὶ τυχὼν ἐντὸς αὐτοῦ ἀναπασάμενος συννοεῖ μᾶλλον τῆ προσβολῆ συνεί, συνορῶν δὲ τὸ μέγα αὐτοῦ τοῖς μετ’ αὐτὸ δι’ αὐτὸ οὖσιν” (Plotinus n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

109 Source text: “夫必有事焉。只是集義。集義只是致良知。”

110 Source text: “良知本體。原是無動無靜的。”

111 One might also think of the characterization of the “heart-mind’s system of vitality” (*xin zhi ti* 心之體) as without goodness and without evil in Wang Yangming’s famous Four-Sentence-Teaching: “無善無惡。是心之體” (Wang Shouren 1933c, 26).

that directionality of *liangzhi* is not actualized by the “will(ing)” (*yi*) in the earlier-mentioned sense (see chapter 1 on Yangming’s model of consciousness and the third last paragraph here). In that case, “evil” (*e*) is present in the sense of a selfish aberration from the “Way” (*dao*).

In the context of their uses of the words “Good” (*agathón*) or “One” (*hén*), respectively, “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), “Way” (*Dao*), and so on, both thinkers are faced with the transversal (permeable) problem horizon of ineffability, which marks our last point to discuss here:

In the case of the virtuous person’s soul, that which is known approaches becoming identical with the substrate which contemplates, inasmuch as it hastens to Intellect. In Intellect, it is clear that the two are already one not by appropriation, as in the case of the best soul, but in Substantiality because “thinking and Being are *identical*”. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.8, 363, italics DB)¹¹²

To point at this identity in the *unity of the unity and difference* of the knower and the known, of subject-object in the self-knowing state of “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis*), Plotinus is using his semantic “pointing rods” (*Zeigestäbe*) (Scheler 1921, 546, tr. DB) “*agathón*” and “*hén*”. Like the terms “Way” (*Dao*) and (when used in a universal sense) “Heaven” (*tian*) in Wang Yangming’s thought, they are both to be viewed as *cataphatic*¹¹³ philosophical terms, that is, as “performative act[s] of the ineffable” (Bartosch 2015b, 276, tr. DB). The adjective “cataphatic” means that both actually allude to the same unsurmountable inexpressibility of that which is to be revealed not by means of explicit negation but by using a particular expression in a supra-conceptual fashion, that is, in the sense of *implicit* infinite negation (ibid., 275):

For this reason, when you have uttered [the word] “the Good”, don’t make any mental additions. For if you add anything, you will make that to which you have added something deficient. For this reason, *don’t, then, even add thinking so as not to make it into something else and make it two* [...]. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.11, 367, italics, insertion in brackets DB)

Wang Yangming’s use of the term “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) in the following passage presents itself in a very similar form of a “logic of ineffability” (Bartosch 2015b, 233–300, “*Logik der Ineffabilität*”); at least in certain passages like these,

112 Source text: “ἐπὶ τῆς σπουδαίας ψυχῆς πρὸς τὸ αὐτὸ τῷ ὑποκειμέν[ω] ἰόντων τῶν ἐγνωσμένων ἄτε εἰς νοῦν σπευδόντων, ἐπὶ τούτου δηλονότι ἤδη ἐν ἄμφοῦ οὐκ οἰκειώσει, ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τῆς ψυχῆς τῆς ἀρίστης, ἀλλ’ οὐσία καὶ τ[ῶ] ταῦτὸν τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ νοεῖν εἶναι” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8], insertions in brackets DB).

113 Regarding the use of this term as a comparative category cf. Bartosch (2015b, 273).

Wang Yangming's word use can be defined as cataphatic in the above-mentioned sense (*ibid.*, 255, 296–300):

Once there was a “master of Chan” (*chanshi* 禪師). People came to ask for the method (of the Buddha). In response, he just lifted a feather duster. One day, his students hid his feather duster. They were curious in what way he would demonstrate the method (of the Buddha). The Chan master was looking for his feather duster, but could not find it, so he raised his empty hand. My (remarks on) “good-knowing” (*liang zhi*) (can be compared to) the demonstration of the method by means of the feather duster. What else could I raise besides this (expression)? (Wang Shouren 1933c, 19, tr. DB)¹¹⁴

From the perspective of oneness and goodness as the foundations of true humanity, the *expressed ineffability* in both cases of Plotinus and Wang Yangming implies that we have to direct all of our efforts towards our shared “blind spot” (Jahraus 2001, 321) of absolute *sameness*—which is not only present throughout all distinction but is the foundation of every distinction and every “thing”: as the blind spot of all expressibility, it is supposed to be *self-reflected* as the foundation of the origin of unity in the “intellect” (*noûs*) as well as its origin of a directionality for good-doing (as its derived manifestation). Like the “source” (*yuan*) of the “true self” (*zhen ji*), which is identical with the “Way” (*Dao*) that cannot be properly expressed in words¹¹⁵ (Wang Shouren 1933b, 60, tr. DB), this sameness is then actualized by way of reflecting the principle of the intellect from the (subordinate) highest part of the “soul” (*psychê*)—which, again, stands in parallel to the “extension of the good-knowing” (*zhi liangzhi*) as the most important task of the human “heart-mind” (*xin*). Rather indirectly, Plotinus's thought—and with it, from a transversal systematic perspective Wang Yangming's as well—can be related to Nicolaus Cusanus's (1401–1464) statement that to realize divine goodness one should always unfold one's path of action through “the middle of sameness (*aequalitatis medio*)” (Nicolai de Cusa 1972, 182, tr. DB): “But you see that in this equality that has already been mentioned all virtue itself is enfolded and that no virtue can come to be except through the participation in this [absolute] *sameness*”¹¹⁶ (*ibid.*, tr., insertion in brackets DB).¹¹⁷

114 Source text: “昔有禪師·人來問法·只把塵尾提起·一日·其徒將其塵尾藏過·試他如何設法·禪師尋塵尾不見·又只空手提起·我這箇良知就是設法的塵尾·舍了這箇·有何可提得。”

115 Source text (with context): “在知道者默而識之·非可以言語窮也。”

116 Source text: “Vides autem in ea ipsa aequalitate iam dicta omnem moralem complicari virtutem nec virtutem esse posse, nisi in huius aequalitatis participatione existat.”

117 With Goethe, one might also put it as follows: “[...] *il faut croire à la simplicité!* In German: one has

Conclusion and Outlook

The present investigation has uncovered central aspects of Plotinus's and Wang Yangming's philosophies, which at least partly resonate with each other from a transversal perspective. These “resonances” also exist because both thinkers started from comparable problems and from there, in certain respects, also developed comparable¹¹⁸ solutions in view of the respective general topics. This is remarkable, because both thinkers were not influenced by the other's historical traditions of philosophy. There are no historical correlations. Nevertheless, we find certain similarities when analysing the two philosophies transversally. These commonalities, which have been introduced here, provide a necessary foundation for the development of a further, complementing train of thought that will allow us to put more emphasis on particular contentual differences. Thus, I plan to explore the differences with regard to Plotinus's views on “matter” (*hylē*) and Wang Yangming's understanding of “fluidum/matter-energy” (*qi*) as well as both thinkers' “extended” views on subjectivity and transpersonal connection or, if I may say so, the “We in I” in a future investigation from here.¹¹⁹ Last not least, I believe that reflections like the ones in the present paper can serve as inspirations for the future development of more sophisticated East-West perspectives, for example, in the field of modern process philosophy. They provide further hints and also historical foundations for a modern process cosmology with a global outlook under a transversal background of as many historical roots and useful, to-be-further-developed ideas as possible. It is an important and urgent task *to work on a global philosophy of nature and sustainability*, which includes the best and most useful perspectives of as many ancient wisdom traditions of mankind as possible.

to believe in simplicity, the most simple, (one has to) believe in that which is ‘the most ancient and ever-lasting agent of (all) productivity’ (*das urständig Productive*), if one wants to acquire the right way. But not everybody is given this (chance to realize this); we are born into an artificial state (of existence) and it is indeed easier ‘to make it more and more artificial in more complex ways’ (*diesen immer mehr zu bekünsteln*) than to return to the simple (way)” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe quoted in Bartosch 2019, 58, tr., italics DB).

118 In the sense of the possibility to compare similarities and, as we have seen, differences too.

119 We have already seen that the subjective or finite personal perspective of the heart-mind is grounded in the intersubjective foundation of “*ren* 仁”, respectively, “*fu-zi zhi ai*” (see ch. 1). In a different, yet therefore comparable way (in the sense of comparability), Plotinus has reflected on the problem of the correlation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the context of his philosophy.

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