

Article

Human and World: Fichte and Wang Yangming on the Highest Good

Jun Wang

Department of Philosophy, East China Normal University, Shanghai 200241, China;
wangjun@philo.ecnu.edu.cn

Abstract: In comparative philosophy, the study of Fichte and Wang Yangming has been largely overlooked. This article compares their views on the highest good and their approaches to the human-world relationship. Fichte sees the highest good as the realization of practical reason, achievable through religious faith and love for God, enabling individuals to transcend sensual desires and unify with God. Religious faith connects individuals to a higher existence, fostering moral actions. Wang Yangming, however, defines the highest good as the manifestation of conscience within, emphasizing internal cultivation and moral practice to achieve the unity of knowledge and action. Fichte's approach relies on religious faith, while Wang Yangming's focuses on self-cultivation. This study reveals the complementarity between Chinese and Western perspectives on the highest good, offering a new lens for cross-cultural dialogue and insights into the complex relationship between humans and the world.

Keywords: Fichte; Wang Yangming; human-world relationship; love; the highest good

1. Introduction

The highest good, as the ultimate moral goal and the supreme realm humans should strive for, is a core issue in philosophy. Throughout history, philosophers from both the East and the West have explored the concept of the highest good, approaching it from different cultural backgrounds, value systems, and metaphysical stances. Among these thinkers, German Idealist Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the Ming Dynasty master of Neo-Confucianism Wang Yangming stand out as significant representatives. Although they lived in different eras and cultural contexts, their understanding and pursuit of the highest good reveal certain similarities that merit in-depth comparison and reflection. While there is extensive research on each of their views on the highest good, comparative studies between the two remain scarce, especially in the context of comparative philosophy.

In existing comparative studies between German Classical Philosophy and Yangming's Neo-Confucianism, the most common approach is to compare Kant and Wang Yangming. It is generally believed that Kant's philosophy shares many similarities with Wang's thought, such as the concept of practical philosophy, where Kant posits transcendental principles for cognition, practice, and aesthetics, akin to Wang's idea that "the mind (Xin 心) is principle (Li 理)", which holds that the subject itself possesses transcendental principles (Yu 2000; Hu 2003; Yang 2012; Chen 2019; Lee 2023). However, a frequently overlooked issue in contemporary research is that, unlike Kant, who emphasizes the universal validity of the transcendental principles governing cognition and practice, Wang Yangming focuses more on the practical dimension of the mind as the principle, or rather, the actualization of moral motivation. Therefore, from the perspective of the realization of moral motivation, Wang Yangming's thought is more aligned with Fichte, who, while influenced by Kant, emphasizes the practical dimension of original self-activity. Contemporary Chinese philosopher Chen Lai has pointed out that compared to other philosophers, Fichte's thought shows more similarities to Wang Yangming (Chen 1991, p. 12). However, the comparative study of Fichte and Wang Yangming has yet to receive sufficient attention.



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As early as the early 20th century, Chinese philosopher Zhang Junmai studied the philosophies of Fichte and Wang Yangming, focusing on Fichte's political thought on national socialism and Wang Yangming's doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action, even directly calling Wang an "idealist" (Zhang 1962). Zhang Wenxi compared the ethical thought of both philosophers, interpreting Wang Yangming's concept of the I through Fichte's views on ethics. He argued that, unlike Kant, who treated ethical principles as mere formalities applied to real life, Fichte discussed how we should act, uniquely emphasizing human subjectivity. This resonates with Wang Yangming's framework of virtue ethics, which is built from the standpoint of subjective thought (Zhang 2000). Zhang Xuezhi compared these two representative figures in Eastern and Western philosophy, focusing on the similarities between Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. He pointed out that both start from the I and emphasize the importance of action. Additionally, there is considerable alignment between Wang Yangming's notion of "conscience (Liangzhi 良知) is Heaven (Tian 天)" and Fichte's "absolute I" in their deductive approaches. However, Zhang Xuezhi also noted that the core of Western philosophy lies in the subject–object dichotomy—the conquest of the object by the subject—which differs from Eastern philosophy. Fichte's philosophy is a theory of knowledge, primarily studying the components and interrelations of knowledge (Zhang 1993). In Chen Lai's book *The Realms of Being and Non-Being: The Spirit of Wang Yangming's Philosophy*, he also discusses a comparison between Wang Yangming and Fichte. Despite Fichte's influence by Descartes, his notion of the pure I is not only the logical basis of the individual I but transcends the individual, becoming a universal rationality that also forms the core of individual ontology. Based on this, Fichte argued that morality requires not only good intentions but must also be actualized through action, which closely resembles Wang Yangming's idea of the unity of knowledge and action. Moreover, Fichte regarded conscience as the touchstone of all truth, urging individuals to follow the guidance of conscience to liberate themselves from sensual bondage, aligning with Wang Yangming's idea that "conscience is Principle of Nature (Tian Li 天理)" (Chen 1991, p. 12). These studies suggest that Fichte and Wang Yangming's practical philosophy share many points of convergence, implying deep potential for dialogue in the field of comparative philosophy. Thus, a comparative study of their thoughts undoubtedly holds significant academic value.

However, the current comparative studies of Fichte and Wang Yangming are sparse, fragmented, and often limited to the traditional method of comparing similarities and differences. To address this major gap in the existing research, this article attempts to analyze Fichte and Wang Yangming's philosophies through a new perspective of comparative philosophy, focusing on how their respective systems interpret moral goals and attain the ideal of the highest good.¹ It further clarifies the exploration of the highest good in Chinese and Western philosophy from the perspective of the relationship between humans and the world. The first part of the article will explore Fichte's interpretation of the highest good, the second part will delve into Wang Yangming's understanding, and the third part will assess the insights and limitations reflected in their discussions concerning the relationship between humans and the world in Chinese and Western philosophy.

2. The Highest Good in Fichte's Philosophy of Religion

Fichte is a prominent figure in German classical philosophy who inherited and transcended Kant's philosophy, attempting to address some of its issues through the concept of the "absolute I". He regarded the "absolute I" as the foundation, considering it the starting point of all human cognition and practice. Fichte closely linked moral life with religious faith, emphasizing the need to act according to the moral laws of practical reason through religious faith to achieve humanity's ultimate moral goal, the highest good.

In Kant's practical philosophy, the moral law established by practical reason is an unconditional moral command, requiring individuals to act independently of any sensory preferences or desires, following the moral law completely (Kant 1913, p. 20). However, Kant also acknowledged the need for the unity of morality and happiness, proposing the

concept of the highest good as this unity (Kant 1913, pp. 124–32). To ensure the realization of the highest good, Kant introduced the assumptions of God's existence and the immortality of the soul, arguing that morality inevitably leads to religion, thus giving rise to the concept of a divine moral legislator (Kant 1914, p. 6). Building on this foundation, Fichte explored how humanity can achieve the highest good. In his view, adherence to the moral law relies on the guidance of conscience. However, conscience can be disturbed by sensory desires, causing individuals to deviate from the demands of the moral law. To overcome this difficulty, Fichte introduced religious faith, asserting that only by elevating conscience to faith in God can individuals consistently act according to the commands of practical reason and realize the ideal of the highest good.

In his early work on religious philosophy, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, Fichte proposed two definitions of God: first, God as the ideal of the highest good, where moral commands are fully obeyed, representing the ultimate goal and state of supreme blessedness; second, God as the moral legislator who prescribes human moral actions (Fichte 1964, pp. 22–3). God represents a state of supreme blessedness, characterized by complete obedience to the moral law, where sensory preferences and personal desires are fully regulated by rational moral laws, and happiness arises solely from this obedience. Furthermore, God acts as a just legislator, ensuring that the moral actions of all rational beings lead to good outcomes in the real world, maintaining the harmony between morality and its consequences, thus promoting moral actions. In short, for Fichte, God not only embodies the realization of the moral law and the state of complete obedience to it as the highest good but is also seen as a just legislator, maintaining the harmony between virtue and happiness, ensuring the realization of the highest good.

Fichte further elaborated his thoughts on the highest good in “Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung”, emphasizing that God is the fulfillment of the ultimate purpose for finite beings in the sensory world. God is not an ideal model existing beyond reach but manifests through individuals' faith in God. Through faith in God, people can maintain moral action in the real world and thereby achieve the highest good. Fichte opposed the personification and substantialization of God, where God is seen as someone who grants satisfaction of desires and personal happiness. This view would reduce God to a finite entity, merely replicating human attributes in a limited being (Fichte 1977, p. 355). The aim of this practice is to pursue personal enjoyment, which contradicts the rational moral law. Therefore, true believers do not care about the outcome of moral actions in the material world. They act morally, guided only by the voice of God within, focusing solely on fulfilling the moral actions commanded by God, thus realizing a life of supreme blessedness. For Fichte, such blessedness is the result of real actions in the suprasensory world, embodying both the realization of the ultimate goal and the outcome of moral actions. Supreme blessedness is the religious life of obedience to God's commands, manifesting in moral actions within the real world. In this sense, the suprasensory world is not separate from the real world but is revealed through religious faith and moral actions in reality.

In Fichte's view, God enhances the power of the absolute I to guide human moral actions. He argued, “By embracing that purpose set for me by my own being and making it the aim of my actual actions, I simultaneously posit the realization of this purpose through actual action as possible” (Fichte 1977, p. 352). In “Ankündigung der Appellation an das Publikum”, he further described “that absolute self-sufficiency of reason, that complete liberation from all dependence, as blessedness” (Fichte 1977, p. 426). Blessedness is the realm of the highest good, entirely belonging to the suprasensory world, to be realized through religious faith and moral actions. This highest moral realm embodies human dignity, and achieving the state of blessedness is also the realization of human dignity. In this sense,

“I necessarily will my blessedness, not as a state of enjoyment, but as one of the dignity that is rightfully mine, not because I desire blessedness, but because it is absolutely fitting for a rational being. I cannot renounce this claim without renouncing myself, my true being, and considering myself as an empty sem-

blance or a deceptive image. My conscience reveals to me the fulfillment of duty as the sole but infallible means to blessedness, not that duty is fulfilled merely in general, but that it is fulfilled solely for the sake of duty itself" (Fichte 1977, pp. 426–27).

In Fichte's early religious philosophy, God is the moral law itself, the ideal model of moral life. Through religious faith and moral actions, individuals strive to transcend the limitations of the non-I and realize a life of blessedness. Individuals engage wholeheartedly in moral actions, consistently focusing on the ultimate purpose of blessedness in the suprasensory world. Compared to this state, the outcomes of moral actions and personal enjoyment in the material world seem insignificant.

If Fichte's early focus on the highest good emphasized the ultimate purpose of human actions in the material world and the alignment of moral law, free will, and real action, his later works began to emphasize God's self-manifestation in humans. In *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben* (1806), he elaborated his philosophy of religion from an ontological perspective.

In *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, Fichte initially distinguished two kinds of life: the authentic life of love for the One (God) and the illusory life of love for the many (the world). For Fichte, true blessed life is the authentic life of loving God, and individuals should strive to break free from the illusory life to enter the authentic one. Fichte's later religious philosophy starts from the premise that being is the immutable One, and consciousness is the existence of being. Consciousness is the existence or image of being, with the former serving as the prototype of the latter, and being manifests in consciousness. Fichte asserted, "The existence of being (Daseyn des Seyns) must necessarily be a self-consciousness of itself (of existence), as a mere image of the absolutely self-existent being (in sich selber seyenden Seyn), and can be nothing else" (Fichte 1995, p. 88). Existence and being, consciousness or knowledge and God, are inseparable: "The true life of knowledge, at its root, is the inner being and essence of the Absolute, nothing else; there is no separation between the Absolute or God and knowledge at its deepest root, but rather a complete fusion" (Fichte 1995, p. 89). Because they are inseparably united, consciousness of God as the immutable Being is also self-awareness of its essence. However, consciousness inevitably reflects on being, causing a division within it. Consequently, consciousness itself becomes aware of diversity. Reflective consciousness perceives the diversity and multiplicity in the phenomenal world, standing in contrast to the awareness of God. Fichte likened reflective consciousness to a prism, which refracts light into different colors, and, in this sense, being manifests in various forms in reflective consciousness. Although consciousness becomes aware of different forms through reflection, it can also break free from this multiplicity, returning to awareness of the One, re-immersing itself in the light. Fichte stated,

"The divine existence, its existence, I say, according to the earlier distinction made, its expression and revelation, is absolutely, through itself and absolutely necessary, light: namely, the inner and spiritual light. This light, when left to itself, disperses and splits into manifold and infinite rays, and in this way, in these individual rays, becomes alienated from itself and its original source. However, this same light is also capable, through itself, of gathering itself again out of this dispersion, comprehending itself as one, and understanding itself as what it essentially is: as existence and the revelation of God. While remaining, even in this understanding, what it is in its form, light, yet in this state, and by means of this very state, it interprets itself as nothing real in itself, but solely as existence and self-representation of God" (Fichte 1995, p. 103).

Consciousness returns to unity out of love for being, and the love for God is "the bond between pure being and reflection", where "being and existence, God and humans, are fully united" (Fichte 1995, p. 166). Faith combined with the love of being is manifested in immersion and focus on God. For Fichte, "Living life is love, and as love, it has and possesses the beloved, embraced, permeated, fused, and merged with it: eternally one and the same love. It is not love that externally projects and divides it, but only reflection does so"

(Fichte 1995, p. 169). Through the love for God, Fichte emphasized a deep understanding of God, reflecting the life connection between God and humans.

The religious faith Fichte described in *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben* is not a mysticism of transcendent being in a world beyond (Asmuth 2022, p. 44). Rather, like his earlier religious philosophy, it is a faith in the sacred moral law and God's commandments, which guide people toward moral actions and the realization of the blessed life. In Fichte's view,

"true religion, although it elevates the gaze of those it grasps to its own sphere, nevertheless firmly grounds their life in the domain of action and of genuinely moral action. Genuine and true religiosity is not merely contemplative or reflective, not simply brooding over pious thoughts, it is necessarily active. As we have seen, it consists in the profound awareness that God truly lives within us, is active, and carries out His work" (Fichte 1995, p. 113).

Therefore, Fichte asserted,

"It is entirely futile to say to one who is not in love: act morally, for only in love does the moral world emerge, and without it, there is none. And equally superfluous is it to say to one who loves: act, for their love already lives through itself, and action, including moral action, is merely the silent appearance of this life." (Fichte 1995, p. 169).

From Fichte's discussions on love, it is clear that his later ontological religious philosophy emphasizes escaping from the multiplicity of inauthentic life to an authentic life of moral action through love for God, thereby realizing the ideal of the highest good.

Overall, Fichte's early religious philosophy closely links moral life with religious faith, believing that through free will's choice of faith in God (the moral law) and its practice, humanity's ultimate ideal of the highest good can be achieved. The highest good is the final goal of human free will and action. Fichte's later work, *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, deepened his religious philosophy. From an ontological perspective, he discussed the relationship between unity and multiplicity, advocating the return to an authentic, unified life from the diverse sensory life through love for God. In this life, religious faith is not merely conceptual but embodied in all thoughts and actions. Through love for God, individuals can transcend sensory limitations, enter into a true moral life, and realize the ideal of the highest good. This thought continues his earlier religious philosophy on the highest good while providing a deeper ontological explanation.

3. The Highest Good in Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind

Wang Yangming, also known as Wang Shouren, was a distinguished philosopher of the Ming Dynasty. He played a crucial role in the development of Confucianism, and his teachings, widely known as the "philosophy of the mind" (Xin Xue 心学), became the dominant Confucian thought from the late Ming to the Qing Dynasty. Wang Yangming's philosophy places the "mind" at the center of Confucianism, regarding it as the foundation of the universe and all things, with the highest good being the "substance" (Ben Ti 本体) of the mind. His views on the highest good are primarily expressed in his representative work, *Instructions for Practical Living* (*Chuan Xi Lu* 传习录), and his philosophy was largely shaped through dialogues with Zhu Xi's thought. The core topics include the relationship between mind and principle, the understanding of "the investigation of things to attain knowledge" (Ge Wu Zhi Zhi 格物致知). The following will elaborate on Wang Yangming's view of the highest good by focusing on these two core topics.

First, Wang Yangming's perspective on the relationship between mind and principle differs from that of Zhu Xi. In *Instructions for Practical Living*, Wang Yangming explicitly states,

"The highest good is the original substance of the mind. It is no other than manifesting one's clear character to the point of refinement and singleness of mind. And yet it is not separated from events and things. When Zhu Xi said in his commentary that (manifesting the clear character is) 'the realization of the Principle

of Nature to the fullest extent without an iota of selfish human desire', he got the point" (Wang 1963, p. 7)².

According to him, the highest good is not an external absolute principle or objective truth but the pure expression of one's inherent mind. Wang opposed seeking the highest good within external things, considering it a misunderstanding of its essence. He argued that the highest good resides inherently within one's nature and can be restored through continuous cultivation and practice, rather than external exploration. This contrasts with Zhu Xi's view that "everything has its determined principle" (Zhu 2014, p. 297), emphasizing the investigation of things to understand principles. Wang Yangming, however, asserted that "to seek the highest good (the abiding point) in individual events and things is to regard righteousness as external" (Wang 1963, p. 6), emphasizing that the highest good is not found in external things but is the substance of the mind. The highest good is a pure goodness inherently present within every person's mind, a manifestation of the Principle of Nature that exists at all times within the mind. In other words, the highest good is the nature of the mind, representing inner moral conscience. To emphasize that "the highest good is the original substance of the mind", Wang Yangming proposed that "the mind and principle are identical" (Wang 1963, p. 7). He illustrated this by asking,

"in the matter of serving one's parents, one cannot seek for the principle of filial piety in the parent. In serving one's ruler, one cannot seek for the principle of loyalty in the ruler. In the intercourse with friends and in governing the people, one cannot seek for the principles of faithfulness and humanity in friends and the people. They are all in the mind, that is all, for the mind and principle are identical. When the mind is free from the obscuration of selfish desires, it is the embodiment of the Principle of Nature, which requires not an iota added from the outside. When this mind, which has become completely identical with the Principle of Nature, is applied and arises to serve parents, there is filial piety; when it arises to serve the ruler, there is loyalty; when it arises to deal with friends or to govern the people, there are faithfulness and humanity. The main thing is for the mind to make an effort to get rid of selfish human desires and preserve the Principle of Nature" (Wang 1963, p. 7).

Regarding the pure mind without selfish desires, Wang used filial piety as an example:

"if the mind is free from selfish human desires and has become completely identical with the Principle of Nature, and if it is the mind that is sincere in its filial piety to parents, then in the winter it will naturally think of the cold of parents and seek a way to provide warmth for them, and in the summer it will naturally think of the heat of parents and seek a way to provide coolness for them. These are all offshoots of the mind that is sincere in its filial piety. Nevertheless, there must first be such a mind before there can be these offshoots. Compared to the tree, the mind with sincere filial piety is the root, whereas the offshoots are the leaves and branches. There must first be roots before there can be leaves and branches" (Wang 1963, p. 8).

Evidently, for Wang Yangming, once there is a mind free of selfish desires, one will naturally act accordingly. For instance, a sincere filial mind would naturally consider the cold in winter and the heat in summer and would act to provide warmth or coolness accordingly. These actions stem from a mind of selfless filial piety. According to Wang, the pure mind without selfish desires is like the root of a tree, while external rituals and norms are the branches and leaves. One must first cultivate the root to have branches and leaves, rather than searching for the leaves and then planting the root. Here, Wang proposed the concrete method for achieving the highest good: "preserve the Principle of Nature" and "get rid of selfish human desires". By removing desires from the mind, the mind becomes a pure mind of Principle of Nature, and the highest good is thus the manifestation of this mind in real moral actions. Wang Yangming opposed the view that equated the highest good with specific rituals and norms, such as how to keep parents warm in winter or cool

in summer, or how to arrange meals. While external rituals and norms are important, they do not constitute the highest good on their own. Inner sincerity and purity are crucial, rather than focusing on learning how to perfect external rituals through reasoning. In Wang Yangming's view, the highest good pertains only to whether the mind is purely aligned with Principle of Nature. Therefore, he said,

"If the highest good means no more than having the details correct, then dressing like an actor and acting out these details correctly on the stage would be called the highest good" (Wang 1963, p. 9).

In other words, merely focusing on external forms without inner cultivation is not the highest good, just as a stage actor's performance cannot be considered the highest good.

Secondly, Wang Yangming's understanding of the highest good also diverges from Zhu Xi's view on "the investigation of things". In Wang Yangming's philosophy, "things" refer not only to physical objects but also to moral situations or events considered in ethical deliberation. This term plays a central role in the debate between Wang Yangming and Zhu Xi regarding the method of "the investigation of things to attain knowledge". Through his interpretation of "things", Wang Yangming criticizes Zhu Xi's tendency towards purely theoretical understanding of "things", highlighting the practical connotation of the concept of "things". Wang said, "The investigation of things is the work of abiding in the highest good. Once we know what the highest good is, we know how to investigate of things" (Wang 1963, p. 12). Here, Wang clarifies that the purpose of the investigation of things is to bring the mind to a state of the highest good and maintain it in that state, a process he calls "attaining the highest good". In Wang's interpretation, "The highest good is the nature (Xing 性). [...] To abide by it is simply to recover the nature's original state" (Wang 1963, p. 56). Therefore, "attaining" (Zhi 致) means allowing the mind to return to its original nature, to its innate state of the highest good, free from the disturbances of external desires and distractions. Concerning the practice of "the investigation of things", Wang Yangming criticized Zhu Xi's misinterpretation. He said,

"But Zhu Xi wrongly interpreted the doctrine of the investigation of things. Because he reversed the above order, and thought that the higher attainments of exerting one's mind to the utmost and knowing one's nature (Jin Xin Zhi Xing 尽心知性) are equivalent to the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge (Ge Wu Zhi Zhi 格物知至), he required the beginner to perform the acts of those who are born to know and who practice naturally and easily. How can that be done?" (Wang 1963, p. 13).

Wang believed Zhu Xi misunderstood the "investigation of things", reversing the order of cause and effect by treating "exerting one's mind to the utmost and knowing one's nature" as the result of investigation. For Wang, "exerting one's mind to the utmost and knowing one's nature" is the basis of investigation, not its outcome. Only by exhausting the mind can one truly engage in correct actions. Wang's explanation was,

"our nature is the substance of the mind and Heaven is the source of our nature. To exert one's mind to the utmost is the same as fully developing one's nature. Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature and 'know the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth.' Those who merely preserve their minds, on the other hand, have not yet exerted them to the utmost" (Wang 1963, p. 13).

In other words, nature is the substance of the mind, and Heaven is the origin of nature. Exerting the mind equates to exerting nature, and only the most sincere individuals can truly exert their nature and comprehend the transformations of Heaven and Earth.

Regarding the meaning of "things", Xu Ai stated, "the word 'thing' in the phrase 'the investigation of things' has the same meaning as the word 'event' (Shi 事), both referring to the mind" (Wang 1963, p. 14). Wang agreed and said,

"the master of the body is the mind. What emanates from the mind is the will. The original substance of the will is knowledge, and wherever the will is directed

is a thing. For example, when the will is directed toward serving one's parents, then serving one's parents is a 'thing'. When the will is directed toward serving one's ruler, then serving one's ruler is a 'thing'. When the will is directed toward being humane to all people and feeling love toward things, then being humane to all people and feeling love toward things are 'things,' and when the will is directed toward seeing, hearing, speaking, and acting, then each of these is a 'thing'. Therefore I say that there are neither principles nor things outside the mind" (Wang 1963, p. 14).

In Wang's response, he discusses the relationships among five categories: mind, body, will, knowledge, and things. The mind governs the body to engage in moral practice, and will is an expression of the mind, always concerning events or things, such as filial piety, serving the lord, loving the people, or everyday behaviors.

Wang Yangming's view of "the investigation of things" primarily regards "things" as "events", linking "the investigation of things" with his doctrine of "the mind is principle". For Wang, the premise of investigation is to rest in the highest good, meaning the mind must return to its original nature, to a state aligned with Principle of Nature. Thus, the key is not to seek external norms of action but to find the mind's origin. Once the mind returns to its original nature and the highest good is achieved, specific moral actions (including how to conduct proper rituals) naturally follow. In *Instructions for Practical Living*, Wang consistently emphasized the importance of cultivating the mind, stating that the core of this cultivation lies in eliminating selfish desires and preserving the Principle of Nature. Essentially, this process is a return to the highest good, as the Principle of Nature is the substance of the mind, and selfish desires obscure this pure Principle of Nature. Therefore, the primary task of practicing the highest good is to eliminate selfish desires through inner cultivation and reflection, allowing the Principle of Nature to manifest. Regarding Zhu Xi's approach, Wang argued, "former scholars interpreted the investigation of things as investigating all the things in the world. How can all things in the world be investigated? [...] I interpret the word 'investigation' (Ge 格) to mean 'rectifying' (Zheng 正) and 'thing' to mean 'affair' or 'event'" (Wang 1963, p. 247). In summary, Wang Yangming criticized Zhu Xi's interpretation of "the investigation of things", arguing that it is not about seeking principles from external things but about first rectifying one's mind and will and then applying this to correct specific actions and realize one's conscience. For Wang, the true process involves purifying intentions and aligning the mind with moral practice, allowing the substance of the highest good to manifest in real actions. He believed everyone could become a sage like Yao or Shun through this approach. For Wang, "according to the *Great Learning* (*Da Xue* 《大学》), however, the task consists purely in making the will sincere. When making the will sincere reaches the highest degree, there is the highest good" (Wang 1963, p. 87). In other words, when sincerity and the investigation of things are perfected, the highest good is realized. The mind is innately aligned with the highest good, but it may be swayed by distractions. Therefore, rectifying intentions and the investigation of things are necessary practices to return the mind to its original state and achieve the highest good.

In summary, Wang Yangming's doctrine of "the mind is principle" regards the highest good as the inner substance of the human mind, which should not be sought in external things. To cultivate the mind, one must "preserve the Principle of Nature" and "get rid of selfish human desires", removing selfish desires to restore the pure nature of the mind and achieve the highest good. Wang argued that one should begin by "rectifying one's mind and will", focusing on internal cultivation rather than seeking external principles. He emphasized that the purpose of the investigation of things is to rest in the highest good, through which inner moral practice brings forth the actualization of conscience in actions. The highest good is the unclouded mind aligned with the Principle of Nature, while evil is the obscured highest good. He emphasized following the Principle of Nature to naturally practice goodness. Wang's concept of the highest good highlights inner cultivation, where "get rid of selfish human desires" and "preserve the Principle of Nature" allows the natural manifestation of the highest good, reflected in moral practice.

4. The Issue of the Highest Good from the Perspective of the Human–World Relationship

Through the previous in-depth exploration of Fichte and Wang Yangming's views on the highest good, we can see that although they came from different cultural backgrounds and philosophical traditions, both deeply reflected on humanity's moral mission in the world and the paths to realizing the highest good. Fichte emphasized the agency of the I, seeking to transform the world through moral practice to achieve the highest good, while Wang Yangming emphasized the cultivation of one's inner moral nature, aiming to reach the state of the highest good. This chapter will analyze and compare their views on the highest good from the perspective of the human–world relationship, exploring their unique insights and possible limitations. Of course, these limitations do not imply flaws but reflect the philosophers' respective perspectives and reveal potential challenges within their philosophies. Through this specific comparative inquiry, the study aims to shed light on certain differences between Fichte's and Wang Yangming's approaches, which, at least from the specific perspective of the issue of the highest good, may reflect broader trends in Chinese and Western philosophies concerning the relationship between humans and the world.

First, it is necessary to clarify that although Fichte and Wang Yangming lived in different times and cultural contexts, they both faced common philosophical questions: the role and place of humans in the world and how to achieve moral excellence. As a prominent representative of German classical philosophy, Fichte lived in post-Enlightenment Europe and was deeply influenced by Kantian philosophy. He focused on finding a balance between reason and faith, using human agency to realize moral ideals. Wang Yangming, on the other hand, was a renowned thinker and philosopher of the Ming Dynasty, who developed his philosophy of mind within the Confucian tradition, emphasizing the importance of cultivating one's inner moral nature and moral self-awareness.

In Fichte's philosophy of religion, the highest good represents the ultimate purpose of human free will and action, as well as the highest ideal of moral practice. Fichte approached this from both a practical philosophy and an ontological perspective, emphasizing that through love and faith in God, humans can exclude the influence of personal desires and preferences, consistently engaging in moral actions to achieve the ideal of the highest good.

From the perspective of practical philosophy, the moral law originates from reason and is universal and necessary. God, as the embodiment of the moral law, commands humans to act morally through religious faith. Fichte argued that the moral law is absolute and unconditional, requiring people to transcend personal desires and act according to rational demands. In this process, religious faith plays a crucial role, as it deepens people's understanding and appreciation of the moral law. The ideal of the highest good is the unification of the command of the moral law and free will, the unity of obedience to moral law and the sense of happiness, and the integration of religious faith with moral actions in the real world. Through these three forms of unity, Fichte emphasized that individuals must focus wholeheartedly on the moral law within the context of religious faith, maintaining moral action. He believed that true freedom and the highest good could only be achieved when human free will fully conformed to the moral law.

From an ontological perspective, Fichte also saw love for God, expressed through moral actions (as presence), as a manifestation of God. In other words, the love of religion is primarily the self-love of God. Fichte believed that God is not a transcendent entity existing outside of the world but manifests through human moral actions within the world. Human moral practice is, thus, the self-realization of God in the world. Therefore, when people love God and engage in moral actions, they are, in fact, participating in the process of God's self-realization.

However, there are some limitations in Fichte's discourse on the highest good. First, his discussion of religious intuition is related to free will, but he lacks further argumentation on why religious love possesses this perfect and flawless characteristic of freedom.

While he asserted that religious love enables people to concentrate fully on God, maintaining a state of inner purity, he did not explain in detail how this love avoids the interference of selfish desires. Additionally, from a practical standpoint, Fichte may have overlooked the complexity and diversity of the real world. In actual life, personal desires and external temptations are often difficult to eliminate entirely, and relying solely on religious faith may not fully address these issues. Moreover, whether religious love is also susceptible to being clouded by selfish desires remains a question for further clarification and exploration.

Wang Yangming's concept of the highest good is based on the principle of "the mind is principle", which asserts that the highest good resides within the human mind and should not be sought from external things. He proposed that through the practices of "rectifying one's mind and will" and "the realization of conscience", one can discover the Principle of Nature within the mind, allowing the highest good to manifest effectively without hindrance.

Firstly, Wang Yangming proposed "the mind is principle", suggesting that the human mind itself is the highest moral principle, inherently endowed with the Principle of Nature. The Principle of Nature represents the essential law of the universe and is also the highest moral standard. By returning to the mind and recognizing one's conscience, a person can comprehend the Principle of Nature, thereby achieving moral excellence. Thus, the highest good is not something that exists externally but is intrinsic to one's nature. Secondly, in terms of the path to achieving the highest good, Wang Yangming emphasized the importance of "preserving the Principle of Nature" and "getting rid of selfish human desires", removing selfish desires from the mind to restore its pure nature. He believed that the mind is originally pure and good, but due to acquired desires and distractions, its true nature is obscured. Therefore, it is necessary to use the method of "the realization of conscience" to remove these obstructions, allowing the Principle of Nature to manifest. Specifically, this involves the rectification of inner thoughts and the execution of moral actions. Through continuous self-reflection and correcting wrong thoughts, along with the practice of moral behavior in daily life, one can achieve the unity of knowledge and action. Wang Yangming's philosophy embodies a strong sense of introspection and moral self-awareness, emphasizing the importance of inner cultivation and moral practice. He argued that only through personal effort can one achieve the highest moral good without relying on external doctrines or authorities. This idea holds significant importance in Chinese philosophy and has had a profound impact on subsequent generations.

Nevertheless, Wang Yangming's philosophy may face challenges in practice. The extent to which the emphasis on inner cultivation can succeed in reality is a matter worth pondering. People's minds are often influenced by various external factors, and relying solely on self-cultivation may not achieve the ideal state. In an environment where moral standards are lacking or social norms are corrupted, it may be difficult for personal cultivation to be effectively supported and realized.

The insights and limitations of Fichte and Wang Yangming on the issue of the highest good reflect the differences between Chinese and Western philosophies in addressing the relationship between humans and the world. Both recognize the dual nature of humanity: on the one hand, humans belong to the transcendental, metaphysical world, with moral ideals and pursuits; on the other hand, they exist in the sensory world, subject to desires and the challenges of reality. In addressing the highest good, Fichte's religious philosophy emphasized that people must commit themselves wholly to God, and that achieving the highest good is possible through religious faith. He believed that through love and faith in God, individuals can transcend personal desires, act according to moral laws, and reach the state of the highest good. This view reflects Western philosophy's emphasis on transcendence and otherness, suggesting that moral perfection is achieved by transcending the I and committing to a higher existence.

Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind, on the other hand, emphasized that the highest good is the substance of the human mind, and achieving it requires removing self-

ish desires and returning to the pure nature of the mind. He advocated achieving the Principle of Nature through inner cultivation and moral practice, which reflects the importance placed on introspection and self-cultivation in Chinese philosophy. This approach suggests that moral excellence is attained through self-reflection and cultivation, rather than through external reliance.

When it comes to individuals disturbed by desires within the sensory world, both Chinese and Western philosophies seek a return to the substance of the mind or the I. However, Western philosophy tends to emphasize a wholehearted commitment, relying on religious faith to transcend the I and invest in an absolute, transcendental existence to overcome personal limitations and desires. Chinese philosophy, in contrast, places more emphasis on the cultivation of the mind and the practice of virtue, using self-reflection and moral action to remove desires and restore the purity of the mind. This difference reflects the divergent approaches of Chinese and Western philosophies regarding the relationship between humans and the world. Western thought tends to realize self-transcendence through dependence on a higher existence, while Chinese thought tends to achieve moral perfection through inner self-cultivation. This divergence is not only evident in their understanding of the highest good but also permeates their entire philosophical systems and modes of thinking.

Nonetheless, there are also similarities between the two. Both philosophies acknowledge that moral pursuits must transcend personal desires and emphasize the importance of moral practice. Fichte and Wang Yangming both sought to provide a path to achieving the highest good for humanity, though they chose different methods and approaches. Their thoughts on the topic have had a profound impact on later generations and are worthy of in-depth study and reflection.

5. Conclusions

This article focuses on the issue of the highest good, providing an in-depth comparison of Fichte and Wang Yangming's thoughts on this philosophical topic, exploring their respective understandings of the highest good and the paths to its realization. Fichte believed that the highest good is related to the knowledge of the command of practical reason, where individuals act according to practical reason through conscience. However, the obstacles posed by sensory desires need to be overcome through religious love, allowing consistent adherence to the moral law and the realization of the ideal of the highest good. Wang Yangming, on the other hand, asserted that the mind or conscience is the knowledge of the principle of practice, united with action, but that it can be obscured by selfish desires. Only when conscience becomes true knowledge can it consistently align with action, thereby achieving the highest good.

By comparing the philosophical thought of Fichte and Wang Yangming, this article reveals their different approaches to the relationship between humans and the world. Fichte emphasized that through religious faith and love for God, the subject can transcend the limitations of sensory desires, thereby achieving unity between humans and the world. Wang Yangming, on the other hand, emphasized the cultivation of inner moral nature, advocating "rectifying one's mind and will" and "the realization of conscience" to allow individuals to integrate with the world through internal moral practice. The two thinkers explore the realization of the highest good through external religious faith and internal cultivation of the mind, respectively, reflecting the strengths and limitations of Chinese and Western philosophies regarding subjectivity and practice.

This comparative study deepens the multidimensional understanding of the philosophy of subjectivity, highlighting the complementarity and potential for dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophies on core issues. Through the different interpretations of the highest good by Fichte and Wang Yangming, this article offers new perspectives for building cross-cultural philosophical dialogue and provides a more comprehensive and profound theoretical foundation for understanding the complex relationship between humans and the world. This not only aids in a better understanding of the essence of Chinese

and Western philosophies but also offers valuable insights for contemporary philosophical reflections on the relationship between humans and the world.

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Notes

- ¹ As the contemporary Chinese philosopher Yang Guorong points out, “Comparative research in the field of philosophy should not remain at the level of listing similarities and differences between Chinese and Western philosophies, but should further take universal philosophical problems faced by both traditions as the object of study. By exploring how Chinese and Western philosophies address these universal problems, we can provide a broader perspective for thinking about related issues” (Yang 2018, p. 43).
- ² Some terms and personal names in the cited translation have been adapted for consistency with the context of the discussion.

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