

# A Comparative Study on the Moral Conceptual Framework of Kohlberg and Wang Yangming<sup>\*</sup>

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Kohlberg constructed modern Western moral cognition theory. Wang Yangming proposed the idea of the extension of intuitive knowledge in Ming Dynasty. We conduct a comparison on three main conceptual schemes of Kohlberg's theory—moral judgment, moral development, and moral behavior—from the following three aspects: problem consciousness, thinking model, and value idea. Moral cognition development theory lays emphasis on the core position of cognition to the moral development, while the idea of intuitive knowledge aims to become sages. From the point of view of thinking model, moral cognition development theory intends to conduct moral education for individual moral development, while the idea of the extension of intuitive knowledge highlights the intuitive knowledge ontology in the practice of extending the intuitive knowledge to its extremity and removing the obstacles of selfishness. In terms of value idea, the core value idea of moral cognition theory is the principle of justice, but the idea of the extension of intuitive knowledge indicates that the intuitive knowledge has characteristics of innateness and universality, which is the judgment principle of the individual transcendentalism.

*Keywords:* Kohlberg, Wang Yangming, moral judgment, moral development, moral behavior

Kohlberg (1927-1987) is an American psychologist and educator of moral development. He inherited and developed Piaget's cognitive theory, founded the contemporary Western theory of moral cognitive development, and launched the "cognitive development education movement" in the United States in the 1970s, which had a wide and far-reaching impact in the world. Wang Yangming (1472-1529), or Wang Shouren, was the most influential philosopher in the Ming Dynasty. The theory of "extension of innate knowledge" formed in his later years is both the final form of his theory of the philosophy of the mind and the core idea of his moral concept.

Due to the long-standing and well-established Western traditional moral thought, the formation and development of Kohlberg's moral theory have been influenced by views of thinkers, such as Socrates and Plato in ancient Greece, Kant in modern times, and Frankena and Rawls in contemporary times. The moral civilization represented by Confucianism is representative of the Chinese civilization in China, a "state of ceremonies", with moral spirit and moral education being its value foundation. The moral concept of Wang Yangming, a master of Confucianism, embodies the important achievements of Chinese people made in the field of moral exploration and practice.

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We advocate comparing these two moral thoughts of different cultural backgrounds and theoretical forms from the perspectives of problem consciousness, thinking mode and value standpoint rather than specific concepts and definitions. With such comparison going to the source, the similarities and differences between the two theories can be thoroughly revealed. We may as well start with some specific basic conceptual frameworks, otherwise, we will achieve nothing but self-talk. Therefore, this paper will analyze and compare the two theories respectively by starting with the three conceptual frameworks of Kohlberg's theory: moral judgment, moral development, and moral behavior.

### **Moral Judgement**

Kohlberg defines moral judgment from the perspective of both structure and content. He believes that moral judgment at different levels and stages of development has both specific content and specific structure and that it is the moral operation of individuals in terms of form and content in a certain moral context.

The structure of moral judgment is the method and process by which specific moral content is processed. If moral judgment is compared to computer, structure will be the program or method by which information is processed by computer whereas content will be the information or data processed. Therefore, Kohlberg said,

structure refers to the general organizational principles or patterns of thinking, rather than specific moral beliefs or concepts. That is to say, it is believed that ideas are linked according to general structural characteristics instead of being acquired or used independently. It is the form of thinking rather than the content that is emphasized as forms show the regularity and universality of development of different individuals. (Kohlberg, DeVries, Fein, Hart, Mayer, Noam, Snarey, & Wertsch, 1987, p. 2)

Moreover, the so-called structure must have some value orientation intrinsic to itself rather than being merely an empty framework. In this regard, Kohlberg clearly points out that moral issue is in essence the issue of "justice". Therefore, the most basic structure of moral judgment is the structure of the principle of justice. "The core of every moral stage is a potential concept of justice, and every higher stage of it is to better solve the problem of justice", Kohlberg said (Kohlberg, 1984, p. xvi). At the same time, "everyone recognizes that justice is a structure, a mode of balance or harmony in a group or society" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. xv).

In the moral situation, there are often conflicts of views and interests, and the principle of justice is the basic starting point and the internal mechanism to resolve these conflicts. The structure of the principle of justice prescribes specific operations of justice, which include equality, justice, reciprocity, prescriptive role-playing, universality, and so on.

The concept of innate knowledge originates from "Mencius". Mencius said, "by innate ability, a person can act without learning in the first place; by innate knowledge, a person can learn without thinking. All children were born to love their parents, and respect their elderly brothers when they grow up" (Zhu, 1983, p. 353). According to Mencius, "innate knowledge" refers to the moral consciousness that people can acquire neither without thinking nor depending on the external environment. He believed that children were born to love their parents and respect their elderly brothers when they grew up. Therefore, it can be seen that Mencius believes that innate knowledge is intrinsic to the subject, which is transcendental and involves a potential gradual development process.

Wang Yangming inherited Mencius' ontological connotation of innate knowledge and put forward concrete functions of it. He clearly points out that innate knowledge is the transcendental moral criterion for everyone. He once said to Chen Jiuchuan, "your innate knowledge is your criterion that determines whether

what you are doing is right. With it, nothing can be concealed” (Wang, 1992, p. 92). Therefore, Wang Yangming believes that innate knowledge is the internal moral judgment system of human beings, and that it has the function of perception, supervision, and judgment of moral consciousness. He said, “Mencius’s moral judgment is no more than innate knowledge that is intrinsic to everyone” (Wang, 1992, p. 189). “Innate knowledge is nothing but a matter of moral judgment that distinguishes the good from the evil” (Wang, 1992, p. 111). It can be seen that Wang Yangming thinks innate knowledge, as a congenital moral criterion to distinguish the right from the wrong, has not only the perceptual function of “distinguishing the right from the wrong”, but also the judgment function of “favoring the good and against the evil”.

It can be seen from the above analysis of moral judgment of the two theories that Kohlberg’s theory of moral cognitive development and Wang Yangming’s theory of innate knowledge adopt the same framework of moral judgment, yet totally different from each other in terms of the content. To sum up, comparison can be made from three aspects: subject of judgment, judging criterion, and judging mechanism, which are as follows:

Table 1

*A Comparison of Moral Judgments Between the Two Theories*

	Subject of judgement	Judging criterion	Judging mechanism
Moral cognitive development theory	Structure	Principle of justice	Operation of justice
Theory of innate knowledge	Ontology of innate knowledge	Sense of right and wrong	Intuition

Firstly, moral judgment needs a subject of judgment which is clearly considered to be a structure by the theory of moral cognitive development yet the ontology of innate knowledge by the theory of innate knowledge, both of which are of transcendental nature from the ontological point of view, yet moral consciousness is intrinsic to the ontology of innate knowledge itself while the structure of cognitive development theory is separated from the content.

Secondly, moral judgment needs to be based on certain criteria. The theory of moral cognitive development emphasizes the principle of justice, while the theory of innate knowledge emphasizes the sense of right and wrong, which clearly shows differences in moral judgment, that is, the two different views on justice and good and evil between the Western thinkers and Confucians.

Finally, moral judgment needs judgment mechanism. The theory of moral cognitive development considers that the principle of justice is a moral operation in the form of structure, while the theory of innate knowledge mainly emphasizes intuition, which is similar to Haidt’s theory of moral intuition in the United States to some extent. On the one hand, it reflects that the theory of moral cognitive development is more refined, and lays a theoretical foundation for the subsequent development theory. On the other hand, it illustrates that Confucians view moral consciousness as congenital, which makes the realization of the ultimate goal of moral cultivation possible.

### **Moral Development**

Kohlberg’s theory of moral cognitive development is influenced by cognitive development theorists, such as Piaget. Kohlberg holds that the moral growth of an individual should go through a process of development of different stages. He once said, “I adopt a rigorous and precise concept of development by stages, which comes from the structural tradition of Piaget and other cognitive development theorists” (Kohlberg, 1973, p. 93). According to the previous analysis, moral development must be built on the basis of the development of moral

structure as moral judgment, the most important moral element, is structurally functioned. Therefore, the stage of moral development is determined by the structure of moral judgment. "A formal or qualitative change that occurs with age is called a stage, or structure by structure-development theorists" (Kohlberg, Colby, Fenton, & Speicher-Dubin, 1976, p. 20), Kohlberg said. Thus, the moral judgment structure of the same stage can have different moral judgment, and that of different stage can produce the same moral judgment. Hence, according to the different nature of moral judgment structure, Kohlberg divides moral development of individuals into three levels and six stages, i.e., the famous model of "three levels and six stages" of moral development. The three levels include pre-custom level, custom level, and post-custom level.

Since the moral development depends on the change of structure, how to change and develop structure has become a key issue in the theory of moral cognitive development. Kohlberg said,

(Moral) stage or psychological structure, although based on internal organizational tendencies, is not dependent on the organism; nor stage, despite depending on experience and knowledge of an individual, a direct reflection of children's cultural and the external world. Instead, stage is the product of the experience of interaction between children and the world. It is this experience that leads to a new structure of children's own organization, rather than cultural patterns being imposed on them. (Kohlberg & Gilligan, 1971, p. 1069)

Obviously, the moral development of individuals is neither due to the innate factor of individuals nor the influence of external environment, but rather the result of interaction between individuals and society. The mechanism of interaction is essentially a process of continuous construction. Therefore, Kohlberg's theory is also called social constructivism, which holds that the process of individual's moral development is the process that individual's moral structure is constantly constructed in the process of interaction between itself and society, or a process of gradual development by stages from the macro point of view.

It is not difficult to see that as far as the motive force of moral development of individuals is concerned, Kohlberg opposes not only maturity theory but also learning theory, but explicitly advocates constructivism of interaction.

Maturity theory holds that basic mental structure comes from innate pattern, environmental learning theory believes that it originates from the pattern or connection of events in the external world, and cognitive development theory argues that it is derived from the interaction of body structure tendency with the structure of the external world, rather than the direct reflection of either of them. (Chazan, 1985, p. 68)

Wang Yangming regards innate knowledge as the inherent moral consciousness that has the function of "distinguishing the good from the evil and the right from the wrong". However, only the ontology itself is not enough to play its due role as the innate knowledge cannot play its due role without constant moral practice of individuals. Wang Yangming put forward the theory of "extension of innate knowledge" in his later years, which is the core theory of his theory of the philosophy of the mind. We may as well start with the word "extension" to examine how innate knowledge of individuals is gradually revealed.

Wang Yangming said in "The Great Learning" that "what I have acquired by innate knowledge without any deficiencies, nor can it be concealed by anything, thus it can reach the realm of perfection" (Wang, 1992, p. 972). Obviously, the word "extension" contains two meanings: One is to express a conduct or process, that is, to arrive from one place to another; the other is to express a state, that is, to reach a "limit", i.e., to reach the realm of perfection. From the point of view of moral practice, the ontology of innate knowledge is inherent to everyone, but only those who give full play to it can become saints.

Therefore, Wang Yangming put forward the idea of “expanding to the realm of perfection”. He once said, “Children were born to love their parents or respect their elderly brothers. Such spirit, instead of being concealed by worldly desires, will be fully exposed when it is fully expanded” (Wang, 1992, p. 34). From the Confucian point of view, “the extension of innate knowledge” is about moral practice and cultivation, which evolves toward two directions: One is to eliminate one’s worldly desires and the other is to extend his innate knowledge to reach the realm of perfection. From the macro perspective, it is a process during which a person constantly commits to the improvement of moral character and thereby ultimately becomes a saint and a virtuous person.

Then, how can we put such “extension” into moral practice? Specific practice, such as “a constant precaution”, “keeping the natural law and abolishing the worldly desires”, and “intraception and self-restraint”, has been proposed by Wang Yangming. However, one who desires to achieve the realm of perfection must consciously understand that “sense of good and evil is not inherent” as is preached by Wang Yangming. Chen Lai said in “Self State and Selfless State”,

Its significance is not to deny the difference between good and evil in terms of ethics, and what is discussed by it is a problem different from that of social ethics. The disposition refers to the pure Buddha nature that lusts excessively for nothing. It is the internal basis for people to realize their ideal state of freedom. (Chen, 1991, p. 212)

The internal mechanism of two theories about personal moral development has been discussed above. Strictly speaking, the innate knowledge of morality of individuals is regarded as a process of continuous development by the theory of moral cognitive development, while Wang Yangming’s theory of “extension of innate knowledge” holds that morality is not about development, but rather competence in moral practice. The theory of moral cognitive development holds that human moral development is a process of constant construction of human psychological structure and external environment; Wang Yangming argues that the innate knowledge of morality is a process of constantly eliminating disadvantages and expanding to reach the realm of perfection, which also involves the moral construction of individuals. Both theories acknowledge that the innate knowledge of morality is a changing process accompanying the growth of individuals, but totally different in the mechanism and mode of change.

### **Moral Behaviors**

In moral practice, there are often inconsistencies between “knowledge” and “practice”. It is a very important issue in the field of moral practice that how to understand the organic relationship between individual’s internal moral cognition and external moral results, that is, the relationship between moral cognition and moral behavior.

As according to the theory of moral cognitive development, moral cognition refers to the sense of right and wrong and good and evil, and focuses on moral judgment. Kohlberg defines the “relationship between knowledge and practice” as that between moral judgment and moral behavior. In terms of the moral behavior, Kohlberg said, “the moral conduct includes not only the idea of executing the rightful conduct of the doer but also the execution of such conduct based on responsibility judgment” (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 518). It can be seen from the definition that Kohlberg attributes the final formation of moral behavior to two ideas: One is the idea of judging the proper conduct, and the other is the idea of judging whether to implement such conduct, namely, the process of moral judgment and responsibility judgment. Thus, even if a person has correct moral judgment,

it does not necessarily lead to moral behavior directly, but rather two kinds of judgment or functions, namely moral judgment and responsibility judgment, based on which moral conduct will be carried out.

These two kinds of judgment are logically orderly. The moral judgment is a kind of judgment of moral ontology, that is, to judge what is justified. The judgment of responsibility is the responsibility judgment of the moral subject to implement what conducts following the judgment of moral ontology, that is, the function of beginning well and ending well advocated by Kohlberg.

The so-called judgment of moral ontology is to regard the just structure of moral judgment as a transcendental ontological judgment that will not be interfered by the will of the moral subject, which is no more than the fundamental principle judgment made by the ontology on the basis of the principle of justice. In the second kind of responsibility judgment, the moral subject judges what choices to be made based on many factors, including self-control, expected results, delay of satisfaction, and so on.

Kohlberg once assumed that with the development of morality of individuals from a lower stage to a higher stage, moral judgment and responsibility judgment are increasingly consistent, which is partly proved to be correct by the empirical study. "This means that the proportion of individuals whose conduct is "morally" integral or acting in accordance with their moral judgment beyond the moral context also increases linearly" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 519). Therefore, Kohlberg concludes that the higher the moral stage an individual is at, the more likely he is to act in accordance with the choice of circumstances judged to be justified.

The relationship between knowledge and behavior is also an important category in Confucian moral practice. Zhu Xi, a representative of Neo-Confucianism of the Song Dynasty, once put forward the viewpoint that to practice what you have learnt, that practice values more than knowledge in order, and that knowledge and practice should be reciprocal, which represents the basic view of Confucianism in Song Dynasty on the concept of knowledge and practice. Wang Yangming's view of knowledge and practice is different from Zhu Xi's. Through practical experience, he put forward the famous view of "the unity of knowledge and practice". He believes that knowledge and practice should be unified, in other words, they should involve in rather than be separated from each other. Therefore, he said that one who has the knowledge but not puts it into practice cannot be called a "real learned person", which can be interpreted as the difference between knowledge and cognition.

Wang Yangming has made a concrete statement and demonstration of the theory of "the unity of knowledge and practice" as the theory is easy to be misunderstood. Some representative viewpoints are as follows:

First, "only one who can put what he has learnt into practice can be called a learned person", which defines the category of knowledge by "practice". That is to say, "knowledge" cannot be separated from "practice". In moral practice, moral consciousness exists only when moral behavior has been conducted.

Secondly, "knowledge is where the practice begins while practice is the means by which knowledge is practiced". Wang Yangming once said, "knowledge is where the practice begins while practice is the means by which knowledge is practiced. Scholarship is about the cultivation. Knowledge and practice can not be separated from each other" (Wang, 1992, p. 13). It can be seen from the above that Wang Yangming regards knowledge and practice as different stages of a conduct. The so-called "scholarship" refers to moral practice and cultivation, which is about the endeavor made to it. Knowledge and practice are two aspects of a conduct that cannot be separated from each other.

Thirdly, “knowledge is the idea based on which practice is conducted while practice is the means by which knowledge is practiced”, which emphasizes that “knowledge” plays an orientation and commanding role, while “practice” serves as a macro means and behavior. (Further discussion will be carried out.)

Generally speaking, Wang Yangming’s theory of unity of knowledge and practice is generated against the background of Zhu Xi’s theory of knowledge and practice. Zhu Xi emphasizes “learning and then practice” and the importance of “knowledge” in the philosophy system. He thinks that moral cognition is the precondition of moral behavior and practice, which, however, will lead to the phenomenon of “learning without practice”. Wang Yangming’s theory of innate knowledge emphasizes that “knowledge” is inherent, so he emphasizes the importance of practice, which indicates that his theory of the unity of knowledge and practice is inherently consistent with his whole philosophy system.

It can be seen by comparison that Kohlberg’s theory of cognitive development attributes the consistency of moral judgment and moral behavior to the responsibility judgment of moral subject, which, on the one hand, justifies the judgment of the principle of justice of moral ontology, on the other hand, explains the reasons for the difference between moral cognition and moral behavior. Besides, it is demonstrated from the empirical point of view that the higher the degree of moral cognitive development, the higher the consistency of moral behavior and moral judgment. In fact, logically speaking, the Confucian interpretation of the relationship between knowledge and practice is similar to Kohlberg’s interpretation structure, but richer in content. Specifically, Wang Yangming’s view of “the unity of knowledge and practice” is that the choice made by the moral subject should be consistent with the judgment of the moral ontology. The process of the unity of knowledge and practice is the process of moral practice and cultivation in which the moral subject and the moral ontology approach infinitely.

### **Conclusion From Comparison**

To sum up, the similarities and differences between the above two moral systems can be explained in three aspects:

Firstly, from the point of view of purpose, the theory of moral cognitive development opposes both the traditional character education theory and the modern value clarification theory of the United States. Kohlberg advocates “a kind of moral education theory which is both psychological and philosophical” (Kohlberg, 1972, p. 13). He holds that development should be the purpose of moral education, and that a perfect theoretical system for moral education should be provided in schools and educational institutions. Wang Yangming lived in the late Ming Dynasty, a morally degenerated society. In the process of inheriting and developing the moral concepts of Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties, he explored in depth the theory and practice of personal sainthood and virtue. What he pursued was to accomplish the moral cultivation required by Confucianism internally, and to obtain the merits of benefiting the world externally, in order to achieve the learning both sound in theory and practice that Confucianism yearned for.

Secondly, from the point of view of thinking mode, the theory of moral cognitive development emphasizes the core position of cognition in moral development. People’s cognitive ability gradually improves and develops with age in the course of constant construction of external environment, so the structure of moral judgment also develops continuously. Kohlberg describes the function of the structure of moral judgment without analyzing the ontology of it. However, this structure must be innate and a potential thinking organization that applies a certain procedural mode. In Wang Yangming’s theory system of “extension of

innate knowledge”, innate knowledge clearly exists as a transcendental ontology that is gradually exposed in the process of eliminating disadvantages and expanding to reach the realm of perfection without experiencing a process of development. Although Wang Yangming does not mention the concept of development, he emphasizes that the perfection of personal moral cultivation is a long process and that morality is not merely dependent on innate knowledge.

Third, from the point of view of value, the core value of the theory of moral cognitive development is the principle of justice. Kohlberg’s structural theory of principle of justice is influenced by his colleague J. B. Rawls at Harvard University, and Rawls’ theory of justice is also well explained by his empirical research. Rawls holds in his book *A Theory of Justice* that the basic structure of society is the theme of justice. Before reaching other agreements, people should first reach an agreement on the principles of social system. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why the starting point of Kohlberg’s moral principle is to regulate the relationship between the whole society, and justice is the most basic principle. Wang Yangming’s theory of “extension of innate knowledge” holds that innate knowledge is inherent and universal, and that it is the transcendental criterion to distinguish right from wrong for everyone. What he is concerned about is the inherent moral consciousness with which people are not required to find the criteria to distinguish right from wrong externally. The ultimate concern of Confucianism is human itself and to reach the spiritual realm of the ultimate good by means of self-cultivation and moral practice, which highlights the transcendental value of Confucianism’s moral practice.

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