

Perception as Generation: A Predictive Coding Interpretation of Wang Yangming’s “This Flower” Proposition

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Abstract

Wang Yangming’s “this flower” proposition from the *Chuanxi lu* (傳習錄) has long been subject to two opposing misreadings: either assimilated to Berkeleyan subjective idealism, or treated as a mystical intuition beyond the reach of philosophical analysis. This paper argues that both misreadings stem from a common error: interpreting the proposition as an ontological claim about the existence of flowers, thereby obscuring its genuine epistemological core — that the manifestation of perceptual objects depends on the mind’s active generative activity rather than on a unidirectional projection from the external world onto the mind. Drawing on Clark (2013)’s predictive coding theory, the paper demonstrates a systematic structural analogy at the level of perceptual mechanism: the mind corresponds to the generative model; “silent vacancy” corresponds to the non-activation of the flower-specific prediction loop; sensory contact corresponds to the triggering of prediction error; and “colors showing up clearly” corresponds to the stabilization of perceptual representation upon prediction error minimization. The paper also examines the genuine differences between the two frameworks — in particular, the fundamental divergence between the innate normativity of *liangzhi* and the fallible, learnable generative model — and precisely delimits the scope of the proposed analogy.

Keywords: Wang Yangming; “this flower” proposition; predictive coding; generative model; the-

1 Introduction

“Before you look at these flowers, they and your mind are both in a state of silent vacancy; as you come to look at them, their colors at once show up clearly.” (「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。」)

This passage by Wang Yangming, from passage 275 of the lower *juan* of the *Chuanxi lu* (傳習錄) (Wang Yangming, 1992a, lower *juan*, passage 275), is probably one of the most frequently cited yet most deeply misunderstood propositions in the history of Chinese philosophy. For five hundred years it has attracted two opposing misreadings: either assimilated to Berkeleyan subjective idealism (the flower does not exist when unperceived), or treated as a mystical intuition beyond the reach of philosophical analysis. Both misreadings, as this paper argues, stem from a common error: treating the proposition as an ontological claim about the existence of flowers, thereby obscuring its genuine epistemological core.

This paper proposes a different reading. The “this flower” proposition is, at its heart, a claim about the **mechanism of perceptual generation**: the appearance of the flower as a perceptual object—its colors, its form, its manifest presence—depends on the active generative operation of the *xin*, and cannot arise from a unidirectional projection of the external world onto a passive mind. Sections 2 and 3 develop this reading and introduce the comparative framework. Section 4 argues that this perceptual-generative account exhibits a systematic structural analogy with predictive coding theory (Clark, 2013; Friston, 2010): the *xin* corresponds to the generative model; the state of silent vacancy corresponds to the non-activation of the flower-specific prediction loop; sensory contact corresponds to the triggering of prediction error; and “colors becoming clear all at once” corresponds to the generation of stable perceptual representation through prediction-error minimization. Section 5 delimits the boundaries of this analogy by examining the genuine differences between the two frameworks, particularly the divergence between the normativity of *liangzhi* and

the computational neutrality of the generative model. Section 6 draws conclusions.

The central thesis is that Yangming’s “this flower” proposition describes a perceptual generative mechanism that is coherent and precise within the framework of contemporary cognitive science—a reading that displaces both the idealist and the mystical misreadings and recovers the proposition as a genuine contribution to the epistemology of perception, while pointing toward a structural convergence between two traditions whose ultimate significance remains an open philosophical question.

2 The Text and Interpretation of the “This Flower” Proposition

2.1 The Original Text and Its Conversational Context

The “this flower” proposition comes from passage 275 of the lower *juan* of the *Chuanxi lu* (傳習錄) (Wang Yangming, 1992a, lower *juan*, passage 275), recording a conversation Wang Yangming had with a friend during a visit to Nanzheng:

The Master was visiting Nanzheng. A friend pointed to the flower trees in the cliff and asked: “You say there is nothing outside the mind; but flowers like these bloom and fall of themselves in the remote mountains—what do they have to do with my mind?”

The Master replied: “Before you look at these flowers, they and your mind are both in a state of silent vacancy. As you come to look at these flowers, their colors at once show up clearly. From this you know that these flowers are not outside your mind.”

To understand this passage, we must first grasp the logic of the interlocutor’s challenge. The friend is not challenging the proposition “there is nothing outside the mind” itself; rather, he uses the example of “flowers blooming and falling in the remote mountains” to press upon a difficulty within it: what grounds are there for saying that a flower with which I have no perceptual connection is “not outside the mind”? This challenge has considerable philosophical acuity — it is in effect

asking: if “there is nothing outside the mind” holds, how are we to account for natural things that exist independently of all cognitive subjects?

Yangming’s answer does not evade this difficulty but responds to it through an analysis that attends carefully to the phenomenal structure of the perceptual event. This answer has three layers, and readings that quote only the first two sentences risk obscuring the most crucial concluding sentence: “From this you know that these flowers are not outside your mind.” It is this third sentence that reveals the argumentative aim of the preceding two: Yangming’s purpose is not to describe the ontological status of the flower, but to argue for **the epistemological conditions of the flower’s appearance**.

2.2 Two Misreadings and Their Clarification

The misreadings that this passage has attracted in the history of philosophy can broadly be divided into two kinds.

The first misreading: the idealist reading. This reading takes Yangming’s meaning to be that the material existence of the flower depends on the mind’s perception—when no one looks, the flower ceases to exist. On this reading, Yangming is merely dressing up Berkeleyan subjective idealism in Confucian clothing: “to exist is to be perceived.”

Yet a careful reading of the original text shows that Yangming says the flower and the mind “return together to silent vacancy” (*tong gui yu ji*), not that the flower “vanishes into nothingness.” “Silent vacancy” (*ji*) in Yangming’s philosophy refers to a latent, quiescent state, not a state of nothingness. More crucially, the friend’s question itself presupposes that “the flower blooms and falls of itself in the remote mountains”—and Yangming does not challenge this presupposition. What he truly denies is the view that the flower’s **appearance** (the presentation of its color and form in perception) can occur independently of the mind. CHEN Lai (1991, chap. 5), through careful textual analysis, points out that the *wu* (things) in “there is nothing outside the mind” refers primarily to the *li* (principle) of things—their moral-metaphysical structure and order—rather than *qi* (the material substrate of existence). Wang Yangming never denied the independent existence of

qi; what he denied was that things, in the sense of their perceptual appearance, can be constituted independently of the mind.

It should be acknowledged that the idealist reading is not without scholarly defenders. Wing-tsit Chan's influential translation and commentary (Chan, 1963, pp. 659–667) tends toward an idealist emphasis in its reading of certain passages, and the Berkeleyan parallel has been found illuminating by a strand of Western comparative scholarship. The objection to the idealist reading advanced here is therefore not that it is obviously wrong, but that it rests on a failure to attend to the logical structure of Yangming's argument in passage 275. The friend's challenge presupposes the flower's independent existence; Yangming's response does not contest this presupposition but redirects attention to the conditions of perceptual appearance. To read the conclusion—"this flower is not outside your mind"—as denying physical existence would make Yangming's argument self-defeating: it would ignore his own starting premise. The epistemological reading, by contrast, respects the internal logic of the exchange, and it is on these textual grounds—not merely on the authority of later commentators—that the idealist reading is set aside.

The second misreading: the mystical reading. This reading acknowledges that Yangming's words have a deeper meaning, but interprets "the mind and the flower returning together to silent vacancy" as a mysterious state accessible only in particular states of spiritual cultivation, which cannot be articulated in the language of ordinary epistemology. Though this reading avoids the crudeness of idealism, it forecloses the possibility of philosophical analysis through an appeal to mysticism.

Both of these misreadings share a common presupposition: both treat Yangming's proposition as an ontological claim about **the existence of the flower**. Once we step outside this presupposition, we find that Yangming is truly addressing an epistemological question.

2.3 The Epistemological Reading: The Generativity of Perceptual Appearance

Let us re-examine the three layers of the "this flower" proposition:

First layer: “Before you look at this flower, this flower and your mind are both in a state of silent vacancy.” “Silent vacancy” (*ji*) describes a state of latency, of being untriggered and unactivated. Before looking, there is no “perceptual object of the flower”—its colors, its form, its clear and manifest appearance—none of these have yet occurred. What Yangming says here is not that the material basis of the flower does not exist, but that **the appearance of the flower as a perceptual object has not yet taken place.** “This flower and your mind returning together to silent vacancy” means that both mind and flower are in an unactivated state: the mind is not operating, the flower is not appearing, and the two dwell together in a kind of latent silence.

Second layer: “As you come to look at this flower, its colors at once show up clearly.” “Showing up clearly” (*mingbai qilai*) is the key expression in this passage. It describes a **generative event**, not a discovery event. “Showing up clearly” is not “discovering colors that were already there”; it is the colors being generated and becoming manifest in this very moment. The phrase “at once” (*yishi*) emphasizes the instantaneous and holistic character of this appearance—the colors do not passively enter the mind from outside, but surge forth all at once in the encounter between mind and flower.

Third layer: “From this you know that this flower is not outside your mind.” This is the conclusion of Yangming’s entire argument. The preceding two layers of analysis together show that the appearance of the flower (that is, the flower’s presentation as a perceptual object) cannot take place apart from the operation of the mind. Therefore, the flower being “not outside the mind” means: **the flower in the perceptual sense is the product of the mind’s operation**, not a unidirectional projection from the external world onto the mind.

It is worth being precise about what is being claimed here, since this third layer is the point at which a misreading most easily enters. Yangming says this flower—*as it appears*, as a perceptual object with colors and form—is not outside the mind. He does not say that the physical substrate of the flower (its *qi*) is mind-dependent; as the friend’s own question presupposes, the flower blooms and falls in the remote mountains regardless. The conclusion concerns the constitution of **perceptual content**, not the existence of physical things. Whether this claim conflicts with or is supported

by predictive coding theory's physical realism is a question that Section 5 addresses in detail; what can be said at this stage is that the epistemological reading confines Yangming's conclusion to the domain of perceptual constitution, where a comparison with cognitive-scientific frameworks becomes meaningful.

The interpretive move from "this flower" to "this flower *as a perceptual object*" requires explicit justification, since it is the step on which the entire epistemological reading turns. The justification is internal to Yangming's own argument. The friend's challenge specifies exactly what kind of flower is at issue: one that "blooms and falls of itself in the remote mountains"—a flower whose physical existence proceeds entirely independently of any observer. Yangming does not contest this specification; he accepts it as the shared starting point of the exchange. What the first two layers of his reply then demonstrate is that the flower's *appearing*—its colors becoming clear, its perceptual presence—cannot take place without the operation of *xin*. The third layer's conclusion, "this flower is not outside your mind," is therefore a conclusion about what the preceding two layers have addressed: the conditions of perceptual appearance, not the conditions of physical existence. To read the conclusion as denying the physical flower's independence would be to ignore the logical structure Yangming himself establishes: a conclusion cannot coherently contradict the premise it is drawn from. Since the premise concedes the flower's physical independence, the conclusion must be restricted to the domain of perceptual appearance. The epistemological reading is therefore not an external imposition but a reconstruction of Yangming's own argumentative logic.

We may now state the epistemological core of Yangming's "this flower" proposition: **the perceptual object is not a passive mapping of the external world, but the result of the mind's active generation.** This is not a claim about the material existence of the flower, but a proposition about the mechanism of perception—the flower "shows up clearly" because the mind's operation makes it so.

This reading has its basis in the broader context of Yangming's philosophy. In the very passage immediately preceding the "this flower" entry (passage 274 of the lower *juan*) (Wang Yangming, 1992a, lower *juan*, passage 274), Yangming has just said: "Heaven, earth, and the ten thousand

things originally form one body with human beings; the most refined point of emanation (*faqiao*) of all this is the one point of luminous awareness (*lingming*) in the human mind.” The term *faqiao* is of particular importance: the mind is not a passive receiver but the active generative center through which the ten thousand things “come to fruition” and become manifest. The “this flower” proposition unfolds within this framework—it describes the mode of operation of the mind as a generative system.

2.4 Distinguishing the Present Approach from Existing Comparative Studies

In recent years, several scholars have interpreted Wang Yangming from the perspective of embodied cognition and enactivism. Chan (2024), through the Varela-Thompson tradition, reads “the unity of knowledge and action” as an anti-representationalist moral epistemological proposition; Frisina (2022) takes “forming one body with the ten thousand things” as an entry point for discussing Yangming’s organicism within the framework of embodied mind theory. The contribution of these studies lies in establishing the legitimacy of a dialogue between Yangming’s Learning of the Mind-and-Heart and contemporary cognitive science.

The approach of this paper is complementary but distinct. Existing studies focus on Yangming’s **moral epistemological** propositions (the unity of knowledge and action, *liangzhi*), and draw primarily on the enactivist tradition of Varela et al. (1991), Thompson, Noë, and others as their cognitive-scientific resource. This paper focuses on Yangming’s **theory of perception** (the “this flower” proposition), and draws on the predictive coding framework as represented by Clark (2013). Enactivism emphasizes that cognition is the coupled action of organism and environment; predictive coding provides a more precise computational description—perception is the process by which a generative model continuously predicts and minimizes prediction error. The latter is capable of forming correspondences with the three-layered structure of the “this flower” proposition at a finer level of granularity. This is the point of departure for the argument of this paper.

One might ask why predictive coding rather than phenomenology—Husserlian intentionality,

Merleau-Ponty’s bodily intentionality, or Kantian schematism—serves as the comparative framework here, since each of these traditions also insists, in its own way, that perception is not passive reception but active, structuring engagement. The choice is motivated by a specific feature of the “this flower” proposition: its **three-layered sequential structure** (before looking / coming to look / colors becoming clear) describes a perceptual event in terms of triggering conditions, signal input, and the generative production of a stable percept. This is precisely the kind of mechanistic, stage-structured account that predictive coding articulates with computational precision—the sequence from prior, to prediction error triggered by sensory input, to stabilized perceptual representation maps directly onto Yangming’s three layers. Phenomenological frameworks, for all their depth, describe the intentional structure of perceptual experience from the first-person perspective; they do not typically offer an account of the *mechanism* by which the perceptual object is generated from its pre-perceptual conditions. It is at this mechanistic level that the comparison with predictive coding proves most illuminating.

3 The Core Mechanisms of Predictive Coding Theory

The dominant intuition regarding perception can be described through a simple schema: the external world emits physical signals such as light and sound; these signals reach the brain via the sensory organs and yield perceptual representations of external things. In this picture, the direction of perception is unidirectional—from outside to inside, from world to mind. Predictive coding theory, developed from Helmholtz’s notion of “unconscious inference” (Helmholtz, 1867) and given its neural-computational formulation by Rao and Ballard (1999), radically inverts this picture.

3.1 The Basic Framework of Predictive Coding

The central claim of predictive coding theory, as summarized by Clark (2013), is as follows: the brain is a continuously operating **prediction machine**, whose basic mode of operation is not to extract information about the world incrementally from sensory inputs, but to continuously generate

predictions of those inputs and to test and revise such predictions against the actual inputs received.

Within the predictive coding framework, the brain is understood as a **hierarchical generative system**: higher cortical areas continuously send prediction signals to lower areas; lower areas compute the discrepancy between these top-down predictions and their own representations of incoming sensory data, and feed back upward the difference between the two—the **prediction error** (for a more technically precise account, see Friston, 2010). Higher areas revise their predictive models in response to this error signal, and the system thereby iterates continuously, converging on the optimal explanation of the current sensory input. The perceptual object is the optimal hypothesis that the system outputs upon convergence of this iterative process.

3.2 Four Key Concepts

Generative model. The “generative model” is the most central concept in predictive coding theory. It refers to a probabilistic model of the world maintained within the brain—not a static description of “what the world is like,” but a dynamic model of “how the world generates the current sensory input.” Clark (2013) notes that the task of this model is to “track the causal structure that produces sensory inputs,” generating expectations of sensory inputs through internal simulation. Perception is not a matter of “reading out” the world from sensory inputs, but of “generating” the world from the generative model.

Prediction error. Prediction error is the difference between prediction and actual input, and it is the core signal driving the operation of the entire system. In the hierarchical architecture of predictive coding, **what is transmitted upward is prediction error alone**, and not the sensory input itself—the brain responds only to “what is unexpected.” When prediction and input are closely matched, prediction error approaches zero, the system requires no updating, and a stable state is achieved; when a significant discrepancy exists between the two, the error signal triggers revision and updating of the model. The occurrence of perception is not a matter of sensory signals “entering” the brain, but of the brain’s predictive model being “corrected” by sensory signals. The function of sensory input is to provide error feedback, not to directly furnish perceptual content.

Prior. “Prior” refers to the predictive dispositions that the brain has formed through the accumulation of past experience, brought to bear prior to the reception of any new sensory input. Priors are not static stored memories but dynamic dispositions sedimented in the connection weights of neural networks—they shape the initial expectations of the generative model when confronted with new inputs. It is for this reason that Clark (2013) notes that “perception is theory-laden”: what we perceive depends, to a considerable degree, on the priors that the brain brings to the perceptual process.

Explaining away. “Explaining away” is predictive coding theory’s overarching characterization of the perceptual process. Clark (2013) notes that the essence of perception is to “explain away” sensory inputs by means of top-down predictions: when the generative model successfully “explains” the current sensory signal through its predictions—that is, when prediction error is minimized—the perceptual object stably “presents” itself. Perception is not discovery but a distinctive form of explanation: the brain makes an optimal inference about the causal source of sensory inputs and outputs this inference as perceptual content.

3.3 The Nature of Perception: The Brain’s Best Guess

Synthesizing the four concepts above, predictive coding theory’s account of the nature of perception may be condensed into a single claim: **perception is the optimal interpretation of current sensory input by the brain’s generative predictive model, not a direct mapping of sensory input onto the brain.**

Clark (2013) captures the central spirit of this theory in a striking formulation: “Our expectations are, in some important sense, the primary source of all our perceptual content, even though that content is continuously tested, refined, and selected by prediction error signals arising from sensory inputs.”

The subversive force of this statement lies in how it reverses the causal direction of perception: it is not the external world that “injects” content into the brain, but the brain that generates content on the basis of priors, with external signals subsequently “correcting” this content. The greater part

of perception originates from within; sensory input functions as constraint and revision rather than as the originating source of perceptual content.

It should be clarified that predictive coding theory neither denies the existence of the external world nor the causal role of sensory input. Sensory inputs (signals of light, sound, touch, and so forth) are real physical processes that provide error constraints for the brain's predictive model; but the **content** of perception—the red we see, the melody we hear, the spatial structure we experience—is the output of the brain's generative model, not a direct encoding of sensory signals. In this sense, perception is at once dependent upon external input and the product of internal generation; neither can be dispensed with.

It should be noted that the account followed in this paper—Clark's philosophical elaboration of the predictive coding framework (Clark, 2013)—is not the only version of the theory. Friston's free-energy principle (Friston, 2010) offers a more mathematically rigorous and biologically general formulation, and extends the framework from perception to action through the concept of active inference. Where these two versions agree on the fundamental claim—that the brain is a generative model minimizing prediction error—the argument of this paper applies equally to both. The choice of Clark's version as the primary reference is motivated by its philosophical accessibility and its explicit attention to the epistemological implications of the theory; it is not intended to exclude the Fristonian framework.

4 Structural Correspondence Analysis

The preceding two sections have clarified, respectively, the epistemological implications of the “this flower” proposition and the core mechanisms of predictive coding theory. This section systematically argues for a structural correspondence between the two. By “structural analogy” I mean that two theoretical frameworks, in describing the same class of phenomena, employ parallel conceptual structures and explanatory logics at a specified level of analysis. Such analogy does not require complete agreement on ontological presuppositions, nor does it require any historical re-

lationship of influence; it requires only that, **at the level of describing perceptual mechanisms**, the central claims of each framework be mutually translatable and mutually illuminating. It should also be acknowledged that predictive coding theory itself remains a subject of active debate within cognitive science and philosophy of mind: questions persist regarding the precise scope of the generative model, the neural implementation of prediction error, and whether the framework can be extended from perception to cognition more broadly. The argument of this paper is therefore restricted to the core claims of Clark’s version of the theory as a framework for perceptual mechanism, and does not presuppose that predictive coding has been conclusively established as the correct account of all neural processing.

One further point about the argumentative role of this correspondence deserves emphasis. The epistemological reading of the “this flower” proposition advanced in Section 2—that the proposition concerns the constitution of perceptual content rather than the existence of physical things—was argued on textual and internal-logical grounds. The structural analogy demonstrated in this section provides a further line of support. The idealist and mystical readings both orient their interpretation around the question of the flower’s ontological status—whether the flower exists when unperceived, or whether a mysterious unity of mind and world is achieved in perception. Neither reading is primarily concerned with the three-layered *sequential* structure of the proposition—the state of non-activation, the triggering event, and the holistic emergence of perceptual content. It is precisely this sequential, mechanistic structure that maps onto the predictive coding account with systematic precision, and it is precisely this structure that the epistemological reading foregrounds. The predictive coding framework thus functions not merely as a parallel to be appreciated, but as an external standard that rewards the epistemological reading and leaves the idealist and mystical readings with no corresponding structural purchase.

4.1 *Xin* and the Generative Model: Active Generation Rather than Passive Reception

The most fundamental point of convergence between predictive coding theory and Wang Yangming's "this flower" proposition lies in their respective understandings of the perceiving subject.

Within the predictive coding framework, the brain's core function is not to receive and store external information, but to maintain and operate a generative model—a dynamic probabilistic system concerning how the current sensory input is generated by the world. This model operates continuously, generating predictions continuously; perceptual content is its output rather than its input. The brain, in this framework, is an **active generative system**.

The *xin* in Wang Yangming's account possesses a strikingly parallel structural character. In the context of the "this flower" proposition, Yangming has just described *xin* as "the most refined point of emanation of all things in heaven and earth"—the term *faqiao* 發竅 (point of emanation) is of singular importance here. Its meaning is not "a window opened to allow external things to enter," but rather "that from which the ten thousand things surge forth and become manifest." The *xin* is not a passive receptacle receiving the projections of the world; it is the generative center through which the world comes to be disclosed. It is important to note that this claim operates at a level that encompasses both the ontological and the epistemological: *faqiao* designates *xin*'s general role as the generative locus of the ten thousand things within the moral-cosmic order. When Yangming immediately proceeds to the "this flower" proposition, he is not abandoning this framework but applying it at the level of a specific perceptual event: the same generative activity of *xin* that, at the ontological level, is the condition of the ten thousand things' disclosure, is what, at the perceptual level, makes the flower's colors "become clear all at once" when sense organ meets sense object. The move from ontological to perceptual level may thus be read not as an arbitrary analogical leap but as an application of the same principle at a finer grain—though it should be acknowledged that this is an interpretive proposal rather than a claim that Yangming himself draws this distinction explicitly.

This parallel is not superficial. The generative model of predictive coding and Yangming's *xin*

share the same core structural feature: **perceptual content is generated from within, not input from without**. Both reject the unidirectional transmission model of “world → sensation → mind,” and both maintain that the direction of perception is fundamentally from the inside outward—the brain/*xin* first generates anticipations of the world, and the role of sensory input is to constrain and correct these anticipations, not to supply perceptual content from scratch.

Two clarifications are needed before proceeding. The first concerns the predictive coding side of the comparison. In the predictive coding framework, the “generative model” is a specific functional component—the probabilistic model of causal structure that generates top-down predictions—rather than the brain or cognitive system as a whole. The brain’s full predictive processing architecture additionally includes the prediction-error units, precision-weighting mechanisms, and active inference loops. The comparison made in this section is therefore between *xin*-as-active-generative-system and the *brain as a whole hierarchical predictive-processing architecture*; within that architecture, the structural feature being highlighted is the one played by the generative model: that perceptual content is the output of an internally-generated model, not a direct transcription of sensory inputs. The correspondence identified in the summary table and throughout this section should be understood in this sense: it is a correspondence at the level of the system’s overall generative orientation, with the generative model as its characteristic component.

The second clarification concerns the Yangming side. *Xin* in Yangming’s philosophy is not a simple faculty with a single function; it encompasses at least three intertwined dimensions: (1) the active generator of perceptual content; (2) the seat of *liangzhi*, the faculty of innate moral discrimination; and (3) the ontological center through which, as *faqiao*, the ten thousand things are disclosed within the moral-cosmic order. Comparing *xin* to the predictive processing architecture of the brain might seem to require illegitimately isolating dimension (1) from the others—and one might worry that in Yangming’s framework, these dimensions are not separable modules but aspects of a single integrated reality.

This worry is genuine, but it does not defeat the comparison. The methodological move being made is not to *reduce xin* to its perceptual-generative function, but to treat that function as a

distinguishable level of description. Yangming’s own conduct of the “this flower” argument supports this: the question posed by his friend concerns the *perceptual appearance* of the flower, and Yangming’s response addresses precisely the conditions under which that appearance arises and ceases. Within the argument itself, *xin* is operating as a perceptual-generative system—it is what makes the flower’s colors “become clear all at once.” That *liangzhi* and the ontological-generative function are simultaneously at work does not prevent us from identifying and analysing the perceptual-generative dimension; it means only that our analysis is partial—a point this paper explicitly acknowledges. Comparative analysis across traditions routinely proceeds by identifying a level of description at which two frameworks converge, without claiming that they converge at every level. The present comparison is conducted at the level of **perceptual mechanism**, and it is at that level that the analogy is claimed to hold.

4.2 “Returning Together to Silent Vacancy” and the Non-Activation of Flower-Specific Prediction

The first layer of the “this flower” proposition—“when you had not yet looked at this flower, this flower and your *xin* were returning together to silent vacancy”—is at once the most easily misread passage in the entire exchange and the place where the predictive coding framework is able to furnish the most precise elucidation.

A common misreading would interpret “returning together to silent vacancy” as the mind falling into quiescence or the cessation of mental activity—a kind of global standby. The predictive coding framework allows us to resist this reading with mechanistic precision. Within a predictive coding system, the generative model does not simply switch off in the absence of a particular stimulus: it continuously generates predictions at every level of the processing hierarchy, maintaining prior expectations about the structure of the environment even in the absence of specific triggering input. What changes when the observer has not yet turned to look at the flower is not that the *xin* (or brain) ceases to operate altogether, but rather that the **flower-specific prediction-and-error loop has not been engaged**—no flower-related sensory signal has arrived to generate a flower-related prediction

error, and therefore no flower-directed error-minimization process has been initiated, and no flower percept has been constructed.

“This flower and your *xin* returning together to silent vacancy” is thus best understood not as a description of global inactivity, but as a description of **mutual non-activation** at the level of this particular perceptual encounter:

- “This flower” (as perceptual object) returns to silent vacancy — the flower, as a constituted perceptual object with its specific colors and form, has not yet been generated; its phenomenal presence is absent
- “Your *xin*” returns to silent vacancy — the flower-directed generative loop within *xin* has not been triggered; *xin* bears no flower-related representation in this moment

The character *tong* (“together”) in “returning together to silent vacancy” is particularly precise: *xin* and flower are not each dwelling in two separate kinds of stillness, but co-inhabiting a single state of mutually dependent non-activation—when the flower-directed loop in *xin* is not engaged, the flower does not appear as a percept; when there is no flower percept, there is nothing to have engaged the loop. This corresponds exactly to the relation of mutual dependence between sensory signal and generative output in predictive coding: the absence of flower-specific input means the absence of flower-specific prediction error, which means the absence of any flower-specific perceptual representation.

A limit of the predictive coding interpretation must be acknowledged here. The analysis above captures *jì* (寂) in its negative aspect: the absence of a particular perceptual event. But in the Neo-Confucian tradition more broadly—and in the paired concepts *jì-gǎn* (寂感, “silent vacancy and resonant response”) that inform Yangming’s usage—*jì* designates not merely the absence of perceptual activity but the **positive ontological ground** from which resonant response (*gǎn* 感) becomes possible: the original undivided fullness of *xin* prior to any particular differentiation. This is *xin* in its *tǐ* (體, substance) aspect, as distinct from its *yòng* (用, function) aspect. Predictive coding has no concept that maps onto this positive dimension: a generative model in the absence of specific

triggering input is simply a model awaiting input, not a positively characterized ground of potential responsiveness with ontological standing. The analysis offered here captures the functional-mechanistic reading of “returning together to silent vacancy” while leaving its deeper metaphysical resonances—which belong to the *tǐ-yòng* (體用) structure of Yangming’s philosophy—outside the scope of the comparison.

4.3 “Coming to Look at This Flower” and the Triggering of Sensory Signals

“When you come to look at this flower”—this phrase describes a triggering event. When the observer turns his gaze toward the flower tree amid the rocks, a series of physical processes ensues: light of particular wavelengths reflected by the flower enters the eye, stimulates the photoreceptor cells of the retina, is converted into neural electrical signals, and propagates upward along the visual pathway.

Within the predictive coding framework, this process corresponds to **sensory signal input to the system**. These signals do not themselves carry any perceptual content—they are purely physical perturbations, what in predictive coding terminology are sometimes called “driving signals.” Their function is not to produce perception directly, but to encounter the predictions of the generative model, generate prediction errors, and thereby trigger the initiation of the entire error-minimization process.

There is a detail here worth attending to: Yangming says “when you **come to look at this flower**,” not “when this flower enters your eyes.” The subject is “you,” and the verb is the active “come to look”—this implies that the occurrence of perception is not merely the passive reception of light striking the eye, but an active orientation and contact between sense organ and sense object. This is in profound accord with the spirit of “active inference” in predictive coding theory (Friston, 2010): the perceiving subject does not wait passively for sensory input, but actively directs the sense organs toward the world, constraining the range of sensory input through action.

4.4 “The Colors Becoming Clear All at Once” and the Generation of Perceptual Representation

“Then the colors of this flower become clear all at once”—this is the crux of the entire passage, and also the point at which the correspondence between predictive coding theory and Yangming’s proposition is most precise.

Consider first the expression “becoming clear” (*mingbai qilai*). The directional complement *qilai* (“becoming,” literally “rising up”) marks a **generative process from non-existence to existence, from latency to manifestation**. “The colors becoming clear all at once” describes not colors entering the *xin* from outside, but colors **surging forth** in this moment—it is an event, an occurrence of generation, not the completion of a reception.

It might be objected that *qilai* could equally mark a process of *disclosure* or *unconcealment* rather than generation—on a Heidegger-inflected reading, the colors do not come into being but come out of hiddenness, and the event would be an *alētheia* (unveiling) rather than a production. This reading is philosophically coherent in its own right, but it fits poorly with the specific logic of Yangming’s argument. The disclosure model presupposes that the flower’s perceptual character—its colors and form as we experience them—pre-existed the perceptual encounter and was merely hidden awaiting uncovering; but Yangming’s third-layer conclusion—“this flower is not outside your mind”—is precisely a claim that those perceptual qualities could not have existed outside the mind’s generative operation. If the colors were pre-existing and merely uncovered, they would be “outside the mind” before the encounter, and Yangming’s conclusion would be unwarranted. The constitutive reading—that the colored, formed appearance is *made* rather than *found*—is the most coherent reading given Yangming’s epistemological commitments: it is the reading that makes the third layer follow consistently from the first two. This constitutive claim is better captured by the generative model of predictive coding, where perceptual content is actively produced by the model’s output, than by a disclosure model, where something pre-existing is merely uncovered.

This accords closely with predictive coding’s description of perceptual generation. In the predictive coding framework, once sensory input has triggered prediction errors, the generative model

begins sending a cascade of predictions downward, iteratively converging through mutual correction with the error signals propagating upward through successive levels. When this process reaches stability across all levels—that is, when prediction errors have been sufficiently minimized—the system outputs a stable perceptual representation. Clark (2013) describes this moment as the stabilization of the brain’s “best guess” regarding the current sensory input: when the generative model has found the optimal interpretation of the current sensory signals, the perceptual object “presents itself.”

The expression *yishi* (“all at once”) carries an additional layer of significance: this generative process is **holistic and instantaneous**. The colors are not assembled piece by piece, but surge forth as a whole in a single moment. This too is consistent with the mechanism of predictive coding: the hierarchical prediction error minimization process completes within an extremely brief interval, and the perceptual object is stabilized and disclosed as a whole rather than being assembled fragment by fragment.

4.5 The Historical Conditionedness of *Xin* and the Prior Structure of the Generative Model

Although the “this flower” proposition as a textual unit describes only the instant of a single perceptual occurrence, both Yangming’s account and predictive coding theory agree on a point that extends beyond the single event: **the structure of the perceiving system is not fixed but is shaped by the history of its own past operations**. In the predictive coding framework, the priors that the generative model brings to any given perceptual encounter are themselves the sedimented product of prior prediction errors—what the model “expects” at any moment reflects what it has repeatedly encountered and learned. In this sense, the generative model that underlies the flower percept is not a blank slate but a historically constituted structure.

Yangming’s account equally insists that the structure of *xin* is historically conditioned. The *xin* that a person brings to any perceptual encounter already carries the accumulated weight of past cognitive and moral activity. This shared structural insight—that the generative background of

perception is a historical deposit, not a fixed given—constitutes a genuine point of convergence between the two frameworks.

However, this convergence conceals a deep asymmetry that must be squarely acknowledged, and that anticipates the discussion in Section 5. In the predictive coding framework, the updating of the model’s prior structure through prediction error is **normatively neutral**: every perceptual encounter, whether it deepens veridical perception or reinforces a distortion, equally updates the weights. The model has no internal standard distinguishing a “good update” from a “bad” one; it only tracks statistical fit.

Yangming’s account is structured entirely differently. He explicitly identifies the concept of *xí rǎn* (習染)—the accumulation of habitual desires and conditioned distortions—as a **corrupting** process that progressively occludes the original luminosity of *liangzhi* (see Wang Yangming, 1992a, upper *juan*). For Yangming, not all experiential shaping of *xin* is equivalent: cultivation (*gōngfū* 功夫) that extends *liangzhi* moves the *xin* toward its proper functioning, while *xí rǎn* moves it away. The historical conditionedness of *xin* is therefore not a neutral learning process but a normatively charged one, in which the direction of shaping is subject to evaluation.

This asymmetry is philosophically significant. It means that the structural parallel between historically constituted priors and the historically constituted *xin* holds only at a coarse grain—both are historically shaped—but breaks down as soon as normative direction is introduced. Predictive coding provides no analogue for the distinction between *liangzhi*-extending cultivation and *xí rǎn*-induced distortion. This is not merely a detail; it marks the boundary of the structural analogy examined in this paper, and connects directly to the deeper divergence between *liangzhi* and the generative model discussed in Section 5.

4.6 Summary Table of Structural Correspondences

The foregoing analysis may be summarized in the following table of correspondences (see Table 1):

This table of correspondences demonstrates that Wang Yangming’s “this flower” proposition and predictive coding theory exhibit systematic structural parallels at the level of describing per-

Table 1: Structural Correspondences Between Wang Yangming’s “This Flower” Proposition and Predictive Coding Theory

Yangming Concept	Mechanistic Description	Predictive Coding Structural Parallel
<i>Xin</i> (mind)	The system that actively generates perceptual content	Hierarchical predictive-processing architecture (generative model as central component)
Before looking: returning together to silent vacancy	No flower-directed loop engaged; flower-percept absent	Flower-specific sensory signal absent; no flower-related prediction error; no flower percept generated
Coming to look at this flower (contact between sense organ and object)	Sense organ encounters external stimulus	Sensory signal input triggers generation of prediction error
The colors becoming clear all at once	Holistic emergence of perceptual object; a generative event	Prediction error minimization; generative model outputs stable perceptual representation
Historical conditionedness of <i>xin</i> ; <i>xí rǎn</i> (習染) as normatively charged shaping	Past experience shapes the standing prior structure of <i>xin</i> , but direction is subject to normative evaluation	Generative model’s priors are historically sedimented, but updating is normatively neutral
This flower is not outside the mind	The appearance of the perceptual object depends on the operation of <i>xin</i>	Perceptual content is the output of the generative model, not a direct mapping of external signals

ceptual mechanisms, rather than merely local and incidental coincidence. The two frameworks employ different languages and conceptual systems, yet they converge with striking consistency on the following core claims: **perception is a generation from inside outward, not a reception from outside inward; the perceptual object is the output of a generative system, not a direct mapping of the external world; the occurrence of perception depends on the triggering of sensory signals, but the content of perception is determined by the internal generative model.**

One additional concept introduced in Section 3 bears mention here: “explaining away.” This

concept names the overall logic of the perceptual process in predictive coding—the generative model “explains away” incoming sensory signals by successfully predicting them, such that the achievement of prediction-error minimization is simultaneously the achievement of stable perceptual representation. This logic is implicit in the correspondences above rather than mapped onto a single Yangming phrase. Yangming’s three-layered sequence—mutual non-activation, sensory triggering, holistic emergence—describes precisely the process whereby the encounter between *xin* and flower “resolves” into a stable percept; the “becoming clear all at once” of the colors corresponds not merely to a reduction of prediction error but to the achievement of that explanatory closure that predictive coding calls “explaining away.”

5 Differences and Limits

The correspondence analysis in the preceding section demonstrates that Wang Yangming’s “this flower” proposition and predictive coding theory exhibit a systematic structural analogy at the level of describing perceptual mechanisms. Yet structural analogy is not equivalent to complete identity. Any rigorous cross-traditional comparison must directly confront the genuine differences between the two frameworks and explicitly delimit the boundaries of its argumentative claims, so as to render the proposed analogy more persuasive. This section addresses these differences across three levels.

5.1 Differences in Ontological Presuppositions

Predictive coding theory constitutes an explicitly realist framework: it presupposes the existence of a mind-independent physical world that continuously generates sensory signals, providing error constraints for the brain’s generative model. The physical sources of sensory signals—the wavelengths of light, the frequencies of sound waves, the pressure of tactile sensation—are real physical processes that obtain independently of any cognitive subject.

Wang Yangming’s ontological presuppositions, by contrast, have been a subject of sustained

scholarly controversy. The proposition “there is nothing outside the mind” (*xin wai wu wu* 心外無物) has historically attracted the criticism of “subjective idealism”—the charge that Yangming denies the existence of a mind-independent physical world, rendering his position analogous to Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*. However, this criticism has been substantially challenged by influential Chinese scholars of Wang Yangming. CHEN Lai (1991), through careful textual analysis, argues that the *wu* (things) in “there is nothing outside the mind” refers primarily to the *li* (principle) of things—their moral-metaphysical structure and order—rather than to *qi* (vital force) as the material substrate of existence. Wang Yangming never denied the independent existence of *qi*; what he denied was that things, in their moral-ontological significance, could be constituted independently of the *xin*. MOU Zongsan (1969) further argues that the “production of things” by innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) is an “ontological creation”—a phrase that, as this paper interprets it, does not designate the *ex nihilo* creation of things out of nothing, but rather the conferral upon things of their proper place within the moral-cosmic order.

With respect to the “this flower” proposition, Yangming does not deny the existence of the flower at the level of *qi*—the friend’s very question presupposes that “this flower in the remote mountains blooms and falls of itself,” and Yangming does not contest this presupposition. What he denies is that the flower’s colors can “become clear all at once” independently of the operation of the *xin*. This is consistent with the position of predictive coding at the level of mechanism: sensory signals (the physical processes of *qi*) trigger perception, but the content of perception (the manifest appearance of color) is constituted by the generative model (the *xin*).

Accordingly, the ontological difference between the two can be stated with greater precision: predictive coding is explicitly committed to physical realism, while Yangming’s ontological position is compatible with this commitment at the level of *qi*, but belongs to an altogether different problem-framework at the level of *li*. **The comparative claim of this paper is restricted to the descriptive level of perceptual mechanism; it does not require the two frameworks to achieve coherence at the level of overall ontology.**

A sharper objection must be addressed here, however. Yangming uses his account of percep-

tual mechanism (layers one and two of the “this flower” proposition) as evidence for a conclusion (layer three: “this flower is not outside your mind”) that appears to carry ontological weight. If the structural analogy with predictive coding is valid, does it not follow that predictive coding supports Yangming’s ontological conclusion—which would be awkward for a realist framework? Or conversely, does predictive coding’s realism undermine Yangming’s conclusion, thereby threatening the analogy itself?

The answer depends on a careful reading of what Yangming’s third-layer conclusion actually claims. As argued in Section 2, Yangming does not conclude that the physical flower is mind-dependent; he concludes that the flower *as a perceptual object*—as a constituted appearance with colors and form—cannot exist outside the mind’s generative operation. This is a claim about the constitution of *perceptual content*, not about the existence of mind-independent physical things. So understood, predictive coding does not conflict with Yangming’s conclusion but actively supports it: the red we see and the form we experience are outputs of the generative model, not direct encodings of mind-independent physical properties. Both frameworks agree that perceptual content, as content, is mind-constituted; they disagree only about whether the physical world that provides the error signal is itself mind-dependent. That further disagreement operates at a level that Yangming’s third-layer conclusion, on the epistemological reading, does not require us to resolve. It is important to distinguish this shared commitment from idealism about the external world. I use the term *perceptual constitutivism* to label the position that perceptual content as content is constituted by the mind’s generative activity; so understood, perceptual constitutivism is fully compatible with *physical realism*—the position that the mind-independent physical world exists and causally constrains perception. Predictive coding holds both positions simultaneously: the physical world is real and generates sensory signals, but what we perceive (the red, the form, the spatial structure) is the model’s output, not a direct transcription of those signals. Yangming’s third-layer conclusion, on the epistemological reading, is a perceptual constitutivist claim; it does not require idealism about the physical world. Both frameworks thus occupy a position that is neither naive realism nor subjective idealism: perceptual content is mind-constituted, while the physical world that generates

the sensory signal remains causally real. That two frameworks arrived at this same intermediate position—one through computational neuroscience in the late twentieth century, the other through philosophical reflection in sixteenth-century China, without any contact or mutual influence—is itself a datum that invites explanation, and one that the convergence hypothesis explored in Section 6 takes seriously.

5.2 The Fundamental Difference between *Liangzhi* and the Generative Model

A deeper difference exists between the generative model of predictive coding and Wang Yang-ming’s innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi*).

The generative model of predictive coding is **acquired *a posteriori*, fallible, and revisable**. The model’s priors derive from the accumulation of past experience, and its weights are continuously updated through prediction errors—it is precisely because the model can err that error signals are needed to drive correction. The model itself has no normative orientation; it is merely a probabilistic approximation of the statistical structure of the world, maintaining a computationally neutral stance toward error.

Innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi*) is fundamentally different. Wang Yangming holds that *liangzhi* is a **congenitally complete, essentially infallible** moral-cognitive capacity: “Innate moral knowledge is simply the mind that distinguishes right from wrong; right and wrong are simply the capacity to like and dislike. To like and dislike already exhausts right and wrong; to distinguish right and wrong already exhausts the ten thousand things and all their transformations” (Wang Yangming, 1992a, middle *juan*, passage 166). The fact that *liangzhi* manifests as deviation and obscuration in practice is not because *liangzhi* itself is in error, but because **selfish desires** (*siyu 私欲*) have obscured its original luminosity. The core of Yangming’s self-cultivation discourse is “extending innate moral knowledge” (*zhi liangzhi 致良知*)—removing the obscuration of selfish desires so that the original functioning of *liangzhi* can be fully expressed, rather than training a better model through error feedback.

This difference touches on the fundamental divergence between the two frameworks: the epis-

temology of predictive coding is **Bayesian**—all cognition consists in probabilistic updating on the basis of evidence, with no *a priori* certain knowledge; Wang Yangming’s epistemology, by contrast, presupposes a **congenitally complete moral-cognitive capacity**, and the goal of self-cultivation is one of return rather than construction. This difference cannot be dissolved and must be explicitly acknowledged. It indicates that the structural analogy between the “this flower” proposition and predictive coding is concentrated primarily in the **mechanistic description of perceptual generation**, rather than in a correspondence between the two as complete epistemological frameworks.

5.3 The Asymmetry between the Descriptive and Normative Dimensions

Predictive coding is a **purely descriptive theory**, whereas the “this flower” proposition is embedded within the context of Yangming’s **self-cultivation discourse** (*gongfu lun* 功夫論), and thus possesses an intrinsic normative dimension.

Predictive coding describes how the brain works—it treats sage and ordinary person alike, employing the same mechanistic description for veridical and erroneous perception. It draws no distinction between the normative and the actual, and provides no normative guidance concerning “how one ought to perceive.”

Yangming’s “this flower” proposition, by contrast, arises in response to a question concerning the level of cultivation attained. Yangming’s answer is not merely a phenomenological description of perception; it simultaneously implies a cultivational ideal: the sage who has genuinely penetrated “there is nothing outside the mind” possesses a *liangzhi* whose capacity for resonant response extends to heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things—“The great man regards heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things as one body” (*Daxue wen*, in Wang Yangming, 1992b). This is a normative claim about which the predictive coding framework maintains complete silence.

The position of this paper is as follows: the structural analogy obtains at the descriptive level; differences at the normative level do not negate the analogy at the descriptive level, but neither can they be ignored. A Wang Yangming specialist might object that this distinction is itself alien to Yangming’s framework: in the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart, even the most

basic act of perceptual engagement is already morally oriented, since the *xin* that generates the flower percept is the same *xin* whose *liangzhi* is always already at work. This objection is well-founded as a claim about Yangming’s own unified framework—but it does not defeat the comparison. The methodological move being made is a *level-distinction for purposes of analysis*, not a claim that Yangming himself treats description and normativity as separable domains. Comparative philosophy across traditions routinely identifies a level of description at which two frameworks converge, while explicitly acknowledging that other levels of their respective frameworks diverge. The present analogy is conducted at the mechanistic-descriptive level, and the normative dimensions of Yangming’s account are not dissolved but explicitly reserved for the limit-discussion that follows. Placing predictive coding in juxtaposition with the “this flower” proposition furnishes the latter with a precise cognitive-scientific interpretation that displaces mystical misreadings; but such an interpretation only touches upon the perceptual-theoretical dimension of Yangming’s proposition, and does not encompass its self-cultivation discourse or its moral-metaphysical dimensions. The latter constitute an irreducible and distinctive contribution of Yangming’s philosophy—one that cannot be exhausted by the language of science.

5.4 The Valid Scope of the Structural Analogy

Synthesizing the analysis across the three levels above, the valid scope of the structural analogy advanced by this paper can be precisely delimited as follows:

The valid scope: At the level of the **mechanistic description of a single perceptual event**—how the object of perception emerges from nothing into presence, how sensory triggering encounters the internal generative system, and why perceptual content depends on an internal model rather than on external mapping—the “this flower” proposition and predictive coding theory exhibit a systematic conceptual correspondence. This analogy is sufficient to support the central argument of this paper: Yangming’s proposition describes a perceptual generation mechanism that is coherent and precise within a cognitive-scientific framework, rather than a mystical intuitive experience.

The limits: The innate normativity of *liangzhi*, the practical orientation of self-cultivation dis-

course, and the moral-metaphysical framework of the ontology all fall outside the scope of this structural correspondence. These dimensions are central to Yangming’s philosophy, yet they are precisely the domains that predictive coding theory has never reached. Acknowledging this boundary is not a depreciation of Yangming’s philosophy, but an expression of respect for the distinctive character of each framework.

6 Conclusion

This paper takes Wang Yangming’s “this flower” proposition as its core text and predictive coding theory as its comparative framework, arguing for a systematic structural analogy between the two at the level of describing perceptual generation mechanisms. The argument proceeds through close textual analysis of the proposition’s three-layered sequential structure, systematic exposition of the predictive coding framework, and a correspondence analysis showing that the two frameworks converge—at the mechanistic-descriptive level—on the same core claim: perceptual content is generated from within outward, not received from without inward. Section 5 then explicitly delimits the scope of this analogy by examining the genuine differences between the two frameworks, particularly the divergence between the innate normativity of *liangzhi* and the computational neutrality of the generative model.

6.1 Implications for the Study of Wang Yangming

The significance of this argument for the study of Wang Yangming lies, first and foremost, in providing a precise modern epistemological vocabulary for the interpretation of the “this flower” proposition, thereby effectively addressing the longstanding misreading that equates the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart with mysticism or subjective idealism. “The colors becoming clear all at once” is not a metaphysical experience, not an inexpressible moment of sudden enlightenment, but a perceptual generation event with a clearly articulable cognitive-scientific mechanism—an interpretation that restores to Yangming’s proposition the possibility of analytical engagement within

contemporary philosophical discussion.

Second, the approach of this paper is complementary to existing enactivist interpretive lines (Chan, 2024; Frisina, 2022). Both lines of interpretation together reveal deep resonances between Yangming’s Learning of the Mind-and-Heart and contemporary cognitive science at multiple levels, and jointly demonstrate that interpreting Yangming’s philosophy through the framework of modern cognitive science is not a Procrustean comparison but a dialogue of genuine philosophical substance.

6.2 Implications for the Philosophy of Cognitive Science

From the perspective of the philosophy of cognitive science, the argument of this paper points to a historically significant fact worthy of serious reflection: the core insight that predictive coding theory developed within the Western scientific tradition—that perception is generated from within outward, rather than received from without inward—is not an entirely novel discovery of modern neuroscience, but rather a persistent theme in human cognitive reflection that has emerged, in different languages, across different cultural traditions and historical periods. In sixteenth-century China, through philosophical reflection and moral-practical inquiry, Yangming articulated a description of the perceptual process that exhibits striking structural parallels with the predictive coding account first given precise neural-computational formulation in the late twentieth century.

Whether this constitutes genuine philosophical convergence—two independent traditions arriving at the same deep truth about perception—or whether the appearance of convergence partly reflects the interpreter’s use of predictive coding as a reading lens, is itself a question that warrants careful philosophical scrutiny. The author takes the former possibility seriously without claiming to have resolved the question. The philosophical payoff of this paper can therefore be stated at two levels. At the *minimum*: the structural analogy demonstrates that Yangming’s “this flower” proposition admits of a coherent and non-mysterious reading within the framework of contemporary cognitive science—a reading that displaces both the idealist and the mystical misreadings and recovers the proposition as a genuine contribution to the epistemology of perception. This mini-

mum claim is established regardless of whether one accepts the stronger convergence thesis. At the *maximum*: if the structural parallel does reflect independent convergence, then the “this flower” proposition constitutes evidence that the core insight of predictive coding theory—perception as generation from inside outward—is not contingent on modern neuroscience but is a discoverable truth about perception, one that a different tradition reached through philosophical reflection alone. Even a reader skeptical of the maximum claim should find the minimum claim substantive: showing that a classical Chinese philosophical proposition has a rigorous cognitive-scientific interpretation is itself a contribution to comparative philosophy, not merely an observation of historical curiosity.

6.3 Open Questions

The argument of this paper opens up several directions worthy of further exploration.

Within Yangming’s philosophy, “investigating things” (*gewu* 格物), as the core practical concept of Yangming’s self-cultivation discourse, invites comparison with active inference in the predictive coding framework. In Yangming’s reading, *gé* (格) is glossed as *zhèng* (正, rectifying): *gewu* means extending *liangzhi* outward toward things so as to rectify them in accordance with their proper moral structure (Wang Yangming, 1992a, lower *juan*). In active inference, an organism actively moves its sensors to occupy states in which predicted and received inputs are brought into alignment, thereby minimizing prediction error through action. At the level of surface structure—active, outward-directed engagement with things rather than passive reception—there is an apparent parallel. However, the comparison faces a deeper difficulty than the analogies examined in this paper. Active inference, as a mechanism for minimizing free energy, operates by bringing sensory input into conformity with the organism’s *own* generative model; the direction of rectification is from world to model. Yangming’s *gewu*, by contrast, involves extending *liangzhi*—an innately normative standard—outward to rectify things in accordance with their proper moral structure; the direction of rectification runs from the normative standard *toward* things. These directions are not merely asymmetric in the way that §5 identifies (normative orientation versus computational neutrality); they are structurally opposed. Any rigorous development of a *gewu*–active inference

correspondence would need to resolve this opposition directly, rather than resting on the surface-level similarity of outward-directed engagement. A detailed argument is left for future research.

Furthermore, this paper focuses on the description of a **single perceptual event** in the “this flower” proposition. Another important perception-related proposition in Yangming’s philosophy—“the sage’s mind is like a bright mirror”—concerns the overall state and ideal condition of the perceptual system. Whether a structural analogy analogous to the one examined here obtains between this proposition and the discussions of prior precision and attention in predictive coding theory is another direction worthy of further exploration.

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