



Where Does the Sensation of Well-Being Come from? A Cross-Cultural Perspective Meets with a Contemporary Neuroscientific Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the sensation of well-being from a cross-cultural perspective, comparing Western and Chinese philosophical views and integrating contemporary neuroscience. Western philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill, and Nietzsche, primarily view well-being as an individualistic pursuit related to personal virtue, happiness, or power. In contrast, Chinese philosophers, including Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Neo-Confucians, see well-being as a holistic concept, deeply interconnected with the individual's relationship to society, nature, and the cosmos. The paper then examines contemporary neural theories, particularly Georg Northoff's Spatial-Temporal Structure Theory of Consciousness (STSTC), which suggests that well-being arises from the alignment between the brain's spatial-temporal structure and that of the external world. Northoff's theory resonates with both Western individualism, in its focus on the brain's intrinsic capacities, and Chinese holism, in its emphasis on the harmony between the individual and the environment. Finally, the paper connects Northoff's theory with Spinoza's double-aspect theory, positing that the brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being stems from Nature's dual attributes of thought and extension. This Spinozistic interpretation aligns with Neo-Confucian ideas of qi, reinforcing the notion that well-being is a manifestation of the dynamic interplay between the individual and the world. The paper concludes by suggesting that the sensation of well-being is inherently rooted in this complex interaction between the mind, body, and the cosmos and demonstrating how the Spinozistic and Neo-Confucian

philosophical traditions can be combined into an integrated framework for understanding where the sensation of well-being originates.

Keywords: Well-Being, Western vs. Chinese Philosophy, Spatial-Temporal Structure Theory of Consciousness (STSTC), Spinozistic Double-Aspect Theory of Things, Neo-Confucian Idea of Qi.

1. Introduction

The concept of well-being has been a central theme in both Western and Chinese philosophical traditions, albeit approached from fundamentally different perspectives. In Western philosophy, well-being has often been understood in terms of individual fulfillment, personal happiness, and the cultivation of virtues. Thinkers like Aristotle, Kant, and Mill have emphasized the importance of living a virtuous life, acting in accordance with moral principles, and maximizing happiness as central to achieving well-being. This individualistic view contrasts sharply with the holistic perspective found in Chinese philosophy, where well-being is intrinsically linked to the harmony between the individual and the broader social and cosmic orders. Confucianism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism all stress the importance of aligning personal conduct with the moral order of society and the universe, suggesting that an individual's well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of the community, nature, and the cosmos.

This paper explores these contrasting views of well-being through a cross-cultural lens, examining how Western individualism and Chinese holism shape their respective understandings of human flourishing. It delves into the Spatial-Temporal

Structure Theory of Consciousness (STSTC), proposed by contemporary neuroscientist Georg Northoff, which offers a unique perspective on how the brain's interaction with its environment may influence well-being. By aligning the STSTC with both Western and Chinese philosophical frameworks, the paper seeks to bridge these cultural paradigms and propose a more integrated understanding of well-being. Additionally, the paper considers Spinoza's Double-Aspect Theory of Things as a potential philosophical foundation for understanding the origin of the brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being. The paper then further explores the convergence of Spinoza's Double-Aspect Theory of Things and New-Confucian scholar Rur-bin Yang's concept of qi, suggesting a deep philosophical and metaphysical connection between individual consciousness and the broader structure of the universe. Through this synthesis, the paper not only compares Spinoza's Western rationalism with Yang's Chinese holism but also aims to demonstrate how these traditions can be combined into an integrated framework for understanding where the sensation of well-being originates.

2. What Did Western Philosophers Say about "Well-Being"?

The concept of well-being has been a central topic in Western philosophy for over two millennia, with thinkers from various historical periods offering distinct interpretations. In ancient Greece, Plato (c. 427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) laid the foundations for Western thought on well-being. Plato's dialogues, particularly *The Republic*, emphasize the importance of achieving harmony within the soul by cultivating virtues and aligning with a higher sense of the Good. In his work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle introduces the idea of "eudaimonia," a flourishing life achieved through the practice of virtues and fulfillment of one's potential. In the dialogues of *The Republic*, Plato discusses how the just individual, whose soul is ordered and harmonious, achieves well-being. This harmony is achieved by cultivating virtues and aligning oneself with the Good, which transcends mere physical or material pleasures.¹ For Aristotle, the concept of "well-being" is normally translated as "eudaimonia," it is not merely about pleasure or happiness but about living a life in accordance with virtue and achieving one's full potential. For him, well-being is achieved through the practice of virtues such as courage, temperance, and wisdom, and through the fulfillment of one's function or purpose.²

In the modern period, philosophers like David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) shifted the focus towards human experience and rationality. Hume, an empiricist of the Enlightenment, linked well-being to the experience of pleasure and pain, introducing the concept of utility. Kant, on the other hand, saw well-being as a matter of moral duty and autonomy, asserting that well-being arises from living according to rational moral principles. As an empiricist, Hume emphasized the role of sentiment in human life. For him, well-being is connected to the feelings of pleasure and pain. He also introduced the idea of utility, suggesting that actions and policies should be judged based on their utility, or the extent to which they promote happiness and reduce suffering.³ As a rationalist, Kant believed that true well-being comes from acting in accordance with one's moral duty and exercising one's autonomy. For Kant, well-being is not about pursuing pleasure but about living a life guided by rational moral principles and respecting the dignity of oneself and others.⁴

In the 19th century, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) offered contrasting views. Mill, a utilitarian, defined well-being as the pursuit of higher intellectual and moral pleasures, prioritizing happiness and utility. Nietzsche rejected these traditional moral frameworks, proposing that true well-being comes from the assertion of individual power, creativity, and self-overcoming. Each of these philosophers shaped distinct conceptions of what it means to live a good and fulfilled life in their respective eras. Mill emphasized that well-being is the greatest happiness principle, which means actions are right if they promote happiness and wrong if they produce the opposite of happiness. For Mill, happiness is defined as pleasure and the absence of pain, and he made a distinction between higher and lower pleasures, advocating for the pursuit of higher intellectual and moral pleasures.⁵ Nietzsche rejected the idea of a universal morality and instead focused on the "will to power" as the driving force of human life. For Nietzsche, well-being is about the individual's ability to assert and enhance their power, creativity, and individuality. It involves overcoming challenges, embracing life's struggles, and achieving self-mastery and self-overcoming.⁶

3. What Did Chinese Philosophers Say about "Well-Being"?

For Confucius, well-being is achieved through the cultivation of moral virtues, harmonious social relationships, and adherence to traditional rituals and customs.

The well-being of an individual is intrinsically linked to the well-being of the community and society. Confucian ethics also stresses the importance of aligning human actions with the moral order of Heaven (天, tiān).⁷ Mencius believed in the innate goodness of human nature. Well-being is achieved through the cultivation of one's innate virtues and moral development. He emphasized the importance of self-cultivation, righteous conduct, and the role of benevolent governance in promoting the well-being of individuals and society. As with Confucius, Mencius believed humans have an innate moral sense that reflecting the cosmic order. When individuals cultivate their virtues and act in accordance with this moral sense, they achieve both personal well-being and harmony with Heaven.⁸ Laozi, the founder of Daoism, advocated for wu wei (無為, non-action or effortless action) and living in harmony with the Dao (the Way). Well-being, according to Laozi, is achieved by aligning oneself with the natural order of the universe, embracing simplicity, and avoiding unnecessary desires and actions; it is about finding balance and tranquility through a deep understanding of the Dao.⁹ Zhuangzi is another prominent Daoist philosopher who emphasized spontaneity and freedom from social conventions and artificial distinctions. For Zhuangzi, well-being is about embracing the spontaneity of life, finding joy in the present moment, and transcending rigid societal norms. It involves a carefree and open-minded attitude toward life's challenges and changes.¹⁰

Zhou Dunyi is one of the founders of Neo-Confucianism. He developed a cosmological framework that integrated Daoist and Buddhist ideas with Confucian thought. His most significant work, the *Taiji Tushuo* (太極圖說) or "Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate," illustrates the unity of the cosmos and the interrelationship between Heaven and humanity.¹¹ Zhang Zai is also a Neo-Confucian scholar. His philosophy emphasized the idea of Qi (氣, vital energy) as the fundamental substance of the universe. He believed that humans are a manifestation of the same Qi that permeates Heaven and Earth, thus advocating for the "unity of Heaven and humanity" (天人合一).¹²

Wang Yangming is a later Neo-Confucian philosopher who emphasized the "unity of knowledge and action" (知行合一). He argued that the innate moral knowledge within each person is connected to the universal moral order, thus reflecting what Zhang Zai advocated the "unity of Heaven and humanity."¹³ Feng Youlan is a

prominent modern Chinese philosopher who explored the idea of the unity of Heaven and humanity and its relevance to contemporary philosophical and ethical issues. Feng emphasized that this unity involves moral and ethical self-cultivation. By aligning one's actions and virtues with the principles of Heaven, individuals can achieve moral integrity and inner peace (thus, achieving the well-being of individuals). This echoes the Confucian emphasis on the cultivation of virtues and the Daoist idea of living in accordance with the natural order.¹⁴ Feng's interpretation of this unity has significant implications for contemporary society. In a world facing issues such as environmental degradation and social disintegration, the idea of harmonizing human actions with the larger cosmic order offers a path toward sustainable and ethical living. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans and nature, he advocated for a respectful and harmonious relationship with the environment, anticipating many themes in contemporary ecological philosophy.¹⁵

4. What is the Difference between the Western and Chinese Philosophical Views on Well-Being?

Based on the above-reviewed ideas of Western and Chinese philosophers about well-being, we can find that there is a significant difference between the Western and Chinese ideas about well-being: The Western philosophical view on well-being generally tends to think that well-being is purely a personal matter related to one's feelings, the development of one's potential, and the pursuit of one's own happiness, and obviously has little to do with society, the country, the world, or nature as a whole outside of the individual. Let us call such a view the *individualistic* view of well-being. The Chinese philosophers' view on well-being tends to believe that the degree of an individual's well-being is strongly related to the external environment, be it the human society, the all-embracing nature, or the mysterious and unknown universe. The changes in one's well-being are strongly related to the changes in the external environment. Let us call such a view of well-being the *holistic* view of well-being.

Being it the Western style of individualistic or the Chinese style of holistic view of well-being, our next question, however, is: How does contemporary science view well-being? In particular, how does neuroscience, which is strongly related to human feelings and cognition, view the well-being of an individual?

5. How Does Contemporary Neural Theory of Consciousness Tell about and Measure the Degree of the Well-Being of an Individual?

Georg Northoff, a prominent German-born Canadian physician and neural scientist, maintains a so-called “spatial-temporal structure theory of consciousness (STSTC).”¹⁶ According to STSTC, we get to know about the world by applying our “neural predisposition.” The neural predisposition is the brain’s “capacity” to make spontaneous (or active) predictions about specific stimuli in the external world before these stimuli are processed by the sensory organs. Thus, this spontaneous prediction made by the brain’s capacity can be compared with real sensory stimuli from the external world and a “difference” between the two can be detected. Immediately afterward, the neural predisposition as a capacity proceeds to the next round of spontaneous prediction of this difference; and this prediction of the difference is compared with the difference itself, and a further difference is detected, whereupon the neural predisposition will make a newer prediction. It may look like that whenever the brain confronts a new message from the outside world, it always conducts an “iterative revisionary process”: prediction → comparison → difference → prediction → comparison → difference → ... and so on. The process repeats itself over and over again until the brain’s prediction of the difference is no longer wrong. The above description of the brain’s iterative prediction and correction process in response to stimuli from the external world is what Northoff calls the brain’s “difference-based coding strategy.”

Another important element of the STSTC is the idea that the spatial-temporal structure serves as a common currency between the world and the brain, and is capable of linking the spatial-temporal structure of the world to that of the brain. Clinical data show that different regions within the brain process different kinds of spatial and temporal information, and the distribution of these brain regions constitutes what Northoff calls “the spatial-temporal structure of the brain”. The environment of the external world in which the brain is located also has its spatial-temporal structure, and this spatial-temporal structure information, with the help of the brain’s spontaneous neural predisposition, can be converted into relevant spatial-temporal details to correspond to the distribution of spatial-temporal information in the brain’s corresponding brain regions. When the information about the spatial-temporal structure of the environment of the external world is isomorphic or congruent to the information about the spatial-temporal structure of the brain, the

person will be in a good mental state; when the information about the spatial-temporal structure of the external world is an-isomorphic or incongruent to the information about the spatial-temporal structure of the brain, the person will be in a bad mental state.

From the cases of abnormal brain functions, Northoff not only maintains that there is a correspondence between the “spatial-temporal structure of the brain” and the “spatial-temporal structure of the external world”, but he is even more inspired by the fact that our so-called “mind” in the past is in fact the representation of the status of the correspondence between the “spatial-temporal structure of the brain” and the “spatial-temporal structure of the external world”. If the status of the correspondence can be used as an index to measure the degree of the well-being of an individual, it then is plausible to say that when the spatial-temporal structure of the brain and the spatial-temporal structure of the external world are homogeneous or compatible, the state of mind is normal and is thus in a high degree of well-being; on the contrary, when the corresponding status of the two spatial-temporal structures are heterogeneous or incompatible, the state of mind is abnormal and is thus in a low degree of well-being.

6. Where Does the Sensation of Well-Being Come from?

According to the above description, since the STSTC’s determination of the acquisition of an individual’s state of well-being depends on whether the spatial-temporal structure of the individual’s brain and the spatial-temporal structure of the surrounding environment are in a state of compatibility, STSTC seems to be more congenial with the Chinese conception of well-being that emphasizes the holistic view of well-being and is different from the Western conception of well-being that focuses on the individual’s feelings. However, it seems simplistic to interpret the characteristics of STSTC concerning the conception of well-being in this way; for STSTC has at least the following two theoretical characteristics: (1) Northoff’s theory of the brain seems to follow the Aristotelian tradition in looking at the brain: Northoff’s theory emphasizes “the nature of things”—i.e., “the capacity of the brain” or “the predisposition of the brain”—to explain how the brain works. This seems to point to Western individualism; (2) Northoff’s brain theory seems to have the connotation of the Chinese culture’s emphasis on holism: François Jullien, a famous

French sinologist, once compared the characteristics of Chinese and Western cultures and pointed out that Western culture views the world from the aspect of the nature of things, whereas Chinese culture looks at the external world from the perspective of “situation” or “shi (勢)”; Western culture emphasizes “individuality”, whereas Chinese culture focuses on the structure of the world, which allows the situation to take its course. Accordingly, it may seem that Northoff’s STSTC is a skillful fusion of Chinese and Western philosophical features because, on the one hand, it possesses the orientation of the nature of individual things (focusing on the discussion of the nature of the brain’s neural predisposition) which is emphasized by the Western culture; and, on the other hand, it also possesses the orientation of the structure of the world which is emphasized by the Chinese culture (focusing on the discussion of the correspondence between the spatial-temporal structure of the brain and that of the world).

Be the characteristic of STSTC holistic, individualistic, or both, the question that interests us more is: Where does our sensation of well-being come from? If, according to the STSTC, the sensation of well-being is produced by the brain’s capacity to reconfigure its spatial-temporal structure with the spatial-temporal structure of the world, then the question becomes: Where does the brain’s capacity to produce the sensation of well-being come from?

7. A Spinozistic Account of the Origin of Brain’s Capacity to Produce the Sensation of Well-Being¹⁷

According to Stuart Hampshire, a prominent scholar of Spinoza, Spinoza believed that what we generally call the Creator should be conceived of as the only singular substance that is composed of the following two aspects - *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*; that is, the only singular substance that is composed of thought and extension; or composed of the active and the passive. Within this singular substance called Nature; there are all kinds of things (or entities or objects), each of which is a “finite mode.” All things or beings in Nature (or the world) have their own “individuality”; and they all have a “conatus” (drive to preserve themselves), which is the spontaneous ability of beings to preserve their identity and independence. All entities constitute an overall system (or structure) of mutual containment. Through this inter-containment relationship, some entities are always contained in other

entities. Therefore, through this inter-containment relationship, entities within this system have different degrees of complexity.

Human beings are also members of a variety of “finite modes” that are part of the overall structure of nature. Just like other finite modes (i.e., other entities that exist in the world), human beings also exhibit the general characteristic of a finite mode—that is, they resist the external forces that affect their existence through the “drive for the preservation of their own individuality.” However, the human finite mode differs from other finite modes in the following feature: humans have a high intensity of the power of reflective thinking. As a result, human beings can not only act in accordance with their mental states, but they can also criticize these mental states. It is precisely this power of reflective thinking that makes human beings superior to other finite modes and gives them a certain degree of freedom.

Spinoza uses the concept of cause to construct his ontological explanatory framework. He argues that there is a supreme cause, which is the only singular entity that is the cause of all reality, and that it has two aspects: the aspect of “self-creation”—that is, the aspect of “*natura naturans*,” and the aspect of “the structure of things that are created”—that is, the aspect of “*natura naturata*.” According to this notion of cause, God or Nature is the immanent cause of all things, and then “mind” and “extension” must be two universal attributes universally connected within things. If we conduct some introspection, we will realize that we ourselves possess two completely different attributes or aspects of an individual: the mind and the body. “Thoughts” can be manifested in the behavior of things, and the movement of things in space reveals that their “extensions” follow the laws of motion. When we observe, we are constantly in this “process of shifting positions”—constantly shifting between the positions of observer and agent.

On the subject of perception, Spinoza argues that every perception involves a physical transaction or causal interplay between the observer and the thing being observed. This physical transaction is reflected in the observer’s thoughts or perceptual contents. For the observer, he becomes self-conscious of the content of this clear thought or perception. On this basis, the human capacity for reflection plays an active role: in knowledge, it has an important function in the correction of

perception; in ethics, it also has a function in the correction of emotions and desires. Through reflection, people are able to rethink their own (first-order) ideas, thus producing a second-order concept (an idea of ideas), such a capacity to conduct meta-thinking demonstrates the unique capacity for human freedom. From the point of view of the double-aspect theory of things, the capacity to reflect is stored in certain circuit structures in the brain; just as the capacity to see is stored in the retina and its neural network associated with the brain. Once people begin to exercise this reflective faculty and try to correct their thoughts, concepts of concepts (second-order concepts) are produced without limit, allowing the mind to move along a path independent of any particular viewpoint.

Overall, according to Hampshire's interpretation of Spinoza's idea of Nature, Nature is a single substance with two attributes (i.e., two aspects)—thought and extension—all things in Nature can be categorized as "activities" or "actions." All activity has two aspects: the first is concerned with the meaning and purpose of the thing that is 'animate'; the second is concerned with the movement or change of the physical position of the thing to which the activity or action relates. The double-aspect theory of activities, which involves both meaning and physical movement, can be generalized to the activities of all things at all levels in Nature. In this way, from the activities of the simplest single-cell organisms to the complex social activities of human societies, the origin of these activities can be found in Nature. In other words, all things in Nature are always continuously moving back and forth within the circle of initiating activities and observing activities. Nature, as the only singular substance, possesses the two aspects of thought and extension, which are instantiated, manifested, or expressed through the actions of all the individual things within Nature.

Recall the question we are from: Where does the brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being come from? According to Hampshire's interpretation of Spinozistic double-aspect theory of things or activities, every perception involves a physical transaction or causal interplay between the observer and the thing being observed. This physical transaction is reflected in the observer's thoughts or perceptual contents. As with this Spinozistic account of perception, the STSTC's interpretation of an individual's well-being as the congruent status between the spatial-temporal structure of the brain and that of the world can be regarded as the

brain's capacity to conduct a physical transaction or causal interplay between the observer and the thing being observed. When the result of the causal play between the observer and the thing being observed is in a congruent status between the spatial-temporal structures of the brain and the world, we can say that an individual's sensation of well-being is thus formed. And, because the observer can be regarded as an animate thinking subject and the things being observed can be regarded as an inanimate passive object, both of which can be further regarded as the manifestations of the two aspects of Nature—i.e., the aspects of thought and extension. Therefore, based on the above inference, when people ask: Where does the brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being come from? It may seem that, according to the above Spinozistic account, we may reply by saying that the brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being comes from Nature, of which is composed *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.

8. Connecting the Western with the Chinese Wisdom of the Origin of the Sensation of Wellbeing

Does this Spinozistic answer to the origin of the human capacity to produce the sensation of well-being have any relevance for the Chinese philosophical idea about the relationship between individuals and the world they live? Yes! This Spinozistic account squarely fits with the prominent contemporary New-Confucian scholar Rurbin Yang's idea about *qi* (氣) as the fundamental connecting point in the individual-world continuum. According to Yang, typical *qi* scholars usually advocate that *qi* is the source of the world and that *qi* is also the driving force of change. In short, regardless of the cosmological or ontological point of view, *qi* is regarded as the most fundamental substance permeated among individuals and the world. In contrast, although *li* (理, regularity) is also essential in that it governs the behavior of things in the world, it is only an attribute of *qi*, and *li* can only exist if it is attached to the substance of *qi*. In other words, just like Spinoza called the only singular substance Nature, the Neo-Confucian and New-Confucian scholars called the only singular substance of the world *Qi*.¹⁹

But why do these Neo-Confucian and New-Confucian scholars see *qi* as such an important element in shaping the individual and the world? Yang's genealogical study of the question suggests that the core concept in ancient Chinese thought is

the “five primitive phases” (Wu Hsing, 五行), representing the elements of gold, water, wood, fire, and earth. By applying the ideas of “hierophany” (manifestation of the sacred) and “material imagination” (manifestation of the material), these phases are elevated to “primordial” status, blending both sacred and material qualities. This dual nature of the elements reflects an archetypal status, connecting spiritual and linguistic imagery. Through these archetypes, ancient people gave ontological significance to human behavior, affirming a world that transcends the mind-matter divide, as seen in the sages’ moral discourse intertwined with natural imagery.²⁰

And, how does qi fit in to connect the individual with the world? Let’s take a look at what Yang says about this:

“The ‘living subject’ of Chinese philosophy is coexisting with the world through the channel of qi. The consciousness of the world is nurtured in the subject, and before a scholar recognizes the world, his subject has already entered the world in a subtle and anonymous way, and the subject’s cosmopolitan nature is implicitly manifested. The qi-nized worldly subject means that individuality has the basis of the subject’s consciousness but has no boundaries, and the Lesser Circumference is connected to the Greater Circumference. The qi of the Greater Circumference does not have the element of the subject, but it can participate in the formation of the subject. The Greater and Lesser circumferences are co-constructed and co-existing structures, each individual is composed of an irreducible subjectivity and a boundless world of qi.”²¹

In other words, what Yang says about “qi as a connecting-point in the individual-world continuum” can be paraphrased as follows: In Chinese philosophy, the “living subject” is interconnected with the world through qi. The subject’s awareness of the world is formed subtly, even before conscious recognition, reflecting its cosmopolitan nature. This qi-infused subject exists without clear boundaries, linking the Lesser Circumference (individual) with the Greater Circumference (universal). While the Greater Circumference lacks personal subjectivity, it helps shape the individual. Both circumferences co-create and coexist, with each individual being a mix of unique subjectivity and the limitless world of qi.

By comparing Spinoza’s and Yang’s accounts of the singular substance of Nature (*Nature* for Spinoza and *qi* for Yang), we may conclude by maintaining that they both

provide frameworks for understanding the origin of human well-being as a harmonious relationship between the individual and the world. Their contributions arise from different traditions—Western rationalism and Chinese Neo-Confucianism—but they converge in how they describe the connection between the individual’s subjective experience and the larger, unified structure of existence. Both philosophers emphasize a single substance that permeates and organizes all things, leading to an understanding of well-being as the product of an individual’s congruence with this fundamental order.

Concerning the transcendence of the mind-matter divide, Spinoza’s system dissolves the traditional mind-body divide by treating *thought* and *extension* as two attributes of the same underlying substance, Nature. Every action involves both mental and physical dimensions, and well-being is achieved through the harmonious interplay of these aspects within the individual and the world. Similarly, Yang’s philosophy transcends the mind-matter divide by treating *qi* as the unifying substance that connects the spiritual and material realms. The elements of the world embody both sacred and material qualities, and *qi* acts as the force that binds these realms together. Both thinkers dissolve the dichotomy between mind and matter by focusing on a singular substance that unites both. Well-being, in both accounts, is achieved through a balanced interaction of mental/spiritual and physical/material aspects of existence.

As for the issues of the singular substance and the double aspects of things, Spinoza argues that everything in the universe is an expression of a single substance, which he calls *Nature* or *God*. This substance has two fundamental attributes—*thought* (the mental, animate) and *extension* (the physical, inanimate)—that coexist in every aspect of Nature. According to Spinoza’s double-aspect theory, each action or event in Nature has both a mental and a physical dimension. This duality forms the basis for Spinoza’s explanation of perception, where a physical transaction between the observer and the object leads to the formation of mental representations. This dual aspect applies to all levels of existence, from the smallest single-cell organisms to human consciousness and social interactions. In Yang’s Neo-Confucian philosophy, *qi* (氣) is the singular substance that underpins the entire cosmos. *Qi* permeates both the individual and the world, acting as the fundamental connective tissue that links the microcosm (individual) to the macrocosm (the world). While *li* (理) represents

regularity or pattern, it is always attached to *qi*, which is the source of all movement and change. Like Spinoza's Nature, *qi* is the primal force that drives the dynamic interaction between individuals and the world. Yang's account of *qi* also involves a duality, blending the sacred and the material. In his interpretation of ancient Chinese thought, the "five primitive phases" (gold, water, wood, fire, earth) manifest both sacred and material qualities. This reflects the transcendence of the mind-matter divide and the integration of spiritual and natural imagery. *Qi* acts as the connecting force between these realms, uniting the spiritual and material aspects of life. Both Spinoza and Yang view the world as composed of dual aspects—Spinoza through the mental and physical, Yang through the sacred and material. These dualities are not separate entities but are deeply interconnected and manifested in every action and event in the world. In both systems, the harmonious interaction of these dual aspects is essential for understanding the nature of existence and the experience of well-being.

Concerning the issues of the relationship between the individual and the world and the emergence of the sensation of well-being, in Spinoza's system, the individual is an expression of Nature, and human well-being arises when there is congruence between the individual's internal structures (both mental and physical) and the external world. The human mind is part of the attribute of *thought*, while the human body is part of the attribute of *extension*. The brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being is rooted in its ability to engage in a causal interplay with the world, aligning its spatial-temporal structure with that of the external environment. According to Yang, the individual and the world are part of a continuum linked by *qi*. The individual's consciousness and awareness of the world are subtly shaped by this universal *qi*, which flows between the "Lesser Circumference" (individual) and the "Greater Circumference" (universal world). The subject exists without clear boundaries, with the Greater Circumference helping to form the individual. Well-being is achieved when the individual is in harmony with the world of *qi*, reflecting a balanced relationship between the personal and the cosmic. Both Spinoza and Yang emphasize the deep connection between the individual and the world, with the individual being a part of a greater whole. Spinoza sees this relationship as structured by the attributes of thought and extension, while Yang describes it in terms of the interaction between the individual and universal *qi*. In both cases, the origin of human well-being lies in the harmonious interaction between the individual

and the world, with well-being emerging when the individual is in alignment with the larger, universal structures.

9. Conclusion: A Unified Approach to Understanding Well-Being

The comparison between Spinoza's and Yang's accounts of Nature and *qi* provides a compelling demonstration of how Western and Chinese philosophical traditions can be synthesized to offer a profound explanation of human well-being. While they emerge from distinct cultural and intellectual backgrounds, Spinoza's rationalist philosophy and Yang's Neo-Confucian thought share a striking convergence in their views on the singular substance that underpins existence—be it Spinoza's *Nature* or Yang's *qi*. This unified substance serves as the foundation for understanding the origin of the brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being, illustrating how mental, physical, spiritual, and material dimensions of life are deeply interconnected.

At the heart of this synthesis is the recognition that both thinkers transcend the traditional mind-matter divide by proposing a singular substance with dual aspects—*thought* and *extension* for Spinoza, the *sacred* and the *material* for Yang. This duality does not suggest separation but rather a harmonious interplay of mental and physical forces, which together create the conditions for human well-being. Both systems suggest that the brain's capacity to sense well-being arises from this dynamic, whether it is expressed as the congruence between the mind's *thought* and the body's *extension* in Spinoza's terms, or the flow of *qi* between the individual and the world in Yang's framework.

Moreover, both Spinoza and Yang emphasize the inseparability of the individual from the larger world. In Spinoza's philosophy, the individual is a mode of Nature, and well-being arises when there is harmony between the individual's internal structures and the external environment. For Yang, the individual is part of a continuum with the world through *qi*, and well-being is achieved when the Lesser Circumference of the individual aligns with the Greater Circumference of the universal cosmos. Both systems stress that well-being is not merely an internal state but the result of an ongoing, balanced interaction between the individual and the world.

This synthesis of Spinoza's and Yang's ideas serves as a model for how Western and Chinese philosophical wisdom can be jointly applied to understand complex issues

such as the origin of well-being. Their complementary frameworks show that the pursuit of well-being is not confined to one cultural perspective but is a universal quest, rooted in the same fundamental structures of existence. By bridging these two philosophical traditions, we can move toward a more holistic understanding of well-being that encompasses both the physical and mental, the sacred and the material, the personal and the cosmic.

In this way, Spinoza's and Yang's unified accounts offer not just an explanation of the brain's capacity to produce the sensation of well-being, but also a broader philosophical lesson. They represent a call for integrating diverse intellectual traditions to tackle profound human questions, providing a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between individuals and the world. This union of Western rationalism and Chinese Neo-Confucianism highlights the potential for a global philosophical dialogue that can inform and enhance our understanding of human existence and well-being.

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Endnote:

¹ For the idea of a just individual, Plato discusses in *The Republic* the three parts of the soul (rational, spirited, and appetitive) and how justice and well-being are achieved when these parts are in harmony. This is where Plato defines justice as each part of the soul doing its appropriate work and not interfering with the others, he argues that justice in the soul mirrors justice in the city, it will be a kind of health, a harmony of parts where reason rules over spirit and appetite (Book IV, around 443d-444a). As for the idea of the Good, it can be referred to section including the Allegory of the Sun, where Plato introduces the concept of the Good as

the ultimate principle that gives truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower; in other words, he explains that the Form of the Good is the source of all that is right and beautiful, comparing it to the sun in the visible world, which provides light and enables vision, and in the intelligible world, as the source of truth and knowledge. (Book VI, around 508b-509a). As for the journey of the soul heading for the Good, refer to the Allegory of the Cave, which symbolizes the journey of the soul from ignorance to enlightenment and understanding of the Good (Book VII, around 517b-c).

² Aristotle defines eudaimonia in *Nicomachean Ethics* as the highest good and ultimate purpose of human life, it is closely tied to the practice of virtue and achieved by living in accordance with virtue, specifically “perfect” or “complete” virtue, meaning living in accordance with the best and most complete virtues over a lifetime (Book I, Chapter 7, 1098a16-20). Aristotle introduces the concept of the “function” of a human being, which is tied to the activity of the soul in accordance with reason and virtue. Aristotle’s function argument suggests that well-being is achieved when humans fulfill their natural function, which is reason and rational activity (Book I, Chapter 7, 1098a3-17). Aristotle elaborates on the specific virtues required for well-being, such as courage, temperance, and practical wisdom (phronesis), he discusses the concept of virtue as a mean between extremes, and how this mean is determined by rational principles guided by practical wisdom (Book II, Chapter 6, 1106b36-1107a2).

³ In his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume emphasized that human morality is rooted in sentiment rather than reason, and well-being, in his view, is directly tied to feelings of pleasure and pain: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” (Book II, Part III, Section 3) Also in the *Treatise*, Hume mentioned the origin of the well-being or enjoyment: “All the enjoyments and sufferings of human life are founded on the passions; and these passions again receive their existence from pleasure and pain.” (Book II, Part III, Section 9) In his another influential book, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume introduced the idea of utility as a central concept in moral judgment. Actions that increase happiness and reduce suffering are considered beneficial: “The end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty; and by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other.” (Section I)

⁴ In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, contra to Hume, Kant emphasizes that true well-being or “the highest good” stems from acting out of a sense of moral duty, rather than inclination or desire for pleasure: “The representation of an objective principle, insofar as it is necessitating for a will, is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an imperative. All imperatives are expressed by an ought, and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will...” (Section II, Ak. 4:413). As for the autonomy of the will, in the same book, Kant maintains: “Autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition).” (Section II,

Ak. 4:440). Kant also argues that well-being is connected to respecting the dignity of others, which comes from treating individuals as ends in themselves, rather than as means to an end: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." (Section II, Ak. 4:429) With respect to the issue of respect of others, Kant points out in his Critique of Practical Reason: "The moral law is the sole law that makes us conscious of the worth of ourselves and of all rational beings..." (Part I, Book I, Chapter 3, Ak. 5:87) For Kant, well-being also includes the idea of achieving the highest good, which is a combination of virtue and happiness; however, happiness is secondary to moral duty. (Part I, Book II, Chapter 2, Ak. 5:110)

⁵ With respect to the greatest happiness principle, in this seminal work, *Utilitarianism*, Mill famously argued that the rightness of an action is determined by its ability to promote happiness, with happiness defined as pleasure and the absence of pain: "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals 'utility' or the 'greatest happiness principle' holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure." (Chapter 2: "What Utilitarianism Is"). In the same chapter, Mill also made a distinction between higher and lower pleasures, arguing that intellectual and moral pleasures are of a higher quality compared to mere physical pleasure: "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others... Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure."

⁶ Nietzsche's views on well-being, particularly his emphasis on the "will to power" and the rejection of universal morality, are most notably expressed in his works such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, *The Antichrist*, and *Twilight of the Idols*. Nietzsche's idea of the "will to power" represents a fundamental drive for self-assertion, creativity, and individuality. He believed that well-being comes from striving for power and overcoming challenges rather than adhering to traditional moral frameworks. For this, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he wrote: "Wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power; and even in the will of the serving I found the will to be master. The weaker is persuaded by its own will to serve the stronger, because it wants to be master over what is still weaker: this is the only pleasure it is incapable of renouncing." (Second Part, "On Self-Overcoming") It is obvious that, for Nietzsche, life itself is will to power; the will to power, which is an unexhausted procreating will. Nietzsche's concept of "self-overcoming" or *Selbstüberwindung* is central to his idea of well-being. He argues that individuals must continually strive to overcome themselves, challenge their limits, and achieve greater mastery over their lives. In *The Antichrist*, he wrote: "What is good? – Everything that enhances people's feeling of power, will to power, power itself. What is bad? – Everything stemming

from weakness. What is happiness? – The feeling that power is growing, that some resistance has been overcome.” (Section 2) In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he mentioned: “Human being is something that must be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?” (Prologue, Section 3) Nietzsche believed that life’s struggles and challenges are essential for growth and that true well-being comes from embracing these struggles rather than avoiding them. With respect to this theme, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he pointed out: “You must want to burn yourself up in your own flame: how could you become new if you did not first become ashes!” (First Part, “On the Way of the Creator”) Also, in *Twilight of the Idols*, he mentioned: “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” (Arrows and Epigrams, Section 8)

⁷ As for Confucius’s idea on the cultivation of virtue and harmonious relationships as central to well-being, we can refer to *The Analects (of Confucius)*, which is one of the primary sources of Confucian thought: “The Master said, ‘Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar? Is it not gentlemanly not to take offense when others fail to appreciate your abilities?’” (*The Analects* 1:1) As for Confucius’s emphasis on the importance of cultivating virtues like benevolence (仁, rén) through the practice of ritual and moral behavior, refer to: “The Master said, ‘If a man sets his heart on benevolence, he will be free from evil.’” (*The Analects* 4:4) As for Confucius’s idea of alignment with Heaven, refer to: “The Master said, ‘At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I became established; at forty, I had no doubts; at fifty, I knew the will of Heaven.’” (*The Analects* 2:4) This quotation clearly reflects Confucius’s idea that personal moral development is strongly connected with an understanding of the cosmic or moral order of Heaven. For a more literal and concise, adhering more closely to the classical Chinese syntax, version of English translation of Confucius’s *Analects*, refer to D. C. Lau’s translation (1979).

⁸ Mencius’s belief in the innate goodness of human nature is reflected in *Mencius (Mengzi)*, as is the idea indicated in (*Mencius* 6A:2): The tendency of man’s nature to do good is like the tendency of water to flow downward. As for the idea of the importance of self-cultivation and how righteous governance should arise from the cultivation of this innate moral sense, we can refer to the idea indicated in (*Mencius* 6A:6): All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the suffering of others. The ancient kings had this commiserating mind, and therefore they had a commiserating government. As is the idea indicated in (*Mencius* 4B:12 and 7A:1): The great man is he who does not lose his childlike heart and the retention of his heart and the nurturing of his nature are the means by which he serves Heaven, it reflects Mencius’s belief that maintaining one’s original moral sense (the “childlike heart”) is key to achieving well-being and aligning with the cosmic order, including Heaven.

⁹ For Laozi’s principle of wu wei, which is about acting in harmony with nature without forceful interference, refer to *Laozi* (also known as *Tao Te Ching*), the following idea is indicated in (Chapter 2): The Sage acts by doing nothing (wu wei) and teaches without speaking. Things arise and he lets them come; things disappear and he lets them go. In (Chapter 25), Laozi explains that well-being comes from living in alignment with the Dao, which reflects the

natural order of the universe: Man follows the Earth. Earth follows Heaven. Heaven follows the Dao. The Dao follows what is natural. As for Laozi's emphasis on the importance of simplicity and avoiding excessive desires for achieving tranquility and balance in life, refer to (Chapter 33): He who knows contentment is rich. He who knows how to stop has enough.

¹⁰ For Zhuangzi's belief in transcending social conventions, achieving spontaneity, and living without attachment to fame or external validation, refer to the following idea indicated in (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 2: Discussion on Making All Things Equal): The Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame. Zhuangzi advocates for embracing the natural ebb and flow of life, recognizing life's changes, including death, as part of a larger whole, for this point, refer to (Chapter 6: The Great and Venerable Teacher): The sage wanders about in the realm where nothing can escape, and all lives are seen as one. For him, life and death are but a single thread. Zhuangzi emphasizes the idea of finding joy in the present moment, free from the pursuit of conventional happiness, and being content with the way things naturally are, for this, refer to (Chapter 18: Perfect Happiness): Happiness is the absence of striving for happiness.

¹¹ Zhou Dunyi emphasizes the dynamic and balanced interaction of opposites in the cosmos, a foundational principle for well-being in Zhou's view, reflecting harmony between Heaven, Earth, and humanity. According to Zhou, the Supreme Ultimate (太極, Taiji) moves and generates yang (陽); when its movement reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil and generates yin (陰). Zhou also highlights the connection between human beings and the cosmic forces, stressing that humans, as spiritual beings, are linked to the natural order of the universe. According to his theory, humans receive the finest essence of the five elements and are born from them. Hence, humans are the most spiritual beings in the world. Zhou emphasizes moral cultivation as essential for aligning with the cosmic order, reinforcing the Confucian idea that well-being comes from living a virtuous life in harmony with universal principles; for him, the cultivation of the self is about aligning one's moral nature with the principles of Heaven. For a concise translation and discussion of Zhou's idea, refer to Adler (2014).

¹² In *Zhengmeng* (正蒙, *Rectifying the Ignorant*), the most significant work of Zhang Zai, he indicates the following idea: That which fills the universe, I regard as my body; that which directs the universe, I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. This idea manifests Zhang Zai's belief that Qi permeates all things, and that humanity shares the same vital energy that exists throughout the universe. This interconnectedness forms the foundation of his idea of the unity of Heaven, Earth, and humanity. As for the idea of unity of Heaven and humanity, Zhang articulates how human beings are an integral part of the cosmic order, suggesting that well-being is achieved through aligning with this universal Qi, thus it brings us back again to the aforementioned idea that: Heaven is my father, and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe, I regard as my body, and

that which directs the universe, I consider as my nature.” Zhang Zai connects the cultivation of virtue to the understanding of Qi and the unity of all things, reinforcing the idea that well-being is derived from aligning personal virtue with the universal flow of Qi; for this, he maintains that the sage regards the universe as one body, and virtue as the substance that connects all living things. For a precise introduction to Zhang Zai’s idea, refer to Kim (2015).

¹³ In his most significant work, *Chuanxilu* (傳習錄) or “Instructions for Practical Living,” Wang Yangming expresses the belief that moral knowledge cannot be separated from moral action, suggesting that true well-being is achieved when individuals align their actions with the innate moral knowledge they possess. As for the relation between knowledge and action, he maintains that to know and to act are one and the same. If you know something but do not act upon it, you do not truly know it. Knowledge is the beginning of action, and action is the completion of knowledge. This idea exemplifies Wang’s belief that true well-being arises when knowledge and action are unified. He further argues that moral knowledge must be expressed through action to be genuine. As for the innate moral knowledge, he mentions a very important idea of “innate knowledge of good” (良知, liangzhi): The mind of the sage is free from doubt, for the sage’s knowledge of the good is immediate and intuitive., and this is called the innate knowledge of the good. For this, Wang emphasizes that every person possesses innate moral knowledge (liangzhi), which, when properly cultivated and acted upon, leads to harmony with the universal moral order. As for the Principle (理, li) of Heaven and Earth, he maintains that the mind is the Principle of Heaven and Earth; everyone has this luminous virtue of the mind within. What Heaven bestows on us is called human nature, to follow our nature is to conform to the Principle, and therefore, the mind is the Principle. It is in the previous sense that Wang’s idea echoes Zhang Zai’s notion of the “unity of Heaven and humanity,” indicating that well-being involves aligning one’s actions with this inherent moral sense. As for the achievement of the status of well-being, Wang maintains that the great man regards Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body; therefore, he sees Heaven and Earth as his nature, and the universal principles of right and wrong as his moral compass. This idea suggests that well-being is achieved through recognizing and acting in accordance with the universal moral order; and the way for cultivating well-being is through overcoming selfish desires. For this, he further maintains that when the mind is free from selfish desires, it will naturally be in accord with the Principle, and the world will become peaceful. Wang highlights the importance of overcoming personal desires to achieve harmony with the moral order, reinforcing the Confucian idea that well-being is rooted in moral clarity and virtuous action. For a precise English version of Wang’s *Instructions*, refer to the one translated by Wing-tsit Chan (1963).

¹⁴ Feng Youlan (also known as Fung Yu-Lan) supposes that Confucius did suggest that the well-being of an individual is dependent upon the cultivation of moral virtues, which aligns an individual’s life with the natural and cosmic order, achieving peace within and harmony

without. From this supposition, it is obvious that, Feng aligns Confucian moral self-cultivation with the broader concept of living in harmony with the universe, which reflects his belief that moral integrity leads to well-being. For Feng's interpretation of Confucius's idea, refer to Fung (1948).

¹⁵ As for Feng's philosophical impact on contemporary ecological philosophy, especially Feng's making the connection of the traditional philosophical idea of harmony with the natural world to contemporary ecological concerns such as to show that well-being includes a sustainable relationship with the environment, refer to Fung (1991), Pfister (2003).

¹⁶ STSTC is the result of Northoff's long-term empirical and clinical exploration of neurological mechanisms of brain functioning. For a detailed description of neural predisposition, see Northoff (2014), and for STSTC, see Northoff (2018). The description of Northoff's neuroscientific theory here is largely based on the contents of Szu-Ting Chen's commentary review and introductory review on the two aforementioned books by Northoff, see Chen (2016) and Chen (2022).

¹⁷ The Spinozistic account spelled out in this section is based on Stuart Hampshire's interpretation of Spinoza's theory in "Spinoza and Spinozism," a summary of his lifelong reflection on Spinoza's ideas. See: pp. xv-lviii, Hampshire (2005).

¹⁸ Yang (2006), p. 263.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 272.

²⁰ For a more complete discussion of the genealogical study of the question, see: Yang (2016).

²¹ p. 3, Yang (2024). For a more complete description of Yang's idea about "Qi as a Connecting-Point in the Individual-World Continuum," also refer to the same page.