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The Philosophical  
Thought of Wang Chong

Alexus McLeod

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, even though my fifth in order, is in many ways my first. Most of the initial research and writing was completed between ten and six years ago. It was my first planned book after I finished my dissertation and moved to my first job in Dayton, Ohio. Wang Chong was one of the first philosophers in the Chinese tradition I ever encountered. I was introduced to his work by David Branner, whose class in Early Chinese Literature I took as an undergraduate at the University of Maryland. The first paper I ever wrote on early Chinese thought was my term paper for that class, on what I took to be Wang Chong's "skepticism" (I've changed my view in the years since). Years later, during my graduate studies, I planned to work on a dissertation on the *Lunheng*, but ended up abandoning this project for something I thought (at the time) might have more philosophical cache and generate more interest. Instead, I wrote a paper on Wang Chong's philosophical method, which became my first professional publication (in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2007), the ideas of which still form the basis of my view of Wang's central critical method. I revisited my idea for a book on Wang Chong after finishing my PhD and starting my career, but worked slowly on the project as I focused on publishing articles (a standard move for early-career academics). In 2011, I decided to devote my full attention to the book, but other projects kept getting in the way, and the Wang Chong book went onto the shelf over and over. I finally made it halfway through a draft by 2013, but could not find any publishers interested in what then seemed a fringe figure in the history of Chinese philosophy. So once again onto the shelf the project went. Luckily, there seems to have been a minor resurgence in interest in

Wang Chong and Han Dynasty philosophy in general since 2014 or so, which I attribute at least in part to the excellent new translations of important early Han texts such as *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu*. I finally picked up the project definitively off the shelf and finished the book in 2018, about 18 years (almost to the day) after I submitted my first written work in Chinese philosophy, also on Wang Chong. Finally being finished with this project feels like the close of a major chapter in my life (that has spanned almost half of it thus far!). There are far too many people to thank for their help along the way, but a few stand out. Thanks to David Branner for introducing me to Wang Chong, to Ning Yu (formerly at the University of Oklahoma, currently Penn State University) for helping me to understand the *Lunheng* in the original during my time at OU, to Bo Mou and Lajos Brons for very fruitful discussions about my work on Wang Chong that has appeared in the pages of *Comparative Philosophy*, and to all those I have had discussions with over the years on this interesting and important philosopher. The work here is in a different form than the one in which it was initially envisioned—I lost almost all of my translation of a number of important chapters of the *Lunheng* (along with a large amount of other work) when my computer was destroyed in May 2018, and with great sadness made the choice to move forward without these translated chapters (some of the important remains are included throughout the book). The book is lesser for it, but I hope I've still been able to offer something of value in my interpretation of Wang Chong's work. Finally, thanks as always to my sons Francis and Siddhu (who even helped me with a part of this book!) and my wife Shubhalaxmi.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Wang Chong and Philosophy in Early China

This book represents an attempt to think through aspects of the thought of Wang Chong of concern to and that may aid in the work in contemporary philosophy. Of necessity, I have left out a number of important issues, even ones of philosophical interest. I make no claims to be comprehensive here, and this is one of the reasons I don't call this book a study of Wang Chong's thought. I am focused on what I deem to be (which is, admittedly subjective) the most important or interesting of Wang Chong's philosophical positions, and I attempt to recover, appraise, and develop these positions. This involves three different methods operative within each of the chapters, which I will try to be clear and keep distinct (even though, as with a lot of comparative and cross-boundary works, I suspect I will alienate numerous audiences).

The “sinological/historical” focus here will concern the attempt to recover facts about the textual history, cultural context, Wang's motivations, views, and so on in a way keeping as closely as possible to the context of Wang Chong's and Eastern Han thought. The “philosophical” focus involves two subfoci: the historical-philosophical, analyzing the theories Wang presents, along with the concepts included and the arguments Wang uses to establish positions, and the appraisal/appropriational, which considers the plausibility of these positions, possible objections and fixes, and their applicability to and usefulness in contemporary debates in philosophy concerning these concepts. It is this latter focus that in part explains my selection of certain aspects of Wang's thought and certain

positions for this book. The positions in the *Lunheng* of most interest to me, and I suspect that will also be of most interest to contemporary analytic philosophers, are those I focus on in this book. Even if use of this frame for Wang's thought is artificial and anachronistic in some sense (which I can't deny that it is), it is no more so than using contemporary historical techniques to understand early Chinese thinkers, or even using modern languages like English, for that matter, to understand the thought of early Chinese thinkers. It's unclear to me how the philosophical method of appraisal can be any *more* comparative or foreign, let alone "inauthentic" than any other method of appraisal and appropriation of these texts in use in contemporary academia.

The question confronts those who work in ancient Chinese thought—just how original or unique *was* Wang Chong, really? When Western thinkers first took notice of this interesting thinker, in the late nineteenth century with the revival of Chinese interest in his thought by critical Qing scholars, Wang was seen as an anomaly, a brilliant and completely unique representative of critical thought in the desert of scholasticism and scholarly conformity and stagnation that was the Han dynasty. Many authors spoke of Wang as representing the first stirrings of critical and even "scientific" thought in China. Even Joseph Needham, in the volumes of his magisterial classic "Science and Civilization in China", contributed to this view of Wang as the arch "proto-scientist" of the Eastern Han. "Science", of course, is a loaded word, as much now as it was back then. "Scientific" thought, as opposed to traditional, religious, or even philosophical thought, was supposed to be thought freed from the bias of background prejudices, information, and infection of traditions, literary canon, or environment. Of course, this pristine view of scientific thought has always been little more than a guiding myth. The inconvenient truth is that *no one* engages in intellectual work in this purely autonomous, disconnected, universalistic manner. All human thought is bound by human experience, tradition, history, and biological tendencies—including the "purest" science, the mechanics of Newton or the atomic theory of Bohr. To distinguish "scientific" from "non-scientific" thought outside of the actual practice of science is, in essence, to apply value categories generally fixed to the attempt to reject, criticize, or otherwise undermine tradition. And this is just what the earliest Western scholars to work on Wang saw going on in his work: Wang Chong as iconoclast, critic, and thus upholder of "scientific"

thought.<sup>1</sup> Although I will conclude that these scholars were not completely right about Wang, there was some sense in which Wang *was* a uniquely critical and less tradition-bound philosopher.

More recent Western studies, following the trend in Chinese scholarship, aimed to chip away this older view of Wang, emphasizing the ways in which Wang's thought was typical of late Eastern Han thinkers, and in which he was influenced by the surrounding cultural attitudes, which were shifting from earlier views dominant in the Western Han.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there is good reason to see Wang as much closer to the norm than earlier scholars were able or willing to, as we see very similar views and sentiments expressed in the work of other Eastern Han thinkers such as Xu Gan, Xun Yue, Wang Fu, and Cui Shi (among others). A critical strain can be found in all of these authors, usually surrounding the same topics, and using similar methods to those of Wang Chong. Wang, of course, was the earliest of these thinkers, but not necessarily the most outstanding or unique in his adoption of these ideas and methods. Although I will conclude that these more recent interpreters are also missing something critical about Wang and that their views that Wang was simply a representative thinker cannot be completely accepted, there is also some sense in which Wang was not as far from the norm, as unique, as some interpreters made him out to be.

So why is Wang a philosopher we should care about, take seriously, or give priority to in a field of brilliant thinkers of the (Western and Eastern) Han like those mentioned above and many more? In short, what justifies a new book-length study on this enigmatic Eastern Han philosopher, who may be taken to have been fairly neglected in contemporary Chinese studies? It is important to note that, for all the familiarity with Wang among sinologists (I have not infrequently encountered scholars whose recognition of Eastern Han thinkers only extends to Wang Chong), there have

<sup>1</sup>Including Alfred Forke, who wrote the first (and still only) complete translation of the *Lunheng* into English, Chang Chih-lien, "Wang Chong as Critic", in *Cina* 15 (1979), Lionello Lanciotti, *Wang Chong l'iconoclasta* (1997).

<sup>2</sup>Some examples of such studies, discussed further below, are Michael Puett's "Listening to Sages: Divination, Omens, and the Rhetoric of Antiquity in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*", *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005); Reinhard Emmerich, "Wang Chong's Praises for the Han Dynasty", *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008).

been no book-length studies in English on Wang Chong since Western scholars first became acquainted with him in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

First, although Western scholars know of Wang Chong, they tend to know very little about his actual views, arguments, and philosophical import. Second, even in the extant non-English literature on Wang Chong, there has been hardly any consideration of Wang's *philosophical* contribution, and a thorough investigation of his innovations of philosophical method, as well as his arguments, theories, and concepts. This book focuses on these issues. Third, much of the material on Wang Chong has presented him in light of one of the two above scholarly tendencies of the last century or so—that is, to read him either as arch-skeptic, proto-scientist and iconoclast extraordinaire or as a typical Eastern Han malcontent, writing on well-worn themes and, for all the hay he makes of truth and criticism, not diverging widely from the accepted views or methods of his time. Both of these views, I argue in this book, fail to capture the real Wang Chong and the import of his work. No doubt Wang did not intend to do something *radically* new, to completely break with the past or with tradition in his thinking about method and truth, and, indeed, like most of his contemporaries, he saw his project in terms of *continuity* with the content and methods of the ancients. Within this context, however, Wang's actual work *was* highly innovative, and the method he devised was, if not completely unprecedented, a synthesis of a number of earlier strains of thought along with enormous creative work and innovation on Wang's part, resulting in a fairly radical reinterpretation of the entire early Chinese philosophical tradition as a whole. Even if Wang Chong was not the "iconoclast" earlier scholars claim he was (after all he unquestioningly accepts much from earlier thinkers and adopts more than a few tropes of his time), his thought was nonetheless highly innovative.

Of course, with his divergence from the tradition came some negatives as well. Wang Chong's style makes his writing sometimes difficult to follow, because he does not follow the standard constructions of his day.<sup>4</sup> He can also be repetitive and tedious, spending hundreds of words to hammer home a single easily made point, tending to harp on the smallest and

<sup>3</sup>There have, however, been a number of studies in Chinese, of various aspects of Wang's work and influence, and a few in Japanese, Korean, German, and Nicolas Zufferey's study (in French). I look to most of this literature throughout the present book.

<sup>4</sup>The awkwardness of his style has been discussed by Michael Nylan, in "Han Classicists Writing About Their Own Tradition", *Philosophy East and West* 47: 2 (1996).

seemingly most insignificant of details to make his points, and sometimes becoming hopelessly bogged down in minutiae for no apparent reason. At other times, his arguments are too broad, making sweeping and general claims that don't take sufficient account of details. His arguments are not always sound or valid, and he can be at turns both very careful in his work and very haphazard. It is easy to be stricken by the depth and skill of his work in one passage and to be frustrated with its pedantry and weakness in another. On the whole, Wang is an excellent philosopher worthy of study, but his weaknesses can make it difficult for readers to appreciate what he is trying to do, without taking a great deal of work to piece together his often disparate thoughts. This is perhaps one of the reasons Wang was never held up as a more central figure in the tradition.<sup>5</sup> His style is simply difficult to read and decipher, and even when one can follow him, it is often hard to see the point of what he's saying, without connecting parts of his work that he does not explicitly connect. If one has the patience to do this, however, one discovers a gold mine. Part of my goal in this book is to offer a blueprint for making these connections—a kind of key to connecting these ideas and understanding Wang's underlying views on a number of important philosophical topics.

A few main facts about Wang's situation and character explain his ability and willingness to reinterpret the tradition in the way he does—his independence from scholastic debates because of his lack of position and “school”. His stylistic and philosophical divergence from generally followed norms strengthened this alienation, and his lack of connection to any particular school made it possible for him to more widely criticize, diverge, and reinterpret, without the constraints that would have bound him were he beholden to a certain teacher or ideology. In some sense, it was Wang's failure in the public arena that allowed him to be as innovative and creative as he was. He had no responsibility to uphold the teachings of a particular sect or individual, and had plenty of personal reasons to attack the various positions of the entrenched groups and interests represented in officialdom. This situation made Wang well positioned to reinterpret the philosophical tradition he inherited. The critical, perhaps even antagonistic, character that seems to have been his genetic inheritance (discussed in Chap. 2) also probably played a role here as well. As Wang notes in his autobiographical chapter, his forefathers all ran into trouble

<sup>5</sup> Another reason being that he is not easily fit into any particular “school” (*jia* 家), an issue discussed further below.

due to their contrarian natures, and any reader of the *Lunheng* can see that Wang himself had something of this nature.

The purpose and the organization of this book might strike some as somewhat unusual. I have not intended here to write a monograph on Wang Chong's *Lunheng* as a whole, a history of his time, or an interpretation of his specific arguments. Although I cover all of these things to some extent, the goal of this book is somewhat unique. I am certainly interested in historical context, in what shaped Wang's thought, and in uncovering adequate interpretation(s) of his thought. However, my larger goal is a philosophical one. I attempt to integrate the positions, arguments, and insights of Wang Chong into historical and contemporary debates on the topics he is interested in. To this end, what guides my focus here are the issues Wang discusses and the way he discusses them, how he argues, the methods he uses, and what arguments he presents. Using these arguments, we can build on concepts in different traditions. We can try to use Wang's positions and arguments to make sense of less clear positions and arguments in other traditions. Or we can use these to aid arguments or objections in these other traditions. Perhaps Wang even offers us insights that might help us develop new and more sophisticated positions on important philosophical topics in contemporary philosophy. So, although I am certainly here concerned with Wang Chong as historical figure in context, and with interpretation of his language, his ideas, and his style, I am primarily concerned with the philosophical value of his thought today, and the use of Wang's work as an experimental aid in doing philosophy, and for this reason I focus on a number of issues in the *Lunheng* that potentially have implications for contemporary philosophy. While I of course want to be sensitive to historical context, and do not aim to present anything historically inaccurate, my primary concern here is philosophical. What are Wang's views? How does he defend them? And how might such views be relevant to contemporary philosophical debates surrounding similar concepts and issues? These are the questions I aim to answer here.

It is for this reason that I title this book "the *philosophical* thought of Wang Chong". It is not lightly and without awareness of the loaded nature of this term that I use "philosophical" here. Certainly in ancient China there was no concept that could be thought to correspond to the contemporary (or even early Western) conception of *philosophy*. So to talk about the philosophical thought of Wang Chong is in essence to make a comparativist claim, and one that reveals my motivations here. Although Wang was not a "philosopher" in our contemporary sense, as there was no such thing in

Eastern Han China, any more than there were *ru* scholars in fifteenth-century England, we can read much of his thought as *philosophical*, in this comparative mode, in which we can see what he says and the arguments he gives as relevant to a whole host of philosophical issues and problems. Even while Wang would not have taken himself to be doing philosophy, much of what he did *was* philosophy, and his philosophical positions can be of great use in a number of ways in the comparative project as well as in the project of historical interpretation. Because I try to do all three of these things in this book (offer a historically sensitive interpretation of Wang Chong's work, place it in a comparative context with other philosophical traditions, and consider the possibilities and implications for modern debates appropriating Wang's thought), it might be thought that I necessarily fail in all of them. Any time one aims to accomplish multiple goals that may interest multiple audiences (here in sinology, history of philosophy, and contemporary philosophy), one runs the risk of alienating all of these audiences. So it is with some trepidation, but also with excitement, that I offer this work. In order to create larger audiences for works such as this, it is the responsibility of authors of works such as this to show why such projects are useful, and that they can ultimately be of great utility to those working in a number of different areas. In addition, works such as this one aim to create *new* areas of study, in which the boundaries of area studies, history, and philosophy are crossed in order to develop exciting new positions and ideas. I hope I've been successful here in doing this.

The objection sometimes given to this kind of project, that this is to misread the early Chinese thinkers or misconstrue their intentions, is not one that particularly bothers me. The reason for this is that I see a number of fairly major and important differences between the historical project and the philosophical project concerning early Chinese thinkers, as well as those from other philosophical traditions. The historical project might be seen as an attempt to read these thinkers in their contexts fully (or as fully as possible) in order to try to understand the cultural, philosophical, political, economic, or other causes of their views. While this is certainly a legitimate project, I take the philosophical project to be aimed more at understanding how historical thinkers conceived of and formed theories around certain concepts of perennial philosophical interest, in order to advance a history of the way these concepts were thought about (the historical-philosophical project) or to contribute to our understanding of these concepts and advance contemporary debates (the "philosophical

appropriational” project<sup>6</sup>). These two projects can and should develop alongside one another, although in any given work there will likely be more attention given to one than the other.

The way I conceive of the philosophical project here is comparative in nature. Beginning with basic philosophical concepts such as truth or knowledge, we can investigate the work of historical philosophers to see how they can contribute to our understanding of these concepts. This will of necessity ignore or neglect certain aspects of their thought, perhaps even *central* aspects of their thought. But there is no less justification for us to be able to parse and look at particular aspects of the thought of a given philosopher than there is for us to specialize in any other way.<sup>7</sup>

Historical philosophers in the “Western tradition” have not, at least for the past few hundred years, been subjected to the same suspicion and resistance as those in non-Western traditions by the Western academy. This is the case even though the thinkers of ancient Greece or medieval Italy are as distant from contemporary philosophy as are the ancient Chinese, Indian, or Mesoamerican philosophers. Historians of philosophy focus only on certain aspects of the thought of these historical philosophers that they see as continuous with a more objective and culturally unbounded philosophical tradition. We do the same thing with historical scientists. Given that “science” as we conceive of it today was not a distinct pursuit much before the

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Joel Kupperman (who advised my dissertation at UConn) for this phrase, which he used years ago in private conversation to describe his approach to Chinese philosophy. Although the term “appropriation” gets a bad rap and is often seen as negative, I think it is as important as it is inevitable to ensure a vital intellectual culture.

<sup>7</sup>James Maffie offers an excellent explanation of this understanding of the comparative-historical philosophical project, in his case concerning Aztec (or Nahuatl) philosophy, but one that is just as applicable to Chinese philosophy, in his recent book *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*. “What makes mine a *philosophical* project rather than a historical, religious, or anthropological examination and interpretation is the fact that I bring to bear upon our understanding of Aztec metaphysics the analytical tools, concepts, hermeneutical strategies, lessons, and insights of those areas of academic philosophy [analytic and Western]. Doing so, I hope, enables me to shed new light upon the Aztecs’ views about the nature, constitution, and structure of reality. This project *reconstructs* Aztec metaphysics in the sense of presenting and explicating the concepts and claims of Aztec metaphysics in a manner not necessarily identical with the Aztecs’ manner of presentation. Doing so inevitably involves highlighting and making explicit certain aspects of Aztec metaphysics at the expense of others. What’s more, many of the terms I employ—beginning with the concept of metaphysics itself—are alien to Aztec thought. This is unavoidable in any explication that involves interpreting and translating one way of thinking about things into an alien system of thinking about things.” Maffie, p. 3.



time of Newton (and arguably even in his time), to call anyone outside of the modern period a “scientist” or claiming them to have contributed to scientific thought could be seen as anachronistic and breaking outside of historical context. But while that may be so, certainly this is not an illegitimate project. Given what we conceive of as science, there were certainly people engaged in aspects of this before Newton’s time, even if they didn’t see what they were doing as “science”, or if it was only in part consistent with the contemporary standards of the pursuit. The history of science is in large part the history of prescience and science done outside of the context of science. Given our contemporary definition and understanding, however, we can project back into the past and see much of the work done by historical thinkers *as* science, even if they did not themselves conceive of it this way, because of the universality of our conception. Science is not bound to contemporary cultures, and using our definitions of it we can pick out and consider the scientific work of thinkers in the past. The work and thought of Johannes Kepler serves as a good example. Kepler’s role in the history of astronomy is largely seen as that of a scientific astronomer who formulated the laws of motion of planets, which Newton later systematized mathematically. But this view of Kepler takes him radically from his context. Kepler was engaged in, and saw himself as furthering, the same astrological and mystical projects as many others in his time were engaged in, including his attempt to account for the Aristotelian harmony of the spheres, and his understanding of the planets and their motions as involved intimately in human affairs.<sup>8</sup> In historical context, it would be most proper to understand Kepler as astrologer rather than scientist. However, it is not an illegitimate project to read him as a scientist playing a role in the development of contemporary astronomy, however, since one aspect of his work and thought can be considered perfectly “scientific” and forms part of what we endorse within the scientific tradition. That is, we can profitably use our category of science and appropriate some of Kepler’s work as representative of this category, and consider the influence of that aspect of his thought in the construction of the category itself.

\* \* \*

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Boner discusses Kepler’s astrological orientation in *Kepler’s Cosmological Synthesis: Astrology, Mechanism, and the Soul* (2007).

In the chapters of this book I do not cover all of the chapters, ideas, and arguments of the massive *Lunheng* (which would require many volumes), but only those I deem to be devoted to philosophical subjects and involved in developing unique theories in response to other positions existing in the Eastern Han. If we see Wang Chong as a philosopher, he must be a philosopher *among* other things. Since I am considering the work of Wang Chong as philosopher, it is necessary to give an account of what I take to be sufficiently philosophical, as distinct from literary, scientific, or simply critical. The following discussion builds a conception of philosophy broad enough to include much of the thought of Wang Chong and other early Chinese thinkers, but narrow enough to avoid collapsing into something along the lines of “intellectual production”. This consideration is not ad hoc and led by a desire to include Wang and other early Chinese thinkers as philosophers, but instead I argue that a plausible conception of philosophy adequate to capture what most philosophers will consider as philosophy (and necessary to include work of most thinkers, East and West, we agree on as philosophical) will include much of the intellectual activity of Wang and many other early Chinese thinkers. This conception of philosophy still allows us to distinguish philosophy from religion, history, literature, science, and a number of other important but independent pursuits, however.

While there can be a distinction made between philosophy and these other intellectual pursuits, it is also the case that many people we might deem philosophers by this conception did not consider themselves philosophers and did not consider their philosophical work as independent from the rest of their thought. Thinkers in early China had no conception of “philosophy” as a pursuit, not just because of their lack of a term for such an enterprise, but because they didn’t think of what I will define here as philosophy and what we generally take as philosophy as an area distinct from the concerns of certain other areas of thought. I will not get deeply here into dealing with the challenge from those who hold that there was no philosophy in early China due to lack of a term to translate “philosophy” (which does not arrive in China until 哲學 “*zhe xue*” of the modern period, explicitly an attempt to render the Western term and concept of philosophy<sup>9</sup>), as this issue has been discussed by Bryan Van Norden (among others), who argues convincingly against what he calls the “lexical

<sup>9</sup>The first use of this term to translate “philosophy” is generally attributed to the Japanese philosopher Nishi Amane (1829–1897).

fallacy”. Lack of a specific term for a concept in a language does not entail lack of that concept in speakers of that language.<sup>10</sup>

The issue of philosophy and philosophical self-conception is a bit tougher, however. There are two ways in which we might consider the thought of Wang Chong as philosophical—one of them perhaps “provincial” and the other cosmopolitan. Both senses will serve my purposes here, however, and much of Wang’s thought can be considered philosophy on either conception. This is one of the things that makes Wang unique even among early Chinese philosophers and, I think, one of the reasons many Western scholars have paid so much attention to Wang’s thought, even given his relative lack of influence in Chinese intellectual history.

One difficulty of defining philosophy, even in the Western context, is the issue of its change over time. It is almost certainly the case that the ancient Greek conception of philosophy is very different from the project of contemporary analytic philosophy in the academy, for example, even though most professional philosophers today would trace back their “lineage” ultimately to the ancient Greeks.<sup>11</sup> Taking contemporary analytic philosophy as our starting point (not because I wish to dismiss continental philosophy and other conceptions of philosophy, but simply because I am more familiar with and was trained within the analytic tradition), we might give a definition of philosophy as centrally involving *conceptual analysis*. Although there are certainly deep metaphilosophical debates as to just how we ought to understand such analysis, we can say a few things about it unproblematically. Generally, we attempt to define and employ concepts in a theory in such a way that they manifest internal coherence, which can be determined by a priori means generally, and also that they are at least empirically acceptable insofar as they aren’t ruled out by empirical observation. Generally, philosophical issues and concepts are those that cannot really be determined one way or other through empirical observation and, for this reason, cannot fall within the domain of the sciences. Some philosophers (especially early in the analytic “movement”)<sup>12</sup> thought of philosophy as thus the beginning point of science, simply determining and clarifying the concepts that would then be used in empirically respectable

<sup>10</sup> Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> This accounts for why ancient Greek philosophy, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, remains one of the most basic requirements in any program of study in a philosophy department.

<sup>12</sup> Such as, famously (or perhaps infamously) W.V.O. Quine. This attitude has origins further back in history with the British Empiricists, particularly John Locke.

science. This “philosophy as handmaiden of the sciences” view persists in some corners of academic philosophy, but more commonly philosophy has come to be seen as an independent pursuit dealing with questions that presumably could never be decided by the methods of the empirical sciences because they are irreducibly conceptual.<sup>13</sup> One conception of what philosophy does that has had adherents recently is the idea that philosophy clarifies the concepts of our ordinary language, and that using logical techniques we can come to speak in a clearer and more incisive way, independently of the so-called facts about the world.<sup>14</sup>

While these conceptions of the philosophical program are taken to be continuous with those of earlier Western philosophers, these ways of thinking about philosophy are very different from those found in ancient Greece and indeed much of the “Western tradition” until the modern day.<sup>15</sup>

According to Wang Chong himself in a number of passages across essays of the *Lunbeng*, his main goal in writing was to flesh out and advance a particular method for attaining *truths* (*shi* 實), or, as we can safely say, a *philosophical* method. Some may object here to my use of the term “philosophical” in this context, and my claim that Wang Chong constructed and advanced a philosophical method in anything like the way that philosophy has been understood in the Western tradition. Indeed, a number of authors have challenged the notion that anything resembling philosophy in the Western sense existed in China for much of its history.<sup>16</sup> I disagree with this, and in particular with the view that Wang’s own thought cannot be called “philosophy”. Indeed, it is one of the main contentions of this book that in the thought of Wang Chong we see among the first *explicitly* philosophical projects in Chinese history in the sense of philosophy that resembles much of what is done in the contemporary Western tradition. On this

<sup>13</sup>The implosion of the logical positivist project showed that there are a number of conceptual issues that simply cannot be empirically solved, in part because observation is always itself “theory-laden”, most famously argued by Thomas Kuhn.

<sup>14</sup>This understanding of philosophy rose to a prominent place with the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. See Scott Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century: Vol. 1*, and “The Changing Role of Language in Analytic Philosophy”, in Preston, ed. *Analytic Philosophy: An Interpretive History*.

<sup>15</sup>I use scare quotes here to flag the fact that the so-called Western tradition itself is a semi-fictional construct.

<sup>16</sup>See Heiner Roetz, “Philosophy in China? Notes on a Debate”, in *Extrême-Orient, Extrême Occident* 27 (2005), 53–55.

measure, Wang's work is more clearly "philosophical" than much philosophy in the history of the Western tradition.

Wang's philosophical project alienated many of his contemporaries, and was one of the reasons (one may suspect) that his work was relatively neglected until the modern period, in which it was "rediscovered" as part of the modernizing movements beginning in the late Qing. Wang saw himself doing, and in fact *was* doing, something very different than his contemporaries in his writings. I think there is good evidence to hold that Wang was one of the first thinkers in Chinese history we can refer to explicitly as a philosopher, and whose thought in many ways we can call philosophy. Not *everything* that Wang wrote was philosophy, of course, and in this book I focus on those parts of his *Lunheng* that are philosophical, but among other things (in addition to being a classical scholar, historian, and astronomer) Wang can be called a philosopher. It is in his capacity as philosopher that I, as a philosopher myself, am most interested in him, and it is as philosopher that I think he has most to contribute to contemporary debates.

In order to understand the way in which we might see Wang Chong as one of the first philosophers of Chinese history, it is important to have a sense of the intellectual projects of scholars throughout the earlier Han dynasty as well as in the more studied (by philosophers at least) and formative Warring States period. Wang's own philosophical project was, although new and innovative, not completely unprecedented, and was influenced by a combination of the attitudes of earlier thinkers in Warring States and Han thought. One major distinguishing feature of Wang Chong and his work, however, makes him stand out as clearly a philosopher in a familiar vein: the aim of his work, explicitly stated as the search for *shi* 實 (reality, truth) as opposed to *xu* 虛 (emptiness, falsity), especially insofar as it applies to teachings or *words* (言 *yan*). Where most other thinkers in ancient China were primarily concerned with social or personal thriving and wrote in order to facilitate this, Wang was concerned with theory and with understanding it as the basis of practical action.

Chad Hansen discusses what he calls the problem of the "defensive" strategy of interpreting Chinese philosophy in which various positions and concepts in ancient Chinese texts are offered as being similar to particular well-known Western positions and concepts, or offering us alternative positions on familiar debates in Western philosophy. While I agree that this strategy is a problematic one, Hansen's response to this is to insist on the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western philosophy

concerning theory of language and ideas.<sup>17</sup> I think this is largely to miss the point concerning the debate surrounding whether Chinese thought is “philosophical”. This is a legitimate question, as much as that of asking whether there was theology, literary theory, or competitive sports in ancient China. Not just *any* intellectually developed theoretical system counts as philosophy. There are theories of physics, economics, political science, and history. None of these would count as philosophical simply because they are coherent, rigorous, credible, and even constructed a priori. In order to discern whether or not a particular kind of thought counts as philosophical, we have to have some base conception of what philosophy *is*. However, the net of philosophy cannot be so wide as to capture just *any* rigorous theoretical method, or we will have to end up concluding things as strange as that every field in contemporary academia is, in fact, philosophy.

Perhaps it is more difficult to define philosophy or to set boundaries for philosophy than it is for other areas of thought. It has to be possible to do so, however, or else “philosophy” becomes meaningless. One way of seeing philosophy is as a kind of “catch-all” area of thought into which falls whatever can’t be classified as belonging to some more determinate area of thought. If this is the case, however, it should be unproblematic to call ancient Chinese thought “philosophy”, insofar as it is in many ways very different from Western thought, and does not fall easily into any of the intellectual categories we have tended to distinguish in the West. I think this view of philosophy is an impoverished one, however. It is to hold that there is nothing in particular that philosophy *does*, that there is no specifically philosophical project, and that to call something “philosophical” is simply to make a claim about its lack of applicability to other fields, rather than its having a particular kind of positive project.

Almost any philosopher, contemporary or historical, will take himself or herself to have a positive conception of what it means to do philosophy, such that his or her work can be read as involved in a specific kind of project, with specific methods, rules, and, most importantly, aims. It is in this that I think philosophy ought to be defined—in that it consists in a certain set of related projects with shared aims and methods, however loosely defined these methods may be.

If we take relatively modest and broad view about what constitutes philosophy, one that I think most philosophers would agree to (at least

<sup>17</sup>Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, p. 26.

these can be seen as *necessary* conditions of something being philosophy), we can say that on the dominant conception of what philosophy is, it takes as its aim attainment of truth(s), however broadly conceived (we might have different views on what truth is, its place and role, and so on, but philosophers will generally take this concept as important and something their project aims to attain), uses largely a priori methods heavily reliant on logic (conceptual analysis is a dominant method in Western philosophy, but note that the methodological claim here is broader, such that it allows for conceptual analysis or other a priori methods), and is taken as *foundational* for other areas of human knowledge. This, I believe, supplies us with a *thin* conception of the concept of philosophy, that can be (and is) filled out in different ways in different traditions. But it gives us at least enough to be able to determine, within traditions, what constitutes philosophy and what does not. And this is something we can bring to the Chinese tradition as well.

It turns out that, if we use this relatively modest conception of philosophy, there is plenty of philosophy going on in ancient China. But even if we “up the ante” and take a more Western-based view of philosophy taking the central method to be one of conceptual analysis and debate, we *still* can find philosophy in ancient China, even though this whittles down the number of thinkers who can be said to have been engaged in philosophy. One of the thinkers who survives almost no matter how far we come toward the Western conception of philosophy is Wang Chong. In a sense, Wang is the most “Western” of the philosophers of the ancient period (perhaps with the exception of the later Mohists), in that his aims and methods align with those of many philosophers of the Western tradition.

A couple of objections might arise to this line of thinking. First, how can we treat a concept that either did not exist or was not a major concern in early China as a major category in our analysis of a thinker like Wang Chong? Isn't this an anachronism at best, and a blatant misrepresentation of the thought of Wang and other early Chinese thinkers at worst? I think the best answer to this objection is simply to point out that our concern with historical thinkers is *always* guided by concepts and concerns that were not those of the figures we study. In our interpretation of texts, we are guided by concerns that are uniquely ours. How we read a text is necessarily shaped by these considerations. Even in rendering the thought of Wang Chong or another early Chinese thinker into English is to distance ourselves from his concerns as he understood them, and to present his thought outside of its “context”. We can never access a “pure”

understanding of any early Chinese thinker using our concepts and our language, because the fact always remains that these thinkers themselves did not use these concepts and this language. The most we could ever do to approach most closely the thought of Wang Chong would be simply to repeat his words, using his language, in exactly the way he used them.<sup>18</sup> When we give an economic explanation for the actions of an emperor or a scholar who had no idea of the concepts of modern economic theory or even thought himself of his actions in anything like these terms, we often defend this methodology by claiming (or arguing) that these theories *really* explain the actions or thoughts of the figure in question, whether he realized it or not. Yet many remain unwilling to do this for the case of philosophy. We have no qualms about applying the conceptual tools of economic materialism to ancient Chinese thought, but resist the application of philosophy. I suspect some of the reason for this is the implicit mistrust of the concepts and categories of philosophy as legitimate aspects of human experience and the assumption that economic materialism is legitimately explanatory and “real” in a way philosophy is not. If the concepts and methods of economic materialism get at something that is actually there in human nature or action or thought, regardless of whether early Chinese thinkers conceptualized it as such, it is a legitimate enterprise to use these concepts and methods to interpret early Chinese thinkers. If the concepts and methods of philosophy are parochial, mind and culturally dependent, subjective, and private, however, then they cannot be used outside of their narrow context. I think such views are wrong about both philosophy and economic materialism.

Second, we might ask, why concern oneself with investigating an ancient Chinese thinker like Wang Chong in light of Western philosophy (ancient or contemporary)? What is the point? Why not aim to simply understand Wang Chong’s thought in its own historical and intellectual context, reading his *Lunheng* against the background of other Han dynasty and earlier texts that he would have read, the thinkers he would have actually engaged with, and the concepts and arguments he would have been working with? There is something to this response, in that we ought to be careful to avoid taking the similarity of thinkers like Wang Chong to certain strains of Western philosophy as doing more work than it possibly can. Also, we must resist the urge to completely transform thinkers like Wang

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this was the reason for the closeness of the “explanations” of the commentaries in the He Yan *Lunyu jijie* collection to the *Analects* itself.



into Western philosophers. Although Wang may share more similarities with Western philosophers than the vast majority of other known thinkers in the ancient Chinese world, this neither shows that he can be completely integrated into the mold of Western philosophy nor that we can simply read him as presenting views and arguments on topics and debates of interest in the Western tradition. While Wang's thought may look more familiar to philosophers in the Western tradition than that of most other ancient Chinese thinkers, Wang's work was still engaged with specifically Han debates, and this must be kept in mind as we engage with and interpret Wang's work. In some ways, understanding Wang is *complicated* by the stark similarities between his thought and much of Western philosophy, because we have to constantly resist the tendency to use the same interpretive schemes to understand Wang as we do to understand historical Western philosophers such as the ancient Greeks.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, reading Wang in an explicitly philosophical way, through the lenses of a more Western-based conception of philosophy, can be useful in a number of ways. Wang acquits himself pretty well, whether we use the interpretive schemes of Chinese or of Western thought. Chad Hansen has expressed the worry that, when read using Western concepts, Chinese thinkers become pale imitations of better-known and more rigorous Western philosophers. I'm not sure why this should be the case, however, unless Chinese thinkers are indeed weaker and offer us less interesting positions on these issues, in which case there is no point in investigating their views in this area or style of philosophy (even while they may be worthy of study in *different* philosophical areas or outside of philosophy altogether). Some Chinese thinkers will indeed suffer in such comparison, just as some Western philosophers will look impoverished and inadequate when compared with Chinese thinkers on issues of political harmony and self-cultivation.

The situation with Wang Chong, however, is different. In Wang, we have an ancient Chinese philosophical thinker whose work is in the strain of and stands up in light of anything in ancient Western thought. Because of this, contemporary philosophers have potentially much more to gain (to assist their own current projects at least) from a study of Wang Chong

<sup>19</sup>A trap, I think, into which a number of very capable comparative philosophers have occasionally fallen with respect to the similarities between Confucius and Aristotle. May Sim, Jiyuan Yu, and so on. In the case of Sim and Yu, however, this may be due in part to the fact that they are primarily Aristotle scholars.

than they do from ancient Chinese thinkers who are “further afield” from the methods and interests of contemporary philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Of course, there are a couple of issues here. There are numerous reasons contemporary philosophers ought to study and understand ancient Chinese philosophy (if I had my way, ancient Chinese philosophy would be an area of the history of philosophy deemed as necessary to a proper philosophical education as classical Greek philosophy), but two of them stand out here.

First, much of ancient Chinese philosophy can serve as a *counterbalance* to specifically Western conceptions of philosophy and can help to give us a sense of the different ways philosophy might develop and how we might think of our own projects in radically different ways, in order to diffuse, rather than solve, intractable philosophical problems. Most philosophical progress (just like progress in the sciences) has happened this way—difficult problems are not generally solved using the methods within which those problems arose, but rather we often find that a critical rethinking of the foundations of our projects, a Kuhnian “paradigm shift”, shows us how our conceptualizations and methods created the problem and how new ways of thinking about our projects undermines the basis on which the problems generate. But paradigm shifts cannot happen without the availability of new ways of thinking, without the ability to reimagine our projects and goals. It is no mystery why cultural renaissances seem to coincide with the introduction of new discoveries, whether scientific or cultural. In this vein we can see the usefulness of the kind of Chinese philosophy that presents an alternative to dominant Western conceptions of philosophy. Thinkers such as the early Confucians, Zhuangzi and other Daoists, and the Han correlative philosophers fall under this category. These philosophers would surely appear inadequate in comparison to many Western philosophers if we investigate them through the lenses of philosophy as conceptual analysis and debate, but an investigation of what they do better than Western philosophers can help to dislodge the prevalent notion in the West that what philosophy is (or at least what philosophy is *at its best*) consists of conceptual and linguistic analysis.

<sup>20</sup>This is not to say, of course, that studying and engaging with very different thinkers with very different concerns and views from our own is not valuable. In my view this task is even more important than that of engaging with thinkers from whom we can gain additional tools for our current projects. To encounter difference helps us to question, rethink, and adapt our own projects.

A second reason for contemporary philosophers to understand ancient Chinese thinkers such as Wang Chong is insofar as some of these philosophers *are* engaged in projects similar to those of Western philosophers, but offer sometimes very different positions and different ways of developing those projects. Ancient Chinese thought is no more monolithic and single-minded than is Western thought. While there are Chinese philosophers engaged in very different projects than, say, contemporary analytic philosophers, there are others who are engaged in projects startlingly similar to those of contemporary analytic philosophers. Perhaps the most similar of these ancient Chinese thinkers is Wang Chong. In studying Wang's work then, we open up new avenues of thought and discover new possibilities for answering the outstanding questions of contemporary philosophical discourse. While Wang Chong cannot be profitably seen as engaging in the exact same projects or being concerned with the exact same questions that many contemporary Westerners are, we can take his positions and arguments as relevant and applicable to contemporary debates. We will see that Wang's positions on truth, naturalism, and normativity, for example (among others), show us unique positions that might be taken up and defended as live options in contemporary debates. In organizing the themes of the rest of the book, I have concentrated on those aspects of Wang Chong's work *most* relevant to contemporary philosophers. Because of this, I've neglected discussion of other very interesting aspects of Wang Chong's thought, such as his physical, medical, and (to some extent) astronomical positions. This book, however, does not aim to be an exhaustive interpretation of Wang Chong's work as a whole, but to be an account of his *philosophical* work.

### METHODOLOGIES OF PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, AND COMPARATIVE THOUGHT

Some readers of this book will find relatively unproblematic the approach I am taking to the work of Wang Chong, situated in a comparative and appropriative context. A certain kind of philosopher, the "philosophical appropriatist", who takes the study of historical philosophers as useful for the insights we might gain into live philosophical problems, will likely have the least issues with what I am doing in this book. However, this is one of those projects in which, in the attempt to do something new and innovative combining the interests of multiple fields, one ends up alienating

all involved, rather than demonstrating to each the merits of the other, and establishing the conclusion that each field should look to the other for enlightenment about the subject matter they study. In this book, I look to philosophy, history, religion, and literature to make sense of a number of important features of the thought of the Han dynasty Chinese philosopher Wang Chong, and to think about both Wang's place in the context of global philosophical thought and the ways that contemporary philosophers might use his unique and powerful positions to help advance current philosophical debates, and solve seemingly intractable problems.

The two primary audiences for this book will inevitably be philosophers and sinologists from a range of other fields. The danger with this kind of project, though, is that instead of edifying both audiences, it can alienate both. Philosophers will likely follow and appreciate the accounts of philosophical problems, historical attempts to solve them, and perhaps even my consideration of Wang's own attempts to confront these issues. But they will likely be frustrated, on the other hand, with the amount of cultural and historical background I discuss on Wang Chong and his thought, seeing this as irrelevant to his philosophical positions. Sinologists, on the other hand, may appreciate my attempts to situate Wang historically and culturally, as well as my close analysis of the relevant text(s), but their eyes are likely to glaze over when I get into philosophical accounts of concepts Wang uses, and when I consider and develop these concepts in light of contemporary debates. That is—one audience will likely take me to task for being overly concerned with culture and history and insufficiently philosophical, and the other will take me to task for doing too much philosophy, and insufficiently engaging with the material, economic, cultural, and historical context of Wang Chong's life and thought.

### DESCRIPTION OF CHAPTERS

In Chap. 2, I offer an overview of Wang Chong's life, his philosophical background, and the textual history of the *Lunheng*. The picture I offer here is very general, and meant to situate Wang Chong's work in its historical and philosophical context. This is a book about philosophy and by a philosopher, but I encourage my philosophical audience to read this chapter as well, as it helps explain why Wang wrote and argued as he did, and gives us glimpses into the background that led to the development of his thought. Sinologists may find my account here quick and historically superficial. This is because the nature of my project is philosophical, and

although historical issues are certainly important, my aim here is not to engage in historical analysis, but rather to present a clear enough picture of Wang's life and intellectual milieu to give us insight into his philosophical views.

In Chap. 3, I discuss Wang Chong's philosophical and critical method, beginning with his arguments in defense of "creation" (作 *zuo*) as a legitimate tool in the service of discovery of truths. I then offer an account of the method of questioning and challenging (問難 *wen nan*) as described primarily in the *Wenkong* 問孔 ("Questioning Confucius") chapter. I explain the operation, purpose, and application of Wang's method, and give an account of how we might understand the purpose of the *Lunheng* as a whole as expression of this method. I also attempt to account for a number of inconsistencies between chapters of the text through reference to this method. I move on to discuss Wang Chong's account of knowledge, engaging with current interpretations and offering an interpretation of Wang Chong as developing a pluralist theory of knowledge.

In Chap. 4, I offer an account of what I take to be Wang Chong's pluralist theory of truth, centered on the concept of 實 *shi*. I explain how *shi* serves as a general truth concept meant to pick out specific truth-maker concepts within particular domains of discourse (in the case of linguistic truth). I explain how Wang's truth pluralism grows out of the pluralistic conceptions of earlier texts such as the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, combined with an understanding of *shi* developed in texts such as the *Xunzi*. While Wang rejects the "synthetic" or convergence approaches of earlier Han texts, such method nonetheless influenced his thinking about truth. Later in the chapter, I consider how something like Wang's pluralism might fit into contemporary philosophical discussions about truth, and aid current debates.

In Chap. 5, I discuss Wang Chong's supposed "naturalism", in light of his views on concepts such as 天 *tian* (nature), 氣 *qi* (vital essence), and 自然 *ziran* (spontaneity). I spend the first part of this chapter discussing the issue of naturalism in general and its applicability to early Chinese thought, and the question of whether Wang can be seen as developing a naturalist view as opposed to other metaphysical views in the Han. I then move on to discuss his views on the relationship between the operation of nature, spontaneous (or nonwilled) activity, and vital essence.

In Chap. 6, I discuss the problem of free will and determinism as it arises in early Chinese philosophy and in Wang Chong's *Lunheng* in particular. In the first section, I argue that there *was* a problem of free will in

early China, arising in most early texts but tackled most directly in Daoist/Zhuangist and early Han texts. I discuss the differences between the “problem of free will” as it arises in many Western contexts and the problem of free will in early China. I then outline Wang’s views on 德 *de* (potency) and 修 *xiu* (cultivation), and their connection to the distinction between spontaneous (*ziran*) and intentional (志 *zhi*) activity. I argue that Wang’s conception of three kinds of allotment (命 *ming*) is meant to solve the problem of free will as it arises in the context of his thought, but that his solution is ultimately unsuccessful.

In Chap. 7, I argue for the historical and philosophical significance of Wang Chong’s *Lunheng* given the positions of the previous chapters. Wang’s philosophical thought can be extremely valuable for contemporary philosophers, as he offers a toolkit of positions and arguments that have the potential to transform contemporary debates. I maintain that philosophers too (and not only historians of philosophy) should pay more attention to the thought of Wang Chong and to early Chinese thought in general. Considering and integrating insights and arguments from these texts can reinvigorate contemporary philosophy.



## Background, Writings, and Influence

論貴是而不務華。

*What is valuable in discussion is truth, rather than forced and flowery language.*<sup>1</sup>

While I do not get into specifically philosophical issues until the final sections of this chapter, I present a brief historical background of the life and times of Wang Chong, his position in early Chinese thought relative to better-known thinkers, his influences, and his influence on later thinkers. While readers versed in sinology will be familiar with much of this, it will help philosophers and others to situate Wang and better access important features of his thought.

Most work by philosophers on early Chinese thought has been on pre-Qin thinkers, particularly from the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). Most of the philosophers and texts of the early Chinese tradition best known in the West originate in this period and the period just before it (the “Spring and Autumn” period, 722–481 BCE). Well-known texts such as the *Lunyu* (*Analects*), *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*, *Mozi*, *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Hanfeizi* were written and compiled during this period.<sup>2</sup> It is generally

<sup>1</sup> *Lunheng*, *Ziji* 8. Citations of *Lunheng* and other early texts in this book follow the numbering of the *Chinese Text Project* website ([ctext.org](http://ctext.org)), except where mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> This is a matter of some controversy however. Some scholars argue that many of these collections were compiled during the Han. Michael Hunter argues for such a date for construction of the received *Analects* (*Confucius Beyond the Analects*), while Harold Roth and others (Roth, “Who Compiled the Chuang Tzu?”) argue that the *Zhuangzi* may have been

considered the “classical” period of Chinese philosophy, and by far most philosophical work on the Chinese tradition focuses on the texts of this period. Later periods such as the (Western and Eastern) Han still tend to be relatively neglected by philosophers, but the recent production of excellent new translations of key Han texts as well as groundbreaking scholarly work in the area may be beginning to turn the tide.<sup>3</sup>

## LIFE AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The second half of the Han Dynasty, or more accurately the *second* Han dynasty, was inaugurated by Liu Xiu 劉秀, a member of the extended Liu family who had ruled the empire during the first (or “Western”) Han Dynasty,<sup>4</sup> and distant relative of Emperor Jing (188–141 BC) of the Western Han. Before subduing his competitors for power following the void created by the fall of Wang Mang and his Xin dynasty, Liu took the name Guangwu 光武 and claimed the emperorship. Eventually he was successful in subduing the other claimants to power, and thus began what is referred to today as the Eastern Han dynasty, after Liu Xiu’s establishment of the capital in Luoyang, east of the former capital Chang’an.

The Eastern Han directly followed a short-lived reign orchestrated by a power grab by the Wang family, connected to the widow of Emperor Yuan, the Empress Dowager Wang Zhengjun. As part of her attempt to place members of the Wang family in positions of power so as to consolidate their grip on the empire, she placed her nephew Wang Mang in charge of the imperial guard. This proved to be an unfortunate move by the Empress Dowager, as Wang Mang was able to eventually consolidate power and take over control of the court, establishing the *Xin* (New) Dynasty.<sup>5</sup>

at least in part compiled by the authors of the Western Han text *Huainanzi*. The issue of source material date versus compilation date is also relevant, and perhaps even more difficult to determine. For my purposes here, we can assume the texts mentioned to be relatively early, or at least early enough that they are canonical and/or well known by the time of Wang Chong, who discusses them in the *Lunheng*.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ing and I discuss the neglect of Han Dynasty thought in our introduction to the special issue on Han thought in *Asia Major*, Third Series, 29: 2.

<sup>4</sup> Known as the Western Han because of the location of its capital, Chang’an (current-day Xi’an), in distinction to the second (or “Eastern”) Han Dynasty’s capital in Luoyang, about 200 miles east of Chang’an.

<sup>5</sup> My account of the details of Wang Mang’s life and reign follow the account of Ban Gu in his memoir of Wang Mang in the *Han Shu*. Rudi Thomsen discusses the implications of Wang’s reign and innovations in his *Ambition and Confucianism*.



Wang Mang's reign was in many ways an experiment in new and progressive social systems, involving numerous reforms of the existing Han social and economic policies. Some have called Wang a Confucian, and read his reforms as keeping with Confucian notions of (relative) social equality and virtue. While there may have been some enlightened features of some of his economic and political reforms keeping with Confucian ideals, Wang's rise to certainly cannot be said to keep with Confucian norms, involving as it did the standard means—murder, backstabbing, duplicity, and regicide. So it seems most prudent to remain neutral on Wang's authenticity as a Confucian reformer.

That said, there were certainly features of Wang's reign that were very Confucian, including his desire to reorder the empire along the lines of the ancient Zhou dynasty (something Confucius himself insisted on as the key to a harmonious society, according to passages in the *Analects*). Wang's major reforms were the deprivatization of land and the institution of income tax, both of which aimed to bolster the resources and power of the state as well as to redistribute land and resources more equally. While private ownership of land did not completely disappear, the rights of owners to develop and acquire were severely curbed. No new land acquisition was permitted, and owners with allotment of land deemed excessive had parts of it distributed to other family or community members. While such policies doubtlessly delighted the poorer members of society, it created and enmity in rich landowning families which eventually led to Wang's downfall.

Rebellions formed in the countryside fueled by dissatisfaction concerning Wang's land policies, and eventually members of the Liu family were able to take advantage of this rebelliousness and consolidated the movement into a more organized revolution. This eventually led to the fall of Wang's Xin dynasty and to Liu Xiu/Guangwu's rise and the establishment of the Eastern Han.

It was two years after Liu Xiu declared himself the Guangwu emperor (although power had still yet to be consolidated), in 27 CE, that a son was born to the impoverished Wang Song in the village of Shangyu in Kuaiji Commandery, along the coast (in the present-day city of Xiaoxing in Zhejiang province). The story of the poverty of the Wang Chong's family may prove an interesting link between the two Wang's, Wang Chong and Wang Mang. Wang Chong's great grandfather had been a landowner, and the Wang family once possessed wealth and a higher position in society. Somehow (and the literature is not exactly clear how), the Wang family descended from these respectable origins through the next couple of

generations to the depth it occupied by Wang Chong's birth. It may be relevant that the decline of the fortunes of the Wang family seem to have coincided with the reign of Wang Mang and his agrarian reforms, which would have done economic harm to landowners such as the Wang family.

Regardless of the ultimate reasons for the fall from grace of the Wang family, however, Wang Chong reports that his childhood was one of poverty and constant migration. According to his account,<sup>6</sup> his great grandfather was responsible for the decline of the status of the family. His behavior was less than exemplary, Wang explains, and his enemies looked for ways to subvert his power and influence. The revolts in Guiji (during the breakup of the Western Han) led to a chaotic situation in which Wang Chong's great grandfather's enemies were able to take advantage of the lack of order to plot against the Wang family. Because of this, the family moved to Qiantang County. Wang says:

世祖勇任氣，卒咸不揆於人。歲凶，橫道傷殺，怨讎眾多。會世擾亂，恐為怨讎所擒，祖父汎舉家檐載，就安會稽，留錢唐縣，以賈販為事。生子二人，長曰蒙，少曰誦，誦即充父。

His [Wang Chong's] great grandfather had a brave and robust spirit, and in his agitation had no concern for others. In difficult years, he harmed others and killed people, and created great resentment and numerous enemies among the people. In that time in Kuaiji there were revolts, and he feared that those who resented him and his enemies would capture him. Thus, [Wang Chong's] grandfather, Wang Fan, moved the family to Qiantang County, where he took up work as a merchant. Wang Fan had two sons—the older was named Meng and the younger Song. Song is the father of Wang Chong.<sup>7</sup>

The unrest Wang speaks of would have been connected to the turmoil during the end of the Western Han dynasty which aided in the transition of the Wang Mang interregnum (and explained some of Wang Mang's reforms), and we might imagine that some of the animosity toward Wang Chong's forebears was due to the unrest concerning land distribution and

<sup>6</sup>There has been some question whether the account of Wang's life in the *Ziji pian*, collected in *Lunheng*, is the work of Wang (source), both because Wang is spoken of in the third person and, as Donald Leslie points out, this essay "omits the standard phrases and grammatical forms found throughout the remaining chapters [of the *Lunheng*]". (Leslie, "Contribution to a New Translation of the *Lun Heng*", *T'oung Pao* 44, p. 102) Michael Loewe and Timoteus Pokora suggest this could be the case in the entry on the *Lunheng* in Loewe, ed. *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*.

<sup>7</sup>*Lunheng*, *Ziji* 1.

the shifting social place of minor landowners. Indeed, some Marxist Chinese scholars argued that Wang Chong's "materialist" and "naturalist" thought was the result of peasant uprisings and shifting ideology against the idealism of Han elites.<sup>8</sup> This position is highly implausible, however, given the story in the *Ziji* chapter concerning Wang's family, as well as the fact that Wang's thought is neither materialist nor naturalist in anything like a Marxist sense. In addition, Wang leveled challenges and criticisms at the statements and views of *su ren* 俗人 (common people) and "peasants" every bit as skeptical and sometimes vitriolic as those he leveled at elites. Not to mention that most of the people who receive the highest praise from Wang in the *Lunheng* (although such people still do not go uncriticized) are figures such as Confucius, Dong Zhongshu, Yang Xiong, and others associated with the Han elite.<sup>9</sup>

By Wang Chong's birth, however, the Wang family was no longer in a position of wealth or power. Wang Chong's grandfather Wang Fan became a merchant in the new family home of Qiantang County. According to Wang Chong, Fan unfortunately seems to have inherited the violent temper of his father, and the family moved again, to Shangyu, as a result of a dispute between the Wang family and other powerful families of Qiantang County, instigated by his grandfather Fan. It was in Shangyu that Wang Chong was born, to the younger of Fan's two sons, Song. In later years, Chong would exhibit that same Wang family antagonism and vehemence, but the physical and economic feuds of his forefathers would be transformed by Wang Chong and brought into the intellectual realm.

Although we have to take Wang's account of his own youth (or that of whoever wrote *Ziji pian*) with cautious suspicion (and that of the *Houbanshu* with even more suspicion<sup>10</sup>), it recounts an unusually intellectually adept and curious childhood. Wang Chong did not involve himself in the normal play

<sup>8</sup> For example, Ren Jiyu, 中國哲學史 *History of Chinese Philosophy*, also discussed in Carine Defoort and Yvonne Schulz Zinda, "Ren Jiyu: The Marxist View of Chinese Philosophy and Religion", *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, 41.4., 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Emmerich discusses some of this praise of Han-connected figures in "Wang Chong's Praises for the Han Dynasty", *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008).

<sup>10</sup> It is likely that the *Houbanshu* account took the *Ziji pian* as its main source, as it repeats a number of clear mistakes of *Ziji pian* and does not diverge from its account where the two overlap. The source of the material in the *Houbanshu* account not contained in *Zijipian* is unclear, although it is certainly possible that most of this is the fabrication of Fan Ye, as the most implausible of the claims of the *Houbanshu* account are those not contained in the *Ziji pian* account.

of the youths of his town, instead preferring thought and learning. Wang Chong says that he was first taught the classical literature at six years of age, and from this learned the important (Confucian) virtues. He manifested these virtues through his practice, mastering them such that his parents never had to punish him and he was never beaten for faults or lack of studiousness at school. As he developed the ability to write in school, his teachers introduced him to and helped him understand the *Analects* and the *Shang shu*, which, according to Wang, helped to further develop his virtue. Wang studied at the academy in Luoyang, and after gaining sufficient knowledge and moral development (according to Wang), he thanked his teacher and went out to study on his own, spending his time reading and writing. According to the account in the *Houbanshu*, because his family had no money, Wang frequented book vendors in the Luoyang market to sit and read their texts.<sup>11</sup> If this was the case, one would imagine that the book vendors would not have taken too kindly to this (or perhaps their virtue outweighed their desire to make a profit and they happily allowed Wang to read without buying).

<sup>11</sup> This is not the only detail of Wang's early life on which the accounts of the *Lunheng* and the *Houbanshu* differ. Wang's *Ziji pian* does not mention reading in the stalls of book vendors in Luoyang and memorizing the classics there—rather it says that his teacher introduced him to and taught him the classics—nor does it mention Wang being an orphan, as is claimed in the *Houbanshu* account. Wang's account has his father being alive until at least Wang's sixth year, as he claims to have been instructed at that age and without needing to be beaten by his father to study his lessons. Wang's account does not mention his father dying, nor does it mention the capital; it simply says that Wang went to school at eight years (although it was likely the capital, with 100 students). It is consistent with Wang's account that his father and mother lived while Wang went away to school. However, no further mention is made of Wang's father in the *Ziji pian*. Perhaps Wang Song was a troublemaker like his father and grandfather, or perhaps Wang Chong wanted to distance himself from the poverty of his youth? Or perhaps his father did die around the time Wang went to school at eight years, or afterward. There are a number of inconsistencies between the accounts of *Houbanshu* and that of the *Ziji pian*. On the whole, the *Houbanshu* account gives a more “flashy” portrayal of Wang's early life than that of the *Ziji pian*. Rather than “school”, Wang attends the Imperial College in Loyang, and is taught by none other than Ban Biao, the father of Ban Gu, author of the *Han Shu*. All of this smacks of sensationalism, and we might more readily believe Wang's own more modest account, especially in light of the inability of Wang to secure stable employment through his career and his complaints throughout the *Lunheng*. Emmerich (“Wang Chong's Praises For the Han Dynasty”) argues that the apparent bragging and likely stretching of the truth in *Ziji pian* show that Wang himself likely wrote the text. I would suggest that this is actually better evidence that he *didn't* write the *Ziji pian*. Wang was not prone to self-aggrandizing in the other chapters of *Lunheng*, and the *Houbanshu* account contains far more of what might be considered tall tales to enhance Wang's image, yet Wang Chong was certainly not responsible for this.

Wang is concerned to point out a couple of outstanding features of his character early on in his *Ziji* chapter. According to him (or whoever wrote the *Ziji*), even though he had great skill in forming argument and making distinctions, he didn't enjoy opposing others in competitions of dialectical skill.<sup>12</sup> His conception of doing what we in the contemporary West call "philosophy" was not, at least early on, if we take this seriously, did not involve the kind of intellectual combat we often see as a feature of the discipline today, and which is sometimes taken to foster development. Of course, in Wang's mature work we see plenty of such combat, in the richest tradition of Western philosophy (which is perhaps what led so many scholars to deem Wang as the first "scientific" thinker or as a beacon of logical and philosophical thought in the midst of what some saw as a particularly irrationalist time).

Wang also claims that his style of speaking and writing was awkward and, he says, sounded strange or deceiving to most people, but those who stayed with it and heard him out eventually gave their assent, seeing that what he said or wrote was true.<sup>13</sup> Wang spends a great deal of time in the *Ziji* chapter and a couple of other essays defending his unique style of writing, which he seems self-consciously to recognize as very different from the more traditional and accepted forms of literary construction in the Eastern Han, and takes pains to defend. Doubtlessly Wang would have been criticized for his style, which would have been considered awkward and lacking by one adhering to the traditional standards, although there is no objective sense in which Wang's literary style can be considered inferior to the accepted and popular styles.<sup>14</sup> Wang's use of vocabulary and breadth and consistency of constructions cannot, other than arbitrarily, be considered less sophisticated than that of traditional stylists, and in his creativity Wang can easily be considered far more developed than his contemporaries.

His was a time that did not, at least explicitly, endorse creativity or disagreement and dispute, however, at least insofar as it entailed stylistic and philosophical innovation. This fact is part of Wang's problem with his contemporary thinkers (and, ironically also the reason he's one of the only Han philosophers known by many contemporary scholars), which

<sup>12</sup> *Ziji* 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ziji* 2.

<sup>14</sup> A consideration of Wang's style in comparison to some of his rough contemporaries can be found in Michael Nylan's "Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue About Their Own Tradition", *Philosophy East and West* 47 (2), 1997.

eventually brings him to construct his major work, *Lunheng* (Balanced Discourses).<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, Wang was headed for a literary and bureaucratic career, but the course of this career would prove difficult, due to the kind of awkwardness of style Wang discusses as well as his contrarian nature, presumably inherited from his Wang forefathers, given his accounts of their behavior. Wang held the position of 功曹 *gong cao* (secretary) at the 縣 *xian* (county) level, and later held a position at the 州 *zhou* (province) level.<sup>16</sup>

One of the curious features of Wang's career and mature life accounted in both the *Ziji pian* and the *Houhanshu* is his poverty. Wang makes much of this in the *Ziji pian* account; he had neither land nor a constant salary from his offices. He also seems to suggest that his employment was also not constant.<sup>17</sup> He often lost positions not long after gaining them, according to the *Houhanshu*, due to arguments and remonstrations with superiors and colleagues.<sup>18</sup> Given both accounts of the antagonistic temperaments of his father's and Wang's own seeming predilection for controversy and contrarianism, we might not find this account too hard to believe. Wang offers an alternative, more charitable reason for his lack of gainful employment in *Ziji pian*, however. He attributes his inability to rise in the ranks as well as his inability to hold down a position (which he never explicitly admits to, but suggests) to his "pure and weighty" manner of engaging with others, and his various virtues.<sup>19</sup>

Wang says that he refrained from shamelessly advancing himself and engaging in empty fame seeking. In his focus on virtuous conduct, he eschewed acting with an eye for personal advancement or the self-aggrandizement necessary (according to his account and those of other Han scholars) to attain position. He followed Confucius' injunction to be

<sup>15</sup> Wang's most direct discussion of this comes in his *Duizuo* chapter, which I discuss in a section below. Michael Puett deals with the question of *zuo* in early Chinese thought, including Wang Chong's work, in his *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*, Stanford University Press, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> *Ziji* 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ziji* 2, 4.

<sup>18</sup> *HHS*, 王充王符仲長統列傳

<sup>19</sup> This was to become a common theme in Eastern Han literature by scholars who failed to secure employment in government. To what extent this was actually the case is debatable, but there are some cases in which it is plausible that certain moral qualms on the part of the scholar in question did actually hold them from office. Perhaps this is most clearly so in the case of Wang Fu (78–163 CE), whose refusal on moral grounds to take office on recommendation from friends led to his failure to ever attain office.

more concerned with doing something worthy of fame than in attaining fame, and would not tout his accomplishments, engage in boosterism, or overestimate his talents and abilities in order to ingratiate himself with others. All of these things were common in the Eastern Han dynasty, according to a number of authors from the period, all of whom complain about the inauthenticity of many office holders and the duplicitousness with which a rise to high position increasingly had to be performed.<sup>20</sup> Wang claims that he had a talent for, but did not enjoy, *bian* 辯 (argument).<sup>21</sup>

His virtuous behavior, according to his own account, led him to act in ways not productive of promotion or stable employment. He tended not to emphasize the faults of other people, he did not shy from remonstrating with a superior when he thought their actions were wrong, he only spoke when spoken to or asked to speak, and he did not attempt to make himself look better when slighted by others, or complain and remonstrate when he did not attain position. We might find this final statement revealing of the reasons for Wang's failure to attain position or steady employment. The enmity of others, for whatever reason, led to his disfavor and rejection by higher officials. He offers an extended explanation and apologia for his refusal (or inability) to respond to slights to his ability and character by those with enmity toward him. This emphasis might tell us that Wang perceived this to be the central reason for his inability to obtain position and secure employment. Whether this was due to Wang's attitude, his insistence on truth, abrasive relations with others, or the performance of virtuous actions he suggests in the *Ziji* chapter, it seems clear that resentment toward Wang, and his inability to negotiate the world of petty politics accounted at least in part for his career failures.

It is useful here to let Wang speak for himself. He explains:

或曰：「有良材奇文，無罪見陷，胡不自陳？羊勝之徒，摩口膏舌；鄒陽自明，入獄復出。苟有全完之行，不宜為人所缺；既耐勉自伸，不宜為人所屈。」

答曰：不清不見塵，不高不見危，不廣不見削，不盈不見虧。士茲多口，為人所陷，蓋亦其宜。好進故自明，憎退故自陳。吾無好憎，故默無言。

羊勝為讒，或使之也；鄒陽得免，或拔之也。孔子稱命，孟子言天，吉凶安危，不在於人。昔人見之，故歸之於命，委之於時，浩然恬忽，無所怨尤。

<sup>20</sup> These practices seemingly become worse in later parts of the Eastern Han, as the question of the talent and substance of officials versus their fame and undeserved reputations comes to occupy a greater amount of attention of thinkers such as Wang Fu, Cai Yong, and Xu Gan (who I will discuss in later chapters).

<sup>21</sup> *Ziji* 2.

福至不謂己所得，禍到不謂己所為。故時進意不為豐，時退志不為虧。不嫌虧以求盈，不違險以趨平；不鬻智以干祿，不辭爵以弔名；不貪進以自明，不惡退以怨人。同安危而齊死生，鈞吉凶而一敗成，遭十羊勝，謂之無傷。動歸於天，故不自明。

Some say: “Having great talent and being preternaturally literate, without fault but being maligned, why didn’t you object? Yang Sheng’s followers were crude loudmouths, but when Zou Yang made things clear, he was able to get him out of prison.<sup>22</sup> If a person has a completed character, it is not fitting that people should hold it as flawed. When he has already made efforts to develop himself, it is not fitting that people should hold him as deficient.”

My answer is: the impure do not observe dust, the lowly do not see danger, the narrow do not observe restraint, and the empty do not observe deficiencies. The scholars of today run their mouths, and this is what people criticize them for, which is only fitting. These scholars desire to advance their careers and thus they try to make themselves look good. They hate to have their careers regress and thus they promote themselves. I lack these concerns, thus I remain silent and without speaking. The defamation of Yang Sheng was caused by something. When Zou Yang obtained his release, someone saved him. Confucius spoke about allotment (*ming*), while Mengzi spoke about heaven (*tian*). Luck and misfortune, peace and danger, these are not within the control of people. The ancients saw this, thus they returned to seeing them in allotment and attributing them to the times. In an abundance of tranquility, there was nothing of which to be resentful. When fortune arrived, they did not say that they had achieved it, and when difficulties occurred, they did not say that they had created them. Thus, when they met with the fortunate times, they were not inordinately joyful, and when they did not meet with fortunate times, their will did not flag. They did not hate being in a state of want and thus seek plenty. They did not turn away from danger in order to hasten to peace. They did not sell their wisdom in order to procure wealth. They did not refuse titles in order to gain a name. They did not covet advancement and thus strive to make themselves look good. They did not hate to have their careers regress and thus resent others. They saw peace and danger as the same, and life and death as equal, luck and misfortune as the same, and defeat and victory as one. Even encountering ten Yang Shengs, they would

<sup>22</sup>Yang Sheng, a minister of the vassal Liu Wu, prince of Liang (second-century BCE), was jailed after being defamed. Another minister, Zou Yang, took up Yang’s cause and gained his freedom.



have said this was without harm. The way things progress is a matter of heaven, and thus they did not try to make themselves look good.<sup>23</sup>

Wang's response here relies heavily on the concept of *ming* 命 (allotment) and its connection to *tian* 天 (heaven), which operate independently of human effort to fix one's destiny. Wang devotes a number of essays in the *Lunheng* to working out his unique view of *ming* and its connection to the concepts of *tian*, *qi* 氣 (vital energy), and *xing* 性 (inborn characteristics), we will see in Chaps. 5 and 6. This may show that either Wang himself was indeed the author of the *Ziji*, or alternatively that the author of the essay was very conversant in Wang Chong's style, methods of argument, and positions concerning allotment.

Throughout the latter half of *Ziji*, Wang mentions what he claims were his main motivations in writing his various works. Wang was a lover of literature and reading in general, which is clear enough from the enormous breadth of literary knowledge evidenced in the *Lunheng*. In his readings, according to his account, he found that he disagreed with or saw as in error a number of things, which generally (unfortunately) corresponded to common beliefs. Many of the erroneous teachings and claims in literature were accepted by common people, according to Wang, blindly and without criticism. Wang's first work, *Jisu jieyi* 譏俗節義 ("Collected Explanations on Attacking the Common", rendered by Forke as "Censures on Common Morals"),<sup>24</sup> was, according to his account, motivated by the fickleness of his peers, who had supported him when he came into favor and attained position, and just as quickly abandoned and criticized him when he fell from grace and lost his position.<sup>25</sup> The "common" behavior Wang presumably alluded to here was the focus on position and name, rather than actual talent, and the serious deficiencies of character and degradation of society this entailed.<sup>26</sup> He explains that those who had been his friends once abandoned him when he encountered difficulty, and that this prompted him to write *Jisu jieyi*, which criticized current beliefs and practices. It is likely (as I explain in a section below) that much or all of this

<sup>23</sup> *Ziji* 3.

<sup>24</sup> Shao Yiping argues these are two distinct books, *Jisu* and *Jieyi*. Shao, 論衡研究 (*Study of the Lunheng*), *Fudan daxue chubanshe*, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> *Ziji* 5.

<sup>26</sup> This would become a major theme of a number of disaffected scholars throughout the Eastern Han, who would use a number of dichotomies to explain it, perhaps culminating with the sophistication of Xu Gan's account, using the distinction between 實 *shi* and 名 *ming* to make sense of the difficulty. Wang himself tackles the problem using 實 *shi* and 虛 *xu*.

work is compiled in the extant *Lunheng*, as there is much there concerning criticism of fame seeking and the explanations for failure to attain position.

Both accounts of Wang's life also mention his construction of a book on government, *Zheng wu*, which may also be compiled in the extant *Lunheng*.<sup>27</sup> The *Lunheng* itself is mentioned next in the *Ziji pian* account, and a later work, *Yangxing shu*, is also mentioned. As I discuss below, the *Ziji pian* account must clearly be a later work appended onto an earlier version of the *Lunheng*, as it not only mentions later works, but also discusses the reception of the *Lunheng*, which would be impossible if the *pian* itself were part of this original work. In all likelihood, the extant version of *Lunheng* is a compilation of most (or all) of Wang Chong's writings.<sup>28</sup>

Based on Wang's defense and account, his work was not received well by his contemporaries, and was criticized for a number of reasons, including its divergence from accepted style (Wang claims to write simply rather than using "flowery" language, as part of his concern with truth), as well as divergence from accepted views and criticism of classics, and finally the extraordinary length of his work. Wang's response to these criticisms in the *Ziji* chapter (as well as in *Duizuo*) shows us what Wang took to be his main concern, and one of the things that marks Wang as one of the most unique philosophers of the Han period. The central concern of the *Lunheng* in general, according to Wang, is *shi* 實 (truth, reality), and attaining it by whatever means possible.<sup>29</sup> This focus on truth leads Wang to antagonism with a number of people and positions, which he argues have made critical error and accepted untruths, or "empty sayings" (*xu yan* 虛言). It is not so much this concern with *truth* that makes Wang unique in his time, as it is the method by which Wang thinks that truth is attainable, and what this entails about what Wang takes truth to be. As I spend much of the next chapter arguing, it is Wang's position on truth that makes him a truly unique and important philosopher.

Wang explains, in *Ziji*, that the pursuit of truth was his only normative guide in writing, rather than considerations like style or length.

<sup>27</sup> *Ziji* 6.

<sup>28</sup> Shao Yiping disputes this view, arguing that the present *Lunheng* was written as a single text, and that the others mentioned in *Ziji* have been lost. In my opinion this view cannot make sense of the stylistic and philosophical divergences in various chapters of *Lunheng*.

<sup>29</sup> Chapter 4 is devoted to Wang's theory of truth, built on the concept of *shi*.

夫養實者不育華，調行者不飾辭。豐草多華英，茂林多枯枝。為文欲顯白其為，安能令文而無譴毀？救火拯溺，義不得好；辯論是非，言不得巧。

Those who nourish truth do not engage in what is flowery, those who improve their conduct don't adorn their words. Among plentiful grass there are many flowers, and in thick forests there are many dried-out branches. Creating writings is for the purpose of displaying purity—how can one engage in writing and fail then to reprimand? In saving a person from a fire or from drowning, we are not concerned with maintaining appropriate action. In debating about right and wrong, we should not be concerned with clever words.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, he employs truth in his defense against the criticisms of his contemporaries. He spends a large part of *Ziji* and the *Duizuo* explaining why the general conventions of literary construction are irrelevant when it comes to the search after truth. The primary goal of writing must be to find and present the truth, and this happens more readily through simple, critical, and extended reflection. The major difference here between Wang's conception of truth and that of other thinkers of the Han is Wang's bold rejection of what I call the "convergence model" of truth that was a key tenet of Han dynasty thought.<sup>31</sup> The basic idea behind the convergence model (described in greater detail below) is that truth is more likely to result from a number of experts getting together and figuring out what they can all agree on than through competition and debate between experts and systems. Although I think there is good reason to reject the traditional idea that there was a "Han synthesis" leading to a victory of Confucianism in the Han, the development of this convergence model as ideal, along with the increased focus on Confucius in the Han, led scholars to make this erroneous leap, that then became reinforced in later work and eventually became the dominant view of Han thought.

Wang's rejection of this convergence model is stark, and he rejects it on the grounds that truth (as he understands it) is conceptually distinct from agreement between experts. It is conceivable that all experts can agree on a certain point and still be wrong. The fact that often the results of such agreement are *proven* wrong and thus abandoned shows that agreement

<sup>30</sup> *Ziji* 9.

<sup>31</sup> I discuss this "convergence model" as opposed to a "debate model" more extensively later in the chapter, and independently in "The Convergence Model of Philosophical Method in the Early Han," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 3 (2), 2016.

cannot be the basis of truth.<sup>32</sup> Wang goes further than this, however, in his explanation. People are *more likely* to agree in accepting things that are false, because we have the tendency to accept things that feed our vanity, conform to our desires of how we want things to be, stimulate our aesthetic sense, or otherwise augment our selves, even though these things may be (even obviously!) false.<sup>33</sup> Wang recognizes the role these biases play in obscuring truth and swaying most people to accept error. It is only people who have thought things through and are somehow able to avoid the corrosive influence of the common who are able to discover the truth. And since the vast majority of the people are incapable of this, he thinks, we should not expect vast agreement to lead to truth. Those things that are widely agreed upon are actually more likely to be *false*!

Wang suggests a new approach to the search for truth, which he outlines and refines in various chapters of the *Lunheng*. We see from this that truth was certainly a major concern of this work, and Wang writes in *Ziji* and *Duizuo* that it was the central motivation behind all of his work.

With this apologia of his style of writing, the main part of *Ziji* ends. There is a further account of Wang's later life in the last few paragraphs in *Ziji*, but it is likely that this is by the hand of another author, as it mentions events to the end of Wang's life.<sup>34</sup> It is near impossible that Wang could have written the concluding section mentioning his attempts to prolong his life using meditation techniques and its ultimate failure.<sup>35</sup> This final section of *Ziji* recounts the later years of Wang's life. It mentions Wang gaining a position and setting aside his writing for a number of years. This

<sup>32</sup>The beginning of the *Bozang* ("Simplicity of Funerals") chapter, for example, argues against the widely held view on lavish burials, which, he argues, clashes with the views of the sages. Despite his insistence that agreement among the people does not entail truth, he *does* seem to have a view in a number of places that agreement among *sages* makes a statement likely to be true.

<sup>33</sup>*Ziji* 2: 實事不能快意,而華虛驚耳動心也。(The truth about affairs is not readily believed, while flowery and empty statements delight the ear and rouse the heart.)

<sup>34</sup>*Ziji* 14 recounts Wang's authoring of the *Yangxing shu* and his final attempts to prolong his life using meditation and alchemical techniques.

<sup>35</sup>Given that *Ziji pian* recounts the failure of Wang's project to prolong his life using meditation techniques, and that Wang certainly could not have written anything after his own death (if spirits could write, why wouldn't Confucius write to future generations to resolve disputes surrounding his teachings, for example?), at least part of the *Ziji pian* must have been by another hand. If we consider the possibility of Wang's decline even though trying to extend his life through these techniques and his knowledge of impending death, how could Wang have penned to final section of *Ziji pian* so lucidly were he that close to death that he was sure his life-extending techniques would not work?

could explain the abrupt end in the *Ziji* account of Wang's literary career, with most of his writing done in the years before the attainment of this position as subprefect in Yangzhou province. The account says that Wang was absorbed in this work until the second year of Zhang he (the final period of the reign of Emperor Zhang). It is difficult to establish just how many years Wang held this position, as neither the *Ziji* nor the *Houhan shu* accounts tell us at what age Wang secured this position, or took his extended hiatus from writing. We can, however, try to piece this together by the dates provided in the text. *Ziji* says that Wang achieved this final office "in the third year of Yuan he",<sup>36</sup> which we can isolate as 87 CE, and subtracting Wang's claimed birth date in the second year of Guangwu's reign, in 27 CE, we come up with an age of 60 years for Wang at his securing of this position, which he then held for only a year, as the account gives "the second year of Zhang he" as the end of Wang's employment.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, something is amiss here. The *Ziji* account talks of Wang giving up writing "for many years" to concentrate on his official duties, but according to the years given, he could have held this position for no more than a year. One possibility is that the author locates the beginning of the "many years" of literary inactivity with the end of the *Ziji* account of Wang's own hand, which may have been completed many years before this final position of Wang's. However, the account seems to attribute Wang's literary inactivity to his focus on official work—so either there must have been other positions before the one the account mentions, the dates mentioned were incorrect, or this reason for Wang's inactivity was an invented one. The final explanation is the most plausible, as it would be easy to find corroborating accounts of Wang's holding other positions, and the specificity of dates in *Ziji* makes it unlikely that this is manufactured. On the other hand, the claim linking Wang's literary inactivity to engagement in official work is offhand, nonspecific, and seemingly conjectural. For whatever reason, between the early version of *Lunheng* and what all sources admit is a late work, *Yangxing shu*, Wang seems to have produced no writings.

According to the *Ziji* account, not long after leaving the position in Yangzhou,<sup>38</sup> Wang went into a final retirement, returning home to focus on his health. It was during this late period that he wrote his *Yangxing shu*,

<sup>36</sup> 84–87 CE, the second period of the reign of Emperor Zhang.

<sup>37</sup> Forke speculates that declining health may have been the reason for his retirement from this position.

<sup>38</sup> At the time this referred to the entire region that today includes the city bearing the same name.

concerned with methods for extending life, likely involving meditational and alchemical methods, and focusing on ways of retaining *qi* 氣 (vital energy) so as to prolong life. Wang engaged in this project for some unclear amount of time—if we assume this project began with his retirement at 70 then (although there is a discrepancy between the end of his position in Yangzhou and his 70th year), if we accept Forke’s dating of his death at 97 CE,<sup>39</sup> this would put Wang’s involvement in the project at less than a year, taking the dates listed in the *Ziji* for his late career and age as accurate. If we instead take his involvement in the project from the end of his position in Yangzhou, this puts Wang’s involvement at about eight to nine years, which is much more plausible if the *Yangxing shu* dating from this period indeed consisted of 16 chapters. It would be extremely unlikely that Wang could have written so much in a single year, especially in a state of declining health. Thus, there is good reason to accept a later date for Wang’s death (perhaps closer to 104 CE, the end of the Yongyuan period to the first period of the reign of Emperor He).

The *Houhan shu* account recounts a number of events not discussed in the *Ziji* account, mainly having to do with the particulars of Wang’s official career and appraisal of his work and talent. This comes near the end of the *Houhan shu* account, which we must take with a grain of salt due to historians’ tendency to eulogize and pronounce of the merits or demerits of historical figures at the end of an account of the figure’s life. It is possible that Fan Ye and the other *Houhan shu* authors found external sources for these claims, but it is also not outside of the realm of possibility that these stories were invented. According to the *Houhan shu* account, a friend of Wang’s (Xie Yiwu) recommended Wang to the imperial court, writing a memorial in which he lavished praise upon Wang’s character and talents. In the *Xie Cheng*, according to *Houhan shu*, Xie Yiwu explained that Wang’s talent resulted from natural gifts rather than from learning,<sup>40</sup> and ranks him even higher than Mencius, Xunzi, and the Han philosophers Yang Xiong, Liu Xiang, and Sima Qian. According to this account, Emperor Zhang<sup>41</sup> called for Wang to appear at his court on the basis of

<sup>39</sup> Based on the *Houhan shu* account dating his death in the middle of the Yongyuan period.

<sup>40</sup> Likely an allusion to the sage in *Analects* 7.20, where Confucius discusses those “born with knowledge” (生而知之者).

<sup>41</sup> The text uses Zhang’s “temple name”, Su Zong.

this (presumably to give Wang an official position), but Wang was unable to appear due to illness.

This story is highly implausible for a number of reasons. First, the *Ziji* account puts Wang's appointment to his final position as subprefect in Yangzhou at between 86 and 87 CE (the third year of the Yuan he period). Emperor Zhang died in 88 CE, in the same year that Wang was claimed to have retired from this position (the second year of the Zhang he period). It is very unlikely that during this final year of Emperor Zhang's life he would have called Wang from the provinces, and also that someone would have recommended him from this distance. Second, the story has the feel of a fabrication because of its involving the author's implicit praise of Wang, leading to no actual position. The story of Wang's illness would have been convenient to explain why he did not take official imperial position, as such a memorial would certainly have led Emperor Zhang to title Wang. The fact that Wang gained no such titular change, even in retirement from illness, is a third sign that this story is the invention of the author of the *Houhan shu* account.<sup>42</sup> The details of Wang's life outside of this story just do not mesh with the tale of being invited to Zhang's court on the basis of a glowing memorial. It is certainly still *possible* that the story could be accurate, but the likelihood is that it is a later fabrication.

### TEXTS-LUNHENG

The only extant text of Wang Chong's is the current form of the *Lunheng*, which contains 85 chapters. It is unclear if the current *Lunheng* contains parts of the other texts Wang mentions in *Ziji* and mentioned in *Houhan shu* (although from the subject matter it is likely that it does). Other works mentioned by Wang Chong are *Zhengwu*, *Jisu jieyi*, and *Yangxing shu*. Alfred Forke claims that the *Yangxing shu* has been completely lost, although he puts forth no evidence to show that at least some of this work could not have been compiled into the chapters of the extant *Lunheng* (and he admits to the possibility of at least some of Wang's *Zhengwu* being compiled in the extant *Lunheng*). Possible candidate chapters include *Qishou*, which discusses the connection between *qi* and the length of one's

<sup>42</sup> A further reason to doubt this story is that earlier in the *Houhanshu* account it mentions Yuan Shansong's claim that *Lunheng* was unknown in the central regions of the empire until Cai Yong discovered it in Wu. The work of such an influential and talented person to attract the attention of the emperor would not likely have remained outside the central regions.

life, and *Yantu*, which discusses poison and cures. There does not seem to be 16 chapters worth of material on the extension of life in *Lunheng*, but it is possible that the majority of the chapters did not deal directly with this subject, as we often see Wang veering off topic in numerous chapters of the *Lunheng*, which sometimes have titles almost completely unrelated to the main subjects of the chapter.

It is possible, then, that the current *Lunheng* is a more or less complete compilation of all of Wang's writings, although this common view (which I share) is disputed by Shao Yiping.<sup>43</sup> From an analysis of the style and subject matter of the various chapters, it seems clear that the chapters must have been constructed at different periods of Wang's life and intellectual development, unless Wang purposefully used very different styles, concepts, and terms within a book written at once, which would have been bizarre. Some of the often-noticed inconsistencies between views of the various chapters are likely due more to intellectual development and changing of views through his career than to failure of careful consideration and disregard for wide consistency outside of particular arguments against particular positions. Some have claimed that the inconsistency of the chapters in some regards was due to Wang's lack of hesitancy to use any available argument against an opposing position, even if such an argument was inconsistent with one used elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Such an explanation ought to strike us as particularly strange, however, for a thinker who explicitly insisted on the value of and need for consistency, and made this one of the main themes of his work. It is far more likely, then, given the other reasons to believe so, that the perceived inconsistency is due to the situation far more common to collections—that the various chapters are representative of different stages of Wang's thought. We should thus no more expect consistency across the various chapters than we should expect consistency across the entire *oeuvre* of Plato or Aristotle. Wang, like any thinker engaging in work for a long enough period, likely changed his mind, modified his views, abandoned positions, and adopted new ones. Both the *Ziji* and the *Houhan shu* accounts of Wang's life suggest that his productive period was a long one, beginning with his *Jisu jieyi*,<sup>45</sup> relatively early in his career, and ending with his *Yangxing shu* (which only the

<sup>43</sup> Shao, *Lunheng yanjiu*.

<sup>44</sup> Nylan, "Han Classicists", 146; Forke, *Philosophical Essays*.

<sup>45</sup> The *Houhanshu* account refers to this work as simply *Jisu*.



*Houhan shu* account mentions).<sup>46</sup> The *Ziji* account mentions *Jisu*, *Lunheng*, and *Yangxing shu*, which suggests both that *Ziji* was written long after the early version of *Lunheng*, that *Jisu jieyi* is his earliest work, and that the extant *Lunheng* was a compilation of all of Wang's work, with the *Ziji* appended as explanation. *Ziji* is the 85th of 85 chapters of the *Lunheng*; therefore, it would have been impossible for the early version of *Lunheng* (written before *Yangxing* even according to the *Ziji* account) to have been written as the extant version presents it, and as *Houhan shu* claims (giving the 85 chapters as the extent of the early version).

The main evidence for the *Lunheng* as single work distinct from the other works mentioned comes from a shared account of the *Houhan shu* and the *Ziji*, but we have some reason to doubt that the *Lunheng* mentioned in these two accounts is identical to the extant *Lunheng*. Both accounts attest to Wang's writing of *Lunheng* as a unitary work sometime in the middle of his career, with the *Houhan shu* account referring to it as containing "85 chapters and 200,000 words" (八十五篇二十餘萬言). The *Ziji* refers to it as having "more than 10,000 sentences" and also mentions 85 chapters. One problem with both of these accounts is that the extant version, which has 85 chapters, includes *Ziji*, which refers to the *Lunheng* as an earlier work and discusses later works including *Yangxing shu*, but seeming to include itself in the chapters of the original *Lunheng*. This suggests the work of a later hand attempting to legitimize all 85 collected chapters as part of a single unitary text. In addition, it is only in *Ziji* that Wang (or whoever authored it) mentions the enormous length of the *Lunheng*.<sup>47</sup> He offers an explanation and an apologia for this unusual length in *Ziji*, and in no other chapters of the extant version of *Lunheng*. This ought to strike us as odd, however, if the *Lunheng* were originally a unitary text of the length of the extant version. In particular, we should expect to see a defense, or at least a mention, of its length in *Duizuo*, which serves as a general apologia of Wang's style, method, and the unusual conventions of his work as well as the ways he diverges from accepted methods of authorship. However, although *Lunheng* as a whole

<sup>46</sup>The *Wenxin Diaolong* mentions a *Yangqi* chapter, which does not correspond to any chapter title in the received *Lunheng*. Chen Gong 陳供 argues, in a commentary to the text, that this *Yangqi* actually refers to Wang's *Yangxing*, the text mentioned above (*Wenxin Diaolong Benyi* 文心雕龍本義, 2, 1038).

<sup>47</sup>That is, *Ziji pian* is the only place in the *Lunheng* in which it is mentioned. The *Houhanshu* account, as explained above, also discusses the length of the *Lunheng*, estimating it at exactly the length claimed by the *Ziji pian* account.

is mentioned in *Duizuo*, nothing is said either in defense or about its length.

There is mention of *Lunheng* as a whole in only 7 of the 85 chapters of the extant work: *Xieduan*, *Luanlong*, *Huiguo*, *Xusong*, *Yiwen*, *Duizuo*, and *Ziji*.

The survival of the *Lunheng* collection (presumably in its late, complete form) has an interesting early history, according to the *Houhan shu*. We might expect such a work to have been lost, due to its lack of identification with any “school” (*jia*), and its inability to advance the agenda of any given school. This would have led to its neglect, as with other texts of its kind, and eventual loss (as people found no reason to continue copying it). Wang Chong’s text, however, was able to survive for a very different reason. Wang’s wide reading across areas (likely criticized by representatives of “schools”) may have ironically been exactly what led to the survival of his work. The *Houhan shu* recounts that according to Yuan Shansong the *Lunheng* was unknown in the central regions of the empire, and was “discovered” by the Han philosopher Cai Yong (132–192 CE) in Wu, who used it as a kind of historical and philosophical sourcebook for aid in argument. No doubt this was due to the enormous number of historical and literary references in *Lunheng*, as well as its many arguments and discussions of philosophical and argumentative method. A curious story is told about Cai and the *Lunheng* in *Houhan shu*. According to it, people became suspicious of Cai’s new abilities on returning from Wu, and suspected that he’d found some rare and insightful text. An unnamed intruder scoured Cai Yong’s hiding places and found a copy of *Lunheng* behind his curtains. This person took parts of the *Lunheng*, presumably to gain his own advantage in argument, but somehow Cai Yong caught the thief and worked out a deal with him in which they would both retain a copy of the book and keep it secret, so as to maintain their argumentative advantage.

*Houhan shu* also says that Wang Lang discovered *Lunheng* when he took a position in Guiji commandery and was able to impress his friends with his learning when he returned home to Xuxia. When people discovered the secret to Wang Lang’s learning, the *Lunheng* gained popularity. According to all of these stories in *Houhan shu*, *Lunheng*’s main interest to readers in the later Han was its usefulness for helping in argument and conversation. The *Houhan shu* account does not explain what feature of the book its readers found helpful for this pursuit, but we might imagine that it was the enormous breadth of historical and literary information contained in the text as well as the large number of particular arguments

and discussions of methods of argument that proved helpful in this way. Whatever the reasons were, it seems clear that we have the *Lunheng* today due not primarily to its philosophical content, but to its focus on method and its examples. This, interestingly enough, is quite appropriate, I will argue in the next chapter, as part of the uniqueness of Wang's work is that it shifts much of the focus away from particular philosophical positions to philosophical method and argument itself—something largely neglected in the work of thinkers before him, and one reason Wang's work would have been uniquely helpful to those engaged in disputation (辯bian), regardless of school affiliation or particular position.

### INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND AND HAN THOUGHT

To understand the philosophical thought of Wang Chong and appreciate the usefulness of Wang's work for contemporary philosophical work, we must situate it in its historical context, including understanding the issues, central concepts, and arguments Wang built on as well as responded to in his own work. While understanding historical context is of course important, I resist the notion that our engagement with ancient thinkers such as Wang Chong must involve only native concepts, and that our interpretations need to stay "close to the text".<sup>48</sup> As I point out in the Introduction, while historical engagement with a text and tradition is valuable, it is not the *only* worthwhile or legitimate project we can engage in with respect to a text. And while philosophers are sometimes charged with providing ahistorical or historically irresponsible readings of ancient texts,<sup>49</sup> it is unclear that philosophical reading and engagement with a text is any more anachronistic or distant from a text than are historical or other methods. In any interpretation of a text that does not simply repeat what the original text says and in the same language the original text says it, one necessarily goes beyond the text and its historical milieu.<sup>50</sup> Historians and other sinologists use anachronisms like the modern English language, concepts like "history", "politics", and "economics" that have (in English) deep historical baggage, and make claims about ancient texts that (necessarily) go beyond

<sup>48</sup>Liu Xiaogan, for example, makes such claims concerning Daoist texts in Liu, ed. *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*.

<sup>49</sup>See Michael Nylan, "Academic Silos, or, What I Wish Philosophers Knew About History", in Tan, ed. *Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*.

<sup>50</sup>This is one of the important lessons of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.

what the authors of these texts said. Perhaps a sufficient historically respectable method is to adopt the broadly conceived proscription to try to ensure that our interpretations are *consistent* with the texts and historical contexts we interpret, reconstruct, or build upon. The standard of consistency is much broader and permissive than those often preferred by historians, but there is good reason to think that this broader standard is also the strictest standard we can use without running into the problems I mention above (the fact that as long as we are saying something different from the original texts, we are violating standards).

All of this said, Wang Chong did not do philosophy in a vacuum, and the concepts he discussed, the positions he took, and the arguments he made all depended (in numerous ways) on the intellectual tradition in which he found himself and that came before him. In particular, Warring States and earlier Han Dynasty thought, the concerns of the “syncretists” of the Western Han, Confucians such as Yang Xiong, and other thinkers such as Jia Yi and Huan Tan. To the extent that Wang Chong’s work engaged with ideas from earlier thinkers, such as the early Confucians, Daoists, Zhuangists, and Legalists, he did so through the lenses of these later Warring States and Han thinkers. Wang discusses figures such as Confucius, Mengzi, Xunzi, Mozi, and Hanfeizi throughout the *Lunheng*, but his understanding of these figures is clearly colored by Han interpreters, and the texts to which he looks in his discussions of these figures are standard Han texts (where different texts are consulted in later periods such as the Song and Ming).<sup>51</sup> Below, I offer a brief outline of the major thinkers and views that Wang Chong draws on and that influence Wang’s thought, staying close to Han Dynasty thinkers (who themselves develop views based in earlier parts of the tradition). While I discuss specific issues in earlier thinkers in later chapters, below I focus on methodological issues in Warring States, which Han thought can help us situate and understand both Wang Chong’s general method and his tendency to offer what we might call “pluralist” views on topics such as knowledge and truth, despite the seeming conflict between such pluralism and Wang Chong’s rigid insistence on consistency.<sup>52</sup>

The various debates between thinkers in the late Warring States period gave rise to the methodological concerns that peaked in the Western Han.

<sup>51</sup> Particularly with the focusing of a new Confucian canon by Zhu Xi.

<sup>52</sup> I discuss these issues in more depth in “The Convergence Model of Philosophical Method in the Early Han”, *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 3 (2), 2016.

Perhaps the beginning of this concern goes back to the *Xunzi* and *Zhuangzi*. It is in these texts that methodology is given the most explicit focus and extended discussion before the development of “syncretist” texts such as *Lushi Chunqiu* and *Shizi* near the end of the Warring States. I am discussing here *philosophical* methodology, of course. Almost all early Chinese texts considered questions of political and ethical methodology. What we begin to find in later Warring States texts, however, is a consideration of method as it involves the intellectual project itself—that is, methodology as governing the projects these thinkers engage in when developing and arguing for their positions on ethics, politics, metaphysics, and other topics. Two specific methodological views in early texts that influence Wang’s thought (both directly and via their influence on Han texts) are the Zhuangist view of following the “natural propensities” (天理 *tian li*) and the *Xunzi*’s position concerning the connection between names (名 *ming*) and actualities (實 *shi*). As I discuss in Chap. 4, the concept of *shi* becomes Wang Chong’s central truth concept, developing from the earlier uses of texts such as *Xunzi*, but understood also in a pluralistic way consistent with not only the *Zhuangzi*, but also later Han texts such as the *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu*.

The origins of what I call the “convergence model” are in the *Zhuangzi*’s discussion of perspective and its connection to knowledge. In various parts of the text, a distinction is drawn between “lesser knowledge” (小知 *xiao zhi*) and “greater knowledge” (大知 *da zhi*). While this distinction is difficult to understand and interpretations of it tend to be controversial, I argue briefly here that there is reason to see it as a kind of *summative* knowledge that goes beyond that possible within the various narrow perspectives the *Zhuangzi* constantly points out the limits of. In this way, my reading of the distinction comes fairly close to that of Tim Connolly, who unlike a number of other scholars understands “greater knowledge” as a kind of understanding that arises from the ability to shift perspectives and understand the ways in which these perspectives compliment, contradict, and ultimately complete one another.<sup>53</sup> The very first story from the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* discusses perspective and its link to “greater knowledge”. *Zhuangzi* tells the story of the massive fish Kun, who becomes the gigantic bird Peng (a transformation representing shifting of perspective) and flies thousands of miles at a time. In passing over a small cicada

<sup>53</sup> Connolly, “Perspectivism as a Way of Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*”, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10.4, 2011.

and a student dove, who spend their whole lives between a few trees, the two look up at the enormous transformed bird and laugh at it. They are simply unable to understand its larger perspective, based in its ability to transform and shift. At the end of this story, *Zhuangzi* discusses knowledge:

小知不及大知，小年不及大年。奚以知其然也？朝菌不知晦朔，蟪蛄不知春秋，此小年也。

Lesser knowledge does not reach the level of greater knowledge, just as lesser years do not reach the number of greater years. How do we know this is so? Morning mushrooms do not know the night or month. A mole cricket<sup>54</sup> does not know the spring and autumn. This is to be of lesser years.<sup>55</sup>

Here, greater knowledge is clearly endorsed over lesser knowledge, with the idea (reinforced by the Peng bird story) that whole one with greater knowledge, based on their ability to transform and shift perspectives, can understand in the sense of lesser knowledge, the person with lesser knowledge is limited and cannot have greater knowledge. Greater knowledge thus is *summative*, and this summation requires the ability to shift perspectives. Part of the difficulty with this reading of the text, however, is that different things are said in other parts of the *Zhuangzi* concerning the greater knowledge/lesser knowledge distinction. In Chapter 17, *Qiushui*, (“Floods of Autumn”), we find the claim that those of greater knowledge do not disparage that which is small (including presumably lesser knowledge).<sup>56</sup> Steven Burik reads this plausibly as showing that “Zhuangzi shows contempt for those who think they can separate things one from the other, but ultimately also for those who think that ‘greater knowledge’ is intrinsically better than ‘smaller knowledge’.”<sup>57</sup>

While Burik’s reading of *Qiushui* is surely plausible, I think it is problematic to attribute this and Chapter 1 with an individual “Zhuangzi”. As numerous scholars have argued,<sup>58</sup> the *Zhuangzi* is a composite text,

<sup>54</sup> With a lifespan less than a year, and appearing only in summer.

<sup>55</sup> *Zhuangzi* 1.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Zhuangzi* 17.3.

<sup>57</sup> Burik, “Wisdom as Realization: Heidegger and Zhuangzi on Belonging in the World”, in Moeller and Whitehead, eds., *Wisdom and Philosophy: Contemporary and Comparative Approaches* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> See Chris Fraser, “Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and the Paradoxical Nature of Education”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33 (4), 2006; Liu Xiaogan, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, University of Michigan Press, 2003.

produced by many different hands. Even if we do not accept the view offered by scholars such as Liu Xiaogan (and based on the traditional organization of the text by the third century CE scholar Guo Xiang) that a single author was responsible for the so-called Inner chapters while other (and later) Zhuangists wrote the “Outer” and “Miscellaneous” chapters, there are clearly stylistic, content, and other differences between chapters of the text that make it far more likely that chapters such as 1 and 17 were by the pens of different authors (with different views) rather than either by a single author or by a single school with consistent positions. The positions of Chapters 1 and 17 on greater knowledge simply disagree with one another, and our efforts to make sense of entire texts such as the *Zhuangzi* as offering consistent positions is a fruitless task.<sup>59</sup> In offering a view that greater knowledge is seen as summative and created by ability to transform and shift between perspectives, I am not offering a view of the greater/lesser knowledge distinction for the *Zhuangzi* as a whole. Indeed, I do not think such a position consistent with the text is possible. Rather, I argue only that there is one strand of the text that supports this position—perhaps held by one faction of Zhuangists (whether early or late, Zhuang Zhou or someone else is impossible to say). This Zhuangist position is one that influenced authors of Western Han texts such as *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu*, and also influenced Wang Chong.<sup>60</sup>

Some read the greater/lesser knowledge distinction in a different way, invoking skepticism and distinct ways of responding to the world—the knowledge based on distinction-making and thus susceptible to skeptical arguments, and the “greater” knowledge based on following ordinary appearances or responding to things in an automatic way not dependent on distinction-making (somewhat reminiscent of Sextus Empiricus’ Pyrrhonian skepticism).<sup>61</sup> One way of reading the Zhuangist view of knowledge,

<sup>59</sup>This, for example, is the reason I follow Fraser’s use of the term “Zhuangist” to refer to positions found in the *Zhuangzi*, rather than attributing them to an individual “Zhuangzi”.

<sup>60</sup>Of course, the more “inclusive” position found in *Qiyushui* also influenced the authors of *Huainanzi*, in ways it does not seem to have influenced Wang Chong (at least obviously), so I leave this aside here.

<sup>61</sup>Such a view is developed by Chris Fraser (“Skepticism and Value in the *Zhuangzi*”), and defended by Donald Sturgeon as what he calls a “positive skepticism” (“Zhuangzi, Perspectives, and Greater Knowledge”, *Philosophy East and West* 65.3, 2015). The parallel between this reading and Pyrrhonian Skeptic views is anticipated by Paul Kjellberg (“Sextus Empiricus, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi on ‘Why Be Skeptical?’” in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*).

however, offers a plausible explanation of not only the *Zhuangzi*, but also the origin of the syncretic pluralism and the convergence model of philosophical method prominent in early Han texts. Many chapters of the *Zhuangzi* offer arguments against what Zhuangists take to be narrow positions based on particular ways of engaging in *shi-fei* (this/not-this) distinction-making. This appears to be the “lesser knowledge” (小知 *xiao zhi*) discussed throughout the text. Greater knowledge (大知 *da zhi*), on the other hand, is not subject to the same skeptical difficulties, and thus the question arises as to how greater knowledge manages to avoid such difficulty. I argue that it is in the *summative* nature of greater knowledge that it gains its value and becomes incapable of defeat by skeptical arguments, according to Zhuangists. We find here an early form of what I call the “convergence model” of philosophical thought developed in the Han.

The origins of this method can be found in the skepticism of the *Zhuangzi*. The rejection of knowledge claims about values in text and the process that brings it about is itself taken as a value, and the basis for a different (and greater) kind of knowledge. To become a perfect person, one must cultivate the kind of ability to oppose, see outside of perspectives, and recognize limitations and inadequacy of knowledge claims that grounds skepticism. While it may seem that this conflicts with the value skepticism also supported by the *Zhuangzi*, the reason that they do not conflict is that Zhuangist value skepticism is not a blanket claim about the problem of valuation, nor is it a rejection of knowledge of values altogether. Rather, it is a partial skepticism that allows for knowledge of values only that meet the standards for “greater knowledge”, or perspective-independent knowledge. But how can we ever have such knowledge? For the *Zhuangzi*, the discussion of the self is a critical part of the puzzle.

In the Chapter 17 discussion between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi about the “happy fish” in the Hao River, Zhuangzi makes a knowledge claim that seems absurd on its face about the happiness of the fish in the river. In responding to Hui Shi’s questioning of how he knows that the fish are happy, Zhuangzi suggests that his failure to distinguish between self and other in a robust or universal sense allows him to have such knowledge. Thus, he concludes, “I know it from here above the Hao” (我知之濠上也). One way we might understand this is in the Pyrrhonian sense—when we restrict knowledge claims to those about the appearances, they are unproblematic, as the skeptical problem of justification can never then get a hold. This is why the Pyrrhonians discuss “following the appearances” as the proper response to the skeptical problematization of knowledge



through the “modes” of skepticism. There is certainly an aspect of following the appearances in the Zhuangist approach—responding to the *tian li* 天理 (propensities of nature) involves a direct action that does not result from valuation or conceptualization. But on the Zhuangist view, following *tian li* does seem to involve valuation, albeit of a very different kind than what is usual. When Zhuangzi makes the claim that he knows the fish are happy, he is not merely stating how things appear to him—if this were the case, then Hui Shi’s initial objection reveal a misunderstanding, one which Zhuangzi could have easily handled by clarifying that he was not making a knowledge claim at all. He instead insisted that he *was* making a knowledge claim.

And the content of this claim should also not be ignored, as it sometimes is in discussions of the passage. Zhuangzi’s initial claim was that “these minnows swim about so freely, following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness of fish<sup>62</sup>” (儵魚出遊從容，是魚樂也). This is a key Zhuangist/Daoist statement. Happiness, and success, results from wandering free and easy (like the Peng bird), following patterns (like Cook Ding), understanding and following along with the natural propensities. It seems here that more than just Zhuangzi’s knowledge claim concerning the fish in the Hao River is at issue here. The problem Zhuangzi and Hui Shi are indirectly discussing is the problem of how one can *know* that the Zhuangist way itself—including the valuations it makes, such as the skeptical mindset, the embracing of free and easy wandering, and exhortation to follow the natural propensities—is the right valuation, especially given all the arguments the Zhuangists have given against valuation in general. His response here suggests that the valuations that can figure in knowledge are the ones made without the fundamental distinctions, such as self/other, that we generally use in valuation. In order to make proper valuations, they have to be the result of understanding and following natural propensities, which requires an undermining of the self. This seems to be one of the main points of the discussion between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi at the end of Chapter 6. Zhuangzi claims that we can rid ourselves of our characteristically human concerns, and he associates these concerns with *shi-fei* conceptualization. Once we do this, the valuations created on the basis of following the natural propensities can form the basis of “greater knowledge”, knowledge that is expansive and not perspective dependent, unlike the narrow “lesser knowledge”.

<sup>62</sup> Ziporyn trans., *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, p. 76.

So what, for the Zhuangists, is valuable? Following the natural propensities is valuable. Seeing the “use of the useless” is valuable. Deconceptualization is valuable, and “fasting of the mind”, “sitting and forgetting”, and undermining of the self are valuable. These involve and can only follow from the skeptical mindset. As such, then, skepticism itself is valuable. This range of values, according to the Zhuangist, will help open up *other* values, such that we can eventually form a robust web of values and corresponding knowledge. This is “greater knowledge”, which comes from a source of deconceptualization and skepticism concerning value, as opposed to the “lesser knowledge” that is constructed in the usual ways, and which is vulnerable to skeptical argument.

We might understand the way that knowledge concerning value is constructed in two examples from the *Zhuangzi*: the story of Cook Ding and the famous “butterfly” passage of Chapter 2.

Cook Ding explains his skill that “goes beyond skill” as being a result of seeing with the spirit rather than with the eyes. This is the same language used in the explanation of “fasting of the mind” that Confucius offers to Yan Hui in Chapter 4. In both cases, it is a rejection of conceptualization leading to an undermining even of the most basic conceptualization—the distinction between self and other. Cook Ding no longer sees an ox, and thus he is able to access the natural propensities inherent in the ox. The natural propensities, according to Zhuangzi, are inaccessible to those operating in the normal ways, because they use inadequate means, such as the eyes, the mind, and so on to create their valuations (*this* is important, *this* is not, *this* is useful, *this* is not, etc.) Knowledge claims about values constructed in this way fall victim to the value skepticism the *Zhuangzi* stresses throughout the text. Responding to the *tian li* directly, however, without the intermediary of a self based on conceptualization, allows us unfettered access to the world. As with so much else in the *Zhuangzi*, skepticism is only a problem if we are stuck within narrow perspectives. When we cultivate the ability to undermine conceptualization and respond directly to the natural propensities, using the vital energy (*qi* 氣), we see the skeptical stance as not a problem, but as valuable in itself. We know its value not through using the eyes or our normal ways of conceptualizing, however—rather we know its value through its ability to make us responsive to the myriad changes in the world and to act effectively. This demonstrates the value of skepticism—having the massive skill of Cook Ding that goes beyond skill.

The “butterfly” passage that ends Chapter 2 offers us a picture of the intended result of all of this—what happens when we develop “greater knowledge”. We see an opposition given between the state of being Zhuangzi and that of being the butterfly, with a skeptical argument given concerning which is the “true” state. There seems to be no available evidence to determine whether he is actually Zhuangzi or the butterfly, as from within each perspective the other seems as only a dream. Which can be privileged as the ground? On what basis? The chapter ends with the suggestion that *neither* can be so privileged, and that this is an example of what we must call “the transformation of things”. The result of the skeptical argument here seems to be *not* that one should suspend judgment, as in the Pyrrhonian case, but rather that one should rebuild one’s knowledge on the basis of direct response to the natural patterns, and without the problematic conceptualizations involved in lesser knowledge. What we should give up is the idea that there is a true, right, or proper option in a perspective-independent and universal sense. The Zhuangists seem to be exhorting us to drop the question of whether one is actually Zhuangzi or a butterfly—as we cannot know in part because there simply may be no answer to that question. When we do this, we can follow the natural propensities, as we become able to simply be a butterfly when we’re a butterfly, and Zhuangzi when we’re Zhuangzi. Knowledge of transformation and of the natural propensities on the basis of deconceptualization—this is “greater knowledge”, and such knowledge *requires* a lower-level skepticism concerning “lesser knowledge”. That is, we cannot come to have greater knowledge without a skeptical stance toward lesser knowledge. Rejecting valuation on the basis of preferences and other aspects of the self opens us to the ability to respond to the propensities of nature itself, which grounds new and proper valuations, allowing for knowledge.

Notice that part of this greater knowledge, the ability to value different states and to make use of alternatives and transformations, is itself a pluralistic view along the lines of what we begin to see in late Warring States and early Han “syncretist” texts. Texts such as *Shizi*, *Huainanzi*, and *Lushi Chunqiu* develop a convergence model of philosophical method. This model can be understood as essentially pluralist, in the sense that it takes a plurality of positions, viewpoints, and perspectives as necessary and ineliminable in any true and/or acceptable account of reality.<sup>63</sup> The Zhuangist

<sup>63</sup> I explain in further detail essential pluralism and different kinds of pluralist views in the early Han as they relate to the convergence model in McLeod, “The Convergence Model of Philosophical Method in the Early Han”.

position outlined above comes close to such a position—perhaps the only way it resists categorization as essential pluralism is the rejection of Zhuangists (in general) of the idea that there are true accounts of reality. For the Zhuangist, a plurality of positions, viewpoints, and perspectives are necessary for the construction of “greater knowledge”, but Zhuangists remain agnostic (as it seems they must) concerning whether the content of this greater knowledge accurately depicts “how the world is”. Both the Zhuangists and earlier Daoists are committed to the statement of *Daodejing* Chapter 1: “The *dao* that can be [called, distinguished as, treated as] the *dao* is not the constant *dao*” (道可道非常道).

The convergence model is roughly of the view that as we integrate a greater number of perspectives, viewpoints, and positions into a single systematic understanding of reality, we converge on the truth. The greater the number of distinct positions we are able to integrate into a philosophical system, the closer we approach truth, with the idea that at the limit of such systematic synthesis, we attain a complete understanding of the world. This general understanding of the intellectual project was popular in early Han texts, and these texts were often classified by later scholars as *za* 雜 (“syncretist” or “miscellaneous”), mainly due to their lack of clear school affiliation with respect to the traditional *jia* 家 (“schools”), such as Confucianism and Daoism. I believe these texts were more concerned with method than with points of doctrine (as I argue below was Wang Chong), also following Daoist texts such as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*.

While all of the concepts and views discussed in this section are dealt with in early Chinese philosophy long before the beginning of the Han period, it is the widespread understanding of these positions in the Han that had most direct influence on Wang. It is Han views that Wang responded to directly—accepting, challenging, and refuting in his own work. Even when he discusses earlier works, as he often does (such as the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, and *Hanfeizi*, which he devotes entire chapters to, as well as numerous other pre-Han texts discussed throughout the *Lunheng*), he often understands these texts in ways consistent with readings and interpretations influential in the Han. The readings of pre-Han texts Wang often assumes are very much *Han* readings.

The following chapters in this book deal with some of the concepts with which Wang is most concerned in the *Lunheng*, and each of these has a rich history in Han and pre-Han thought. While I discuss earlier views

and debates before Wang's time in the corresponding chapter for each topic, here I offer a general overview of the concerns and debates spanning through the Han period before Wang's time.

The disputes concerning inborn characteristics (*xing* 性) that raged in pre-Han schools continued unabated into the Han, and almost all of the major texts of the period deal with the question of the moral value and content of human inborn characteristics. We find a variety of views on these questions throughout the Han, and one of the most well known is that of Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE), who held that inborn characteristics included both good and bad elements, and that cultivation of virtue is a matter of selecting and developing the good elements while suppressing the bad.<sup>64</sup> In the *Chunqiu Fanlu*, consistent with its general concern with correlative cosmology, we find inborn characteristics linked with *yang*, while *qing* 情 (emotions, essence) is linked with *yin*.<sup>65</sup>

Wang Chong himself discusses these earlier views of inborn characteristics in the *Benxing* (Original Characteristics) chapter of the *Lunheng*. While the views of the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* certainly influenced Han thinkers, we see increasing discussion of additional components of a person as playing a role in moral development, such as *qing* 情 and *ming* 命 (allotment). We also see increased association of these aspects of the person with metaphysical concepts such as *yin-yang* 陰陽, *qi* 氣, and *wu xing* 五行 (five phases). To a large extent, metaphysical thought was a unique feature of Han thought, especially as compared to the much less metaphysically inclined pre-Han period.<sup>66</sup> This metaphysical bent of Han philosophers perhaps came to its peak in the correlative cosmology of the Western Han, seen in texts such as *Chunqiu Fanlu* and *Huainanzi*. Much of the criticisms leveled at earlier views by Wang involve particular positions on

<sup>64</sup>Bullock, *Yang Xiong: The Philosophy of the Fayan: A Confucian Hermit in the Han Imperial Court*, 57–58. Wang Chong cites the views of a Shi Shi (世碩) as identical to those of Yang Xiong, in the *Benxing* chapter.

<sup>65</sup>*Chunqiu Fanlu*, *Shen cha ming hao* 4: 身之有性情也，若天之有陰陽也。言人之質而無其情，猶言天之陽而無其陰也。

<sup>66</sup>A number of scholars who argue against the presence or importance of metaphysics in early Chinese philosophy tend to neglect texts of the Han period and later. Randall Peerenboom writes: “It is a commonplace that Chinese philosophy is predominantly social and political philosophy: rather than being preoccupied with metaphysical quandaries Chinese thinkers tend to center their aim on the Socratic question of how we as individuals and as a society (ought to) live” (Peerenboom, *Law and Morality in Ancient China*, 19).

metaphysical topics, though Wang often shares basic orientations toward metaphysics with these earlier texts.

For my purposes here in understanding Wang Chong's philosophical orientation, the central development in earlier Han and late Warring States philosophy was the focus on pluralistic methodologies. Beginning in the Warring States in texts such as *Lushi Chunqiu* and *Shizi*, through the early Han, and culminating with the two most well-known pluralistic (or "syncretistic") texts, *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu*, pluralistic methodologies become central. While Wang rejects the pluralistic convergence method of these texts, he is nonetheless influenced by the pluralist bent of earlier Han texts, and (as I show throughout the book) develops a number of different pluralist views—particularly concerning knowledge and truth.

As mentioned above, Wang has generally been read as a critical philosopher, and those who read his work in this way tend to contrast it with what they take to be the "orthodox" scholastic work of the more central Han dynasty thinkers, originating with the thought of Dong Zhongshu in the Western Han. In order to appraise the accuracy of this claim, as well as to situate Wang's project and his own thought, it is necessary to look back to at least the Western Han, to find the growth of concerns, methods, and concepts Wang deals with in a number of ways in his *Lunheng*. It is not the case, of course, that Wang engages with these concepts or earlier thinkers in unproblematic ways, or that he is using or responding to the claims, arguments, and conceptualizations of earlier philosophers or schools,<sup>67</sup> but there is a sense in which he inherits, as thinker using the language and ideas of his time and culture, concepts from the earlier tradition, especially as formulated in the late Warring States through Western Han and into Wang Mang's short-lived Xin dynasty. In particular, Wang's work can be seen as engaging with (and criticizing) a particular popular method of philosophical thought that arises in the Western Han, becomes dominant during the Wang Mang period, and continues to some extent throughout the rest of the history of Chinese philosophy—a method I call the "convergence model" of philosophy, as opposed to the "debate model" that rose to dominance in the Western tradition, and which Wang Chong to some extent endorses in the Chinese context. It is this movement toward the debate model in the *Lunheng*, I argue, that accounts for many Western scholars' attention to Wang Chong as a paragon of "scientific" or "criti-

<sup>67</sup>Despite the contemporary tendency to read Wang's work, like much other ancient work, in light of conflicts between schools of thought (*jia* 家).

cal” thought, more palatable to Western philosophical sensibilities than his contemporaries for many hundreds of years before and after him.<sup>68</sup> It is for this reason that among Han thinkers only Wang Chong and a few others are recognized by a number of sinologists, in our recognition of the familiar. This, however, is based on a crucial misunderstanding of both Wang’s project *and* the earlier philosophical atmosphere of the Western Han.

It used to be a popular view<sup>69</sup> that with the Western Han came a “victory of Confucianism” that took the correlative cosmology of the late Warring States, culminating in the metaphysics of *wu xing* (five elements) and combined it with an imperial version of Confucian ethical and political teaching, focusing on hierarchical relationships and prescribed roles and ritual. The growth of a canon throughout the Han dynasty was connected to this project of “synthesis” that created a new kind of imperial Confucianism that was to become the dominant “orthodox” school of thought starting in the later Western Han.<sup>70</sup> It is for this reason that some contemporary scholars dismiss the Han dynasty as the dawn of Chinese scholasticism, in which scriptural considerations win out over philosophical investigation, and the multitude of schools collapse into a static imperial Confucianism.<sup>71</sup> Such a view likely originated with Song dynasty scholars who implicated the Han dynasty in what they thought was the corruption of “Confucian” teaching, in an enthusiastic zeal to get back to the “pure” teachings of the ancient masters.

There is abundant textual and historical evidence that this view of the Han dynasty is false. Many of the texts on which the consensus about Han uniformity was based, such as the *Chunqiu Fanlu*, are problematic in key ways, and investigations in Han history, reading it beside the philosophical

<sup>68</sup>A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 382; Feng Youlan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 150–153.

<sup>69</sup>Though one increasingly rejected today, see Michael Nylan “A Problematic Model: The Han ‘Orthodox Synthesis’, Then and Now”, in Kern, ed. *Text and Ritual in Early China*, University of Washington Press, 2005; Michael Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu, A “Confucian” Heritage and the Chunqiu Fanlu*. Brill, 2011.

<sup>70</sup>See note 89.

<sup>71</sup>Chad Hansen, for example, makes the following provocative claim: “The Qin and Han dynasties transformed China into an imperial bureaucratic state. They brought an end to the classical period of dynamic thought and the start of China’s Dark Age. The more totalitarian state repressed the guilds, while it provided a convenient home (the bureaucracy) for the Confucians” (*A Chinese Theory of Daoist Thought*, 99). Hansen offers no support for this claim, and it ends up being a repetition of the “traditional” Song prejudice against Han thought.

texts, show inconsistencies between the traditional account and that which emerges from the Han literature. In particular, dynastic histories such as the *Shiji*, the *Han shu*, and the *Hou han shu* advanced a picture of a monolithic, synthesized, and “orthodox” world of thought in the Han dynasty that does not fit with the picture we discover when looking to the extant philosophical texts of the period. It is clear why the historians would want to construct such a mythology surrounding the thought of their age—they had their own agendas to promote, and presented their own philosophical commitments (or rather those of their imperial clients) as the dominant, orthodox, and singly adhered-to systems of their time. Such was far from the truth, however. The reason things appear so much differently in the earlier pre-Qin periods is not because there was *less* uniformity of thought, more independence, and more philosophical debate, but rather because there were no imperial historians and scribes to construct perhaps well-meaning but ultimately self-serving and inaccurate stories about the dominance of their own school of thought, neglecting the others.

In addition to philosophical texts from the Han, we also have access to memorials and stelae, all of which tell a much different story than that in the official histories. If we have come to a view of Han as the beginning of a stale and conformist orthodoxy, it is likely because we have invested too much trust in and attention to the official histories, and too little to the philosophical texts and government material not intended for publication and posterity. Michael Loewe points out:

a simplistic view of either Western or Eastern Han as depending on an existing and unchanging set of ideas and practices can hardly be sustained. The memorials of officials and the texts of imperial edicts reveal not only the incidence of dynastic rivalries and disputes, but also the promotion of different measures to govern the empire, the adoption of different intellectual concepts and a trust in different religious beliefs.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the lack of a unified state ideology in the Han period, we can certainly speak of dominant themes and ideas during the period. Even if there was no “victory of Confucianism”, there were intellectual norms, trends, and common positions that tended to predominate in elite intellectual discussion. The existence of such norms and trends is inevitable

<sup>72</sup>Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu, a ‘Confucian’ Heritage, and the Chunqiu Fanlu*, p. 41.



anywhere there are intellectual communities. Even in the most divisive and disagreeable intellectual communities (of which any group of people in contact with one another surely counts), there are intellectual trends, widely accepted norms, and commonly accepted ways of understanding methodologies and intellectual projects. It is important to discuss some of those intellectual trends here, because much of Wang Chong's work is devoted to challenging, augmenting, or defending them. While Wang has a reputation for criticism, his work is not *merely* or *completely* critical. Where he often differs from his peers is in the amount and the figures he is willing to scrutinize and criticize. But there is still a great deal of the content of the Han intellectual milieu that Wang accepts, sometimes without questioning. As I show below, his method of questioning and challenging (*wen nan* 問難) is not uniformly applied in his work, and real questions arise as to both its applicability and to whether or not Wang thought that its use should be limited to certain kinds of case.

### *Convergence*<sup>73</sup>

The “convergence model” texts of the early Han generally hold that seemingly disparate viewpoints, teachings, and schools (for ease of use, I will refer to these as *perspectives*) seem opposed to one another mainly because they take themselves to be *summative*—that is, they take the aspect of the world they pertain to as exhaustive of all there is. This is a criticism we hear often in the *Zhuangzi* of the various schools. One way of understanding how to unify the disparate perspectives is to see each of them as capturing certain aspects of reality, or having use in different situations. The problem, according to convergence model texts, is that groups such as the *Ru*, Mohists, Daoists, and others took their own perspectives to be summative, excluding the others. Interestingly, this point takes its lead from what we find in the *Zhuangzi* concerning perspective. The *Zhuangzi* presents the negative case for perspectives, which the convergence model offers a response to. While the answer the *Zhuangzi* gives to the problem of the limitation of perspectives is to avoid conceptualization and reject the idea that universal or perspectiveless truth as such is possible, the convergence model texts, while agreeing about the limitations of perspectives, attempt

<sup>73</sup>Parts of the following section are taken from my paper “The Convergence Model of Philosophical Method in the Early Han”, *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 3 (2), 2016.

to solve the problem by unifying these perspectives through somehow making them work as part of a larger social project.

*Dao* itself is ultimately a unity of the multiple perspectives, rather than something independent of these perspectives, prior to, or grounding them. A passage from the *Yuandao* chapter of *Huainanzi* expresses this best.

夫臨江而釣，曠日而不能盈羅，雖有鉤箴芒距、微綸芳餌，加之以詹何、媮嬛之數，猶不能與網罟爭得也。射鳥者扞鳥號之弓，彎棋衛之箭，重之羿、逢蒙子之巧，以要飛鳥，猶不能與羅者競多。何則？以所持之小也。

Now if someone spends an entire day pole-fishing along a riverbank he will not be able to fill up even a hand basket. Even though he may have hooked barbs and sharp spears, fine line and fragrant bait, and, in addition, the skills of Zhan He or Juan Xuan, he would still be unable to compete with the catch hauled in by a trawling net. Or suppose a bowman were to stretch out the famous Wuhao bow and fit it with the fine arrows from Qi and add to this the craft of Yi or Feng Mengzi. If he wanted to hunt birds in flight, he would still be unable to match the amount caught by a gauze net. Why is this? It is because what he is holding is small by comparison.<sup>74</sup>

The trawling net does not represent a single truth that *everyone* has—indeed, no one has such a perspective. The view from the individual is necessarily limited, thus the only way to gain full understanding is to unify one's own perspective with those of others. Part of the difference here between Han convergence theorists and contemporary pluralists is a difference in belief about what is possible for the *individual*. According to most contemporary pluralists, I as an individual within a tradition can conceive of an “infinite transcendent reality”. The Han thinkers reject this, however. An individual is necessarily limited by individual perspective, abilities, and understanding. I can only ever access part of the *dao*, just as I can only see what is in the direction of my visual field, and not the entire world. Attaining unity is a matter of constructing the proper *communities*, not simply a matter of individual viewpoint.

The *Lushi Chunqiu* takes up this issue in Book 17, in the *Zhidu* 知度 (Knowing Measure) chapter. It advises even the ruler to know his place, reminding him that even the loftiest person in society cannot have complete understanding, cannot see everything.

<sup>74</sup> *Huainanzi* 1.6, Major, Queen, et al. translation.

明君者，非遍見萬物也，明於人主之所執也。有術之主者，非一自行之也，知百官之要也。知百官之要，故事省而國治也。明於人主之所執，故權專而姦止。姦止則說者不來，而情諭矣；情者不飾，而事實見矣。此謂之至治。

A ruler who is enlightened does not observe the entirety of the myriad things. His enlightenment consists in having a plan to command and employ people. One with the techniques to command does not take on everything himself, but knows how to delegate things to his officials. Because he knows how to so delegate, his dealings with affairs are infrequent yet the state is ordered. Because his enlightenment consists in having a plan to command people, he consolidates his power and duplicity is ended. When duplicity is ended, then persuaders don't come around, and states of reality are manifest. When states of reality are not obfuscated, then the truth (*shi*) about affairs can be seen. This is called consummate order.<sup>75</sup>

The enlightened ruler understands how to unify the myriad perspectives through understanding how to properly *employ* or manage these perspectives, such that those who stand within particular perspectives are directed to the right place at the right time.

A passage from *Huainanzi* on relative abilities lends itself to such an interpretation:

湯、武，聖主也，而不能與越人乘幹舟而浮於江湖；伊尹，賢相也，而不能與胡人騎驪馬而服駒駘；孔、墨博通，而不能與山居者入榛薄險阻也。

Tang and Wu were sagely rulers, but they could not compete with the men of Yue in navigating little boats and sailing on the rivers and lakes. Yi Yin was a worthy minister, he could not compete with the Hu people in riding horses from Yuan and breaking wild steeds. Confucius and Mozi had broad understanding, but they could not compete with mountain-dwellers in entering overgrown thickets and hazardous defiles.<sup>76</sup>

Paul Goldin takes this passage as evidence of what he calls “insidious syncretism” in the *Huainanzi*,<sup>77</sup> holding that it shows that even the so-called sages like Confucius and Mozi are limited and so should only be used by the ruler for what they can offer the state. I disagree with this reading, and think the passage fits much better into an interpretation like

<sup>75</sup> *Lushi Chunqiu* 17/5.1.

<sup>76</sup> *Huainanzi* 9.8, Goldin trans.

<sup>77</sup> Goldin, Paul. “Insidious Syncretism in the Political Philosophy of *Huai-nan-tzu*”, *Asian Philosophy* 9:3, 1999.

my own, where this constitutes part of an argument for the necessity of convergence.

Goldin reads this as a statement of the importance of Confucius and Mozi not for their ethical teachings but instead for the usefulness of their particular knowledge for the ruler. He argues that it shows the limit of the value of people like Confucius and Mencius. I disagree with this reading.

First, why point out the shortcomings and weaknesses of people you remark on elsewhere as having some essential portion of the *dao*? If there is an implicit criticism in this passage, it seems to be that what made Confucius and Mozi *exclusivist* was their lack of full ability and understanding, their ultimate failure of openness that would have allowed a synthesis of their thought. It is no accident that Confucius and Mozi (*kong mo* 孔墨) are used here. As Goldin himself points out, Confucius and Mozi were taken as arch-opponents, and *Ru-mo* 儒墨 was often used as a complex to identify these views by opponents, not adherents.<sup>78</sup> Why does *Huainanzi* use Confucius and Mozi in this positive way? Surely not just to point out the limitations of concentration on virtue. The use of these most opposed of rivals would have surely been intended to make a broader point about why they ultimately fell short, even if sagely, and, more importantly, how their thought might be unified—following with the major interest of the convergence theorist with unity.

Secondly, there are other passages in *Huainanzi* that seem to echo the sentiments of the above passage but lend themselves much more to a convergence model interpretation, such as 1.9:

木處榛巢，水居窟穴，禽獸有茆，人民有室，陸處宜牛馬，舟行宜多水，匈奴出穢裘，於、越生葛絺。各生所急，以備燥濕；各因所處，以禦寒暑；並得其宜，物便其所。由此觀之，萬物固以自然，聖人又何事焉？

Tree dwellers nest in the woods; water dwellers live in caves. Wild beasts have beds of straw; human beings have houses. Hilly places are suitable for oxen and horses. For travel by boat, it is good to have a lot of water. The

<sup>78</sup> Goldin, p. 175, “well into the third century, the Confucian and Mohist lineages saw in each other their most sophisticated intellectual opposition. Certainly the term *Ru-Mo* (Confucians and Mohists) existed long before the *Huainanzi*, but it was typically used by thinkers who did not consider themselves members of either group in passages ridiculing both.” While this is true for the most part, Goldin neglects to mention the instances of the structure in the earlier text *Lushi Chunqiu*, used in the same positive sense as that of the HNZ. Indeed, in LSCQ, *Ru-mo* is used in the pejorative sense *alongside* of the seemingly positive evaluation of Confucius and Mozi (LSCQ 15/3.1).

Xiongnu produce rancid animal-skin garments, the Gan and Yue peoples make thin clothes of *pueraria* fabric. Each produces what it urgently needs in order to adapt to the aridity or dampness. Each accords with where it lives in order to protect against the cold and the heat. All things attain what is suitable to them; things accord with their niches. From this viewpoint, the myriad things definitely accord with what is natural to them, so why should the sages interfere with this?<sup>79</sup>

In addition, Goldin does not mention the various other places in *Huainanzi* and also in *Lushi Chunqiu* that Confucius and Mozi appear in much the same fashion as in the *Qushu*. There are passages in *Lushi Chunqiu* that are phrased almost exactly the same as this passage, for example, as there are in the *Huainanzi*, and examination of these passages seems to fit a reading of them as advocating the convergence model as I suggest, expressing that unity can be achieved by overcoming partiality (*qu you* 去尤) in the *Lushi Chunqiu*, or prioritization in the *Huainanzi*.

Goldin argues that the “syncretism” of the *Huainanzi* is ultimately in the service of undermining philosophical debate and thought altogether, putting in its place a hierarchization in which each person plays his or her own role and does nothing more. Goldin says:

the *Huai-nan-tzu*'s syncretism ... does not mean taking ideas from every conceivable corner. It means taking ideas that sound as though they come from every conceivable corner, but weaving them into the justification of a political state that subdues all philosophical disputation. The *Huai-nan-tzu* is a 'school' all to itself: it is the autistic-paternalistic anti-intellectual school.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> *Huainanzi* 1.9, Major, Queen et al. trans. p. 56. Similarly, (p. 433): “If you heed the arguments of a multitude of individuals as a means of ordering the state, it will be endangered in no time. How does one know this is so? Lao Dan esteemed softness, Confucius benevolence, Mo Di wholeness, Master Guanyin purity, Master Lie Yukou emptiness, Tian Pian equanimity, Yang Zhu the self, Sun Bin strategic position, Wang Liao going first, and Ni Liang going last. There are bells and drums to unite their ears; solidarity with law and regulation to unite their minds; keeping the wise from being clever and the stupid from being clumsy to unite the troops; and not permitting the brave to go first nor the timid to go last to unite strength. Where there is unity, order results; where there are differences, chaos ensues; where there is unity, security results; and where there are differences, danger arises. Surely it is only the sage who can unify the myriad differences so that the stupid and the wise, the skilled and the clumsy, exhaust their strength and tax their ability as if they emerged from a single cave. Wisdom that lacks proper techniques and ability that is undisciplined—even with reliance on strength, nimbleness, experience, and practice—are insufficient to bring about success.”

<sup>80</sup> Goldin, p. 182.

I think there are deep problems with this position. First, it takes an altogether too cynical and “hermeneutic of suspicion”-based view of what is actually said in the *Huainanzi*. I don’t believe we have any special reason not to read philosophical texts at face value, regardless of what their authors or patrons may have thought would be the further political value of these texts. Goldin’s view seems to commit the mistake of thinking that if Liu An ultimately had in mind the position of ordering the state by subduing debate, that the *Huainanzi* could not also have honest theoretical reasons for advancing the convergence position arising from theoretical concerns such as attaining full understanding of the Dao. Second, there is a large gap between what Goldin shows, the seeming desire of the *Huainanzi* to undermine disputes and differences, and the conclusion that its aim was to undermine philosophical debate as a boon to the ruler. How, indeed, would philosophical differences even be seen as in any way relevant to maintaining order in Liu An’s time? Philosophical “schools” never had such power in early China (or indeed in any period of Chinese history). As the passage from the *Hanshu* above shows, rulers in the period seemed much more interested in attaining philosophical unity as a perceived *benefit* than as a way to undermine dangerous philosophical difference. Such differences were seen as problematic not insofar as they made political unity more difficult (they didn’t).

Passages such as the ones above ultimately offer more evidence, I suggest, that the Han convergence theorists were advocating a kind of essential pluralism about methodology—a necessary feature of the convergence model.

We have seen that convergence model texts see the unification of diverse perspectives as necessary, and that unity is seen at least in part as the harmonious functioning of a social system managed by one who knows when and where a particular perspective is most effective, but there is more to the unity of perspectives on the convergence model than just proper employment by the ruler. Convergence model texts seem to be in agreement that the attainment of unity between disparate perspectives requires attaining (in terms of understanding or mirroring) the *One* (一 *yi*) or *dao*.

In the *Lushi Chunqiu*, a great deal is said about the “One” (*yi*), as guiding principle and organizing strategy. Convergence is by means of the One, and utilizing this will enable one to utilize any or all of the individual aspects of the One.

凡彼萬形，得一後成。

Each of the myriad semblances is completed after attaining the One.<sup>81</sup>

先王不能盡知，執一而萬物治。使人不能執一者，物感之也。

Because the former kings were unable to have exhaustive knowledge, they adhered to the One and the myriad things were ordered. If people cannot adhere to the One, things will confuse them.<sup>82</sup>

What is it to attain or hold to the One? Given what we have seen of *Lushi Chunqiu* passages above, especially those maligning the exclusivist, attaining and holding to the one is a matter of at least in part accepting and knowing how to employ various disparate viewpoints and perspectives, even if they are not one's own. Indeed, the best ruler recognizes his own limitations, the fact that he necessarily occupies a single limited perspective, and thus allows the perspectives of others to make up for these deficiencies. Thus, attaining and holding to the One (used interchangeably with *dao* in some places in *Lushi Chunqiu*<sup>83</sup>) must be a matter of holding close to, or at least not rejecting, these other perspectives.

The *Huainanzi* also includes a number of statements presenting *dao* as playing a unifying role, and describing the attaining of *dao* the result of the process of unifying divergent viewpoints and perspectives. *Huainanzi* speaks more in terms of *dao* than of "the One".<sup>84</sup> Attaining knowledge of or realizing *dao* leads to the kind of unity discussed in the *Lushi Chunqiu*, in which one becomes able to accept, value, and, more importantly, *utilize* a multitude of viewpoints and perspectives.

是故無所喜而無所怒，無所樂而無所苦，萬物玄同也。無非無是，化育玄耀，生而如死。

If you realize the Way, there is nothing to rejoice in and nothing to be angry about, nothing to be happy about and nothing to feel bitter about. You will be mysteriously unified with the myriad things, and there is nothing you reject and nothing you affirm. You transform and nourish a mysterious resplendence and, while alive, seem to be dead.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> LSCQ, 3/4.2.

<sup>82</sup> LSCQ 25/3.5.

<sup>83</sup> 3/5.2, 5/2.4.

<sup>84</sup> And in LSCQ it seems that "the One" may be the personal or graspable aspect of *dao*—*Dao* as cognized by human beings.

<sup>85</sup> *Huainanzi* 1.19, Major, Queen et al. trans. p. 72.

Perhaps one of the most potent descriptions of unity in the *Huainanzi* is given in chapter 2, which discusses the structure of the unity I have been discussing, and will allow us to make better sense of just what “attaining the One” or realizing *dao* will enable.

百家異說，各有所出。若夫墨、楊、申、商之於治道，猶蓋之無一椽，而輪之無一輻。有之可以備數，無之未有害於用也；己自以為獨擅之，不通之於天地之情也。

The Hundred Traditions have different theories, and each has its own origins. For example, the relationship of Mozi, Yang Zhu, Shen Buhai, and Lord Shang to the Way of Governing is like that of an individual umbrella rib to the whole canopy and like that of an individual spoke to the whole chariot wheel. If you have any one of them, you can complete the number; if you are missing any one of them, it will not affect the utility of the whole. Each one thought that he alone had a monopoly on true governing; he did not understand the genuine disposition of Heaven and Earth.<sup>86</sup>

Here we see that unification or convergence is a matter of structuring the various viewpoints and perspectives into a whole that uses the strengths of all parts. The unified whole, however, is more than simply the sum of the parts, and none of the parts is in itself essential and necessary for the whole. The umbrella and rib metaphor is particularly potent here, as it shows the necessity for unification without holding the necessity of any given viewpoint or perspective. The individual perspective of, say, Mozi is an important part of the structure of a unity, but is not essential to this unity, just in the same way that the rib of an umbrella is important but not essential. If enough ribs were removed, there could be no structural integrity and the umbrella would collapse. But any *one* rib could be removed with minimal or no effect on the whole of the umbrella. Thus, unification of disparate viewpoints and perspectives is a matter of not just being able to accept the value of these various perspectives (by ridding oneself of partiality, as described above), but is also a matter of recognizing the ultimate *inessentiality* of any given viewpoint. This combats the tendency to

<sup>86</sup> *Huainanzi* 2.7, Major, Queen et al. trans. p. 92–93. This passage also provides further criticism of the exclusivist model. The failure here, of Mozi, Yang Zhu, and so on, according to the author, is that any of these men had the wrong way, but that the way each possessed was not the *conclusive* way, and that the partiality and exclusivism of each made it such that each of them took his own single perspective to be *the* way itself.



partiality discussed in *Lushi Chunqiu* 13/3.1 above, which is based on “like and dislike”, or to speak in terms reminiscent of the *Zhuangzi*, value and disvalue. “Dislike” can be overcome by recognizing the need for unity, while “like” can be overcome by recognizing the inessentiality of any given perspective.

Other passages in the *Huainanzi* discuss the convergence model as involving something like the Zhuangist ability to accept transformation and delight in the “transformation of myriad things” (*wanwu zhi hua* 萬物之花). There is a clear statement of this at the close of the *Yaolue* chapter, and the *Huainanzi* as a whole, as stock is taken of the project of the *Huainanzi*, and the authors offer a final statement of what they believe themselves to have accomplished:

以統天下，理萬物，應變化，通殊類，非循一跡之路，守一隅之指，拘系牽連之物，而不與世推移也。故置之尋常而不塞，布之天下而不窳。

We have thereby unified the world, brought order to the myriad things, responded to alterations and transformations, and comprehended their distinctions and categories. We have not followed a path made by a solitary footprint or adhered to instructions from a single perspective or allowed ourselves to be entrapped or fettered by things so that we would not advance or shift according to the age. Thus, situate this book in the narrowest of circumstances and nothing will obstruct it; extend it to the whole world and it will leave no empty spaces.<sup>87</sup>

The convergence model outlined in the texts discussed here informed the various kinds of pluralism found in Wang Chong’s *Lunheng*, particularly his pluralism about knowledge and about truth (as discussed in Chaps. 3 and 4). While Wang vehemently rejects the idea that all viewpoints, perspectives, and positions should be unified, in the way the *Huainanzi* argues, he does share with these texts the view that there are different *ways* for things to be true, and for things to be known. Having knowledge and achieving understanding of truth is a matter of understanding of one’s location and application of the proper standards for determining truth given that location. Wang agrees that we should “not adhere to instructions from a single perspective” as the final passage of *Huainanzi* enjoins.

<sup>87</sup> *Huainanzi* 21.4, Major, Queen et al. trans. p. 867.

### *Later Influence*

According to tradition, the survival of the *Lunheng* is due mainly to the massive volume being kept by Cai Yong as a reference for a number of stories from history, folklore, and literature (according to the *Hou han shu* account, which may be more trustworthy on this issue). There are a number of stories for which Wang's *Lunheng* is the only existing source. The *Lunheng*'s usefulness in preparing people for the debates in the movement later called *Qingtán* 清談 (“pure talk”), which had historical connections to the *Xuanxue* 玄學 (“mystery studies”, or neo-Daoism) school. A number of Wang's views, concerning topics such as *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity), influenced the positions of *Xuanxue* philosophers, via *Qingtán*. In particular, the work of Wang Bi and Guo Xiang both show influence by Wang.

In the years after the neo-Daoist revival in the Wei-Jin period, Wang's *Lunheng* fell into neglect. Likely much of the reason for this was Wang's lack of “school” or sect affiliation. The question of “school affiliation” used to be a major concern of sinologists and other scholars of early China, but in many ways this both misunderstands the period and fails to capture the character of Wang Chong's work and that of other thinkers in the Han period.<sup>88</sup> Then as now, texts and thinkers unaffiliated with intellectual and religious groups tend to be ignored, as they provide no material for advancement of the cause of the group(s) in question. Wang Chong was not seen as a Confucian scholar, so his text was ignored by Confucians and

<sup>88</sup> In the introduction to the Major, Queen et al. translation of *Huainanzi*, there is a discussion of its school affiliation (p. 28–32). I think using school affiliation as a way to categorize and understand these texts is a mistake. Especially in the Han, eclecticism was common, and one does not commonly find the same school-based debates and claims of affiliation one finds in pre-Han texts. If we must categorize Han texts (and I admit I don't see why we feel the need to), we should categorize many of them as “eclectic” (*za* 雜), not in terms of belonging to a coherent *za jia*, but in terms of their syncretistic tendencies and focus on synthetic methodology. Wang Chong's work, however, does not belong in this category. Although he did advance a particular philosophical method, he was not involved in the syncretistic project popular in the earlier Western Han period. He was not concerned with school affiliation and did not argue on behalf of any school or group. Perhaps more than most philosophers of his time (or after!), Wang represented no one but himself—he was an idiosyncratic thinker who took his uniqueness as a virtue, although this is likely in large part what led to his later obscurity. The way to immortality in early China, as it tends to still be today around the world, is to become a representative of a particular group, which then advances one's interests after they're gone, and whose work becomes part of their “canon”. Wang was in no school; therefore, he never found his way into anyone's canon.

those looking to advance Confucian positions.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, he is not a Daoist, Buddhist, or advocate of any other clearly discernible intellectual faction. Because of this, his project would not have been seen as essential or useful for the projects of scholars mainly looking to advance the positions of particular factions, and was naturally overlooked. This changed to some extent in the late Qing, which in some sense created a new faction of which Wang could be seen as a historical part—the “school” of critical skeptics challenging key aspects of traditional Chinese culture. These Qing scholars however, in their zeal to find champions, overemphasized and thus misunderstood key aspects of Wang’s thought. Though there are certainly critical aspects of Wang’s thought, it is not true that Wang was a “skeptic” in any meaningful sense, or primarily a critic looking to eliminate earlier views and criticize traditional culture. Wang accepts many traditional views, even without argument, and offers arguments to establish the truth of widely accepted positions on a number of topics. In the *Luanlong* chapter, for example, Wang argues for the view that clay dragons really do play a role in the generation of clouds.<sup>90</sup> In *Benxing* (and a number of other chapters), Wang uses the fact of Confucius’ endorsement of a particular view as sufficient grounds for accepting the view, since Confucius was a sage.<sup>91</sup>

Much of Wang Chong’s influence on his contemporaries and later scholars is difficult to uncover, as it is most often unattributed. For the most part, later scholars do not cite Wang Chong as inspiration for their own ideas. Wang is mentioned in a number of later texts, but most often in the context of listing his works or views, rather than as offering support for particular positions. His work is mentioned or discussed in the *Baopuzi*, *Yanshi Jiaxun*, and *Wenxin Diaolong*, albeit only in passing. As mentioned above, *Wenxin Diaolong* mentions a *Yangqi* (“Nourishing Vital Essence”)

<sup>89</sup> Wang did not see himself as an adherent of a particular school, and attempts to place his text in a school tradition are in general based on influence and shared positions. The problem with categorizing Wang’s work along these lines is that Wang was influenced by a large number of courses, and shares positions with thinkers across a number of schools. Wang criticizes various aspects of almost every known school in the *Lunheng*.

<sup>90</sup> *Luanlong*.

<sup>91</sup> Oddly enough, given this, Wang also attacks this kind of reasoning in the *Wenkong* (“Questioning Confucius”) chapter, arguing that even sages like Confucius were not perfect and cannot be expected to have been right about everything—and thus we must investigate their teachings through the methods of questioning and challenging (*wen nan* 問難) just as we must investigate the claims of nonsages.

chapter that does not appear in the received version of the *Lunheng*. Yao Xinzhong locates the origins of the “naturalistic worldview” underlying Xuanxue thought in the work of Wang Chong, as well as Yang Xiong and Huan Tan.<sup>92</sup> Xu Kangsheng, on the other hand, argued that the Xuanxue thinkers, while perhaps influenced by the “materialist” conception of the spontaneous activity of nature in Wang Chong’s work, misconstrued Wang’s views and developed them in a way he would not have accepted.<sup>93</sup>

Some scholars see Wang’s view on spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) as his fundamental theme and central contribution to early Chinese philosophy.<sup>94</sup> It is certainly true that the topic recurs throughout the *Lunheng* and that Wang relies on it to do a great deal of philosophical work in support of his other positions, but spontaneity often appears as an assisting concept to make sense of the operation of concepts such as *ming* 命 (allotment) or to explain the lack of efficacy of certain views and practices. *Ziran* is an important concept for Wang, but not the central theme of his work. If we must locate a central theme of Wang’s work, it is his development of what he takes to be a crucially important *method* for evaluating the statements (including teachings, testimony, and behaviors) of sages, rulers, and common people alike. I discuss this method in Chap. 3.

<sup>92</sup> “Confucianism in the Wei-Jin Period”, in Yao Xinzhong ed. *Encyclopedia of Confucianism*.

<sup>93</sup> Xu, “A Brief Discussion of the ‘Xuanxue’ School of the Wei-Jin Period”, also 魏晉玄學史 (“History of Wei-Jin Xuanxue”).

<sup>94</sup> Fabrizio Pregadio, “Wang Chong”, in Selin, ed. *Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, p. 1002.



## Philosophical and Critical Method

### CREATION AND TRANSMISSION

One major feature of Han dynasty philosophy in general that distinguishes it from much of pre-Han philosophy is its greater concern with method. Although method had always been a consideration in early Chinese thought, it was with late Warring States texts such as *Lushi Chunqiu* and early Han texts such as *Huainanzi* that philosophical method became a central topic for systematic and theoretical reflection in Chinese thought. This concern with method carried on throughout the Western Han and into the Eastern Han, though there was no single dominant conception of the *proper* philosophical method during those periods. Wang Chong's own position was rather unique for his time, which led some scholars of previous generations to find certain aspects of his thought mirroring intellectual trends in the West.<sup>1</sup>

While I discuss method in a section below, I begin consideration of Wang's philosophical work by looking at a topic that may strike contemporary Western philosophers as strange or archaic—that of the debate surrounding creation and innovation in early China, and Wang's position in it. While many of us may not see this as particularly philosophically relevant, I argue that this distinction, between creation (*zuo* 作) and transmission

<sup>1</sup>Modern scholars in both China and the West have argued that Wang was a “scientific” and “materialist” thinker: Forke, Hu Shi 1959 (also see Tan, “Why Methodology Matters”, in *Bloomsbury Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*, p. 4), Zhang, *Zhongyi Zhaxue Jichu*, Lu Shuyuan, *The Ecological Era and Classical Chinese Naturalism*, 93.

(*shu* 述), is indeed a live issue in contemporary philosophy even if not explicitly dealt with as such. Here we have an example of the reverse of what I and many other comparative philosophers often do with the Chinese tradition—reading a debate from the classical Chinese tradition into the contemporary Western tradition. There are two sides of the coin of comparative philosophy—not only can we use non-Chinese and contemporary resources to understand and interpret early Chinese philosophy, but we can also use Chinese resources to understand, interpret, formulate, and advance debates in contemporary philosophy.

The issue of the value of innovation versus traditionalism is one that contemporary philosophers may not see as relevant to philosophy, but in fact has a deep history in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. In contemporary philosophy, we largely take ourselves to have avoided this debate, but I hope to show in this section that we have not actually overcome this debate but have instead simply swept it under the rug, and that attending to the positions and arguments of philosophers like Wang Chong and others, we can recover important aspects of this issue. The issue of *truth* itself is tied up deeply in that of creation, and we see this as a key aspect of Wang Chong's thought and that of other Chinese thinkers, as well as various philosophers in other traditions.

In the West, the debate most explicitly arises in the medieval period.<sup>2</sup> In contemporary philosophy, while innovation is a prized feature of philosophers and their work—we provide jobs and accolades to those who we think say *new* things about particular topics, even perhaps independently of whether we think they are saying *true* things about these topics—there are numerous ways in which something more akin to “transmission” in early Chinese philosophy are prized. Our conception of the philosophical project

<sup>2</sup>Though some, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, argue that we must take care not to associate distinct periods in Western thought as occupying the same “tradition” (see *After Virtue*)—there is a very real sense in which medieval Western European philosophy was as different from contemporary analytic philosophy as either are from early Chinese or Indian philosophy, for example—I think we can take certain continuities in Western thought as helping to form a tradition. Some of the concerns of contemporary analytic philosophy were born of considerations that reach back to medieval European philosophy and beyond. This, as far as I am concerned, is enough to speak of medieval philosophy as within the same “tradition” as contemporary analytic philosophy, though perhaps this is very thin conception of what it is to be a tradition. I think we get into deep problems if we try to fill out what a tradition is composed of beyond this minimalistic sense, and thus I will use “tradition” consistently in the text in this modest sense.

is just one example of this. As numerous scholars have pointed out,<sup>3</sup> the conception of philosophy and the philosophical tradition in the “mainstream” philosophical community in the West is very narrowly construed. Work by philosophers in philosophy departments generally must conform to the standards of “analytic” philosophy (or “continental” in some departments), which is limited to not only a certain way of approaching philosophical topics and thinking about what those topics are, but also the style in which we write about them (e.g., generally using formal tools). The tricky part is that these standards are often implicit, and one will not often find the claim that enforcing them is a form of traditionalism or resistance to innovation or divergence. In practice, however, this is what it amounts to.

One of the methodological problems Wang deals with in the *Lunheng* is connected to his attempt to justify his larger philosophical project. The uniqueness and oddity of Wang’s writings as compared to that of his contemporaries<sup>4</sup> was, he thought, bound to attract criticism from scholars, who accepted a traditional method following the injunction found in the *Analects*, 述而不作 (transmit and don’t create/innovate).<sup>5</sup> In Wang’s time, *zuo* was seen as something generally to be avoided, and the charge against a work of its being *zuo* might be seen as a decisive objection. While the term is often translated as “creation”, the English rendering “innovation” might be more relevant here in bringing out the sense in which Wang’s contemporaries saw *zuo* as problematic.

In the Han dynasty, the view of the authoritativeness of the classical texts and teachings had reached perhaps its height.<sup>6</sup> The perception of deviation from the core of the classical teachings was enough to warrant

<sup>3</sup> See Garfield and Van Norden, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is”, *New York Times*, May 11, 2016; also Van Norden *Taking Back Philosophy*.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Nylan discusses aspects of Wang Chong’s style compared to earlier Han authors in “Han Classicists”.

<sup>5</sup> *Analects* 7.1.

<sup>6</sup> Such conservative traditionalism was not always the norm in Chinese intellectual culture, even within the Han dynasty. The consolidation of the power of the Han court during the Western Han, while this may have had something to do with the rise of the convergence model of philosophy in ancient China, exemplified by correlative cosmology, there were still numerous and indeed innovative and unique philosophical positions and systems created during this time. Positioning one’s work as “transmission” rather than “innovation” was more rhetorical strategy than anything else. This might remind one of contemporary debates surrounding canonical religious texts and teachings—the teachings are accepted as authoritative, and adherents attempt to justify new readings, innovations, and views as inherent in the texts in some way.

the rejection of any given system or method, and the strategy of positioning one's work as expression of earlier teaching was the primary argumentative method. We see in the early Han correlative texts the origins of this method, in the attempt to situate a particular system as the most comprehensive expression of the core of classical texts and teachings taken as a whole (despite the fact that those texts were often composed in opposition to one another). The idea seemed to be that *zuo* was reserved for the sages, and that any attempt to *zuo* would be akin to likening oneself to a sage.<sup>7</sup> There is some difficulty here in that different texts and schools seem to have different understandings of what it is to *zuo*, and Wang Chong himself may have another understanding altogether. The Mohist conception, for example, seems to differ from that of the Daoists and some later Warring States Confucian texts.

One disagreement about the scope of *zuo* in the pre-Qin material is echoed in Wang Chong's debate with his (real or imagined) opponents in *Duizuo*. As Michael Puett argues in his book on creation in early China, in the *Xunzi* we see the first attempt to give a systematic account of what it means to *zuo*, in which it seems that *zuo* is being softened or lessened from a pure act of creation to an innovation accordance with the patterns of *tian*, or perhaps we might say "the way things are". This also has implications for the concept of *shi* as truth, as I discuss below. If the sage, according to Xunzi, discovers the patterns of nature and engages in *zuo* based on these, there has to be some way things are to be discovered, and these patterns, if linguistically accessible, should somehow be understood in terms of truth. It may be for this reason that we see the transition in *Xunzi* and other texts around this period from the reliance on *shi* in the broad sense of "fullness" or "fruit" to that of the specific sense of a truth property (what *makes* something full). Puett writes:

Xunzi ... defines culture as consisting of ritual and morality and argues that its emergence was in no sense an arbitrary creation. In fact, the production of culture did not involve acts of *zuo* at all. Although culture was consciously made by the sages, and although such a conscious making was outside the realm of nature, culture is nonetheless, when properly instituted, the teleological (if not immediate) product of Heaven.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hagen, *The Philosophy of Xunzi*, 44–45; Michael Puett also discusses Wang Chong's own views of the sage's and authority in "Listening to Sages: Divination, Omens, and the Rhetoric of Antiquity in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*", *Oriens Extremus* 45, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation*, p. 70.



This allows Xunzi to avoid the Mohist conclusion that acts of *zuo* as pure innovation are useful. If *zuo* is useful at all, it is only such in that the sage can access the way things are, truths, or understand proper functions, through some sort of understanding of or connection with *tian*. The role of the sage is to order the world through his abilities and understanding of *tian*. In the *Lilun* chapter, Xunzi writes:

天地合而萬物生，陰陽接而變化起，性偽合而天下治。[...] 宇中萬物生人之屬，待聖人然後分也。

When heaven and earth combine, the myriad things are born; when yin and yang join, changes and transformations arise; when human nature and conscious activity combine, all under heaven is put in order. [...] Within the universe, the myriad things generate those who belong to the human race; they await the sage and only then are they differentiated.<sup>9</sup>

This act, for Xunzi, is connected to naming (*ming* 名), and it is in this act that the abilities of the sage allow him to *zuo*—creation that is nonetheless not pure innovation, but guided by the patterns of *tian*. There must be some independent facts about those patterns independent of human minds, language, and so on in order for them to be grasped by the sage, however, and it is here that the connection between *ming* 名 and *shi* 實 comes into play. This dichotomy is first given explicit attention in the *Xunzi*, and although Wang Chong's use of the concept of *shi* is not in the service of thinking about the connection between *shi* and names, the notion of *shi* as a truth concept is developed in part through consideration of the connection between *ming* and *shi* inaugurated by Xunzi and tied closely to the issue of innovation.

According to Xunzi, in order for names to be correct (*zheng* 正), they must be established in accordance with their *actuality* (*shi* 實). What the sage then accesses with his abilities is knowledge of actualities, and this enables him to properly establish names—to *zuo* in accord with patterns of nature. Xunzi speaks in the *Zhengming* chapter of the ruler “instituting” (*zhi* 制) names and thereby distinguishing actualities, or making actualities understood, which is the purpose of proper naming.

故王者之制名，名定而實辨，道行而志通，則慎率民而一焉。

Therefore in the king's instituting of names, names are established and actualities are distinguished/made manifest. If the way is practiced and intentions are communicated, then the ....<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Lilun* 13.10a, Puett trans.

<sup>10</sup> *Xunzi* 22.3.

The *zuo* of Xunzi insofar as it exists, then, is in making manifest mind-independent truths or actualities, and is justified insofar as this is done. The choice of *zhi* in this passage rather than *zuo* indicates the reliance on external sources based in the world to guide one's creative act. Although this is fairly close to Wang Chong's position on *zuo*, one important difference is that according to Xunzi, only the sage or the ruler has the ability or authority to engage in this kind of "creation", while Wang seems to allow for a broader range of people to engage in the process. There are also distinctions Wang attempts to make between *zuo* as a purely spontaneous creative act and more constrained acts that fall short of *zuo* but nonetheless aim at attaining or making manifest *shi*, which, I argue, can be translated unproblematically as "truth" in Wang's case, even if not yet in Xunzi's (though there is a case to be made that it can or ought to be understood as a truth property in the *Xunzi* as well).

In late Warring States and early Han texts such as *Lushi Chunqiu* and *Huainanzi*, we begin to see a move away from the idea that only sages can engage in *zuo*. The sage ruler does not sully himself with *zuo* (now seen as problematic in the Daoist sense of *wei* 為—forced action), but instead is able to properly employ those who are engaged in *zuo*.<sup>11</sup>

聖王不能二十官之事，然而使二十官盡其巧、畢其能，聖王在上故也。

The sage kings were not able to perform the activities of these twenty officials. However, they caused the twenty officials to use fully their skillfulness and bring completion to their abilities. This is why the sage kings were above.<sup>12</sup>

It is in this context of disagreement about the propriety and even the definition of *zuo* that Wang not only explicitly rejects earlier philosophical methods and systems, but defends the acceptability of engaging in *zuo* in general. While *zuo* remained a difficult concept in early Chinese thought and one that in general retained the air of something to be avoided, Wang's defense of it and himself in one sense embraces *zuo* and in another attempts to distance Wang from it. Wang is not altogether consistent on his attitude toward *zuo* in the *Lunheng*. But through considering his position(s) on it, we can uncover his positions on philosophical method and his development of a concept of truth in that of *shi* 實.

<sup>11</sup> Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation* pp. 83–84, cites *Lushi Chunqiu* Wugong, 17.8–9a.

<sup>12</sup> *Lushi Chunqiu*, *Wugong* 2 (Puett trans.)

While to contemporary philosophers in the West (and in the East), *zuo* as innovation may seem relatively benign, in Eastern Han dynasty China Wang's view would have been considered outrageously radical. Wang's own ambivalence in *Duizuo* suggests that even he himself, ever the caustic contrarian, had hesitations about defending *zuo*. We see this through his shift in views through the essay. He begins by attempting to defend himself against the charge of engaging in *zuo*, carefully explaining why what he does in the *Lunheng* does not constitute *zuo*, but ends with an argument for the more radical conclusion that it ultimately does not *matter* whether one engages in *zuo* or any other creative endeavor, as long as one's project aims to discover truth or results in the discovery of truth. In this second part of *Duizuo*, Wang introduces the concept of *shi* 實 (truth) as the proper ground of the intellectual project in general, as the proper aim of philosophy. Through *Duizuo*, his argument attempts to show that truth cannot always be attained through investigation of the classical sources, and that it is at least theoretically possible that *zuo* could lead to discovery of truths. Both of these conclusions would have been seen as outrageous during Wang's time, even while they may seem trivially true to us, and this is the reason Wang spends so much effort in *Duizuo* attempting to defend them.<sup>13</sup>

Just how he makes this dual-tiered defense is clearest in *Duizuo*, but we can also find elements of it in the autobiographical essay *Ziji*, as well as at the beginning of the "Critical Chapters" cluster in the first part of *Wenkong*. I focus on these essays in following chapters as representing Wang's most developed and sustained account of his philosophical method, the motivation for it, its originality and innovative nature, and its details.

Wang begins *Duizuo* by considering the potential problems with *zuo* and offering an explanation of how his own work should not be considered *zuo*.

<sup>13</sup>While later in the Han dynasty criticisms like Wang's as well as general rejection of the earlier Han notion of the infallibility of canonical texts and teachings become more commonplace, with the criticism of the declining and increasingly corrupt Han court (such as can be found in the work of thinkers like Wang Fu, Xun Yue, Xu Gan, and Wang Su), these features in Wang's work, written in the mid-first century CE, were unprecedented. Wang's innovative and critical method likely influenced the direction of development of these later Han thinkers, even though this influence was unattributed.

或曰：聖人作，賢者述，以賢而作者，非也。《論衡》、《政務》，可謂作者。非曰作也，亦非述也，論也。論者、述之次也。五經之興，可謂作矣。《太史公書》、劉子政序、班叔皮傳，可謂述矣。桓山君《新論》、鄒伯奇《檢論》，可謂論矣。今觀《論衡》、《政務》，桓、鄒之二論也，非所謂作也。造端更為，前始未有，若倉頡作書、奚仲作車是也。《易》言伏羲作八卦，前是未有八卦，伏羲造之，故曰作也。文王圖八，自演為六十四，故曰衍。謂《論衡》之成，猶六十四卦，而又非也。六十四卦以狀衍增益，其卦溢，其數多。今《論衡》就世俗之書，訂其真偽，辯其實虛，非造始更為，無本於前也。儒生就先師之說，詰而難之；文吏就獄卿之事，覆而考之，謂《論衡》為作，儒生、文吏謂作乎？

Some say that sages create (*zuo*) while worthies transmit (*shu*), and that worthies should not create. My *Lunheng* and *Zhengwu* can be called creations. But they should be called neither creations nor transmissions—rather, they are discussions (*lun*). Discussions are second to transmissions. The *Shiji*, the introductions of Liu Xiang,<sup>14</sup> and the *Hanshu*<sup>15</sup> can be called transmissions. Huan Tan's *Xinlun* and Zou Boqi's *Jianlun* can be called discussions (*lun*). Now my *Lunheng* and *Zhengwu* are like the works of Huan and Zuo, and they cannot be called creations. To create something completely new that did not exist in the past would be like Cang Jie's invention of writing, or Xi Zhong's invention of the chariot. The *Yijing* says that Fuxi created the eight diagrams.<sup>16</sup> Before this, no such diagrams existed, and thus Fuxi constructed them. This is why it is said he created them. King Wen further charted the eight diagrams, and made them into 64—this was called extending. Saying that the completed *Lunheng* is like the 64 diagrams is also wrong. The 64 diagrams were increased to this number (from 8) through extending their form, and because the 8 diagrams were extended, the number of diagrams was increased. Now, in the *Lunheng* the common writings of this generation are examined to determine whether they are genuine or artificial, to distinguish whether they are true or false. This is not creating something new, that did not originally exist in the past. The *ru* scholars interrogate and challenge the sayings of former teachers,<sup>17</sup> and ministers reexamine the decisions of their superiors. So if we say that the *Lunheng* is a creation, should we then say that the *ru* scholars and the ministers are engaged in creation?<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Responsible for the *Shuoyuan*, *Zhanguoce*, *Lienuzhuan*, and other texts.

<sup>15</sup>Wang says “the *zhuan* of Ban Shupi (Ban Biao)”. Ban Biao began work on *Hanshu*, which was completed by his son Ban Gu.

<sup>16</sup>The trigrams associated with *Yijing* cosmology.

<sup>17</sup>This might seem to contradict what Wang claims about *ru* scholars in the *Wenkong* chapter discussed below, but there Wang primarily claims that the *ru* fail to question and criticize the *sages*, not that they fail to criticize *anyone*. Still, the language he uses in *Wenkong* does seem to strengthen the claim such that it can easily be read as contradicting what he says here.

<sup>18</sup>*Duizuo* 2.

The definition Wang offers of *zuo* in the essay might strike us as implausibly extreme, and right away we run into an interpretive difficulty. It seems that given the definition of *zuo* that Wang offers, no literary work can possibly constitute *zuo*. If this is the case, however, then surely *zuo* loses any polemical force it might have, and passages like *Analects* 7.1 (述而不作 “I transmit and do not create”) become simply trivial. Confucius only transmits and doesn’t create because he *can’t* create through teaching. Surely, the master meant to suggest that he *could have* created through teaching or writing if he wanted to, but chose instead to transmit because this is superior in some way. Indeed, if no one can *zuo* through writing, then Confucius’ claim (and the many other formulations of it after his time) loses its normative force. If *Analects* 7.1 is not read in a normative sense, as “one *should* transmit and *should not* create”, it is unclear in what sense we are supposed to read it, other than as a uniquely uninformative descriptive claim about Confucius himself, akin to if he had said “I only walk, and do not fly” in a literal sense.

So how does Wang get into this difficulty, and how might it be resolved? Did he really construct such an implausible definition of *zuo* in his attempt to exonerate himself as to undermine the sense and import of *zuo* in earlier works? If so, it seems that Wang is open to the response that, even if what he is engaged in is not *zuo*, certainly there is some other concept corresponding to what Confucius meant by *zuo* in *Analects* 7.1, something we ought not be engaging in (for reasons I will consider below), and which Wang is guilty of engaging in. Wang seems to anticipate just such a response, and in the second part of *Dui zuo* he responds to such a charge. But first, let us consider Wang’s definition of *zuo* as expressed in the first section, and whether the abovementioned problem arises.

Wang anticipates this final position in the opening of *Duizuo*. He begins with a lengthy explanation of his purpose in writing *Lunheng*, starting off with a discussion of sages from former ages, such as Confucius, Mencius, and Mozi, continuing through early Han figures such as Lu Jia and Huan Tan. The primary purpose of any written work, according to Wang, ought to be *shi* 實 (truth). He does not make this claim directly, but this position emerges through his offering of ancient examples and his criticism of texts without concern for truth. Wang says:

起眾書並失實，虛妄之言勝真美也。故虛妄之語不黜，則華文不見息；華文放流，則實事不見用。故《論衡》者、所以銓輕重之言，立真偽之平，非苟調文飾辭，為奇偉之觀也。

Many writings completely lack truth, and false and absurd statements are given precedence over genuine and good ones. If these false and absurd sayings are not toppled, then flowery writing cannot be stopped, and if flowery writing freely spreads, then the truth about affairs cannot be found. Therefore, the *Lunheng* weighs statements to determine whether they are light or heavy, serves as a balance to determine whether statements are genuine or artificial. It does not contain writing based on fancy words merely for ornament, or make outlandish and presumptuous claims.<sup>19</sup>

He expresses this sentiment in connection with his own stated purpose—he is primarily concerned with appraising other texts, teachings, and words, to evaluate to what extent they can be considered *shi* (true). If we compare this with the first passages from *Duizuo* in which Wang discusses the purposes the sages of the past had in writing their texts, Wang believes his own work is continuous with theirs. It turns out, he claims, that their purposes were also corrective, in that people had strayed from the right way in some sense, and the writings were intended to restore the situation to the proper. Wang writes:

聖人作經，藝者傳記，匡濟薄俗，驅民使之歸實誠也。案《六略》之書，萬三千篇，增善消惡，割截橫拓，驅役遊慢，期便道善，歸正道焉。

The sages created the classics and those of ability compiled the records in order to correct and to help the lowly and common. They encouraged the people to return to truth and honesty. The thirteen thousand chapters of the six *lue* increase good and decrease bad, cutting off certain things, and drawing out others, spurring on those who are slow and wandering, making better the way of the age, and returning people to the correct way.<sup>20</sup>

We see something interesting here that we will also have to consider further below—Wang seems to link a concern with *shi* to a concern for what is proper in general, including what is *morally good*, what is sincere, and what is normative for persons. In a number of passages, he equates *shi* with all of this, which shows us that *shi* cannot be identified with something as narrow as *propositional* truth, as a property (or at least a concept) that is a major concern of both the Western and the Indian traditions. Rather, as we will see in Chap. 4, Wang's conception of *shi* is a normative concept that contains propositional truth, perhaps a correspondence property, as well as other properties.

<sup>19</sup> *Duizuo* 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Duizuo* 1.

The specific instances of literary work Wang mentions in the beginning of the essay seem to be *zuo* in a wholly unproblematic sense, if they are *zuo* at all. At this point, Wang has still made no claim as to whether or not these instances count as *zuo* or something else—he is here concerned only with showing that these writings were necessary and that they were primarily intended to serve corrective purposes. In addition, he suggests that there must have been something unique about their abilities, suggesting that they engaged in something beyond merely *shu* (transmission). One need not possess a particularly insightful or creative mind to transmit the words and meanings of the former sages. Insofar as then as the sages offered correctives of their own, they must have done more than merely transmit.

Offering specific examples of the purposes of these sages, Wang writes:

孔子作《春秋》，周民弊也。故采求毫毛之善，貶纖介之惡，撥亂世，反諸正

Confucius created the *Chunqiu* because the people of Zhou were deficient. Thus, he promoted even the thinnest goodness, and criticized even the tiniest evil. In this way he banished the disorder of the age, and returned the people to rectitude.<sup>21</sup>

楊、墨之學不亂傳義，則孟子之《傳》不造；韓國不小弱，法度不壞廢，則韓非之書不為；高祖不辨得天下，馬上之計未轉，則陸賈之語不奏；眾事不失實，凡論不壞亂，則桓譚之論不起。

If the teachings of Yang and Mo<sup>22</sup> had not disordered the tradition concerning righteousness, then Mengzi, then Mengzi would not have constructed his works. If the state of Han had not been small and weak, and its laws and standards not been degraded and discarded, then Han Fei's would never have written his book. If Emperor Gaozu had not argued that to obtain the world one can never budge from their plans for war, then Lu Jia's words would never have been memorialized. If the people in their affairs had not lost the truth, and every discussion not in ruin and disorder, then Huan Tan's discussions would never have occurred.<sup>23</sup>

He discusses this in order to conclude that the sages and worthies are doing something in some sense new in engaging in literary pursuit for these corrective purposes. His own writing, he insists, cannot be taken as doing anything beyond what these authors have done in their own genera-

<sup>21</sup> *Duizuo* 1.

<sup>22</sup> Yang Zhu and Mozi.

<sup>23</sup> *Duizuo* 1.

tions, and certainly not something that ought to be criticized. If it ought not be criticized, however, then either (1) Confucius is wrong that we ought to only transmit and not create or (2) what these authors, including Wang Chong, are doing is something other than *zuo*. Although we might wonder if Wang accepts (1),<sup>24</sup> he offers an argument for (2) in *Duizuo*. He develops this in response to a particular common view he notes, that the proper role of sages is to *zuo*, while the role of worthies is to *shu*. (I will overlook here the problem that this view seems to commit its holder to the position that Confucius was not a sage, as he is given as the source of the quote *shu er bu zuo*.)

The conditions Wang offers in *Duizuo* for something to qualify as *zuo*, as seen in passages above, seem unreasonably high, with only the construction of heretofore unique categories of artifacts (such as the invention of writing and horse-powered travel)—what might be captured by the English term “invention”—qualifying as *zuo*. If this is the case, however, we might wonder how Wang can make sense of every creative act falling outside the category of *zuo*. Is all of this *shu*? Certainly there is a difference between the creative novelty of, say, the *Zhuangzi* and the collected transmissions of earlier works, such as could be accomplished by a scribe producing a new copy of the *Zhuangzi*. And then there is a whole array of texts in the middle, such as *Huainanzi*, which collects older stories but is arranged and elaborated in new ways.

Wang agrees that not all works that do not qualify as *zuo* (which most will not) do qualify as *shu*. Wang argues that his own *Lunheng* should not be thought of as either *zuo* or *shu*, but rather as *lun* (discussion).<sup>25</sup>

There is one anomalous passage here in Wang’s discussion of the possibility and identity of *zuo*, which we might identify as the transition point in the essay from a consideration of the definition and acceptability of *zuo* to the defense of a certain kind of philosophical project, regardless of whether it is *zuo*, *lun*, *shu*, or anything else. He discusses some earlier Han authors whose works were highly influential and says something that makes it unclear whether or not these works ought to be considered *zuo*. On one reading of the passage, Wang directly contradicts what he has just said earlier in the essay about *zuo*, namely that only invention qualifies as *zuo*. Wang writes:

<sup>24</sup>The discussion in his *Wenkong* (“Questioning Confucius”) chapter suggests he might.

<sup>25</sup>*Dui zuo* 4: 非曰作也，亦非述也，論也。Do not say that it [Lunheng] is a creation (*zuo*), nor that it is a transmission (*shu*)—rather it is a discussion (*lun*).



漢家尤多。陽成子張作《樂》，楊子雲造《玄》，二經發於臺下，讀於闕掖，卓絕驚耳，不述而作，材疑聖人，而漢朝不識。

There are a great many schools of thought in the Han period. Yangcheng<sup>26</sup> created the *Yuejing* (Classic of Music)<sup>27</sup> and Yang Xiong constructed the *Taixuanjing*. These two texts issued forth from the Han court, and were read among the people of the court. The texts had a profound effect and alarmed people, because the texts did not engage in transmission but in creation. People doubted that the authors' talents rose to the level of sages, but the Han court still did not condemn their work.<sup>28</sup>

Wang's choice of words here leaves some room for doubt. When he says of these works *bu shu er zuo* (不述而作),<sup>29</sup> it is unclear whether he means that these works were in fact examples of *zuo* and not of *shu*, or whether he instead meant to say that their contemporaries *thought* of them not as *shu* but instead as *zuo*. If the latter is the claim Wang intended to make, this seems continuous with what he argues later in the essay, to close the *Duizuo*, and adds strength to this argument.<sup>30</sup> It becomes clear in the final part of *Duizuo* that Wang's position is ultimately that it does not matter whether something is or is not *zuo*—what makes a work acceptable has to do with whether it is true or false, or facilitates discovery of truth or falsity. If this is what Wang is after in this passage, the implicit argument may run thus: (1) Yang Xiong's work gives us an example of something accepted as *zuo* by the accepted standards, which makes it *zuo*; (2) Yang Xiong's work is also extremely useful and clearly of immense value; (3) either it is not really *zuo* and so is not really useful or what is *zuo* can also be acceptable; (4) 1 and 2 rule out the first two options; (5) therefore, what is *zuo* can also be acceptable.

<sup>26</sup> Also referred to as *Zizhang*.

<sup>27</sup> Distinct from two other texts on music, the *Yueji* chapter of *Liji* and another text of the second century BCE titled *Yueji*. The text is also mentioned in *Hanshu*, and is lost beside from possible fragments of the text. Rafe de Crespigny suggests it may have been commissioned by Wang Mang and lost during the collapse of Wang's government. De Crespigny, "Scholars and Rulers: Imperial Patronage under the Later Han Dynasty", 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Duizuo* 6.

<sup>29</sup> An inversion of the *shu er bu zuo* of the Analects. These allusions to the *Analects* are almost certainly intentional, despite Wang never mentioning Analects 7.1 in *Dui zuo*. His audience would have been intimately familiar with the quote and the idea.

<sup>30</sup> It is a way we see the Mohists often argue against the Confucians in the *Mozì*. Confucians reject the acceptability of something (say impartial care *jian ai*) but are forced to see its acceptability by considering particular instances of something clearly possessing this quality that leads to a positive outcome *because* it has this quality.

If what is *zuo* can also be acceptable, then it cannot be the case that either being *zuo* or not being *zuo* plays any role in the acceptability of a work. That is, what makes a work acceptable must be completely independent of consideration of *zuo*, consisting in its possession of some other property. This refocuses the discussion on the identity of this property. *Zuo* simply does not matter. If a work is acceptable because it has this other property, it is acceptable whether it is *zuo*, *shu*, or *lun*. Wang undermines the charges against him by arguing that what his critics are concerned with is simply inessential, and in *Duizuo* he cleverly shows that even the other commitments of his critics entail that they ought not to be concerned about the issue of whether his works are *zuo*.

Before we consider this final part of the overall argument of *Duizuo*, however, we have to deal with the apparent conflict between what Wang argues about his own work early on and this shift in strategy in late *Duizuo*. As discussed above, Wang argues that his work is not in fact *zuo*, but rather *lun*. He makes this claim on the basis of the almost absurdly high standard he sets for something to qualify as *zuo*, such as the invention of writing or chariots. If he then goes on to conclude that the works of Yang Xiong can be considered *zuo*, even while they are clearly not problematic, and in particular if the argument he makes concerning this is as I have laid out above in (1)–(5), Wang's prior definition of *zuo* makes the argument unsound. In particular, (1) is false. And since this is the case, the trilemma of (3) is undermined. Yang Xiong's work might be acceptable because it is useful and not really *zuo*. This leaves the common rejection of *zuo* untouched. Notice, however, that even though the above argument may be undermined in this way, it is still the case that the *acceptability* of Yang Xiong's work is independent of its status as *zuo*. What makes the work valuable is not the fact that it is *shu*, or that it is not *zuo*. Presumably there are lots of ways to be not *zuo*, including just not writing, or writing exactly what has been said by another. But neither of these things would be very valuable. What Wang is doing in the final part of *Duizuo*, then, is taking our attention off of the issue of *zuo*, and instead arguing that we should concentrate on the properties of works that make them valuable. Since whatever made Yang Xiong's work valuable is independent of *zuo*, even though it may turn out that his work was not in fact *zuo*, and even if being *zuo* disqualifies an otherwise valuable work (which Wang will deny), then we ought to be concerned primarily with the identity of this property and discovering whether a given work has this property. If a given work *does* have this property, Wang will argue to conclude *Dui zuo*, then whether it

is or is not *zuo* is simply irrelevant. Presumably a work of great value because it offers truth will not be diminished even if it is a *zuo*. So what, then, is the problem people generally have with *zuo*? Why would Confucius or anyone else have ever disparaged (whether rightly or wrongly) something seemingly so innocuous? Wang suggests that there are certain dangers that often, but not necessarily, accompany *zuo*, and it is these flaws that thinkers like Confucius reject. That is, much work that is *zuo* has a certain fault, but it is this fault that we should reject, not *zuo* altogether. There is no necessary connection between *zuo* and falsity or exaggeration. Wang writes:

且凡造作之過，意其言妄而謗誹也。《論衡》實事疾妄，《齊世》、《宣漢》、《恢國》、《驗符》、《盛衰》、《須頌》之言，無誹謗之辭，造作如此，可以免於罪矣。

Everyone takes creation to be improper, thinking that the statements of such a creation are preposterous and that they contain egregious and unfair criticisms. The *Lunheng* seeks truth and rejects the preposterous. The statements of [numerous chapters of the *Lunheng*] are free of egregious and unfair criticisms. A creation like this could be seen as unproblematic.<sup>31</sup>

Wang is doing two things here. In the final sentence of the essay, although it might seem like an implicit claim that *Lunheng* is *zuo*, in contradiction to his earlier claims we might take the statement as a counterfactual. Even if *Lunheng* were *zuo*, it would be blameless. Wang seems to be trying to avoid commitment on *zuo* one way or the other at this point, which would make most sense after the argument he has just finished making that it is truth that is the value-making property we ought to be concerned with. Rather than making any claim to the *zuo* status of his own work, we ought to see this claim as an additional rejection of the importance of *zuo*. If *Lunheng* is not *zuo*, then there are no grounds to criticize it for being such. If it is *zuo*, then based on the argument Wang has given here, it is still above reproach. This is a tactic Wang uses throughout the *Lunheng*, and one that puts him in the company of philosophers in the Indian and Western traditions. He often *dissolves* debates rather than joining them, showing that previous ways of framing issues or drawing distinctions are inadequate or somehow flawed. Here we see a key example of that. When appraising philosophical (or other) works, the question of

<sup>31</sup> *Duizuo* 8.

whether they are *zuo* or *shu* is often central to determination of their value, and the debate surrounding value becomes one over the identity of a work as *zuo* or not *zuo*. Wang proposes to replace this consideration with a different and more proper one. A work should be valued on the basis of its being *shi* 實 (true) and avoiding *xu* 虛 (falsity). Rather than the *zuo-shu* debate concerning the value of texts, we should be engaged in the *shi-xu* debate concerning value.

It is this fundamental difference that allows Wang to develop his unique philosophical method, in which the aim is attainment of *shi* and exposure of the *xu* elements of existing teachings and texts. It is this fundamentally truth-based philosophical method that might remind us of the philosophy done in the Ancient Greek tradition beginning with Plato. Before we are able to make better sense of Wang's philosophical method, however, it is essential to flesh out Wang's position on the important concepts of *shi* and *xu*, which, as mentioned above, form the center of his philosophical method.

Wang makes the claim in *Dwizuo* that the primary normative consideration should be *shi*. Of course, Wang still owes us an explanation of what *shi* is, which, as any philosopher who has struggled with the issue of truth can attest, is no easy task. I argue in the next chapter that Wang's conception of truth is a unique and useful one, and has parallels to some contemporary theories of truth, and might be investigated more deeply to contribute to these debates.

## METHOD AND APPLICATION<sup>32</sup>

Having explained the central motivation of his project, discovery of *shi* and appraisal of common beliefs and accepted teachings to distinguish *shi* from *xu*, Wang outlines a method for achieving this goal, one that is relatively general and can be applied to written teachings, persons, and statements alike (although it will be a bit harder in cases where an author is inaccessible, in such cases as ancient texts). Interestingly, Wang does not spend as much space in *Lunheng* discussing this method as he does discussing *shi*, or even defending himself from charges of engaging in *zuo*. We learn most about this method not from explicit statements about it from Wang, but through looking closely at the ways Wang *applies* this method.

<sup>32</sup>This section recounts and further develops the arguments I made in my 2007, "A Reappraisal of Wang Chong's Critical Method Through the *Wenkong* Chapter", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34 (4). Parts of that paper are included in this section.

Most of the arguments in the *Lunheng* can be understood in terms of application of this method, which Wang must have at least informally formulated relatively early in his writing career. There are only a few of the essays of *Lunheng* that do not heavily engage in argument consistent with his explicit formulation and defense of this method.

This brief formulation and defense comes in the first of what I call the “critical chapters” of the *Lunheng*, the *Wenkong* (“Questioning Confucius”). This chapter is the first in order of the critical chapters in the current collection and may indeed have been the first written of the critical chapters. The prefatory material beginning this essay is not found in any of the other critical chapters of the *Lunheng*, and it also makes sense that Wang would begin his appraisals of classic texts with the highly influential *Analects*, as appraising it makes the best case for the usefulness of Wang’s method.<sup>33</sup>

Given that what he says about his critical and philosophical method at the beginning of *Wen kong* amounts to no more than a couple of paragraphs, we can include the translation in full below, before moving on to consider the finer points, significance, and application of this method. Part of the difficulty here is pulling out the general method Wang is offering from the specific application to the case of Confucius he intends to offer here in the *Wenkong*.

世儒學者，好信師而是古，以為賢聖所言皆無非，專精講習，不知難問。夫賢聖下筆造文，用意詳審，尚未可謂盡得實，況倉卒吐言，安能皆是？不能皆是，時人不知難；或是，而意沉難見，時人不知問。

The *ru* scholars of today’s generation cherish and trust in their teachers, and believe the (teachings) of the ancients. They believe the teachings of the worthies and sages to be completely free of error. They can expound on the spirit of these words and explain how to put them into practice, but they do not know how to challenge and question them. When the worthies and sages wrote their works, they used their thoughts to make a detailed investigation of things. Still, we cannot say that they completely attained the truth (about everything). If this is so, how can their everyday and idle statements

<sup>33</sup>Not all scholars are agreed about *Wenkong* or the critical chapters in general. Alfred Forke (*Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch’ung*) and Michael Nylan (“Han Classicists”) see here, for example, only a half-hearted defense of Wang’s criticisms against the untouchable sage Confucius, rather than an expression of method, while Nicolas Zufferey (“Pourquoi Wang Chong critique-t-il Confucius?”, *Études chinoises* XIV (1), 1995) and Colin and Esther Klein (“Wang Chong’s Epistemology of Testimony”, *Asia Major* 29 (2)) see a deeper methodological point being made here, continuous with my reading.

be completely true (*shi* 是)? These statements cannot all be true (是), but the people of today don't know how to challenge them. Or if some (of these statements) are true, and the ideas imparted are unclear and hard to make out, the people of today do not know how to question them.<sup>34</sup>

Beginning with the case of Confucians (he will move on specifically to criticize the words and teachings [*yan*] of Confucius as recounted in the *Analects*<sup>35</sup>), Wang criticizes the inability of contemporary scholars to employ acceptable methods of engaging with or appraising texts. The common practice, Wang complains, is simply to memorize and expound on the classic texts, perhaps writing glosses or commentaries on them. The problem with this, he suggests, is that in this way scholars will inevitably end up perpetuating falsehoods. Why is this so? Because whatever falsehoods were contained in the classic texts since their compilation have not been stricken from the text, due to the inability or unwillingness of scholars to *question* or *challenge* these *yan*.

Wang takes a perhaps controversial position on the sages here, basically assuming that, insofar as the sages were human, the sages were also prone to error. Although perhaps they erred far less than the average person is apt to, they must have erred nonetheless, and thus we have reason to employ some method to appraise their works, to discover what in them is true and what false. This might strike one as an ungrounded claim. Do we really have sufficient reason to employ Wang's methods of appraising texts on the basis of an assumption about the sages? And an assumption that may appear shaky, at that? If we have determined, that is, that certain thinkers of the past were sages and had preternatural abilities of forming and/or determining the proper paths (*dao*) for human life, doesn't this undermine the already-weak assumption on which Wang's argument seemingly rests?

Wang has a possible response to this. *Yan* are open to appraisal, whether they are the *yan* of sages or the *yan* of common people. Indeed, Wang subjects the *yan* of both of these groups to appraisal throughout the *Lunheng*. While the sages themselves may have special abilities, their *yan*

<sup>34</sup> *Wenkong* 1.

<sup>35</sup> Wang uses *yan* 言 to stand for teachings, statements, or anything expressing a particular position that can be appraised for truth content. According to Chris Fraser, the Mohist use of *yan* comes closest to this, with the key difference being that the critical feature of *yan* for the Mohists was the acceptability or perhaps pragmatic assertability of *yan*, rather than its truth, in Wang's terms of *shi-xu*. Fraser, "Truth in Moist Dialectics".

appear as any other *yan*, and if these are true, then we ought to be able to determine whether they are true in the same way we can determine whether the *yan* from any other source are true. Now, we require some way of determining, given the words of less-than-sagely persons, whether these are true or false. So this establishes the need of some method for appraising *yan* for truth value. But then, if we discover and can apply such a method, what reason do we have for foregoing the application of this method to the *yan* of the sages? It is at least possible (given the earlier assumption) that the sages erred from time to time, and given that this method will uncover *shi* and *xu* in the *yan* of the sages just as clearly as it will elsewhere, we ought to apply this method to the sages' *yan* in order to discover which of their *yan* are *shi* and which *xu*, if any. The worst that can happen (or perhaps the best, depending on one's perspective) is that we find that the sages' *yan* are completely *shi* and contain no falsehoods. And if we discover this, we then indeed have a more solid ground for maintaining their perfect sageliness. In this way, we see that the original assumption that the sages must have erred sometimes does not constitute the basis of Wang's argument for applying the critical method to the *yan* of the sages; it simply serves as a strengthening defeasibility statement on top of the more fundamental considerations about appraisal of *yan*.

To the possible objection that the direct students of sages such as Confucius would have known how to distinguish between true and false *yan* of Confucius because they had greater talents than contemporary scholars, Wang argues:

論者皆云：「孔門之徒，七十子之才，勝今之儒。」此言妄也。彼見孔子為師，聖人傳道，必授異才，故謂之殊。夫古人之才，今人之才也，今謂之英、傑，古以為聖、神，故謂七十子歷世希有。使當今有孔子之師，則斯世學者，皆顏、閔之徒也；使無孔子，則七十子之徒，今之儒生也。何以驗之？以學於孔子，不能極問也。聖人之言，不能盡解；說道陳義，不能輒形。不能輒形，宜問以發之；不能盡解，宜難以極之。

In discussions people always say: "The talents of the seventy followers of Confucius were greater than those of today's *ru* scholars." This claim is ridiculous. They had Confucius as a teacher, a sage who taught/propagated the proper way (*dao*), and so necessarily had unusual talents. Thus they say they were unique [in talent]. The talents of the ancients were the same as the talents of the people of today. The (kind of) people we today call brave people and heroes, the ancients thought of as sages and superhuman/spirits. This is why they say that the seventy followers were rare in the history of the world. If the people of today were to have Confucius as a teacher, then

today's generation of scholars would all be like Yan Hui and Min Ziqian.<sup>36</sup> And if Confucius had not been the teacher of the seventy followers, then they would be no different than the *ru* scholars of today. How do we know this is so? Because even though they studied with Confucius, they were unable to adequately question him. The statements of sages cannot (always) be completely explained, and even when the words are righteous, the shape cannot (always) be made out. When the shape cannot be made out, it is fitting to ask questions to draw it out. If they cannot be completely explained, it is fitting to challenge in order to settle things.<sup>37</sup>

Whether a student is talented or not has to do with their ability to question and challenge, and absent this, the *yan* of sages like Confucius will go unappraised, and thus whatever falsehoods are included in their *yan* will simply be passed down through transmission rather than removed. In every age, then, the ability and willingness to apply the method of questioning and challenging will be necessary to the evaluation of *yan*. The fact that the *yan* we appraise might be those of sages does not change its necessity. And the reason Wang spends so much time here in *Wen kong* explaining this is that he thought he needed to give this explanation as a response to the inevitable criticism he would get for being perceived as attacking the *yan* of the sage Confucius. In Wang's final argument for the application of his method against the *yan* of sages (and specifically Confucius) in the first section of *Wen kong*, he writes:

謂問孔子之言，難其不解之文，世間弘才大知生，能答問、解難之人，必將賢吾世間難問之言是非。

If we question Confucius' statements and challenge his writings that are not (clearly) explained, those of many generation with broad talent and great knowledge will be able to answer questions and explain challenged (statements). They will certainly take as worthy this generation's challenging and questioning of statements to determine whether they are right or wrong.<sup>38</sup>

This method Wang briefly discusses in the introduction to *Wenkong* and employs throughout the *Lunheng* consists of two parts: *men* 問 (questioning) and *nan* 難 (challenging). Wang briefly defines these concepts in

<sup>36</sup>Widely considered Confucius's two greatest students, including by Confucius himself (*Analects* 2.9, 6.3, 9.21).

<sup>37</sup>*Wenkong* 2.

<sup>38</sup>*Wenkong* 4.



*Wenkong*, as we have seen in part from the above passages. Clearly, *wen* and *nan* are intimately connected to *shi* 實 (truth)—it is through application of *wen* and *nan* that we come to discover whether particular statements are true or false. There do seem to be some limitations on the method Wang offers, however. First, it seems to be applicable only to appraisal of already-existing or asserted statements, rather than a method for constructing true (*shi*) statements. This method was clearly aimed at appraisal of existing texts and teachings, rather than intended to help guide construction of new *yan*.<sup>39</sup> As such, it relies on the assertion or offering as *shi* of some *yan* or other, which it then investigates using *wen* and *nan*. Such a method might remind us of the so-called Socratic method, or *elenchus*, emphasized in early Platonic dialogues, which is similarly dependent on existing claims and appraisal based. Wang might respond to claims of the apparent limitation of this method in the same way Plato does: by suggesting that eventually, once we have ruled out enough options and appraised enough *yan*, we will discover those that are true. Wang's method of *wen* and *nan*, like the *elenchus*, simply has nothing to say about the creation of statements or teachings. Whatever guidance we can have for this (if any is possible) must come from elsewhere. Perhaps the creation of *yan* is prerational, with the creative act simply one of imaginative construction, free from the same truth constraints.

In *Wenkong*, Wang attempts to describe the method of *wen* and *nan* first through direct explanation and then through practical application. The two aspects of this method can be distinguished separately as two particular processes that aid in the overall goal of discovering or uncovering *shi*.<sup>40</sup> The submethod of *wen* seems to have priority. Not only is *wen* often placed first in Wang's writing of the method (he uses "*wen nan*" most frequently, with the occasional use of "*nan wen*"). Primarily, *wen* has temporal priority due to what it does. By itself it cannot help us discover *shi*, but plays primarily an assisting role to *nan*, which does most of the

<sup>39</sup> Perhaps we can understand this methodological aim in terms of *zuo*: the hesitancy to endorse *zuo* as something of value, following Confucius' *shu er bu zuo*.

<sup>40</sup> In my "Reappraisal of Wang Chong's Critical Method", I took *wen* and *nan* as two different methods that can operate together or alone. I have since revised my position on this—I think there is reason to think that Wang did not hold them as independent methods, but always working in tandem. There may be certain circumstances where one or the other of them is not needed, but these cases are of incomplete application of the method—the question of *shi* is sometimes answered before the method has been completed. Wang's explanations of *wen* and *nan* always go together.

heavy lifting. *Wen* tosses up the alley-oop that *nan* slams to the basket. *Wen* is the jab to open up the opponent; *nan* is the follow-up knockout hook.

Let us first consider the hook, *nan*, in order to understand the goal, and what *wen* sets up. The term “*nan*” can mean something akin to “difficult”, a meaning it takes in contemporary as well as classical Chinese. Something that is not easy to accomplish, bear, or otherwise experience is *nan*. Here, the suggestion is that to apply *nan* to words is literally to give them difficulty. For *yan* to experience difficulty, in the sense Wang means it, is for them to be *challenged*. Thus, my translation of *nan* as “challenging”, while not literal,<sup>41</sup> captures the sense of Wang’s use of the term. The kind of difficulty *nan* presents to a *yan* is an opposition through objection on grounds of logical contradiction. We discover this only partly through Wang’s explanation of the method—most of the evidence for this comes from a consideration of his application of the method. What he says about *nan* in two passages early in *Wenkong* is sufficiently cryptic to get us to wonder further about its application. First, as we have seen above, Wang says that *nan* is applied when confronted with statements that we suspect are not correct. If the statements are correct, then *wen* is the proper tool to use. In the assumption that some of the statements one is presented with are *xu*, there is ground for the application of *nan*. Note again the critical part of the passage mentioned above:

These statements cannot all be true (是), but the people of today don’t know how to challenge them. Or if some (of these statements) are true, and the ideas imparted are unclear and hard to make out, the people of today do not know how to question them.<sup>42</sup>

Wang explains *wen* and *nan* further in another passage:

不能輒形，宜問以發之；不能盡解，宜難以極之。

When the shape cannot be made out, it is fitting to ask questions to draw it out. If they cannot be completely explained, it is fitting to challenge in order to settle things.<sup>43</sup>

Here we see that *nan* is applied to those statements that are problematic even when fully clarified, after the work of *wen* has been done. The

<sup>41</sup> A more literal translation, “difficulting” would, in addition to being incorrect English, would not properly express Wang’s intended sense of *nan*.

<sup>42</sup> *Wenkong* 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Wenkong* 2.

suggestion seems to be that some statements are unclear or confused simply because we have not properly understood them or they have not been clearly stated, and this is what we discover through *wen*. However, some statements still have these problems even when they have been explicated as fully and clearly as possible, and this gives us reason to apply *nan*, in order to uncover the problematic feature of these statements and reveal them as *xu*. We see in Wang's practical application of *nan* that the problematic feature of these statements is most often logical contradiction. This, when one applies *nan*, one presents objections with a view of deriving contradictions from the given statement and thus demonstrating its falsity. Yet more resemblance to the Platonic *elenchus*.

We can take *nan* and *wen* to apply, then, given the clarity and assertiveness of the statement being appraised. *Wen*, literally "questioning", is applied when the meanings of a statement are unclear. One questions in order to discern implications of a certain statement or to get clear on certain points concerning the statement itself. We cannot yet determine whether a statement is *shi* or *xu* through application of the *wen* part of the method alone. For this, *nan* is required. *Nan* plays the critical role of presenting difficulties, or objections, to the statement, to determine whether there are logical inconsistencies that result from holding the statement in connection with other statements that are either obviously true and accepted or that the author of the initial statement holds to be true.<sup>44</sup>

Although each of the parts of this method can function on their own, Wang seems to take the method as one in which both parts operate together to properly achieve the function of discovering *shi*. Wang describes the operation of *wen nan* considered as a single method in *Wenkong*:

皋陶陳道帝舜之前，淺略未極，禹問難之，淺言復深，略指復分。蓋起問難此說，激而深切，觸而著明也。

The discourse of Gao Yao before Emperor Shun was unclear, vague, and not settled. Yu questioned and challenged Gao Yao, the unclear/shallow

<sup>44</sup>The way I describe the two methods in "Reappraisal of Wang Chong's Critical Method" is, I still believe, fundamentally correct. There, I write: "*Nan* is a method applied to appraise words and texts in order to distinguish between correct and incorrect teachings. It operates through presenting objections or counterpoints to a view with an aim to show that the view leads to contradiction, as with *reductio ad absurdum*. *Wen* is a method applied to clarify meanings of teachings found to be correct through the method of *nan*, if the view being appraised is found faulty" (McLeod, "Reappraisal", p. 588).

statements became deep, and the vague outline became more detailed. When statements are subjected to questioning and challenging, this deepens the discourse and clarifies meanings.<sup>45</sup>

One example of what *wen* does on its own is given in Wang's consideration of *Analects* 2.5:

孟懿子問孝，子曰：「毋違。」樊遲御，子告之曰：「孟孫問孝於我，我對曰：『毋違。』」樊遲曰：「何謂也？」子曰：「生、事之以禮，死、葬之以禮。」

問曰：孔子之言「毋違」，毋違者禮也。孝子亦當先意承志，不當違親之欲。孔子言「毋違」，不言「違禮」，懿子聽孔子之言，獨不為嫌於無違志乎？樊遲問何謂，孔子乃言「生、事之以禮，死、葬之以禮，祭之以禮。」使樊遲不問，毋違之說，遂不可知也。懿子之才，不過樊遲，故《論語》篇中，不見言行，樊遲不曉，懿子必能曉哉？

[*Analects* 2.5] “Meng Yizi asked about filiality. The master replied: ‘do not disobey.’ Later when riding with Fan Chi in a chariot, the master said to him: ‘Meng Yizi asked me about filiality’, and I told him ‘do not disobey your parents’. Fan Chi asked: ‘what do you mean by that?’ The master replied: ‘when they are alive, serve them in accordance with ritual. When they have died, bury them in accordance with ritual.’”

[Response] My question is this: when Confucius said “do not disobey”, he meant that one should not disobey ritual norms. But a filial child should also follow the ideas and the will (of their parents), and should not disobey/disregard the desires (of their parents). Confucius said, “Do not disobey”; he didn’t say, “(Do not) disobey ritual.” Hearing Confucius’ (actual) words, could Meng Yizi alone not suspect that (Confucius was not saying) that one should not disobey their parents’ will? When Fan Chi asked what he meant, Confucius said, “When they are alive, serve them in accordance with ritual, and when they have died, bury them in accordance with ritual”. Had Fan Chi not asked what Confucius meant by “do not disobey”, then (his meaning) would not have been known. The talents of Meng Yizi did not reach those of Fan Chi, thus in the *Analects* we see no (account of) his statements or actions. (If Confucius’ statement) was unclear to Fan Chi, then how could it have been clear to Meng Yizi?<sup>46</sup>

Here, the method of *wen* is represented by Fan Chi’s simple question: “What did you mean by that?” Wang’s worries about *Analects* 2.5 can also illustrate why he thinks the seemingly simple method of *wen* is so important. Without Fan Chi’s question, we would be left to guess what

<sup>45</sup> *Wenkong* 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Wenkong* 5, 6.

Confucius' cryptic quote "do not act contrary" means. Wang suggests that Meng Yizi must have been puzzled in this way, due to his failure to question (*wen*). Notice that the question of Fan Chi was not presented as an objection to Confucius' teaching, with a view to refute.

In the very next passage from *Wenkong*, Wang gives an example of a situation in which *nan* is appropriate:

孟武伯問孝，子曰：「父母唯其疾之憂。」武伯善憂父母，故曰「唯其疾之憂」。武伯憂親，懿子違禮。攻其短，荅武伯云「父母唯其疾之憂」，對懿子亦宜言「唯水火之變乃違禮」。周公告小才勅，大材略。子游之、大材也，孔子告之勅；懿子、小才也，告之反略，違周公之志。攻懿子之短，失道理之宜，弟子不難，何哉！

[*Analects* 2.6] "Meng Wubo asked about filiality. The master replied: 'do not give your parents anything to worry about other than the possibility of your becoming ill.'"

[Response] Meng Wubo often caused his parents worry; thus, (Confucius) said: "Do not give them anything to worry about other than the possibility of your becoming ill." Meng Wubo caused his parents worry, (whereas) Yizi disobeyed ritual norms. Focusing on his shortcomings, (Confucius) answered Wubo, "do not give your parents anything to worry about other than the possibility of your becoming ill"; (thus), he should have responded to Meng Yizi "only in flood or conflagration should you disobey ritual". The Duke of Zhou said that those of small talent need explanation, whereas those of great talent need only intimation. Ziyou was a person of great talent, but Confucius gave him an explanation, while Meng Yizi was a person of small talent, and Confucius gave him only an intimation. This violates the injunction (志) of the Duke of Zhou. Focusing on Meng Yizi's shortcomings violated the proper principles (*li* 理) of the way (*dao*), but Confucius' students did not challenge him—why was this?<sup>47</sup>

Here is a case, according to Wang, in which we can derive a contradiction from two teachings of Confucius. Confucius presumably claims to adhere to the "injunction of the Duke of Zhou", and his adherence to this way is evidenced by his actions in *Analects* 2.6. At the same time, his actions in *Analects* 2.5 reveal that he is not consistently adhering to this way, which we can see through the disparity between his responses to Yizi

<sup>47</sup> *Wenkong* 7.

and Wubo. So, in the above passage, Wang himself utilizes *nan* against Confucius and chides the students of Confucius for not themselves challenging the master. Thus, *nan* and *wen* should be seen as two methods which, although distinct, can be used in concert. In many of Wang's discussions of particular passages of the *Analects*, he prefaces his remarks with *wen yue* ("my question is"). However, it is important to point out that not all of his remarks about the various passages from Confucius are instances of the method of *wen*. We might see the *wen* marker at the beginning of these remarks as simply an introduction to Wang's statements, *wen* being used here in the standard sense, rather than in Wang's technical sense. In many cases, though, he flags the use of *nan* and *wen* together. Both in describing the method and in applying it this combination comes out.

Consider the reasons one might use the methods of *nan* and *wen* together. As I suggested when giving the definitions of *wen* and *nan* previously, the questions one presents to a proponent of a particular view to gain clarity on the insufficiently explained points of that view may yield a clarification that renders the view objectionable. Consider the sentence:

1. "If Bill is in a, then Bill is not in the People's Republic of China."

There are at least two ways we can treat (1). First, we might examine whether or not it is true. We can utilize the method of *wen* to do this, since knowing what "a" refers to will tell us whether the sentence is true. So, we ask for clarification, via the method of *wen*:

"What does 'a' refer to?" Answer: "a" refers to Shenyang.

Once this is known, then one can proceed to *nan*, presenting a *reductio ad absurdum*-like argument against (1):

- (i) If "a" refers to Shenyang, then (1) amounts to: "If Bill is in Shenyang, then Bill is not in the People's Republic of China."
- (ii) Assume that (1) is true.
- (iii) It is also true (we know) that Shenyang is in the People's Republic of China.
- (iv) So, if Bill is in Shenyang, then Bill is in the People's Republic of China.
- (v) Bill is in Shenyang [assumption].
- (vi) By (i), Bill is not in the People's Republic of China.

- (vii) By (iv), Bill is in the People's Republic of China.
- (viii) Contradiction, (vi) and (vii). So (1) is not true.

Thus, one is using the methods of *nan* and *wen* together, and we might call this whole process *wen nan*. In fact, one might start from the initial question (*wen*) “what does ‘a’ refer to” with a view to drawing out an objectionable claim which can then be used in a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Now, consider a different case. Take it that we know (1) is true. Now, we can use the method of *wen* to make (1) clearer.

- (i) “If Bill is in a, then Bill is not in the People's Republic of China” is true.
- (ii) Then it follows, that “a” does not refer to Shenyang, Beijing, Fuzhou, and so on.

Notice that the method of *wen* changes when we accept a particular claim as true prior to its use. The method of *nan*, however, will work the same way wherever it is employed, because we assume that the position we take aim at with *nan* is faulty. It may turn out, however, that the position is true, and in these cases use of *nan* will fail to reveal contradictions.

This method of *wen* and *nan* is applied by Wang throughout the *Lunheng*, both to reveal *xu yan* and to establish or endorse *shi yan*. We see many examples of both the negative and positive projects throughout the *Lunheng*, even though Wang perhaps more heartily and enthusiastically engages in the negative project of assaulting false statements.

As argued above, Wang's primary goal in the *Lunheng* is truth. Wang has often been described by earlier scholars, however, as primarily a *skeptic* or *critic*. In earlier English studies of Wang Chong, mainly by nonphilosophers, to call Wang a skeptic was not to attribute to him a philosophical view on epistemology along the lines of the skeptics in the Western tradition, originating in Greek and Hellenistic thought. Rather, by “skeptic” these scholars meant to call Wang someone primarily interested in criticism of contemporaries and ancients, rather than in developing his own positions. These scholars see Wang as engaged in a primarily (or *wholly*, in the case of some scholars) negative project.

I think there is some merit in these interpretations of Wang, but there are a few places they go astray.

First—I object to the use of the term “skeptic” to describe Wang Chong, for a few reasons. This term, as I explain above, already has a

philosophical connotation and connection, and suggests certain epistemological views about the possibility of knowledge that Wang simply does not hold. Wang is nothing like an academic or Pyrrhonian skeptic, or any kind of skeptic at all in the philosophical sense of the word. Indeed, he is the very opposite of the skeptic, in that he holds that it is not only possible for us to discover and know the truth (*shi*), but that it is our duty to employ the method of *wen* and *nan* in order to do so. No skeptic would endorse the project of evaluating statements to determine whether they are true or false, mainly because no skeptic would think that it is possible for us to determine whether any given statement is in fact true or false. The ancient Chinese thinker who perhaps comes closest to being a skeptic is Zhuangzi, and Wang Chong is far from endorsing the epistemological quietism of the *Zhuangzi*. Indeed, Wang Chong might be considered a most complete dogmatist.

Second—insofar as “skeptic” is meant not to attribute a certain epistemological view to Wang, but rather should be read to mean something akin to “critic”, I think labeling Wang as a critic is to rest undue weight on a single aspect of his thought, which is not the central aspect. It is akin to calling Plato a “controversialist” or Confucius a “political theorist”. It emphasizes one peripheral, if important, aspect of his thought and asserts this as fundamental and constitutive. While Wang is certainly highly critical of a number of *yan*, of common people (*su ren* 俗人) and of established texts and even the works of sages, it is not this criticism in itself that is at the heart of his thought—rather, it is the attainment of *shi* and rejection of *xu*. Indeed, Wang explicitly claims as much in multiple chapters of the *Lunheng* (especially *Duizuo* and *Ziji*), and we have no good reason not to take him at his word.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Michael Nylan offers a psychological evaluation of Wang that she thinks justifies the application of a hermeneutic of suspicion to the text (in “Han Classicists”), and reading it in such a way that criticism is central, as a revenge for the perceived slights to Wang throughout his career. I think there are multiple problems with this. First, this is playing fast and loose with psychology, and there’s no reason to think her take on Wang’s inner life or motivations is at all accurate. Second—regardless of what Wang’s motivations were, his thought can be made perfectly good sense of as it’s written. Even if Wang was mainly interested in flummoxing his opponents, this need not undermine his stated philosophical goal of attaining truth, any more than it would mean that, if I wanted to be a great basketball player in order to shame my high school coach, who said I’d never amount to anything on the court, that I in fact didn’t want to be a great basketball player.



*Application of the Critical Method: Appraising Han Feizi*

In the 非韓 *Feihan* (“Against Han Feizi”) chapter of the *Lunheng*, Wang presents a lengthy argument against a few points of Han Feizi’s legalist program. Most importantly, Wang criticizes a particular argument Han Feizi makes against Confucians. In responding to Han Feizi’s argument, Wang attempts to defend the value of 儒 *ru* (Confucian) scholars, as well as the moral categories of ritual (禮 *li*) and appropriateness (義 *yi*), and to draw attention to a general problem with Han Feizi’s legalism that threatens to undermine it.

Eric Hutton notes<sup>49</sup> that Han Feizi’s criticisms of the Confucians have not been paid sufficient attention by scholars, and that his criticisms reveal a general difficulty with the developmental aspects of virtue-ethical theories. After considering Han Feizi’s arguments, Hutton considers a number of possible Confucian responses, which he finds ultimately problematic. Hutton does not consider, however, a different possible response, which is just what Wang Chong develops in *Feihan*, and shows us an example of Wang’s form of challenging in connection with established texts and statements.

The *Feihan* may be easy at first to set aside because it seems initially that Wang Chong is simply offering an ad hominem argument against Han Feizi. The essay begins with a gripe that Han Fei’s “dress does not match with his words”—that is, that he is being inconsistent as he argues that scholars have no place in the ideal state administration, but dresses as (and thus presumably plays the role of) a scholar himself. This seems at first glance to be fallacious for two reasons: (1) Wang assumes that Han Fei takes himself as an exemplar of his own theory or teaching, or must take his own action as consistent with his theory in order to be correct, and (2) he takes Han Fei’s failing as an exemplar as reason to reject his theory in general, which still might be correct or useful even if Han Fei fails to live up to it.

Perhaps a better way to see Wang’s gripe about the inconsistency between Han Fei’s theory and his dress is this: If scholars are disruptive to the proper administration of the state, how is it that Han Fei himself is supposed to be beneficial to the administration of the state? Is he not a scholar, presenting a certain theory of government rulers ought to know if they are to be successful? How is he, in this way, different from a

<sup>49</sup>In “Han Feizi’s Criticism of Confucianism and Its Implications for Virtue Ethics”.

Confucian scholar? If Han Fei is to be consistent, it cannot be that the problem with Confucian scholars is that they engage in theorizing and teaching rather than being soldiers or agriculturalists, because clearly Han Feizi takes his own theorizing and teaching to be essential to the state. The problem, then, has to be with *what* the Confucians advocate, rather than their lack of agricultural or military productivity. And what they advocate is imitation of the actions of the sages—following *virtue* (德 *de*), *ritual* (礼), and *appropriateness* (义).

This, however, although it seems like the core of the argument at first, is only the introduction to what is a much more substantive response to a central argument Han Feizi makes against the Confucians. To understand Han Feizi's argument, it is helpful to turn to Hutton, who offers the most plausible interpretation of his position. According to Hutton, Han Feizi's main argument against the Confucian is *not* that pursuing virtue is ineffective and ultimately disruptive to the order and thriving of the state (as Han Feizi's argument is often interpreted), but rather that the Confucian recommends aiming for an admittedly unachievable ideal, and that the attempt to act in the specified ideal way (imitation of the sages of the past) outside of the right context will likely lead to disaster.<sup>50</sup> Han Feizi's argument against the Confucians is similar, Hutton explains, to a difficulty for virtue ethics developed by Bernard Williams—that it is dangerous for a nonvirtuous person to imitate a virtuous person (or a less-than-ideally virtuous person tries to adhere to an ideal), because the nonvirtuous person does not possess the ability that the virtuous person has. Because mirroring the behavior of virtuous persons plays a central role in the development of the virtues on most accounts of virtue ethics, this creates a serious problem surrounding development of virtues that threatens to undermine the very possibility of gaining virtue. Hutton suggests that Han Feizi's argument against the Confucian is essentially the same as Bernard Williams' argument. The ideal actions of the sages, according to Han Feizi, are dangerous to imitate due to the difference of conditions between the ancient times and Han Fei's own. The Confucians advocate imitation of the sages as a method of moral self-cultivation, and since we cannot duplicate the contexts in which the sages acted (due to the difference of their times), the Confucian position will inevitably lead to disaster.

<sup>50</sup> Hutton, "Han Feizi's Criticism of Confucius and its Implications for Virtue Ethics", *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 5 (3), 2008.

Han Fei presents a number of examples to show that attempting to adhere to the Confucian ideals leads to disaster, and that a ruler is thus better off rejecting these ideals. Instead, he concludes, order ought to be maintained through creation of laws (法 *fǎ*) (and the attendant “handles” of reward and punishment) by the ruler, based on an understanding of the unique circumstances of the time. Confucian scholars, then, as champions of Zhou ritual and the virtue manifested by adherence to Zhou ritual, are detrimental to the state.

Wang offers a two-part response to Han Feizi’s argument against imitation of the sages, the efficacy of ritual, and the Confucian scholars who uphold and transmit ritual: (1) the evidence does not support Han Feizi’s claims about the probability of disaster arising disproportionately from cases in which one without ability or outside of the exact context attempts to imitate the sages. There is no more reason to think that the historical data suggests that imitation of the sages results in catastrophe than there is to think that it results in success. And there is also no more reason to believe, all things considered, that the negative results in cases where it does lead to disaster outweigh the positive results in cases of success. Thus, Han Feizi’s historical examples are inconclusive. (2) There is compelling evidence that imitation of the sages and the upholding of ritual can *indirectly* contribute to the successful administration of a state, due to: (a) the effectiveness of virtue over punishments and rewards in motivating people and creating loyalty, in demonstrating (whether true or not) that one has altruistic rather than selfish concerns; (b) the effectiveness of ritual and virtue as means for creating respect in other states, and as a shield for weaker states against more powerful ones; (c) the effectiveness of imitation of the sages in creating particular motivations and virtues that lead to greater skill at conducting civil and military administration in general.

In arguing that imitation of the sages tends to lead to disaster, Han Feizi appeals to a number of historical examples in which just such things took place, such as that of King Yan of Xu, who, he recounts, caused the destruction of his state through his adherence to “benevolence and righteousness”.<sup>51</sup> Yan’s fame for virtue caused King Wen of Qing to fear that the influence of King Yan and the state of Xu was undermining his own influence and that Xu could be a threat. For this reason, King Wen of Qing attacked and destroyed Xu.

<sup>51</sup> *Hanfeizi* 49.

In his first response to this, Wang attempts to show that the historical record also contains many examples of imitation of the sages and upholding of ritual as crucial to the success or survival of particular states.

One example Wang offers is that of the Confucian scholar Duan Ganmu and the state of Wei. Wang claims that Wei had been spared attack and destruction by the state of Qin due to the respect the people and ruler of Qin had for Duan Ganmu and his virtue. Wang writes:

使魏無干木，秦兵入境，境土危亡。秦、疆國也，兵無不勝。[...] 今魏文式闔門之士，卻疆秦之兵，全魏國之境，濟三軍之眾 ...

If the state of Wei had not had Duan Ganmu (whose orderly action Qin respected), the Qin army would have entered Wei's borders and crushed its soldiers. Qin was an uncompromising state, and its army was unbeatable. [...] Now, a mere scholar who followed an orderly rule and remained within the gates was able to overcome the uncompromising army of Qin, to maintain the borders of Wei, and to aid the numerous armies of Wei.<sup>52</sup>

We may find a couple of problems with this example, as compared to those given by Han Feizi. (1) It is speculative as to the reason Wei avoided attack by Qin, while Han Feizi's examples clearly show how imitative action on the part of key agents led to disastrous results, (2) it suggests that it was not sageliness or protection of virtue or imitation of sages that saved Wei, but rather the possession of a scholar respected by Qin.

Both of these problems can be solved, however. If we look to the *Shiji* account of the Wei/Qin incident, we find, as we do in Wang's account, that one of the key relevant features of the state of Wei is that in making reforms consistent with both the Confucian teachings of Duan Ganmu, the state of Wei had become somewhat powerful, and had a well-organized government and military of high morale. Qin may have avoided attacking Wei primarily for this reason—they presented a greater threat than may have at first been apparent due to the effective organization of the state. But part of this effective organization, Wang argues, was the concentration on virtue and imitation of the example of the sages, in both instituting the policies of and patronizing Duan Ganmu. The suggestion is that if the Marquis Wen of Wei had failed to imitate the sages in his protection and patronage of scholars of ritual such as Duan Ganmu, destruction by Qin clearly would have resulted.

<sup>52</sup> *Feihan* 5.

Wang also considers the example of the first emperor of Han, Gaozu, and his son Liu Ying. Gaozu, he points out, had the intention of removing his son Liu Ying from the role of heir, and this outcome was only avoided through the intervention of wise men who convinced Gaozu to imitate the actions of the sages and thus allow Ying to remain heir. Liu Ying's tenuous position was protected due to adherence to the actions of the sages. Whether this outcome was good or bad for the Han dynasty itself, of course, is debatable—given that Gaozu turned out to be correct that Liu Ying would make a weak emperor—he was later to become the impotent Emperor Hui, whose short puppet reign was overshadowed by his mother Lu Zhi.

We can consider the issue in more general terms as well. If we maintain that moderation in all things is best, for example, and that the ideal person is one who can, say, drink moderately, then in trying to mirror this ideal, we will aim to do the same. But if one is an alcoholic, it may be best for him or her to avoid drinking altogether.<sup>53</sup> In the alcoholic's case, striving to adhere to the ideal of moderation in drinking is bound to lead to disaster, for as soon as they start drinking, they lose control. Han Feizi suggests that it will be more effective to prescribe different things for different people, based on their own unique situations. This is part of the point of Han Feizi's "rabbit hitting the stump" story in chapter 49.

Wang's position suggests an objection to the view that all cases of imitating sages outside of the right context or without the right ability are analogous to the case of the alcoholic attempting to imitate moderate drinkers. On the contrary, most cases will be ones in which the agent is *improved* by imitation, even if the imitation results in failure. Consider the case of a runner who attempts to imitate the actions of the best runners by racing in a 500-meter dash and aiming for breaking the world record. Although a beginning runner of limited talent will necessarily fail at this, they may gain more than they would have if they had not set this unattainable goal. They try harder than they otherwise would have and thus get more from their run than they otherwise would have. Han Feizi has provided us no reason to think that any given case of imitation of the sages will be more similar to the case of the alcoholic than to that of the runner. In order to show that imitating the sages in general directly leads to disaster, Han Feizi has to show that most cases are similar to that of the farmer who saw a rabbit hit a stump and break its neck waiting by the stump to catch more rabbits, or at least that the harm resulting in these cases outweighs

<sup>53</sup> Hutton uses this example to motivate Han Feizi's criticism.

any positive effects of cases similar to that of the runner. This is one of the things Wang denies. And it is at least not obvious that any historical examples could decide this one way or another. There are plenty of historical examples of imitation of the sages leading to success, just as there are plenty of examples of imitation of the sages leading to disaster. Thus, the historical evidence Han Feizi presents to establish his negative conclusion about imitation of the sages is ultimately inconclusive.

Wang offers additional justification for ritual and appropriateness. Even if it turns out (which Wang will deny, but let's concede this for now) that the empirical situation gives us a stalemate—that is, that there is no more reason to think that imitating the sages results in directly positive results (like the runner case) than that it results in disasters (like the alcoholic or the farmer waiting by a stump), there is additional reason to engage in imitating the sages through ritual and appropriateness.

We may simply have no way to decide when the imitation of the sage in a particular way is likely to have a directly negative effect, but we still have reason to imitate the sages if on the whole such action reliably leads *indirectly* to good results. Wang argues that not only does the imitation of the sages reliably directly lead to good results for the state (while admitting sometimes it goes wrong), but that it also has indirectly positive results, which gives us more reason to accept an effective but certainly not perfect method of imitating the actions of the sages, moderated through ritual. Wang says (p. 434):

故以舊防為無益而去之，必有水災；以舊禮為無補而去之，必有亂患。儒者之在世，禮義之舊防也，有之無益，無之有損。

If one takes old levees to be without value and removes them, then a flood will necessarily result. Likewise, if one takes old rituals as being beyond repair and does away with them, a revolt will necessarily result. The *ru* scholars of today are the old levees of ritual and righteousness. If you have them, no value accrues, but if you lack them, disaster results.<sup>54</sup>

We can come away from the debate in general understanding that there is no way to ensure good results for the state for any given action on *any* political theory, but there are some that on the whole lead to a greater percentage of good results than others. The value of ritual (imitation of the sagely ideal) is useful not so much for what it directly results in, but for the three reasons outlined below.

<sup>54</sup> *Feihan* 3.

First—virtue (imitation of the sages) creates loyalty. Concentration on virtue, insofar as this requires imitation of the sages through ritual, is effective in motivating people, and makes it easier for an administration to do its work. Indeed, concentration on virtue is a part of any good administration. Wang says:

治國猶治身也。治一身，省恩德之行，多傷害之操，則交黨踈絕，恥辱至身。推治身以況治國，治國之道，當任德也。韓子任刑，獨以治世，是則治身之人，任傷害也。

Creating order in a state is like creating order in a person. To order the person, if one does not engage in much kindness and virtue, but more often takes up injuriousness and harm, this will sever the ties holding people together, creating shame and insult to the person. If one extends the methods of ordering the person to the situation of ordering the state, then the way of ordering the state must be to rely on virtue. Han Feizi relies on punishment alone to order the world. This is like ordering the person by relying on injuriousness and harm.<sup>55</sup>

Wang's main point here is to show that if the people see rulers or superiors imitating the actions of the sages, this will make them believe (whether it is the case or not) that the superior has their best interests in heart and is benevolent, rather than acting for self-serving reasons, and will be more inclined to work for and be obedient to the superior than they will be if only reward and punishment (Han Feizi's "two handles") are used to ensure obedience. A ruler who is loved and respected is more effective, Wang holds, than one who is feared—here agreeing with *Daodejing* 17.

Part of the reason imitation of the sages (ritually codified) is necessary to cultivate the loyalty of the people is that for the Confucians virtue is *socially* constructed. Virtue is manifested in specific acts,

Second—virtue (imitation of the sages) creates respect in rivals. Unless a state is already militarily stronger than its surrounding states, Wang argues, neglect of virtue (through imitation of the sages) is likely to lead to extinction. In imitation of the sages, respect is created in rival states, and this can often be the only thing keeping a more powerful rival from eliminating one's state. Indeed, this is just what we see in the case of refusal of Qin to invade Wei. Ritual and appropriateness, then, are tools of good administration. Wang writes:

<sup>55</sup> *Feihan* 14.

夫力少則修德，兵彊則奮威。秦以兵彊，威無不勝。卻軍還眾，不犯魏境者，賢干木之操，高魏文之禮也。夫敬賢、弱國之法度，力少之彊助也。謂之非法度之功，如何？

Those with little power must cultivate virtue, whereas those who have powerful armies can instead resort to force. Qin, because the strength of their army had no one they could not defeat. Yet they held back their soldiers and did not invade the state of Wei, because of the uprightness of Duan Ganmu, and their regard for the ritual cultivation of Marquis Wen of Wei. Honoring of the worthy is a governing tool for weak states and a means for those with little power to generate greater strength. How can we say that this is not a matter of effort in governing?<sup>56</sup>

Third—virtue (imitation of the sages) enhances skill in statecraft. A ruler needs, Wang argues, both virtue (through ritual and appropriateness) and laws (in the legalist sense) to have the greatest chances for success of the state, as in the case of the state of Wei. Wang considers the ancient case of King Mu of Zhou, who he claims at first tried to govern only using laws and was unsuccessful, then gained success after adhering to political system the Marquis of Fu got him to become responsive to virtue. This example, of course, is hard for us to verify, both because of its early date and because the *Shiji* seems to offer a very different account of what took place. According to it, King Mu gained a number of successes on the battlefield and conquered a number of tribes to do his adoption of “the penal code of Marquis Fu”, which refers to the *Luxing* 魯形 (penal code of Lu) chapter of the 書經 *Shujing*. When we look to this chapter of the *Shujing*, we find that cultivation of virtue was considered central to the effectiveness of a penal system. Without an understanding that punishment was for straying from virtue and defying ritual and appropriateness, the people will tend to see the penal laws as oppressive, self-serving of the ruler, and vindictive. This, according to the *Shujing*, inevitably creates disorder.<sup>57</sup>

The efficacy of the virtue (德 *de*) of the ruler, then, lends itself, Wang seems to suggest (in a more explicit way than does the *Shujing*) to the effectiveness of the rewards and punishments used by the ruler (Han Feizi’s “two handles”) to maintain order. How does this help to solve the difficulty Han Feizi raises that imitation of the sages tends to lead to disastrous results given the wrong context or ability? Virtue, effective in the way described above, is generated through adherence to ritual, which is a

<sup>56</sup> *Feihan* 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Shujing* 47.2



model derived from the activities of the sages. Ritual, in this sense, is a blueprint of the actions of the sages for us to imitate. Adherence to it is then not only effective directly in that the actions prescribed by ritual directly lead to positive results (this is the point of Wang's "old levees" imagery), but more importantly in that it generates the kind of respect, concern, and obedience that would be impossible to create without reliance on ritual, only through laws enforced by punishment and reward. Wang's major charge (point 2) is that Han Feizi fails to see this aspect of ritual as imitation of the sages, as he is blind to the indirect effects of it, seeing only its direct effects. And even about those, Wang argues, Han Feizi is mistaken.

Is Wang's application of his *wen nan* (questioning and challenging) method against Han Feizi ultimately successful? There does seem to be one obvious difficulty. The same objections Wang levels against the use of historical examples from Han Feizi (in part 1 of his response) could be applied to Wang's use of such examples to argue that imitation of the sages has positive *indirect* results, and to show that arguments based on such examples are inconclusive. Wang's second argument about indirect results does show, however, that there may be reasons to engage in imitation of the ideals of the sages that go beyond those considered by Han Feizi.

Wang thus develops a view that we see in the early Confucian texts about the efficacy of the focus on ritual and the *de* of the scholar who transmits ritual, offering a picture of how this *de* effects administration of the state in general, in such a way as to offer a response to Han Feizi's argument against the Confucian on the basis of the danger of imitating the sages. This also shows us that the method of questioning and challenging Wang adopts in the *Lunheng* is not always used to undermine traditional or popular views. As it is deployed in *Feihan* (and elsewhere in the *Lunheng*), Wang's method is used in the service of widely accepted traditional Confucian views.

### EPISTEMOLOGY: HOW DO WE GAIN KNOWLEDGE?

While some scholars (especially in previous generations) referred to Wang as a "skeptic",<sup>58</sup> Wang's thought is not skeptical in any sense of the word contemporary epistemologists would recognize. While Wang did certainly

<sup>58</sup> Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, 193; Michael Nylan, "Wang Chong" in Cua ed. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*; Nylan, "Classics Without Canonization: Learning

criticize many of the views of his contemporaries and earlier thinkers, he did not hold views like those of classical skeptics in the Hellenistic tradition or Zhuangist skeptics. Wang did not doubt the possibility of making justified knowledge claims or possessing knowledge—indeed, he made a great many statements he thought are or could be known in the *Lunheng*, and offered arguments for them. While he does often challenge the content of specific knowledge claims, he nowhere challenges our ability to *have* knowledge.

Skepticism in the early Chinese philosophical tradition, of course, is very different from Hellenistic skepticism, or skepticism in contemporary epistemology. Early Chinese thinkers in general understand knowledge (*zhi* 知) in ways that tend to go beyond the belief-content conception of knowledge found in contemporary and much of earlier Western philosophy. Knowledge is often understood in terms of practical skill in early China, rather than in terms of belief. Propositions are *sometimes*, but not necessarily, involved in knowledge. In Hellenistic and contemporary skepticism, the knowledge that is challenged by the skeptic is propositional, content of belief. Belief is not often discussed in considerations of knowledge in early China, which tend to surround proper activity. Belief is certainly involved in the construction of knowledge for early Chinese thinkers, but it does not play the central role it does in Western accounts of knowledge. In general, propositional and semantic accounts of knowledge, meaning, and truth are *secondary* and derived from behavioral accounts. Fundamentally, knowledge is ability, a “know-how”, and propositional knowledge is derived from this skill knowledge. To know that [Xu Gan wrote the *Zhonglun*] is primarily to behave in ways toward Xu Gan and the *Zhonglun* suggestive of skillful association. Of course, this is close to an analysis some offer of belief itself, which gives us an account of belief as reducible to behaviors.<sup>59</sup> This view perhaps comes closest to capturing a common position in early Chinese texts, though many early Chinese thinkers go beyond this as well. While we can offer a behavioral account of belief, knowledge is not dependent on belief for early Chinese thinkers, as there can exist knowledge independently of belief. Not every behavior is

and Authority in Qin and Han”, among others.

<sup>59</sup> Such an account of belief is offered by Daniel Dennett, who relates it to what he calls the “intentional stance”: “The intentional stance is the strategy of interpreting the behavior of an entity (person, animal, artifact, whatever) by treating it *as if* it were a rational agent who governed its ‘choice’ of ‘action’ by a ‘consideration’ of its ‘beliefs’ and ‘desires’.” “Intentional Systems Theory”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*.

belief-based behavior. Take riding a bicycle—the skill associated with this may *involve* belief, especially during the stage of development of the skill, but the behavior of riding a bike cannot be understood only in terms of belief states. Can we understand knowing how to ride a bike in terms of the possession of a number of behaviorally constituted beliefs? P believes that [the pedal needs to move this way], [the back should be held at a right angle to the seat], and so on.

One relatively recent trend in epistemology comes much closer to something we see in early Chinese texts regarding knowledge. Virtue epistemology links knowledge with skill, with most of its adherents holding that “knowledge is just an instance of *apt performance*—i.e., a performance that is successful in virtue of one’s cognitive or perceptual skill”.<sup>60</sup> Such virtue epistemologists, however, tend to see the relevant skill in terms of belief-forming dispositions, such that those with knowledge are those who display skill in belief formation, in terms of truth. This is still an account that takes belief as central to knowledge, and the skill that creates knowledge is belief-based skill. For many early Chinese philosophers, this was *not* the case. There can be cognitive and perceptual skills, it seems, that are not themselves belief-formation skills. Whether our responsive activity to patterns of nature can be seen as cognitive if they do not involve belief states would likely be controversial today, but this is likely only because we in general assume belief to be a fundamental part of the cognitive process. It is for this reason that numerous people have challenged the Pyrrhonian skeptics (both in the ancient period and today)—arguing that the Pyrrhonian requires at least some beliefs, as cognition and responsive action are impossible without them.<sup>61</sup> There are a couple of ways to avoid this, of course—one move it appears Sextus Empiricus may have made is to construe belief more narrowly than we may otherwise be inclined. This move may seem unsatisfying though, as he appears to get out of the problem by simply changing the meaning of belief such that what the skeptic has does not rise to the level of belief, seemingly in part because the skeptic has it. A better option would be to deny the assumption that belief states are necessary for cognition and responsive action. They may *sometimes* be necessary, but do not characterize cognition and responsive action

<sup>60</sup> Pavese, “Skill in Epistemology I: Skill and Knowledge”, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Barnes, “The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist”, *The Cambridge Classical Journal*; Myles Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?”, in Burnyeat, *Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy*; Michael Frede, “The Sceptic’s Beliefs”.

as such. While this assumption may seem a big bullet to bite in the Western context, it was unproblematic in early China. This, I take it, is part of the reason that some (or much) of the early Chinese tradition strikes some contemporary philosophers as unintuitive or otherwise false. Note, however, that these philosophers have no good *argument* to show that such positions are flawed, mainly because the views here are based on mere intuitions, however deeply they may be held. As with much else in non-Western traditions, these divergences in intuition can teach us a great deal. Our commitment to certain intuitions is in part due to the fact that *everyone* seems to share them—they seem self-evidently true. No serious thinker would deny them. But when we broaden the scope of our investigations, we find that plenty of people throughout history and across the world deny intuitions that seem to us fundamental and self-evidently true. When we find these intuitions so denied, this should lead us to rethink our positions—not necessarily to give up these intuitions, but to take them as in need of demonstration, as not self-evident after all. If everyone within our Western analytic philosophical echo chamber takes view  $x$  as self-evident, this in itself is not good evidence that we've hit upon a fundamental human intuition—we might have, but it's just as likely (perhaps even moreso) that everyone outside of this group has the intuition that *not- $x$* . Indeed, given the way we construct our academic philosophical communities, we ought to expect such unnatural alignment of intuition. The gatekeepers of our philosophical communities—those with the power to determine who gets to play the game and who does not, including admission committees at PhD granting departments, advisors, and hiring committees at all departments—select those who follow certain norms and practices they understand as “properly philosophical”. And if all or most of this gatekeeping group considers  $x$  a fundamental and necessary intuition, it is doubtful they are going to select (at any level) a person who rejects  $x$  to be part of the community. Having the intuition that  $x$  becomes then a necessary feature for entrance to the community. It's a process of self-selection.

The cleft between belief and knowledge can be seen in a number of early Chinese texts,<sup>62</sup> but emerges most clearly in the *Zhuangzi*. While I agree with much of the analysis of scholars such as Kjellberg, Ivanhoe, Hansen, Chinn, Chung, and others,<sup>63</sup> who understand parts of the

<sup>62</sup> See Tu Weiming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 19–20.

<sup>63</sup> See the papers in Kjellberg ed., *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*; Philip J Ivanhoe, “Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Dao”, Ewing

*Zhuangzi* to be advancing some kind of skeptical position, I don't think this skepticism is essentially belief-bound in nature, based on a conception of knowledge as a certain kind of belief content. In this sense, Zhuangist skepticism is necessarily very different than skepticism in much of the Western tradition, because the Zhuangist conception of *knowledge* is very different. I focus here briefly on knowledge as understood in the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, as this sense of knowledge is less familiar to contemporary philosophers, and forms a crucial part of understanding how Wang Chong thinks about knowledge. While his conception of knowledge is far from Zhuangist, the Zhuangist conception (which is not limited to the *Zhuangzi*) informs the ways Wang thinks about knowledge, as well as his approach to the question of how we gain knowledge.

Throughout the *Zhuangzi* a distinction is drawn between “lesser knowledge” (*xiao zhi* 小知) and “greater knowledge” (*da zhi* 大知).<sup>64</sup> While the Zhuangist authors disparage lesser knowledge (subjecting it to various kinds of skeptical argument), they praise and enjoin greater knowledge. Part of the difficulty here is that it is far from clear that the Zhuangists mean the same thing by “knowledge” in both cases. While we might understand the two as different categories of knowledge, it can seem from some passages as if they are so different as to constitute substantially different categories of thing. A number of scholars have tried to make sense of this distinction in the *Zhuangzi* in different ways.<sup>65</sup> Greater knowledge is linked in a number of passages in the *Zhuangzi* with the kind of breadth of experience and ability that a person possesses only when they are able to move between perspectives, rather than being stuck in a single narrow perspective, with its own fixed valuations (*shi-fei*) and distinctions, moral or otherwise. Broadness rather than narrowness is a feature of greater knowledge, according to numerous discussions in the text. For example, in Chapter Two of the *Zhuangzi*:

大知閑閑，小知閒閒；大言炎炎，小言詹詹。

Chinn, “Zhuangzi and Relativistic Scepticism”, *Asian Philosophy* 7 (3); Julianne Chung, “Taking Skepticism Seriously: How the Zhuang-Zi Can Inform Contemporary Epistemology”, *Comparative Philosophy* 8 (2).

<sup>64</sup>The same distinction is discussed in Chap. 2.

<sup>65</sup>Including Donald Sturgeon, “Zhuangzi, Perspectives, and Greater Knowledge”; Chris Fraser, “Skepticism and Value in the *Zhuangzi*”, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (4); and Tim Connolly, “Perspectivism as a Way of Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*”, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10 (4).

Greater knowledge is (un)circumscribed, while lesser knowledge is petty and idle. Greater statements are energetic and consequential, while lesser statements are prolix and flowery.<sup>66</sup>

And in Chapter One of the *Zhuangzi*, a connection to perspectivism:

小知不及大知，小年不及大年。奚以知其然也？朝菌不知晦朔，蟪蛄不知春秋，此小年也。

Lesser knowledge does not reach the level of greater knowledge, just as few years do not reach the level of many years. How do we know this is so? Mushrooms that live only in the morning do not know the night, (let alone) a month. The cicada and mole cricket do not know the entirety of the year, the spring and autumn. This is a matter of their time being lesser.<sup>67</sup>

In both passages, we see lesser knowledge associated with narrowness in experience and skill—the kind of knowledge that pertains to something limited in scope, just as the lifespan of a plant that lasts only a day. Such knowledge may have some use, but it is not comprehensive in the sense greater knowledge is, and as such will not allow application in a variety of situations. Given that the world is in a constant state of transformation (萬物之化 *wanwu zhi hua*), possessing this broader, greater knowledge is necessary in order to make one's way successfully through the world. We see here that at issue is the question of knowledge not primarily as concerning belief, but knowledge in terms of experience, navigability, and skill—concepts which are rarely associated with the language of belief, and only occasionally connected to statements or propositions (*yan* 言), the kinds of things we might expect to be the contents of beliefs. The passage from this chapter compares knowledge with statements, but does not make statements specifically part of the *content* of knowledge. The passage does not offer statements as part of an analysis of knowledge; rather, it offers them as structurally similar to knowledge in that breadth and wide applicability make the crucial difference between greater and lesser.

In early Han texts, we see an expansion of this idea in a new trend of synthesis, particularly as discussed in texts such as *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu*. In the case of *Huainanzi*, the Zhuangist conception of knowledge certainly had a major influence. Knowledge, in the *Huainanzi*, in the broadest sense, arises from understanding of the root (本 *ben*) of all human

<sup>66</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2.1.

<sup>67</sup> *Zhuangzi* 1.1.

and cosmic activity, manifest in the patterns in which the myriad things emerge. Because of the ubiquity of these patterns, the person with true or greater knowledge will understand the ways they emerge in seemingly disparate areas, teachings, schools, peoples, languages, and so on. The *Huainanzi* understands this knowledge in terms of skill across the chapters of the text, particularly the skill of the ruler, who is the primary intended reader.<sup>68</sup> The final passage of the final chapter of the *Huainanzi*, *Yaolue* (“Essential Outline”) explains this connection of knowledge to the ability to respond to the world in effective ways:

以統天下，理萬物，應變化，通殊類，非循一跡之路，守一隅之指，拘系牽連之物，而不與世推移也。故置之尋常而不塞，布之天下而不窳。

We have thereby unified the world, revealed the pattern (patterned) the myriad things, responded to the changes and transformations, and made clear differences and categories. We have not followed a path made by a solitary footprint or adhered to instructions from a single perspective or allowed ourselves to be entrapped or fettered by things so that we would not advance or shift according to the age. Thus, situate this book in the narrowest of circumstances and nothing will obstruct it; extend it to the whole world and it will leave no empty spaces.<sup>69</sup>

The idea here seems to be that knowledge (contained in the *Huainanzi*) is what allows unification of the world and ability to proceed on a particular path of action in ways that integrate the patterns inherent in the various elements of the cosmos. Knowledge here is understood as responsive ability—a navigational and practical ability, involving (in the case of *Huainanzi*) skillful response to the world as a whole in its myriad forms and differences. The truly knowledgeable person, according to the authors of this text, is not one who has the ability to respond skillfully to a limited subset of the available ways (teachings, schools, people, etc.) inherent in the world, but one who has the ability to respond skillfully to any and all of them. The way one does this, explained through the chapters of the text, is to develop understanding of the root (*ben* 本), the pattern (associated with the *tian li* 天理 of *Zhuangzi* and the *li* 理 of later neo-Confucian texts) inherent in all

<sup>68</sup>For the historical background of the *Huainanzi* and its construction by Liu An and presentation to Emperor Wu of Han (reigned 141–187 BCE), see Major, Queen, et al. *Huainanzi*, introduction, and Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An’s Claim to Moral Authority* (SUNY, 2001).

<sup>69</sup>*Huainanzi* 21.30. Major, Queen, et al. trans.

things—these things understood as the branches (*mo* 末) organically related to the root pattern. The root is also referred to as *dao* 道, the One (*yi* 一), and throughout the text.

The use of the term “*dao*” for grounding knowledge is particularly helpful here. The *Huainanzi*, like the early Daoist text *Daodejing*, understands *dao* both as the ground of being—an ontological prior out of which all things emerge—and as ultimately ineffable. *Dao* cannot ultimately be captured by language, because *dao* is conceptually prior to language, prior to concepts themselves. It is for this reason that *Zhuangzi* rejects the usefulness of *shi-fei* distinction-making.<sup>70</sup> We cannot understand and respond to the propensities of nature (天理 *tian li*) as long as we are conceptualizing *dao* and thus projecting onto it distinctions that are not inherent in *dao* itself. The *Zhuangzi* (more radical than the *Huainanzi* on this point) argues that conceptualization itself is thus fundamentally problematic, unable to mirror, reflect, or respond to the *dao* itself, and given that language is dependent on human conceptualization (this is one of the main themes of this chapter of the *Zhuangzi*), language is also unable to reflect the *dao*. If language cannot do this, then beliefs cannot serve as the basis of the *Zhuangzi*’s “greater knowledge”, where beliefs are understood as propositional attitudes. Thus, even a virtue epistemological “skill based” conception of knowledge cannot capture the sense of knowledge offered in early Chinese texts such as *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, because it ultimately understands knowledge as involving belief. One way around this may be to understand belief as nonpropositional or nonconceptual in nature, or to hold that there is a particular *variety* of belief that is so. But this move, like that of Sextus Empiricus in defending his position that the skeptic possesses no beliefs, seems to modify our general conception of belief enough that it seems better to simply hold that thinkers such as the *Zhuangists* held a view of knowledge as independent from belief, rather than that they held a view of belief radically different from propositional views.

All of this is relevant for us because it can all too easily seem as if Wang’s conception of knowledge is the same as that generally accepted in contemporary philosophy, based on propositions and belief in the “traditional” sense. There is certainly much Wang is concerned with that is propositional (or rather “statement-based”) in nature, but this is only a subset of what he considers in terms of knowledge. Knowledge in the *Lunheng* is *both* the propositional, belief-grounded knowledge of contemporary Western

<sup>70</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2.4–5.



understanding, as well as the skill-responsive knowledge of the *Zhuangzi*, *Huainanzi*, and similar texts. This is part of the reason we should understand *yan* 言 (statements, teachings, saying) in the *Lunheng*, not as identical to statements or propositions in the linguistic sense we may give this in contemporary analytic philosophy, but as inclusive of this sense, along with that of “teaching”, guidance, and response-creating actions. While *yan* is connected specifically to speech, it is not only the content of speech it can refer to, but the act of speaking and guidance as spoken.

In the *Lunheng*, Wang often uses *zhi* in the sense of ability to make distinctions between different kinds of things. When the distinctions one makes correspond to reality (*shi*), one can be said to possess knowledge. Knowledge in this sense has to do with practical discriminative ability, taking one thing as exemplary of *x* or to be given or engaged with when *x* is in question. In the chapter *Mingyi* in the *Lunheng*, Wang discusses knowledge of the allotment of heaven (*tian ming* 天命), claiming that it is something inherently difficult to know.<sup>71</sup> Knowledge of the allotment of heaven is knowing the inevitable outcomes of one’s actions and life, which is not a kind of foreknowledge in any sense that would problematize free will, but rather a knowledge of one’s general tendency—whether one’s allotment will come to fruition in disaster or fortune, for example. This can of course be translated into propositions—what one knows is *that* [person P’s activities will end in disaster], but Wang does not discuss knowledge in a way that takes it to be about such statements or propositions—any such accurate statement could be made as a *result* of knowledge, but it would not in itself *constitute* knowledge.

Two chapters in the *Lunheng* specifically address the issue of knowledge (*zhi*) as central topic: *Shizhi* (“Truth and Knowledge”) and *Zhishi* (“Knowledge of Truth”). In both chapters, knowledge is linked with truth (*shi* 實, discussed in Chap. 4)—it is likely these counterpart chapters are related, given the inversion of characters in their titles. Wang’s use of “truth” here should not mislead us into thinking that he endorses a propositional, belief-based conception of knowledge. As I show in Chap. 4, Wang’s conception of truth, like that of a number of other early Chinese thinkers, is a broader concept than that discussed by most contemporary analytic philosophers. He understands truth as not only a property of linguistic entities with assertoric content. Although linguistic truth is a variety of truth, the concept is far broader than this. If truth is applicable to

<sup>71</sup> *Mingyi*, 10.

things other than statements or propositions, and knowledge is a matter of accessing truth, then knowledge must be understood as based on something distinct from belief as propositional attitude.

In *Shizhi*, Wang opens by connecting knowledge to discriminative ability and proper naming (*ming* 名<sup>72</sup>), recalling earlier debates surrounding *zhengming* 正名 (“rectification of names”) in earlier Han and pre-Han texts. Proper application of names is a matter of accessing and understanding the “substance” (*shi* 實) of things. There is an inherent difficulty here to be worked out. The term “*shi*” is used in the sense of “truth” as well as that of “substantiality” accessible prelinguistically by someone with understanding, and to which certain names properly attach (or are given). Proper naming involves being able to distinguish the substantiality of a given thing, to make accurate distinctions between that thing and other kinds of thing. In *Shizhi*, Wang explains the relationship of the sages to such discriminative knowledge:

儒者論聖人，以為前知千歲，後知萬世，有獨見之明，獨聽之聰，事來則名，不學自知，不問自曉

According to *ru* scholars, the sage has knowledge of what happened thousands of years in the past and into the future. They alone are able to observe these things and explain them, and they alone can hear and understand. Things arise and they are able to properly name them. Without learning they still possess knowledge,<sup>73</sup> without asking questions they are still able to clarify things.<sup>74</sup>

These opening lines are meant to lay out the common view that the sages naturally have a kind of discriminative ability the rest of us lack, and that this ability is both inborn and substantially different from normal human abilities. Wang characteristically rejects this position, arguing that the knowledge of the sage is created by the same means through which knowledge is created by the rest of us. The ability to make proper distinctions and name properly (two intrinsically related activities) is based on the human ability to reason and understand, which all of us have—the sage is not fundamentally different in nature. If there is a difference between the average person and the sage, it is that the sage develops and uses the natural

<sup>72</sup> *Ming* here can be understood as both noun and verb—a name or the application or act of naming.

<sup>73</sup> A seeming allusion to *Analects* 16.9.

<sup>74</sup> *Shizhi* 1.

human discriminative abilities to a greater degree than the rest of us. As in a number of other places, Wang offers objections and arguments against a number of stories seeming to attribute supernatural or extrahuman abilities to the sages, accounting for their knowledge in this way. While for our purposes these arguments are peripheral at best, they show that what seems to be superhuman or categorically different ability turns out to be application of the same kinds of capacity all humans possess. There are no alternative ways of knowing, according to Wang. One knows anything through the same method. But what is this method?

While we have to piece together Wang's views on this across chapters, he says some things about this in *Shizhi* and *Zhishi*. We gain knowledge from known information, extending it through reflection and reason. Wang writes in *Shizhi*:

文記譎常人言耳，非天地之書，則皆緣前因古，有所據狀；如無聞見，則無所狀。凡聖人見禍福也，亦揆端推類，原始見終，從閭巷論朝堂，由昭昭察冥冥。

Literature and histories are constructed by the words and the hearing of common people, and are not books of heaven and earth, thus they all follow what happened in ancient times. They have that in which they take shape. If they are as if without hearing and seeing, then they are without that in which they take shape. That all the sages were able to discern misfortune and fortune was a matter of being able to derive the categories of things from consideration of their beginnings (*duan*). Starting with the origins they observed the completion. In the village they discussed in the morning hall, using what is clear to investigate what is obscured.<sup>75</sup>

According to this, the sage has a grasp of the development or patterns of a thing such that in knowing the beginning they can derive the end. From what is found in texts (what the sage has learned), the sage can apply things correctly because of their ability to discern the ways in which things develop. This discernment is based on only a skill in reasoning or investigation (察 *cha*), and access to what is clearly known through texts and other sources—thus, they follow the same methods anyone else must follow to gain knowledge.

Wang does seem to connect knowledge here specifically to statements/teachings (言 *yan*), which may suggest a view of knowledge much closer to those dominant in contemporary analytic philosophy than that of texts

<sup>75</sup> *Shizhi* 4.

like the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*. We should not take *yan* here, however, as representing propositional content that forms the basis of a belief which is then analyzable as knowledge. A *yan*, as we will see, can be true or false, but the scope of both *yan* and that of truth are broader than would be suggested by rendering *yan* as “statement” alone, and understanding the connection between a statement and knowledge as its containment in belief is too narrow an understanding of *yan* in the *Lunheng* (and early Chinese texts in general), and its connection to knowledge. Not only is *yan* understood as both the *act* of speaking and what is said (thus, my translation “statement” which can refer to both), but the content of *yan* is not only propositional in nature. A guiding *yan* can be one that has an effect such that it creates proper behavior or brings about the ability to make correct distinctions (connected to application of names) in one who engages the *yan*. Thus, gaining knowledge via this *yan* is not always (but is sometimes) a matter of forming a belief in which this *yan* forms the propositional content.

Of course, this naturally raises the question of whether a statement whose surface content is false can ever be the basis of knowledge, other than knowledge that [*yan* Y is false]. If such a false statement results in creating the ability to make proper distinctions or proper conduct in some other sense, then it would seem that this *yan* creates knowledge. Wang has much to say about the truth and falsity of *yan*, which I discuss in Chap. 4, and the connection of this to the issue of knowledge is difficult, as knowledge has primarily to do with distinction-making ability and naming, in which *yan* can play a role. But it is unclear that the role of *yan* is the central role, and always involves belief formation as content of knowledge. As I will show with the concept of truth, Wang’s conception of knowledge is also pluralist. Knowledge as a general concept may be understood as proper distinction-making or naming ability, and this ability depends on different features in different contexts.

Aside from the difficulties of the kind of pluralism about knowledge I suggest here, there is a question of Wang’s orientation toward the form of knowledge familiar to contemporary analytic philosophers—knowledge as a certain kind of true belief. In a recent article, Esther Klein and Colin Klein argue that Wang Chong’s held a view that we can know statements based on their assertion as testimony, absent certain *defeaters* of testimony that Wang considers, using a variety of methods throughout the *Lunheng*.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup>Klein and Klein, “Wang Chong’s Epistemology of Testimony”, *Asia Major* 29 (2), 2016.

That is, testimony can be understood as a condition on true belief making it knowledge—or as “a basic source of knowledge”.<sup>77</sup> They understand the *Lunheng* as concerned with testimony and its evaluation, taking testimony as trustworthy absent the various defeaters that may show it problematic. According to Wang, one does not require additional nontestimonial evidence to demonstrate the truth of testimonial claims. Rather, it is enough that one demonstrates that a particular piece of testimony is free from defeaters that would otherwise undermine it. According to Klein and Klein, Wang’s view is that we have a duty to search for and uncover such defeaters, as part of the process of gaining knowledge. Thus, for Wang, attaining knowledge is a matter of engaging with testimony, searching for defeaters, extracting the defeated testimony and accepting the rest.

Klein and Klein point out that Wang often takes the testimony of the classics as authoritative, arguing that a certain classic claims  $x$ , and thus  $x$  must be the case. We see numerous examples of this, not only connected to classics, but also sagely figures such as Yao and Shun or Confucius. It is not only certain *claims* or testimonies that are taken as authoritative, but also certain individuals—such that a statement (*yan*) by that particular individual can be taken as trustworthy on the basis of their sagehood. Wang is not consistent with this across chapters, however. In certain places, he makes claims like the following:

夫霧、古而有之，故《禮》曰：「霧祭、祭水旱也。」故有霧禮，故孔子不譏，而仲舒申之。夫如是，霧祭、祀禮也。

The rain sacrifice is an ancient practice—thus it is said in the *Liji*: “performing the rain sacrifice will bring water to dry land.”<sup>78</sup> This is why there is a ritual regarding the sacrifice, and why Confucius did not reject it. This is also why Dong Zhongshu endorsed it. Being such, engaging in the rain sacrifice is a proper ritual practice.<sup>79</sup>

Part of the reason he does this is that he draws a distinction between the statements or teachings of sages and those of ordinary people. We have more reason to trust the testimony of sages (and the Classics as constructed by sages) because of the higher level of knowledge, skill, and insight the sages possessed. While this higher level of the sages is not (as pointed out above) due to their possession of superhuman traits, their

<sup>77</sup> Klein and Klein,

<sup>78</sup> *Liji*, *Jifa* 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Mingyu* 15.

abilities have been developed far beyond those of normal people, and thus their testimony carries much more weight than that of ordinary people on its face. This, contrary to the position advanced by Klein and Klein, does not seem to be a non-reductionist view about the value of testimony. Some testimony (namely, sagely testimony) is better than others, and the basis of this evaluation lies in nontestimonial features of the sage's ability.

The discriminative ability of the sages give them an access to the world, to *shi* (truth) that nonsages lack, and thus their testimony can in general be given credence (while however it is still possible to find flaws, given that the sages were not perfect<sup>80</sup>). If this is what is going on, however, then it's not the *testimony* as such that plays the pivotal role in knowledge—Wang takes for granted that the testimony of the sages will be worth more than that of common people. And it is not clear that this is because the testimony of the sages is less likely to fall victim to defeaters than that of common people, as the methods used to evaluate all testimony is the same according to Wang, and the claim about the difference of the sages is one based in their discriminative abilities. These discriminative abilities seem to be the fundamental ground of knowledge for Wang, and insofar as testimony is acceptable, it is in that it reflects, aligns with, or creates this discriminative ability. This reading has the additional virtue that in addition to making sense of propositional knowledge of type contemporary analytic philosophers are interested in, it also captures the broader sense of knowledge found in Wang Chong's work as well as throughout early Chinese literature.

Klein and Klein, offering arguments against a “reductionist” reading of Wang's view on knowledge and statements, write:

Wang Chong as a nonreductionist is reasonable because nonreductionism is arguably the natural attitude toward testimony. No one is actually in a position to carry out the reductionist vetting project in any reasonable time-frame. Hence reductionism is in danger of collapsing into serious skepticism about all sources of testimony. The simplest hypothesis is that Wang Chong, like nearly everyone else, was a nonreductionist about testimony.<sup>81</sup>

There are a number of problems with this claim that I think will illuminate Wang's conception of knowledge. Wang *did*, I argue, appeal to a ground of sources of evidence—just the kind of distinction-making or

<sup>80</sup>See, for example, Wang's explanation of his criticisms of Confucius in the *Wenkong* chapter.

<sup>81</sup>Klein and Klein, 127.

discriminative capacity discussed above (along with evidence that this was related to an already a well-developed view in early China).<sup>82</sup> It is not clear to me that he failed to appeal to them, despite the inconsistencies across chapters (and sometimes within chapters) throughout the *Lunheng*. Klein and Klein offer the non-reductionist testimonial view in part to charitably explain these inconsistencies, but a clear difficulty remains on this view. That is, when one is left with contradictory testimony, this, even according to Wang himself, should serve as a defeater and as need that additional evidence is necessary to establish a claim on the issue.

There is no shortage of examples of Wang offering clearly contradictory positions across the *Lunheng*. Sometimes, for example, he will use the words of the Classics or of sages such as Confucius as a standard, arguing that a certain thing must be the case because the sages claimed that it was, while at other times challenging the authority of the Classics and sages, arguing that sages cannot have been right about everything because they were subject to human failings.<sup>83</sup> Michael Nylan writes that Wang's inconsistent positions across chapters makes it difficult for the reader to discern his actual views on the issues he discusses.<sup>84</sup> Nylan attributes this inconsistency to Wang's desire to win critical victories over particular teachings and works, and lack of concern for the consistency of an overarching system.<sup>85</sup> Neither Nylan's nor Klein and Klein's explanations for Wang's inconsistency across the *Lunheng* solves a number of difficulties, however. In Nylan's case—if Wang's main concern was demonstration of his own talent through skillful criticism of the positions of others, why would he then leave his own positions across the *Lunheng* inconsistent and thus subject to similar criticisms as the ones he himself leveled against other texts?

<sup>82</sup> Knowledge as tied to natural patterns (*tian li* 天理). There are a number of interpretations of this concept in pre-Han and Han thought, and the fundamental disagreement between scholars comes down to whether we should understand such patterns in a realist or anti-realist way. Paul Goldin, Kurtis Hagen, and myself (among others) have discussed this issue.

<sup>83</sup> The beginning of *Wenkong* is an example of the latter.

<sup>84</sup> Nylan, "Han Classicists Writing In Dialogue About Their Own Tradition", 146–147.

<sup>85</sup> Primarily because Nylan reads Wang as concerned mainly "with his own current status and future fame". Nylan, 147. This is certainly true, but this preoccupation in itself does not show that Wang was not engaged in careful and systematic construction of a philosophical method or coherent positions on certain important philosophical issues. We can draw a distinction between a thinker's motivations for their work and the content of their work.

There are a couple of possibilities here to make sense of the contradictions between chapters in the *Lunheng*. I think *both* of these are correct, and while I offer outlines of both responses here, I develop the methodological response more fully in below. First, it is much more likely that the *Lunheng* is a “complete works” collection than that it is a single work. Timoteus Pokora and Michael Loewe both maintain that the *Lunheng* was likely an initially distinct work, containing only a proper subset of the chapters of the current *Lunheng* (chapters 16–30), and that the text was later expanded to include Wang Chong’s other extant uncategorized writings,<sup>86</sup> including parts of his *Yangxing shu*, *Jisu jieyi*, and *Zhengwu*, all of which were written during different periods of his life, according to both the *Autobiography* chapter and the *Houhanshu* chapter on Wang. We should expect, given the compilatory nature of the text, that Wang’s position on certain issues would have changed over the years—especially for an individual as unbound by school and tradition as Wang Chong. This certainly accounts for *some* of the contradictory positions found in the text. Secondly, there is reason to see much of what Wang is doing in various parts of the *Lunheng* as primarily application of his method of questioning and challenging. If we take Wang’s primary concern as methodological rather than substantive, this can mitigate the contradictions as well. Wang, though he does develop his own positive views (discussed throughout this book!) was often primarily interested in developing and demonstrating the operation of his philosophical method.

Of course, this raises new questions concerning the contradictions. If Wang’s philosophical method led to contradictory positions, why wouldn’t (or shouldn’t) Wang have thought of this as demonstrating a fundamental flaw with that method, given his insistence on consistency as a key part of the operation of this method? This is far from clear. It seems that regardless of which stance on Wang’s method for generating knowledge we adopt, we are left with difficulties concerning the contradictions between chapters of the *Lunheng*. What this does show, however, is that none of these readings can be privileged on the basis of their purported solution to the problem of cross-chapter contradictions in the *Lunheng*. We must ultimately rely on different evidence. Above, I offered evidence that Wang was primarily concerned with development and application of his method in a number of chapters of the *Lunheng*, while in other chapters he was

<sup>86</sup> Pokora, “Works of Wang Ch’ung”, *Archiv orientální* 36, 1968; Pokora and Loewe, “Lun heng”, *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*.



more focused on development of a substantive position on particular topics. We can, I argue, distinguish between the chapters focused on these different concerns by looking to Wang's own claims and the style and content of the specific chapters. In this way, we can categorize the chapters of the *Lunheng* into "critical chapters" (focused on construction and demonstration of his philosophical method) and "substantive chapters" (focused on developing views on particular topics).

The epistemology grounding sources of evidence for Wang Chong is well established in the early Chinese philosophical canon. Many early texts (Han and pre-Han) discuss drawing distinctions in terms of *bian* 辨, *shi-fei* 是非, and other categories. While they are not all explicit about the grounds for making proper distinctions, the concept of *tian li* 天理 or simply *li* 理 is often appealed to as this ground. This response is further developed in Han texts and into the later Confucian work engaging with Buddhism, culminating in the metaphysics of Song-Ming Neo-Confucians. While the connection between proper distinction-making (including proper naming) and the natural propensities or patterns (*tian li*) is not formalized consistently across thinkers, neither is it the case that the general conception of states-of-affairs (or something like them) and the role of ideas and belief in knowledge construction is formalized consistently across texts and thinkers in the Modern European tradition. Descartes, Kant, Locke, and others have very different conceptions of ideas, representations, and their epistemological grounding in the world. Indeed, the groundedness of particular ways of making distinctions is brought into doubt by the skepticism of the *Zhuangzi*. This is why we find the distinctive skeptical arguments of the *Zhuangzi* aimed at particular kinds of valuation, distinction, and action. How do we know that distinction *x* is the proper distinction to make, in terms of what leads to effective action, in terms of the patterns inherent in the world? A crucial passage from Chapter Two of the *Zhuangzi* reads:

故知止其所不知，至矣。孰知不言之辯，不道之道？若有能知，此之謂天府。

"Therefore knowledge that stops at that which it does not know is complete. Who knows the argument without words, the *dao* without *dao*? Like this one has the ability to know—this is what is called the storehouse of Heaven."<sup>87</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2.10.

The skepticism suggested in much of the *Zhuangzi*, that is, applies to the idea that our distinctions, conceptualization, and valuation can be grounded in the world independently of perspective. Like the Pyrrhonian skeptics, Zhuangists do not challenge the value of distinctions and valuations themselves, which all have a place within certain contexts and perspectives. What they challenge is the idea that these distinctions and valuations can transcend perspective and be understood as normative across perspectives, or should be imposed on the basis of purportedly capturing facts about the patterns of *tian*. As the Zhuangists constantly point out, the propensities of things—or the “myriad things” (*wanwu* 萬物) manifesting these patterns—are constantly changing,<sup>88</sup> and thus no particular distinction or valuation can invariably reflect or be grounded in the natural patterns. Any, that is, except for the *changing* or perspective-shifting distinction or valuation ability. And it may be in this in which the Zhuangist *da zhi* 大知 (“greater knowledge”) consists.<sup>89</sup>

Wang Chong certainly does see testimony as one legitimate source of knowledge (when tested against other evidence, including consistency with other more reliable testimony and other knowledge), but it is unclear that he sees testimony as basic in the way Klein and Klein argue. One additional feature of the Kleins’ view is that Wang Chong advocated a “piecemeal” nonreductionism about testimony.<sup>90</sup> Wang, that is, saw defeaters as undermining the acceptability of one part of a testimony, rather than the entirety of it. Thus, if we find faulty testimony within the account of a particular scholar, we should extract the faulty testimony but accept the rest of it, rather than dismissing the account altogether. Klein and Klein are right that there are certain texts that Wang treats this way. In his discussion of the teachings (*yan* 言) of Confucius, Wang suggests that we should extract the faulty statements and accept the rest, writing:

聖人之言，不能盡解；說道陳義，不能輒形。不能輒形，宜問以發之；不能盡解，宜難以極之。

<sup>88</sup> *Zhuangzi* 1.2 contains the formulation *wanwu zhi hua* 萬物之化 (“transformation of the myriad things”).

<sup>89</sup> I do not here get into the issue of whether this is the right way to understand the “lesser knowledge”/“greater knowledge” distinction in the *Zhuangzi* as this takes us too far afield, but it is one plausible way of understanding the distinction. For more on the distinction, see Sturgeon, “*Zhuangzi*, Perspectives, and Greater Knowledge”.

<sup>90</sup> Klein and Klein, 127–128.

The statements of the sages cannot be completely explained, and where their way of speaking exhibits right principles, the shape cannot be made out. When the shape cannot be made out, proper questioning can draw it out. When the statements cannot be completely explained, proper challenging can clarify things.<sup>91</sup>

The assumption here is that the statements of the sages are clearly trustworthy, but that they need to be either clarified or extracted where faulty. Wang explains in the chapter that Confucius, though a sage, cannot have been correct all the time. Even sages who apply all their talents in making statements cannot be always right (presumably because they still have human failings), and certainly it cannot be the case that a sage's unconsidered or offhand comments are all correct.<sup>92</sup> This much fits the claim by Klein and Klein concerning the piecemeal nature of Wang's evaluation, and indeed they appeal to claims in the *Wenkong* chapter to make the case. But the *Wenkong* chapter is the best case, and clearly a different case than other texts and pieces of testimony Wang evaluates. Other teachings or statements (*yan*) by less-than-sagely persons are evaluated much differently than Wang evaluates Confucius' statements or those of the Classics. Those whom Wang is less inclined to accept as sages or worthies in general are not held to the same standard, and the faultiness of some of their claims are often taken as grounds for rejection of their teachings in general.

A good example of this is Wang's discussion of Han Feizi at the beginning of *Feihan*. Wang considers Han Feizi's attacks on scholars as useless in the state, and makes the case that Han Feizi himself is a scholar, and thus his words and his actions do not match. On the basis of this, Wang claims, we should reject Han Feizi's teachings. He writes:

加冠於首而立於朝，受無益之服，增無益之仕，言與服相違，行與術相反，吾是以非其言而不用其法也。

He wears a cap on his head and attends the court, and he dresses in a useless manner, adding to the number of [supposedly] useless scholars. His statements and his clothing are incompatible, his practice and his standards oppose one another. [For this reason] I reject his statements and do not use his standards.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup> *Wenkong* 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Wenkong* 1: 夫賢聖下筆造文，用意詳審，尚未可謂盡得實，況倉卒吐言，安能皆是？

<sup>93</sup> *Feihan* 1.

There is some question here as to the scope of this rejection of Han Feizi's statements (*yan*). Does Wang mean that he rejects this *specific* claim of Han Feizi's that scholars are of no use and a drain to the state? This does not seem a plausible reading of the passage, as in addition to rejecting his *yan*,<sup>94</sup> Wang does "not use his method" (不用其法 *bu yong qi fa*). Not only is the previous claim about incompatibility between practice and methods a general one, but the reference to his method (法 *fa*) here refers to Han Feizi's general use and commitment to the general and summative concept of standard (*fa*). Wang explains in the opening sentence of the chapter that "the method of Han Feizi is to clarify standards (*fa*) and encourage achievement" (韓子之術, 明法尚功 *Hanzi zhi shu, ming fa shang gong*). This is clearly a reference to Han Feizi's commitment to *fa* as an organizing principle in his system, and thus Wang's rejection of Han Feizi's *fa* in this context is a rejection of his system as a whole. Wang is far less charitable to Han Feizi than he is to Confucius or the author of the classics. The reason for this, however, is that he does not see Han Feizi as a sage whose testimony has an implicit and assumed authority on that basis. The fact of deep contradictions on basic points of Han Feizi's argument shows, according to Wang, that his system in general should not be trusted or taken seriously, rather that particular pieces of faulty testimony should be extracted from it. Wang adopts a different stance toward sages and nonsages.

Klein and Klein discuss some of Wang's arguments concerning claims of ordinary people, such as his consideration of (and argument against) the existence of ghosts.<sup>95</sup>

But we find other claims of rejection of whole sources on the basis of the unreliability of their testimony as well (in absence of independent reasons to think that the person(s) in question are sagelike). In addition, in quite a few places Wang takes the unreliability of one piece of testimony from a particular source to cast doubt on other pieces of testimony from that same source, insofar as the failures in testimony reveal relevant features of the person's characteristics, such as inattention, general confusion, or desire for fame and making flashy statements. For example, in *Shizhi*, Wang writes:

<sup>94</sup>I translate *yan* here as the plural "statements" because of my view argued for here that the rest of the passage demonstrates that Wang intends the scope of this *yan* to be the statements or teachings of Han Feizi in general.

<sup>95</sup>Klein and Klein, 129–130.

既不至魯，識記何見而云始皇至魯？至魯未可知，其言孔子曰「不知何一男子」之言，亦未可用。「不知何一男子」之言不可用，則言「董仲舒、亂我書」，亦復不可信也。

Since he did not go to Lu, then why did the Record of Prophecies say that Shihuang went to Lu? They could not know that he went to Lu, and so their claim that Confucius said “I do not know what kind of a man he is” is also unreliable. If this claim is unreliable, then their claim that Dong Zhongshu disordering their writings is also untrustworthy.<sup>96</sup>

Even though the pieces of testimony discussed here are not explicitly linked, in terms of a defeater for one of them entailing (or constituting) defeat for the other, Wang nonetheless rejects both, on grounds of the untrustworthiness of more general aspects of testimony.<sup>97</sup>

Despite my disagreement with key elements of their view of Wang’s epistemological and methodological views, Klein and Klein are right that Wang is “demanding” in his view on investigating testimony, holding that we have a duty to critically examine testimony. Indeed, I think this is built into Wang’s method of questioning and challenging (*nanwen* 問難) as discussed in *Wenkong*. He offers a statement in defense of his method in this chapter, directed in particular at Confucius, but offering a general explanation of why he thinks the method should be applied.<sup>98</sup> If we do not rigorously apply the dual method of questioning and challenging statements (including but not limited to testimony), we will inevitably accept untruths along with whatever truths (if any) we may gain from these statements. If it is inevitable that even sages such as Confucius on occasion got things wrong (for a variety of reasons), then certainly there must be even more that is empty and false in the statements of those who are not sages.

<sup>96</sup> *Shizhi* 4.

<sup>97</sup> There are other issues about just what we should take testimonial denial to be, and how deep it goes, either in Wang’s case or any other. Klein and Klein write: “By and large, Wang Chong does not reject first-person sensory reports: he appears happy to accept that people have seen something ghostly, or what look like dragons riding the clouds, or Yao’s polychromatic eyebrows. He instead attacks the downstream interpretations: testimony about how these things should be understood rather than that they were witnessed. If he were a reductionist, this would be a half-hearted, sloppy approach to evidence. If he were a global non-reductionist, he would be picking at nits rather than engaging in the far more promising task of attacking whole sources.”

<sup>98</sup> *Wenkong* 1–2. See also Nicolas Zufferey, “Pourquoi Wang Chong critique-t-il Confucius?” *Études Chinoises* 14 (1).

## OPENING OF 問孔 WEN KONG QUESTIONING CONFUCIUS

*Methodological Preamble*

- [1] The *ru* scholars of today's generation cherish and trust in their teachers, and believe the (teachings) of the ancients. They believe the teachings/words of the worthies and sages to be completely free of error. They can expound on the spirit of these words and explain how to put them into practice, but they do not know how to challenge and question them. When the worthies and sages wrote their works, they used their thoughts to make a detailed investigation of things. Still, we cannot say that they completely attained the truth (about everything). If this is so, how can their everyday and idle statements be completely true (*shi* 是)? These statements cannot all be true (是), but the people of today don't know how to challenge them. Or if some (of these statements) are true, and the ideas imparted are unclear and hard to make out, the people of today do not know how to question them. Now, the statements/teachings of the worthies and sages above and below mutually contradict one another. Their writings before and after mutually disagree with one another. The scholars of today (however) do not understand this.
- [2] In discussions people always say: "The talents of the seventy followers of Confucius were greater than those of today's *ru* scholars." This claim is ridiculous. They had Confucius as a teacher, a sage who taught/propagated the proper way (*dao*), and so necessarily had unusual talents. Thus, they say they were unique in talent. The talents of the ancients were the same as the talents of the people of today. The kind of people we today call brave people and heroes, the ancients thought of as sages and superhuman. This is why they say that the 70 followers were rare in the history of the world. If the people of today were to have Confucius as a teacher, then today's generation of scholars would all be like Yan Hui and Min Ziqian.<sup>99</sup> And if Confucius had not been the teacher of the 70 followers, then they would be no different than the *ru* scholars of today. How do we know this is so? Because even though they studied with Confucius, they were unable to adequately question

<sup>99</sup>Widely considered Confucius's two greatest students, including by Confucius himself.

him. The statements of sages cannot always be completely explained, and even when the words are righteous, the shape cannot always be made out. When the shape cannot be made out, it is fitting to ask questions to draw it out. If they cannot be completely explained, it is fitting to challenge in order to settle things. The discourse of Gao Yao before Emperor Shun was unclear, vague, and not settled. Yu questioned and challenged Gao Yao, the unclear statements became deep, and the vague outline became more detailed. When statements are subjected to questioning and challenging, this deepens the discourse and clarifies meanings.

- [3] When Confucius laughed at Ziyou strumming his zither and singing, Ziyou responded by repeating a statement Confucius had made in the past. If we now look to the *Analects*, we find that many of Confucius' statements resemble his ridicule of Ziyou's strumming and singing, but few of his followers' statements resemble Ziyou's challenge. Thus, Confucius' statements were passed on unexplained. If we proceed like the 70 followers of Confucius and are unable to challenge, then this generation of *ru* scholars will be unable to discern the truth about right and wrong (*shi dao shi-fei*).
- [4] Methods of learning and questioning are not created by lack of talent, but in challenging the teacher one obtains the core of the proper way and the truth concerning righteousness, and gain evidence to determine the difference between right and wrong. The method of questioning and challenging need not be directed at the statements of sages only when they are living. The people of today who engage in discussions do not need the teaching of a sage to instruct them before they dare speak. If they have a question on something that is not clearly explained, and from a distant time challenge the statements of Confucius, how is this damaging to righteousness? If one sincerely wants to propagate the knowledge of the sages, and thus attacks Confucius' words, how does this cut against proper principle (*li*)? If we question Confucius' statements and challenge his writings that are not clearly explained, those of many generation with broad talent and great knowledge will be able to answer questions and explain challenged statements. They will certainly take as worthy this generation's challenging and questioning of statements to determine whether they are right or wrong.

*Examples of Questioning Confucius*

- [5] [*Analects* 2.5] “Meng Yizi asked about filiality. The master replied: ‘do not disobey’. Later when riding with Fan Chi in a chariot, the master said to him: ‘Meng Yizi asked me about filiality, and I told him ‘do not disobey your parents’. Fan Chi asked: ‘what do you mean by that?’ The master replied: ‘when they are alive, serve them in accordance with ritual. When they have died, bury them in accordance with ritual.’”
- [6] [response] My question is this: When Confucius said “do not disobey”, he meant that one should not disobey ritual norms. But a filial child should also follow the ideas and the will of their parents and should not disregard the desires of their parents. Confucius said, “Do not disobey”; he didn’t say, “Do not disobey ritual”. Hearing Confucius’ actual words, could Meng Yizi alone not suspect that Confucius was not saying that one should not disobey their parents’ will? When Fan Chi asked what he meant, Confucius said, “When they are alive, serve them in accordance with ritual, and when they have died, bury them in accordance with ritual”. Had Fan Chi not asked what Confucius meant by “do not disobey”, then his meaning would not have been known. The talents of Meng Yizi did not reach those of Fan Chi; thus, in the *Analects* we see no account of his statements or actions. If Confucius’ statement was unclear to Fan Chi, then how could it have been clear to Meng Yizi?
- [7] [*Analects* 2.6] “Meng Wubo asked about filiality. The master replied: ‘do not give your parents anything to worry about other than the possibility of your becoming ill.’”
- [response] Meng Wubo often caused his parents worry; thus, Confucius said, “Do not give them anything to worry about other than the possibility of your becoming ill”. Meng Wubo caused his parents worry, whereas Yizi disobeyed ritual norms. Focusing on his shortcomings, Confucius answered Wubo, “Do not give your parents anything to worry about other than the possibility of your becoming ill”; thus, he should have responded to Meng Yizi “only in flood or conflagration should you disobey ritual”. The Duke of Zhou said that those of small talent need explanation, whereas



those of great talent need only intimation. Ziyou was a person of great talent, but Confucius gave him an explanation, while Meng Yizi was a person of small talent, and Confucius gave him only an intimation. This violates the injunction (志) of the Duke of Zhou. Focusing on Meng Yizi's shortcomings violated the proper principles (*li* 理) of the way (*dao*), but Confucius' students did not challenge him—why was this?

- [8] If Confucius did not dare speak further because of Meng Yizi's power and lofty position, then in his reply to Meng Wubo he should also have said merely “do not cause worry”, and that's all. Both were sons of the Meng family, and had roughly equal power and loftiness of position. So it is unclear why Confucius gave a deeper explanation to Meng Wubo and only an intimation to Meng Yizi. If Confucius had given a more complete explanation to Meng Yizi and said “do not disobey *ritual*”, what would have been the harm in that? In all of the state of Lu, no family was more powerful than the Ji family, yet Confucius criticized their use of eight rows of dancers in the courtyard and criticized their traveling to Mount Tai to perform rituals.<sup>100</sup> Confucius was not afraid of the Ji family trying to augment its land and did not hide his meaning based on its harm to them, but somehow feared the punishment that might come from giving Meng Yizi a more complete answer. How could this be? Also, more than one person asked him about filiality. In each case, he had a chariot driver around. In replying to Meng Yizi, Confucius didn't feel comfortable revealing his thoughts, and so he told Fan Chi.

<sup>100</sup> Discussed in *Analects* 3.6. The ritual on Mount Tai was to be performed by the ruler, and the Ji family thus usurped this role.



## Truth: Properties and Pluralism

沉論衡細說微論，解釋世俗之疑，辯照是非之理，使後進曉見然否之分。The *Lunheng* uses precise language and detailed discussion, to reveal and explain the doubts of this generation of common people, to bring to light through debate right and wrong principles (是非之理 *shi fei zhi li*), and to help those who come later clearly see the difference between what is the case and what is not the case.<sup>1</sup>

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF *SHI* 實 AS A CENTRAL CONCEPT OF TRUTH

The issue of a concept of truth in early Chinese thought is contentious and fraught with terminological, linguistic, and historical difficulties. A number of scholars have argued that there is no concept of truth in early Chinese thought, or that if there is such a concept, it is a relatively minor concern in early Chinese thought.<sup>2</sup> Chad Hansen famously argued that early Chinese thinkers as a whole did not theorize about truth in *de dicto* fashion, even though they had a *de re* conception of “correctness” or “being the case”.<sup>3</sup> The idea seems to be that having a concept of truth is

<sup>1</sup> *Duizuo* 6.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the best-known such arguments are in Chad Hansen, “Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and ‘Truth’” *Journal of Asian Studies* 44 (3) Roger Ames and David Hall, *Thinking From the Han*.

<sup>3</sup> Hansen, “Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and ‘Truth’”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 44 (3), 1985.

to have a theoretical or *de dicto* understanding of the concept, and absent a particular (worked out) theory of truth or a thickly described concept, one does not have a concept of truth. The focus in Hansen's work is pre-Qin thought, specifically the Mohists and the Zhuangists. This focus leads him, in my opinion, to misread a critical aspect of the tradition. Among early Chinese philosophers, Mohists and Daoists in general are the least concerned with what we might call correspondence truth (although I also disagree with Hansen that either of them truly lacks a robust or linguistic truth concept either), and later Warring States and particularly Han dynasty philosophers are most concerned with the concept of truth as a central aspect of their thought.<sup>4</sup> For no one is this more the case other than Wang Chong, who (as I show below) develops a theory of truth, taking the concept of *shi* 實 as central. Below, I describe how this concept develops through the tradition and how Wang elevates it to the central truth concept (from a familiar concept cluster) and the basis for his pluralist theory of truth.

Concerning Hansen's view of early Chinese thinkers as lacking theoretical discussion of truth—the idea consideration of theoretical conception is not well worked out here. What does it mean to have a theoretical account of truth? If it is merely to have a sense (however limited) of how a truth concept (or “getting things right”) plays a role in a larger philosophical theory (whether metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, etc.), then it seems impossible for any thinker might *not* have a theory of truth. On the other hand, if we require a more robust theoretical account such that truth has to play some particular kind of formative or foundational metaphysical role, then from the outset we privilege certain kinds of concepts as truth concepts in a completely arbitrary way. It's unclear why we ought to do this unless we are privileging certain kinds of truth theory, perhaps those popular in ancient Greece or in some contemporary discussions, as actually being truth theories, and rejecting those that do not look sufficiently like these. Notice that insisting on this definition of what makes something a theory of truth, contemporary theories such as deflationist theories do not count as theories of truth. Perhaps they are about *something*, but they cannot be theories of *truth*. But isn't this just begging the question against the deflationist?

One looming question here is: Why take a very particular thick description of a concept found in a limited number of texts as determinative of

<sup>4</sup>See my *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy*, Chapter One.

truth? When we talk about truth in any tradition, we take ourselves to be talking about something general, universal, abstract, and basic. Any concept so narrowly defined as to pick out only certain theoretical understandings certainly cannot be the basic concept of truth—even if it is a proper *account* of truth. Even if a certain theoretical account of truth is the right one (and we certainly can't claim to know this without demonstration), it does not follow that other conceptions are *not concepts of truth*. They are just flawed or incorrect conceptions of truth. It can't be the case that only whoever is right about truth has a concept or a theory of truth. Having a concept is not the same thing as being right about a concept. The concept of truth itself must be something sufficiently general, abstract, and basic as to capture our intuitions about truth and the features of it we generally take to be our reasons for pursuing it.<sup>5</sup> Borrowing from the “platitude” approach of Crispin Wright and others,<sup>6</sup> it seems unproblematic to say that a truth property, even if not defined by certain basic statements capturing a general theory of truth, must at least meet them. Such platitudes include “if  $x$  is true  $x$  must correspond with reality, or ‘the way things are’”, “ $x$  is always true if  $x$  is ever true”, and so forth. These platitudes can be seen as supplying a description of the kind of thing we are theorizing *about* when we talk about truth. Theories of truth (robust ones, at least) fill out this basically described concept, giving us explanations of how it works and how things (whether linguistic entities or other kinds) come to have this property.

Thus, the concept of truth itself, however understood in a robust or thick sense, has a minimal definition that perhaps corresponds to the “platitudes” of Wright and others. What a full list of platitudes would look like we may not yet know, and investigation of early Chinese views on truth may give us ideas about others to add to the list or remove from the list—but we at least ought to be committed primarily to the notion that truth is an operative concept within every philosophical tradition. This much is necessary if truth is indeed basic, general, and abstract. Investigating global philosophical traditions, including early Chinese philosophy, can help us fill in this list of platitudes describing a thin (or minimal) concept of truth.

<sup>5</sup> Crispin Wright famously offered a definition of the property of truth based on these features, formed into what he called “platitudes” about truth. See his *Truth and Objectivity*.

<sup>6</sup> *Truth and Objectivity*.

The question of whether early Chinese thinkers dealt with a concept of truth has mainly focused on pre-Qin thinkers such as those represented in the *Mozi* and *Zhuangzi* or the *mingjia* 名家 (School of Names) thinkers. The debate is contentious and filled with methodological, terminological, and conceptual dangers and traps, especially in dealing with the concept in these relatively early periods. Following the general neglect of the Han period by philosophers, however, hardly anyone has looked very much at Han texts in connection with this debate surrounding truth. This is unfortunate, because it is in the Han that issues of truth and method come to occupy central stage in a way they never did in pre-Han thought. This is not to say that there was no concept of truth or theories of truth in China before the Han (I think there were),<sup>7</sup> but these theories of truth were not formulated as well, carefully, and explicitly as those of the Han period, nor were they as central to the concerns of the pre-Han thinkers as they were those of the Han. It is not a mischaracterization to call the Han period the period of concern with truth and method in Chinese thought. Thus, to neglect the Han period in our debates concerning whether early Chinese thinkers had a concept of truth is to neglect our most important source. It would be akin to ignoring the work of the Hellenistic philosophers in an attempt to determine the role of psychic relief or evenness of mind (*ataraxia*) in early Western philosophy.

Of course, even absent this I think it has got to be clear and unproblematic that there was a *concept* of truth in early Chinese thought even prior to the Han, without which it is unclear that any philosophy of any kind could be done. Insofar as the pre-Han philosophers were concerned with “reality” or “the way things are”, they were concerned with truth, if truth is sufficiently general, which it needs to be in order to be the concept of *truth* rather than some other concept (as I argued above). Perhaps they did not explicitly theorize about truth in the way that more systematic philosophers would prefer, but this does not show that they did not have a concept of truth that they were reflective about on some level, just as most of us, philosophers and nonphilosophers, are. Everyone has a concept of truth and some *de dicto* understanding of the concept, whether it is a robust understanding or not. Ask anyone what it means for something to be true, and they will likely have something to say—it will not be a question causing much head-scratching or a realization that they’ve never thought about it before. Likely, most of us will answer the question along

<sup>7</sup> See chapters 2–5 of *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy*.

the lines of “something is true when what it says is actually the case”. While we may not make much use of this otherwise, this is certainly a theory of the concept of truth, if it is anything at all. So, we should take it as completely unproblematic that *any* thinker is operating with a *de re* conception of truth (it seems impossible not to), and almost as unproblematic that any thinker has some *de dicto* conception of truth, even if they do not concentrate on this in their texts. We can read a text in theoretical physics, for example, without a single mention of truth in this sense, but this does not show that the physicist who wrote it has no *de dicto* conception of truth—indeed, it would be exceedingly strange for the physicist not to have such a conception. The question, it seems to me, cannot be whether the early Chinese philosophers *had* a concept of truth (most certainly they did—it’s almost absurd to hold that they didn’t), but rather the questions of *how concerned* they were with truth, and of what *aspects* of truth they were most concerned with. And here, I concede to some extent to the “anti-truth” scholars. I agree that many of the pre-Han thinkers were not very concerned with offering theories of linguistic truth at all. Some were more than others, but on the whole linguistic truth was not a major theoretical concern of pre-Han philosophers. They did develop theories of linguistic truth, but these were often secondary to their primary concerns.

But there is a catch. The relative lack of interest of early Chinese thinkers with linguistic truth does not entail a lack of interest in *truth*. Some (such as Hansen) have rejected the view that truth was a central concern of early Chinese thinkers because of certain features of early Chinese views of language. However, this misses a critical point—a theory of truth need not be a theory of *language* alone. While contemporary philosophers tend to focus on truth as a purely linguistic concept, truth is a broader concept that links language, entities, and activity. These nonlinguistic senses of truth are not independent concepts, but linked to linguistic truth in a fundamental way. Ultimately, the property that makes true the true person, the true son, the true method, and the true statement is the same property. This understanding of truth, which is more common in early Chinese texts than in contemporary analytic philosophy, lends itself to the adoption of pluralist theories of truth. And Wang Chong (and a number of his intellectual predecessors) developed such pluralist theories of truth.

Even if we focus solely on linguistic truth, we see that it was one of the central concerns of Han philosophers, including (perhaps *especially*) Wang Chong. For Wang Chong, the concept of *shi* 實 played the pivotal truth

role. In order to understand how this concept came to be understood as a central concept in what I call the “truth cluster” of concepts in early Chinese thought,<sup>8</sup> it is necessary to give a brief overview of earlier senses of *shi* and earlier theories of truth.

The concept of *shi* has a complex history in early Chinese thought. According to the *Shuowen Jiezi*, it has the sense of the core of a plant, a fruit. This led to its early use in a sense close to our “substance”—the substantial or valuable part of a given thing. This could be a property of anything—persons, governments, or teachings. It is not limited to an appraisal of language. In the Western tradition, truth tends to be seen as a linguistic property, and a certain kind of linguistic property, belonging to a narrow subset of linguistic entities. This is certainly how it is seen in most contemporary Western philosophy, but this conception of truth is nothing new to Western thought. It reaches back all the way to the beginnings. The early modern French philosopher Rene Descartes formulated this probably the most closely to the popular contemporary conception (albeit the contemporary versions usually do without Descartes’ representationalism). According to Descartes, truth is a property of certain (linguistically accessible) ideas. It is only *judgments*, however, of all of the classes of ideas we can have, that can take a truth value. Perceptions, as such, cannot take a truth value, nor can volitions—these being the two other classes of ideas.<sup>9</sup> The reason that these two other kinds of ideas cannot have truth value is that something is only true or false insofar as it makes a statement about matters of fact. A perception is a representation, perhaps of anything. The perception itself does not include an assertion, however, that this perception is based on matter of fact, rather than simply being a figment of one’s imagination, a hallucination, and so on. Descartes sees truth as narrowly applicable to statements asserting claims about the way the world is independently of our perception of the world. Thus, truth, according to Descartes, is epistemological and linguistic in basis—it has to do with the accuracy of our assessments of our perceptions, insofar as they mirror the mind (and idea)-independent world.

<sup>8</sup> As in Western thought, there are multiple concepts and terms associated with truth and which different thinkers identify with the truth concept. In contemporary analytic philosophy, for example, we have the concepts of *warranted assertability*, *coherence*, and others, all of which are “truth-like” (or “truthy” if you will), and which some take to be definitive of the concept of truth. Early Chinese thought has its own cluster of concepts associated with the concept of truth, and *shi* is a relatively late addition, but the seeds of its development can be seen in early texts.

<sup>9</sup> *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Third Meditation.

Such a conception of truth is probably the most influential on contemporary conception of truth, but even this has its origins earlier in Western thought, in the Ancient Greeks. In the work of Plato, the concept of truth is broader than the linguistic/epistemological concept of Descartes, but this is one *aspect* of the more robust concept of truth as a whole. We might see the history of Western philosophy as focusing ever closer in on this single aspect of the original Platonic conception of truth, until in contemporary thought philosophers only really ever deal with the issue of truth insofar as it concerns a property of assertoric linguistic entities.

Wang Chong's concept of *shi* is a truth concept, understood pluralistically in order to make sense of truth as linguistic as well as behavioral and personal. His particular theory of truth, I hope my discussion here demonstrates, also has important implications for contemporary debates surrounding truth.

There is no reason that engaging in such a project with early Chinese thinkers like Wang Chong should be considered illegitimate. Although Wang certainly did not consider himself a philosopher and wrote on many topics that fall outside of our understanding of philosophy (which still are of use though perhaps limited for philosophical purposes), he can be considered through the lenses of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> And those concepts philosophers deal with, such as truth and knowledge, are ones Wang Chong, if he can be said to be a philosopher in any sense or engage in philosophical thought, will deal with. In some sense we are in a bind here—we ought to define philosophy on the basis of dealing with basic and key concepts such as truth and knowledge, such that one who does not deal with such concepts cannot be considered as doing philosophy. But at the same time, we have reason to want to leave our conception of truth and knowledge broad enough that a thinker with very different views of it than the majority of philosophers will not be left out of the category of “philosophy” for that reason. We want to admit that one can have a concept of truth even if it is one radically different than usual. In order to do this, we have to construe a thin concept of truth<sup>11</sup> as minimalistically as possible in order to capture very different thick or robust accounts of truth in different traditions and even among thinkers within one tradition.

<sup>10</sup> It is also important to note [as mentioned above] that early Chinese thinkers also did not think of what they did in terms of “ideology”, “history”, “economics”, or any of the other disciplinary distinctions sinologists use. The philosophical project I propose is not uniquely ahistorical, out of context, or anachronistic.

<sup>11</sup> On the distinction between “thin” and “thick” concepts, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 140–142. This distinction is borrowed for use in comparative philosophy by Aaron Stalnaker, Bryan Van Norden, and others.



Even though “truth” is an acceptable rendering of *shi*, we should see its scope as larger than that of the concept of truth discussed in much contemporary philosophical literature. Both nonassertoric utterances and nonlinguistic entities can be *shi* or *xu* (false), for example. Take the sentence, spoken by someone: “Hello, how are you doing?” This is an example of something we would generally take to lack truth value, but for Wang it can be either *shi* or *xu*, and is so based on the authenticity (or truth) of the speaker. This aspect of truth as property of agent is developed theoretically in texts such as the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, but is implicitly adopted more widely than this. These words can be uttered even while the speaker lacks genuine concern proper to the normal utterance of these words. Thus, *shi* and *xu* link to the normative expectations of ritual as well. A greeting such as the above, according to ritual standards, is properly given only when the words and gestures are followed in the spirit appropriate to them. Even early Confucian texts such as the *Analects* suggest this in their analysis of virtuous activity. In *Analects* 2.7, Confucius says that filiality is only exemplified when one both performs the acts one expects from a filial child *and* has the proper attitude or mental state (in this case, care or concern):

子游問孝。子曰：「今之孝者，是謂能養。至於犬馬，皆能有養；不敬，何以別乎？」

Ziyou asked about filiality. The master said: “these days people think that filiality is a matter of being able to take care of your parents (when they get older). But even dogs and horses can do this much. Without reverence (*jing*), what is the difference?”

Proper action, including proper speech, is in part a matter of having the right attitudes and motivations. Confucians, like other early Chinese philosophers, use proper statements (*yan* 言) in terms of proper activity and intention, such that no merely descriptive *yan* can be true on the basis of its independently matching the way the world is. All statements rely on human understanding, and thus states of the agent are relevant in determining the truth of these statements. One may think that a certain kind of pragmatist theory of truth is necessary to maintain such a position, but this is not the case. On a number of theories of truth in early China, correspondence truth is understood in terms of the behavior of the agent corresponding to or otherwise following (*shun* 順) the natural patterns (*tian li* 天理) inherent in the world. Thus, we can make sense of

a correspondence theory of truth for agents themselves, which leads to a secondary correspondence theory of linguistic truth. Some of this is behind the development of Wang Chong's own pluralist theory of truth, which I describe in more detail below.

Wang Chong's conception of the *yan* 言 (statement) is importantly different than familiar conceptions of a statement in contemporary philosophy. *Yan* can refer to both the act of stating as well as the content (what is stated)—in this way, it shares similar ambiguity with the English term “statement”. *Yan* in early China, unlike in uses in English, can refer to nonassertoric linguistic utterances or entities as well. A command, a question, or even an exclamation can be a *yan*. And any of these nonassertoric types of *yan* can be true in the same way assertoric *yan* can be true. When we get a clearer sense of what kinds of things can be true, we gain a better understanding of the kind of thing truth itself is. A common method of investigating questions concerning truth in contemporary philosophy is to begin with a consideration of the role of truth in language and attempt to make sense of a concept of truth based on this. Our consideration of what kinds of things can be true, can take a truth value, is largely subordinate to the consideration of truth's linguistic role. If we begin our consideration from a different point however, we may find that our conception of truth changes. Consideration of the question of the nature of truth in early China seems to begin from the consideration of the various things that can be called true, that can have the property of truth. This class of things, as mentioned above, goes far beyond assertoric linguistic entities or even linguistic entities in general.

If a *yan* (statement) is uttered without the proper gestures and/or spirit, then, this lack of authenticity in itself can constitute a lack of *shi*. Such a statement is *xu* (empty), and thus false. Thus, *shi* and *xu* have a larger scope than our “truth” and “falsity”, but we can see how the aspects of *shi* and *xu* clearly and plausibly contain the ideas of assertoric truth and falsity. It is this aspect of Wang Chong's theory of *shi* (not wholly unique to Wang) that allows him to develop what I call a “pluralist” theory that we might take to solve many of the problems with contemporary theories of truth, and the obstacles they seem to inevitably stumble over. Many of these difficulties may arise, we will see, because of the use of conceptions of truth that are merely properties of assertoric linguistic entities. Our “common-sense” understanding of truth is more in line with Wang's understanding of *shi*, but we cannot square this with technical accounts of truth as the narrow property described. Wang's theory of *shi* might help

us to think about how we might develop technical theories of truth that square with the “folk” conception of truth, and take us away from the idea of truth as a narrowly linguistic property, while offering accounts that make sense of the manifestation of truth properties in assertoric linguistic contexts.

As John Makeham argues in his book on the later Han philosopher Xu Gan, *shi* was often taken in Han and pre-Han literature as paired with *ming*, in the consideration of the acceptability of names. The *ming-shi* debates surrounded the issue of the extent to which a given name (*ming*) matched the *shi*—here translated as “actuality”. In this sense, the property of acceptability attaches to names, and we can know whether or not a name is proper based on whether the *shi* accords with the name. In this sense then, *shi* is not a property of a name, but rather an independent state of the world that names must mirror or otherwise represent. Wang Chong himself does not speak of *shi* in this sense often. There are only a few places in the entire *Lunheng* he uses *ming* and *shi* together, and in these places he is simply using them colloquially, in service of making arguments about unrelated topics, rather than dealing specifically with the philosophical issue of the relationship between names and actuality.<sup>12</sup>

Makeham argues that, for Xu Gan, *shi* is “a state of development peculiar to an entity or state of affairs by virtue of which that entity or state of affairs is what it is”,<sup>13</sup> which is a development beyond the earlier sense of *shi* as a particular object, as found in pre-Qin thought. Wang Chong’s sense of *shi* diverges quite far from both of these, although it seems to have more in common with Xu Gan’s conception (was Xu influenced by Wang?) than it does with the dominant Warring States conception. I take issue with Makeham’s claim about the Warring States slightly, however, as the *ming-shi* issue developed separately from the *shi-xu* issue, and the two senses of *shi* here are substantially different.

Both senses of *shi* originate in the early sense of *shi* translatable as “substance, substantiality”. We find the roots of this in the etymology of Xu Shen in the *Shuowen jiezi*. According to Xu, *shi* should be understood in terms of *fortune* (富 *fu*)—taking the radicals of *guan* 貫 (treasure) underneath a roof (宀 *mian*) that combine to form the character for 實 *shi*.<sup>14</sup> A couple of other glosses Xu makes are relevant here as well. He uses *shi* to

<sup>12</sup> *Daning* and *Ganlei* chapters.

<sup>13</sup> Makeham, *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Shuowen jiezi* 4564, *shi*.

describe both 室 *shi* (hall) and 覈 *he* (investigation). Makeham reads the first case as meant to suggest that “a room is that which is filled”.<sup>15</sup> Makeham does not mention the gloss of *he* as *shi* (he had the misfortune of writing his book in the years before online term searches and websites like the Chinese Text Project, to which I am deeply indebted). Here, we may find something even closer to Wang’s eventual use of *shi*. Xu, after offering *shi* as the description of *he*, continues: “Considering matters, things being covered up and one’s sentences/statements achieving *shi* is called investigation.”<sup>16</sup> Xu also glosses *ri* 日 (sun) as *shi*, suggesting fullness of filling (of light, in this case). In each of these cases, *shi* seems to be given the sense of a filling, fullness, or substantiality. *Shi* fills a room or is what a room can be filled with, represents the fullness of the sun, and can fill an investigation. Makeham writes:

from this primary meaning arose the extended meanings of “replete”, “complete”, “solidness”, “substantiality”, “filled out”. These meanings share the common sense of “substantial manifestation”. *Shi*, meaning ‘fruit’, is derived from this sense of substantial manifestation.<sup>17</sup>

I would add to this another point, however, arising from the gloss of *he* that Makeham does not mention. In this passage from the *Shuowen* in particular, *shi* seems to have a sense of truth absent from the other senses. It is still substantiality or “substantial manifestation”, but the manifestation here seems to include the sense of “how things actually are”. An investigation is completed when the investigator obtains not just some explanation or other, but one that matches the actual events, or states-of-affairs, one that mirrors the way the world actually is. A *true* explanation. We see some indication in the earliest senses of *shi*, then, of Wang’s reading, which is not completely unique to him. There is earlier precedent for the reading of *shi* as “truth”.

We find this understanding of *shi* in a number of early texts. In *Analects* 8.5, *shi* is contrasted with *xu* in Wang’s sense:

以能問於不能，以多問於寡；有若無，實若虛，犯而不校，昔者吾友嘗從事於斯矣。

<sup>15</sup> Makeham, p. 8, *Shuowen* 4535, *shi*.

<sup>16</sup> *Shuowen* 4828, *he*.

<sup>17</sup> Makeham, 8.

While some translators read this *shi* fairly consistently as “fruit” or “fullness”, as opposed to “emptiness” (*xu* 虛), this broad understanding of the terms gives rise to Wang’s more particular understanding of the terms as truth terms, just as “*you* 有” and “*wu* 無” or “*shi* 是” and “*fei* 非” become particularized in texts such as Zhuangzi to refer to “things” (物 *wu*) or conceptualization in general.<sup>18</sup> In the *Mengzi*, we see a use of *shi* 實 as flagging a property of *yan* 言 (saying, teaching), very similar to what we find in *Lunheng*. 4B45 reads:

言無實不祥。不祥之實，蔽賢者當之。

Statements that are without *shi* are inauspicious. The *shi* of inauspiciousness is enacted by those who obscure sageliness.

In the first sentence, *shi* seems to perform much like a truth property. Words that are without *shi* are inauspicious. If *shi* is to be read as “fullness” here, just as *you* is read “to have”, what is it that auspicious words are full of? That which would make words auspicious, effective, or otherwise of positive value would most likely be, for Mengzi, those words that contribute to cultivation of virtue. Whether or not this use of *shi* commits Mengzi to a property of *yan* such that these *yan* assert things *as they are*, or whether there is some other property marked here that makes words valuable, it is certainly the case that the point is being made here that there is some property words can have or lack, and the obtaining of this property makes the difference between valuable and valueless words. This sounds a whole lot like a truth property, and there are few other properties that could plausibly stand in this relation between words and value.

The second sentence here, however, does not help to clarify things. It seems to attribute *shi* to inauspiciousness—the *shi* of inauspiciousness is enacted by those who obscure sageliness. The fullness or reality of inauspiciousness is a possibility here—*shi* in this sense would be close to *cheng* 成 (completeness), as we see *cheng* operating in this way in early texts.<sup>19</sup> There are a number of other places in the *Mengzi* where *shi* is clearly used in its sense of “fruit” or “fullness”. We can see movement, however, toward the truth-value sense in which Wang Chong uses the

<sup>18</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2.5; 2.7.

<sup>19</sup> For example, the variety of claims that 人成之 (humans complete it), generally referring to what *tian* (heaven, nature) creates, in *Chunqiu Fanlu* 20.1, *Xunzi* 10.6, *Guanzi* 39.3, and elsewhere.

term.<sup>20</sup> A passage in the *Xunzi* also seems to signal this move toward Wang's understanding. Xunzi, criticizing the teachings of non-Confucian schools, argues that in being one-sidedly concerned with a particular value, they each rejected an important consideration. For example, he says that in Zhuangzi's concern with *tian*, he neglected *ren*. In Mozi's concern with usefulness, he rejected culture, and

惠子蔽於辭而不知實

In Huizi's overconcern for manipulating words, he did not understand *shi*.<sup>21</sup>

This reading of *shi* contrasts it with *xu* 虛 (empty, false). Wang Chong, as mentioned above, does not get into the issue of the relationship between *ming* 名 and *shi* 實, although he certainly does deal with the issue at the core of this debate in the work of thinkers like Xu Gan. There is a simple terminological difference between Wang and thinkers like Xu. As Makeham explains, Xu Gan's general purpose in discussing *ming* and *shi* in the *Zhonglun* is to distinguish between the names and positions people attain to in government and the substance or talents of the persons, which often, he argues, come apart. Both Wang and Xu criticize their times as ones in which people without talent, without substance, can rise to lofty positions in government, simply due to flattery, corruption, or manipulation. While Xu tackles this problem by considering *ming* and *shi*, Wang also deals with it, but in a different way. According to Wang, differences in *ming* 命 (allotment) are responsible for the different levels of success of persons, which is independent from the person's talent or quality, which is a matter of *qi* 氣 (vitality) and *xing* 性 (inborn characteristics). Wang, as we will see in Chap. 6, is much more concerned with the distinction between inborn characteristics and allotment than he is with the distinction between actuality and name. We see Wang as engaging in some of the same reasoning, however, in his considerations of nature and destiny, that we see later thinkers like Xu Gan and Wang Fu engage in concerning name and actuality. Indeed, we might ask the question of whether these thinkers were influenced by Wang's discussion of this topic, and if so, why they shifted the terms of the debate toward *ming* and *shi*, especially given that Wang's concern with *shi* was so specific and linked to the core of his philosophical method. This, however, is a topic for another place.

<sup>20</sup> An interesting passage of *Biaoji* of the *Liji* also expresses a sense of *shi* as "fullness": 口惠而實不至.

<sup>21</sup> *Xunzi* 21.5.

It is an interesting and relevant question here how we should understand Wang Chong's conception of *yan* 言 as the linguistic entity that can accept truth values. *Yan* is clearly linguistic similar to the way a statement or sentence understood in the contemporary tradition is. Perhaps the notion of propositions is a little further afield from Wang's understanding of *yan*. But Wang's view shares a few important features with propositionalist views of linguistic content. *Yan* can be simply equivalent to the English "to say" in Wang Chong's work or other early Chinese texts,<sup>22</sup> flagging the assertions or words of others, sometimes in a very literal sense, prefacing a direct quote from a text, playing a similar role here to *yue* 曰, which Wang seems to use interchangeably with *yan* in a number of places. *Yan*, however, unlike *yue*, can be used in a verbal or in a nominal sense, to express the act of speaking or the *content* of speaking, what is spoken.<sup>23</sup> In addition, *yan* can take the value *shi* or *xu*, as representing the content rather than act of speaking (or writing). Wang speaks of some particular *yan* being *shi* or *xu* throughout the *Lunheng*, offering various reasons for his appraisals. From just what we are given, it seems that Wang does not give us any particular way to read *yan* as sentences, utterances, propositions, or some other content-bearing linguistic entity, but we can clearly see that for Wang, as for contemporary analytic philosophers, the issue of truth is primarily one having to do with the content of linguistic entities that make some claim or judgment. Only *yan* that predicate some property of something in the world can be *shi* or *xu*—commands, for example, cannot have these properties. This can clearly be taken as a concern with truth so far parallel to that of contemporary analytic philosophers with respect to (roughly) the particular kinds of entity we are evaluating, which will, as mentioned above, have a central role in determining just what kind of property (if any) truth is. *Shi* is something that statements or teachings can have or fail to have.

The question of what makes the relevant linguistic entities true (I will just refer to them as "statements" now so as to avoid begging any questions in the debate between propositional and sentential views) is the next step, and is the main focus of the contemporary philosophical debate surrounding truth. What is often taken as the "traditional" view of truth is *correspondence theory*, in which truth consists of a relation between statements and

<sup>22</sup> There are a number of instances in *Lunheng* in which *yan* prefaces a quote—for example, in *Ming yi*, 故言「有命」 ("therefore [they] say, 'it is destiny'").

<sup>23</sup> Wang does not recognize a difference between the two in terms of spoken versus written language—he treats general claims and word of mouth similarly to the way he treats direct quotes from texts like the *Liji*, *Yueling*, *Zuo zhuan*, and others.

facts or “states-of-affairs”, representing the way the world is. Proponents of the theory grounded it in the intuition that whatever property is represented by the truth predicate must be one that accounts for the connection between a statement and the situation in the world, which ultimately is what *makes* a statement true. The truth of the statement “the sky is blue” must certainly consist in the fact of the matter concerning the color of the sky, which is a situation obtaining in the world independently of the statement, the individual, or the mind. Thus, truth must rest in some relation of correspondence or proper connection between the statement and the situation in the world. When the statement “the sky is blue” is true, the relation of correspondence then holds between this statement and the state of affairs in the world. Just what this relation of correspondence amounts to is a tricky question, and one of the main tasks of correspondence theorists has been to give an account of this.

Wang Chong uses a term translatable as “truth”, *shi* (實), that has an interesting and relevant history, and opposes it with the term *xu* 虛 (false, or literally “empty”). I will first give a brief explanation of some basic points of Wang’s theory of *shi* 實, then I will explain how it is what we might call a “substantive pluralist” theory of truth, and ways it could contribute to contemporary discussions of pluralism about truth.

*Shi* 實 is used to flag *actual* properties (the actual possession of the properties that we seek when appraising statements) as opposed to merely *apparent* properties (the mere apparent possession of these properties) of statements, teachings, or whatever can be *shi*-apt. To see what these properties are, we have to look to Wang’s discussion surrounding the concepts related to *shi* and *xu*.

In the *Duizuo* chapter, two dichotomies are discussed in relation with *shi* and *xu*—namely, *shi-fei* (是非) and *ran-fou* (然否). *Shi* (是) and *fei* (非), when discussed as concepts rather than verbally used, seem to be connected to ethical or normative contexts. Alfred Forke, in his translation, noticed this and translated *shi* (是) and *fei* (非) in the *Duizuo* chapter as “right” and “wrong”, respectively, in all the places where they are discussed as evaluative properties. We see *shi* and *fei* mentioned along with *ran* and *fou*, “is the case” and “is not the case” in discussions of *shi* (實) in the chapter. Two passages in particular show us the two dichotomies discussed together:

明辯然否，病心傷之，安能不論？… [孟子]引平直說，褒是抑非

Those who can determine what is the case and what is not the case feel an ailment in their hearts which pain them [at the thought of truth being



subverted by the “common people” and flowery scholarship] ... [Mengzi’s] language was straight and to the point, according high place to the right (是 *shi*) and suppressing the wrong (非 *fei*).<sup>24</sup>

況論衡細說微論，解釋世俗之疑，辯照是非之理，使後進曉見然否之分

The Lunheng uses precise language and detailed discussion, to reveal and explain the doubts of this generation of common people, to bring to light through debate right and wrong principles (是非之理 *shi fei zhi li*), and to help those who come later clearly see the difference between what is the case and what is not the case.<sup>25</sup>

Here, we see *shi* and *fei* connected to the “principles” (*li* 理) that Wang aims to uncover. His purpose in the *Lunheng* is to reveal *shi* and *fei* principles and to help people distinguish between what is the case and what is not the case. What is the reason for using two different formulations here, *shi-fei* and *ran-fou*, if he means something like “truth and falsity” in both cases? It is implausible that this should be seen as simply using synonyms to mean something like “truth and falsity”, so that he is saying that he wants to (1) uncover true and false principles and (2) help people distinguish between what is true and false. This point is strengthened by his use of *li* (理), by which Wang means something like “moral principle” (though this is not the general usage in the Han). This is far from the neo-Confucian use of *li* (理) to express a foundational metaphysical concept. The abovementioned is the only occurrence of *li* in the *Duizuo* chapter, but if we look to the *Wenkong* (“Questioning Confucius”) chapter, in which consideration of argument and method is a central theme, we learn more about how Wang uses *li*.

難 孔子，何傷於義？誠有傳聖業之知，伐孔子之說，何逆於理？...

[If we] challenge Confucius, how is this injurious to moral appropriateness? If, sincerely attempting to transmit the knowledge of the sages’ teachings, one attacks Confucius’ words, how does this oppose principle (*li*):<sup>26</sup>

This is clearly a view of *li* as either the collection of moral norms or the ground of moral norms. Wang’s second sentence explains and elaborates upon his first. Challenging (難 *nan*) Confucius is not injurious to moral appropriateness (義 *yi*), because attacking Confucius’ words in order to clear things up does not violate the correct moral principles that make certain acts appropriate or inappropriate.

<sup>24</sup> *Duizuo* 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Duizuo* 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Wenkong* 4.

It looks like the passage gives us two separate goals of the *Lunheng*—a moral goal, uncovering true moral principles, and a nonmoral goal, of determining what is the case and what is not the case. Now, the question becomes, why distinguish the two? Wouldn't simply "discovering the truth" take care of both of these? Why didn't Wang simply say that the purpose of the *Lunheng* is to *uncover the truth*, to help us distinguish between *shi* 實 and *xu* 虛, which seems his main purpose as he describes it in other passages? If he is after *truth*, after all, then it looks like facts about moral principles and what is the case will just fall out of this pursuit. If we know what is true, then by definition we will know which moral principles, if any, are right, because we will know whether normative statements, such as "one should never pick on the weaknesses of another", are *true*.

There seems to be some connection between *fou-ran* and *shi-fei* in *Lunheng* 84.363.3–5 above, where Wang talks about Mencius' ability and action. According to this passage, those who have the ability to discriminate between what is the case and what is not the case (*ran* and *fou*) are able to use language to point out what is right (是 *shi*) and what is wrong (非 *fei*). So knowledge of moral principle does seem to follow from the ability to discriminate between what is and what is not the case. Does this, however, show us that there is a single property of truth, such as *ran* (what is the case) that is operative in all contexts? A consideration of *shi* (實) shows us that it is the wise person's grasp of *shi* (實) that enables him to both distinguish between what is and what is not the case *and* to distinguish between right and wrong moral principles. It is not the ability to distinguish between *ran* and *fou* that makes one able to distinguish between *shi* and *fei*, but rather the ability to distinguish between *shi* (實) and *xu* (虛) that makes one able to make both of the other types of discrimination. The fact that Mencius had the ability to distinguish between *ran* and *fou* showed that he had the ability on which the ability to distinguish between *shi* (是) and *fei* (非) rests.

The ability to distinguish between 實 *shi* and 虛 *xu* then presumes the ability to make a number of other useful discriminations involving teachings, statements, and other entities. *Shi* and *xu*, that is, seem like *higher-order* concepts, unlike *ran* and *fou* or *shi* and *fei*. I believe that the best way to make sense of this is to take 是 *shi* and 然 *ran* as ways in which something can be 實 *shi* ("actual", "true"), while 非 *fei* and 否 *fou* are ways in which something can be 虛 *xu* ("empty", "false", "only apparently true"). That is, Wang is offering a view of 實 *shi* in which what makes a statement (言 *yan*) 實 *shi* is *either* being 是 *shi*, or being 然 *ran*.

Which properties then are expressed by 實 *shi*? Moral acceptability (是 *shi*) is one property expressed by 實 *shi*, in the moral domain. This property of acceptability would *not*, however, make nonmoral statements about physical objects true. This property can only be a *shi*-making property in the appropriate domain. Nonmoral statements cannot be 是 *shi*, just as moral principles cannot be 然 *ran*.

One key feature of the concept of truth, or the concept of 實 *shi*, is that it should be a *univocal* concept. Even though there might be different properties in different linguistic contexts that make a statement true, it cannot be the case that “truth” (or 實 *shi*) *means* different things in different contexts. It should mean the same thing to say that a moral statement is true as it does to say that a nonmoral statement is true.

We find passages in the *Lunheng* that show us that Wang did think of *shi* as univocal. The following passage from *Duizuo* is informative here:

人君遭弊，改教於上；君臣(愚)惑，作論於下。[下]實得，則上教從矣。冀悟迷惑之心，使知虛實之分。實虛之分定，而華僞之文滅；華僞之文滅，則純誠之化日以孳矣。

When the ruler does badly, instruction to change conduct is directed toward the person on high. When the ruler's subjects are doltish, engaging in discussions is directed toward the people below. When the people below obtain the truth (實 *shi*), then instruction of the person on high follows. I hope to stir some of these minds, to help them distinguish between truth (實 *shi*) and falsity (虛 *xu*). Once the distinction between truth and falsity is established, then flowery and artificial writings can be eliminated. When flowery and artificial writings are eliminated, pure and sincere transformations will grow more abundant day by day.<sup>27</sup>

In this passage, we see that the ability to distinguish between *shi* and *xu* leads to transformation of conduct as well as the elimination of error in writings. Since much of Wang's criticism in the *Lunheng* is directed at physical and metaphysical as well as moral writings, we can see this second ability as reaching both moral and nonmoral domains or contexts. Wang also asserts a connection between elimination of false (虛 *xu*) writings and moral transformation (we have to assume this is what he means here by 化 *hua*, as the passage began by speaking of conduct and this should be taken to point back to that). We see again that the ability to discriminate between 實 *shi* and 虛 *xu* allows us to both distinguish between 然 *ran* and 否 *fou*

<sup>27</sup> *Duizuo* 2.

and to distinguish between 是 *shi* and 非 *fei*. In order for this to be the case, there must be some univocal concept of 實 *shi* that captures the similarities between the various properties that qualify a statement as true.

The univocality of *shi* 實 is based on its second-order status. The property of *shi* 實, for Wang, is the property of having properties that we actually do and should seek when we appraise statements. This makes truth rest in part on normativity. The normativity involved here, however, is basic, in a sense that what we *should* do is linked with what we *in fact do*, but is not explained by the fact that we do these things. That is, the descriptive element is not meant to explain the normative, but to be a further basic fact beside it. Here, both concepts are in the employ of the truth function, as an explanation for what makes a particular statement true (*shi* 實). If we consider the properties of 然 *ran* and 是 *shi* that can belong to statements in the nonmoral and moral domains, respectively, we can begin to see what is meant. The properties of *ran* and *shi* are properties that humans naturally seek when they appraise sentences, according to Wang. No one accepts as true a statement that they believe to be 不然 *bu ran* or 非 *fei*. Rather, the reason a statement is accepted by anyone is because one believes (sometimes mistakenly) that this statement is either 然 *ran*, 是 *shi*, or has some other 實 *shi*-making property. It is a brute fact about humans that we do seek properties such as 是 *shi* and 然 *ran* when we appraise sentences and accept or believe statements based on whether or not we have reason to think they are *ran* or *shi*. Thus, the key question to be answered when we consider whether or not something is 實 *shi* is whether the statement *actually* has the properties we naturally seek. In addition to this description of what humans actually do, however, there is an added normative element. Not only *do* we seek properties like 然 *ran* and 是 *shi*, but we *ought* to seek such properties. Why ought we? That is, what explains the normativity? Wang takes this normativity as *basic*. Although this certainly would strike most of us in the contemporary Western-based philosophical tradition as strange or implausible, this view (if Wang's own) would be completely unproblematic in ancient China, in which many thinkers accepted such a position.

*Xu's* early sense of emptiness or vacuity fits well with the veridical use Wang makes of the term, as something approximating "falsity". Wang's sense of *xu* seems to go beyond mere falsity, however. According to Wang, people have a tendency to use *xu* words and teachings, because *xu* words and teachings appear more attractive to common or ignorant people who have not properly thought things through. That is, *xu* seems to go hand

in hand with the quality of *hua* 華 (floweriness; verbosity). People are attracted to flowery language, but more often than not such language is also *xu*. What is the reason for this? Is there a necessary connection between *xu* and *hua*? Wang seems to think the connection is more of a methodological one than a conceptual one. Those who use flowery words don't have truth as a goal when they write or teach, and thus their words will often stray from the truth. There seem to be some places, however, that Wang suggests an even close connection between *xu* and *hua* than this. For example, in *Duizuo*, Wang writes that humans seem to have a natural predilection for accepting flowery (and false) claims.

世俗之性，好奇怪之語，說虛妄之文。何則？實事不能快意，而華虛驚耳動心也。是故才能之士，好談論者，增益實事，為美盛之語

The characteristics of common people today are such that they cherish strange and sensational sayings, and they speak about false and preposterous writings. Why is this? Because the truth about affairs is not readily believed, and that which is flowery, false, and exciting gains notice in the mind. This is why talented scholars who like to engage in discussions will augment the truth about matters, and beautify and adorn their language.<sup>28</sup>

*Xu* statements are (or at least can be) flowery, ornate, and naturally appealing to the “common people” (with the intimation that those of high talent will not find *xu* statements compelling). There seems to be a necessary link between *xu* and flowery statements, as the “floweriness” of *xu* statements serves as the reason that the common people tend to accept such statements. At first reading, it seems that Wang has failed to consider two possibilities: that there might be (1) true statements that are flowery; and (2) false or empty statements that are not flowery and appealing. But if we take Wang to be claiming that there is something inherent in *xu* statements that makes them appealing, we can show he is not making this (seemingly elementary) mistake. *Xu* statements are appealing partly because they appear to be true, even when “appearance” is thought of in terms of tendency to accept (something we easily accept may be thought to, in this way, appear to us as true). Does this mean then that Wang thinks of true statements as appearing false, and thus being rejected by the “common people?” If we take “appearing” true as linked to appeal to imagination, or being “readily believed” (*kuai yi* 快意), then the fact that the truth is not readily believed, or is unappealing to the “common” does show that

<sup>28</sup> *Duizuo* 2.

it, in a sense, does not appear true. Of course, it will appear true to those above the common, who possess some wisdom, and it is thus the responsibility of such people to write works promoting the truth, to stir up energy in the common people to seek the truth. And it can come to appear true to the common people given proper instruction by more wise people (such as Wang Chong and others he praises).

Does something appear to be true simply because someone asserts it, for example? Think of a statement like “Confucius was 10 feet tall”. To assert this (in a serious way, outside contexts of joking, fiction, or semantic ascent) is to assert it as true, even though it is in fact false (one might be lying, ignorant, or misinformed). In most normal contexts, a sentence such as this would be uttered so as to inform or convince another person of certain features of Confucius, namely that he was 10 feet tall. Assertion of  $x$  is to present  $x$  as true. It would be naïve, we might think, to take assertion as grounds for belief, but if we consider the normal case, this is often what we in fact do. We generally take a friend’s assertion that “it is 11:30 am” or “Bill isn’t here yet” or “Bill has grey hair” as acceptable grounds for assenting to the statement asserted. At more removed levels, we accept the assertions of experts of all kinds when they say things like “smoking causes cancer”, or “Jupiter’s upper atmosphere is 90 percent hydrogen”. The mistake common people (俗人 *su ren*) often make, according to Wang, is failure to be reflective. They accept what is asserted by people around them as true, even though these people are often either ignorant, misinformed, or dishonest.

$Xu$  statements, then, can be thought of as false statements that we are somehow inclined to believe. So why are we inclined to believe them? Is it due to the mere fact of their being asserted (in the right context)? Or is there some more robust explanation? The above seems to suggest that there is something extra that  $xu$  statements have.

$Xu$  statements are not only ones we would be inclined to believe due to assertion, but they have some other compelling quality—common people delight in them and they appeal to the imagination. Thus, common people are more likely to imagine these statements as possessing the properties that would make them true, based on wishful thinking. We can see how this might work. Human psychology is such that it is far easier to get someone to believe something they would like to be true than something they either have no interest in or do not want to be true. This facet of our psychology can be and has been used to great effect by those wishing to

deceive in various ways.<sup>29</sup> But how about in cases of ignorance or misinformation? The statement “Bill is 6 feet tall” may be false, and I may believe and thus assert this statement, to inform a friend about features of Bill. I may have been misinformed, however, having never met Bill. In fact, say, Bill is only 5 feet 7 inches tall. There is nothing intrinsically compelling, beyond my assertion, about the statement “Bill is 6 feet tall”. This is not something we would expect to appeal to the imagination or be believed due to a human inclination to accept the fantastic. Rather, it will generally be accepted because I assert it and the listener has no reason to doubt that what I say in such cases is true. So is this statement *xu*?

For Wang, statements of this kind are not *xu*. There are statements, like my example of “Bill is 6 feet tall”, that are not-*shi* but are also not-*xu*. The reason Wang does not speak about this kind of statement is that he is mainly concerned with *xu* statements as compelling to common people. *Xu* statements are most problematic. We can and do easily correct our mistakes when they involve things that we have no general inclination to accept. My friend might believe me that Bill is 6 feet tall, but when he gets different information from someone else, he will likely come to doubt what I told him and remain agnostic about Bill’s height until meeting him. However, *xu* statements are much trickier than this because cognitive bias is involved. We are hesitant to give up belief in statements we would like to be true, for example, and often hold to them even in the face of overwhelming evidence that they are false.

*Shi* 實 (truth), as the opposite of *xu*, is being used to flag actual properties (the actual possession of the properties we seek when appraising statements) as opposed to merely apparent properties (the mere apparent possession of these properties) of statements, teachings, or whatever can be *shi*-apt.

As mentioned above, truth is not solely a linguistic property, and even in linguistic consideration is not one limited to assertoric content. We can see how *shi* takes on this sense from a consideration of the earlier sense of

<sup>29</sup>What I mention here is similar to some forms of cognitive bias, such as wishful thinking and confirmation bias. There are many other forms of cognitive bias as well, which shows how prone humans are in general to accept false statements as true even in the face of overwhelming evidence of their falsity. This is very much Wang’s worry. In fact, many of the problems with the beliefs of common people he mentions in the *Lunheng* line up with a number of cognitive biases contemporary behavioral psychologists discuss. He most vehemently heaps scorn upon wishful thinking, which he isolates as a particularly pressing problem among common people in his time.

*shi* expressed in the *Shuowen* and philosophical texts. The veridical/linguistic sense given in the gloss of *he* in the *Shuowen* was one instance of a more general and broad concept suggesting substantiality, which developed into *acceptability* or *accuracy*. The concept of accuracy is a good parallel here. Notice that, for something to be accurate, it has to bear some relation of resemblance or closeness to some other entity. This can be the world, an ideal (character type, desire, etc.), or anything else, and the initial relatum which takes the property of “accurate” can be a linguistic entity, person, fiction, or anything else. What the initial relatum can be, and what makes it accurate, in large part depends on what kind of thing the second relatum is, the intended comparison between the relata (e.g., an image can be accurate in depicting the scale of an object but not in depicting its features, or vice versa) and then how closely the first resembles it in the relevant way. *Shi* in the sense in which Wang uses it can be thought of as close to this sense of accuracy. As we can see, the property that obtains to assertoric linguistic entities such as propositions or statements when they are properly related to or accurately represent the world (states-of-affairs, facts, or the like), is *shi*, but only one particular use of *shi*. *Shi* is not limited to this domain.

Wang’s interest in *shi*, however, is in the property as one of teachings, texts, and claims in general. In part, this is because the stated purpose of *Lunheng* is to appraise existing common claims, teaching, and texts that are widely accepted, so as to discover what in them is *shi* and what *xu*. Thus, his particular focus will be on *shi* as a property of linguistic entities, while still recognizing it as a property of other kinds of entity. He has much to say about whether the teaching of sages and classic texts are *shi* and thus ought to be accepted, and how we might distinguish *shi* statements from *xu* statements.

There has been much written about the early Chinese conception of truth surrounding the concept of *dao*,<sup>30</sup> but we see in the *Lunheng* that Wang does not use such terminology in his consideration of acceptability or truth. We see terms such as “*ran* 然” and “*fou* 否”, “*shi* 是”, and “*fei* 非”, and, most importantly, *shi* 實 and *xu* 虛, but none of this discourse is given in terms of *dao*. Has Wang moved away from a common conception

<sup>30</sup>Including Xu Keqian, “Chinese ‘Dao’ and Western ‘Truth’: A Comparative and Dynamic Perspective”, Bo Mou, “Truth Pursuit and Dao Pursuit: From Davidson’s Approach to Classical Daoist Approach in View of the Thesis of Truth as Strategic Normative Goal”, also Mou’s *Substantive Perspectivism: An Essay on Philosophical Concern with Truth*.



of truth in early China, or is there something that those who focus on *dao* as truth concept in earlier Chinese thought are missing? I think it is the latter that is the case, and the difference in Wang's case is that the issue of truth becomes more central in Wang's work than it was in earlier (especially pre-Han) philosophy. Wang's conception of truth is not unique to him, but can be found back as far as the earliest pre-Qin philosophical literature. The key difference is the emphasis placed on this concept of truth. For Wang, it is central to his entire philosophical project, whereas for earlier philosophers such as Mozi, Mengzi, or even Xunzi, it is a peripheral concept. We should not assume that the issue of truth *must* have been a central concern of ancient Chinese philosophers. It is this assumption, I think, that has led some scholars to focus on *dao* as the truth concept for the ancients, because it is *dao* that gets as much attention as we expect truth *ought* to get in such discussions. While *dao* is part of a cluster of concepts dealing with truth, linguistic truth in the sense philosophers today think of it was often not an important part of early Chinese discussions. The *dao* concern focuses much more on nonlinguistic truth. In the work of Wang Chong, however, linguistic truth is a major concern, and *dao* generally does not come into his consideration in discussion of truth. He does use the term "*dao*" frequently, but not in the context of truth discussion—more often it appears in discussion of morality and proper action—*dao* in the early Confucian sense.

### *Wang's Contribution: A Pluralist Theory?*

The issue of truth is one of the central issues in contemporary philosophy in general, as it has been throughout the history of philosophy in both the West and the East, and has been taken up as a problem specifically concerning the philosophy of language and metaphysics in the contemporary "analytic" tradition of philosophy in which I am most conversant, and which is my concern in this section. Wang's particular conception of *shi* is, I argue, a version of a *pluralist* theory of truth comparable in some ways to pluralist theories in contemporary philosophy, and Wang Chong's particular version of pluralism can be useful in approaching the contemporary debate concerning truth.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See McLeod, 2011, "Pluralism About Truth", Brons, "Wang Chong, Truth, and Quasi-Pluralism", Mou, "Rooted and Rootless Pluralist Approaches to Truth: Two Distinct Interpretations of Wang Chong's Account", and McLeod, "Replies to Brons and Mou",

In the contemporary debate surrounding truth, there are four main competitors in the race, representing general categories of truth theory. There may be other theories that could be added to this list if the concerns were expanded beyond consideration of truth as property of linguistic entities such as sentences or propositions (or *yan* 言).

In general, the concept of truth that contemporary philosophers in the analytic tradition are concerned with is that associated with the use of the term as a predicate connected to linguistic entities such as sentences or propositions. The issue of the right way of construing linguistic entities that can take truth value is a centrally important one, because if there is a property of truth picked out by the predicate [is true] (which itself is in dispute as we will see), the kind of entity it is a property *of* will help us figure out what kind of property it is. Contemporary work on truth, however, echoes Wang's own concerns with it, primarily as a property of linguistic entities with assertoric content. There are proponents for sentential views, propositional views, and also radically different ones in which a property of truth is eliminated altogether, without (or so they claim) doing away with the concept of truth.<sup>32</sup>

Whether one adopts a sentential or propositional view is often due to independent considerations surrounding the plausibility of such views—famously, the idea of the proposition as linguistic entity arose in the early twentieth century with attempts to make sense of sentences that seemed unable to take truth values due to seeming failures of reference, distinct sentences with identical meanings and thus truth values, and other tricky features of sentences, either types or tokens.<sup>33</sup> There were of course a number of difficulties with the notion of propositions as a sub-sentential bearer of linguistic content. What exactly a proposition *is* no one seemed able to explain, other than to claim that it is the content of sentences, and what gives them their truth value. But even though this seems to tell us

*Comparative Philosophy* 6 (1). Wang's theory of truth (or lack thereof, according to critics) is the subject of an article I wrote in 2011, and of a special issue of *Comparative Philosophy* devoted to objections and replies to this article. In this section, I offer a more developed picture of my view on Wang's theory and outline the ways it can help in the contemporary debate concerning truth.

<sup>32</sup>The eliminativist view here is represented mainly by minimalists of various stripes.

<sup>33</sup>The sentence "snow is white" in English, for example, should have the same truth value as "雪白也" in classical Chinese, not because both sentences are independently true, but because they have the same content, even though they are not the same sentence. This *content* then was understood to be a *proposition* they both share.

what propositions *do*, it doesn't tell us what they *are*. If propositions *bear* content, then what kind of entity are they to so bear it? And if they *are* the content, how do we understand linguistic content that is not itself codified already in language? How could there be some kind of shared content between the two sentences "snow is white" and "雪白也" that is not expressed in either English or Classical Chinese but is intelligible in either? This content must be prelinguistic. But how could we make sense of such a thing?<sup>34</sup> For some, numerous problems with the idea of propositions caused a move to understanding sentences, statements, or some other semantic entity as bearer of truth properties.

### *Dealing with Objections to Pluralism*

It is sometimes objected that pluralism cannot account for the truth of statements or propositions that are conjunctions of propositions belonging to different linguistic domains. The reason for this, in general, is that on most pluralist theories, there are particular properties in particular domains that play the truth role. For example, say that in nonmoral contexts, correspondence plays the truth role, while in moral and aesthetic contexts something like coherence plays the truth role. There then comes a problem in giving an account of what plays the truth role for propositions containing both nonmoral and moral or aesthetic conjuncts.

Wang's theory of truth has an easy solution to this problem. In fact, we might think that one of the reasons that the problem never occurred to Wang is that it could never have gained traction given his particular view of *shi* 實. Because a statement is *shi* 實 just in case it has the properties we do and should seek when appraising sentences, it is not necessary for there to be only *one* particular property playing the truth role for a given statement. The necessity of there being one truth property for any given statement or proposition, I contend, is what gets the pluralist into the problem. However, if "is true" expresses a unique truth property that is linked (in virtue of being a second-order property) to the lower-level "truth properties", there is no need to rely on only one property to play the truth-making role. A functionalist pluralist theory of truth (like that of Michael Lynch) *does* require a single property to play the truth role for any given

<sup>34</sup>This is an oversimplification of a number of problems inherent in the idea of propositions, but it clarifies the basic point. There are additional problems discussed in the philosophy of language, but I pass those over here.

proposition, and Crispin Wright’s “platitude” pluralist approach appears to need it as well, because he specifies a higher-order property as being linked to the (single) property that meets the platitudes in a given domain of discourse. The truth property can be defined differently, however, so as not to link it to a single truth-making property that must belong to a statement for it to be true. If a statement is true when it has properties that we do and should seek, it is not necessary for a mixed conjunction to have a single lower-level property that makes it true. It is enough that both conjuncts are true by virtue of having properties we do and should seek.

Consider the following mixed conjunction:

Mars is the 4th closest planet to the sun and murder is wrong.

Wang’s theory can account for the truth of this statement by analysis of the properties of the conjuncts. If each of the conjuncts has lower-level properties we do and should seek and on the basis of which we do and should accept statements, then the conjunction is 實 *shi*. And there is no difficulty here, because the two conjuncts are true in exactly the same way—that is, they both possess properties we do and should seek, and thus the entire statement possesses these properties. Note that the entire statement does *not* possess both *ran* and *shi* (e.g., the moral conjunct does not possess the property of *ran*), but the entire statement *does* possess the second-order property of 實 *shi* in virtue of the possession of each conjunct of properties that we do and should seek. This is so because there is no *single* lower-level property required for every statement, and *shi* 實 can be said to belong to each of the conjuncts in *the same way*. We can explain this ultimately in terms of the properties at the lowest level, in this case 然 *ran* and 是 *shi*, but we can construct ever higher levels in the theory of 實 *shi*. Thus, the above statement is 實 *shi* in virtue of having *shi*-making properties (然 *ran* and 是 *shi*), and the conjuncts considered separately are 實 *shi* in virtue of having 然 *ran* (in the first conjunct) and 是 *shi* (in the second). We can see here that refraining from tying the truth property to a single truth-making lower-level property has enormous advantages over the properties defined by Wright and Lynch.

We can see already how the theory will avoid a related difficulty of pluralist theories. Consider a “platitude” pluralist approach. If the second-order property obtains in virtue of a proposition’s meeting the various platitudes for truth, then it looks like the truth property itself *doesn’t* meet the platitudes for truth. Thus, the second-order property does not itself qualify as a

truth property under the definition of truth on Wright's account. Wang Chong's account of *shi* does not have this problem. Although it is a second-order property, unlike Wright's truth property it *does* itself qualify as a truth property under the conceptual description of truth.

The property expressed by *shi* is the property of (actually) having properties that we do and should seek when appraising statements. Does this property itself meet the criteria for being *shi*? That is, is *this* property something that we do and should seek when appraising statements? It is. But notice that we will only be concerned about whether or not *shi* obtains when there is semantic ascent, or some question as to whether a certain statement does actually or does not have the lower-level properties we seek when appraising statements. Consider the statement:

One should imitate the actions of the Zhou kings.

This statement may be 實 *shi* by virtue of having the property of 是 *shi* (right). So, there are two relevant properties here: 實 *shi* (true) and 是 *shi* (right). 實 *shi* is the second-order property. So, are we looking for *that* when we appraise this sentence? In a sense we are—we are looking for both. The second-order property is especially relevant when we engage in semantic ascent. Consider the statement:

The statement 'you should imitate the actions of the Zhou kings' is true.  
(實 *shi*).

What property or properties do we and should we seek when appraising this sentence? Now that we have semantically ascended, the lowest-level properties such as 然 *ran* and 是 *shi* will be out of the immediate picture, and the sentence must be appraised to see if it has the property of 實 *shi*. What we ought to and will seek here is the *second-order property* itself, because the possession of this will tell us whether the relevant statement is true. Thus, the relevant properties of this statement are the original property of 是 *shi* (right), which makes the second-order property of 實 *shi* obtain, and a third-order 實 *shi* property along side of that.

So the question of whether the second- (and higher-) order property of *shi* can be something itself that counts as a truth property under the given definition of truth can be answered in the affirmative. The definition of truth given here does not bar higher-order properties constructed in this way from serving as truth-making properties.

## SUBSTANTIVE PLURALISM

There are additional problem pluralist theories of truth face. Truth is not only a unified single concept, but it is a complex one that can be the focus of our study and about which we can uncover much. It is a concept that is itself a proper focus of inquiry, and one that is complex and intricate, having tendrils that reach deep into every aspect of human life, and our most basic activities. Gila Sher has criticized pluralist theories of truth for failing to offer substantive accounts of truth.<sup>35</sup> Crispin Wright's "platitude" approach to pluralism is an example—there turns out to be no property associated with truth itself, but rather an associated set of platitudes that pick out different robust properties in different domains of discourse. It is these properties—which are *not* truth properties—that are doing all the work. Sher has suggested that we might move to different accounts that offer us a substantive property connected with truth, but also allow for different *ways* of being true in different domains. She has herself offered a kind of view we might call a "correspondence pluralist" view to solve this problem, taking correspondence as the primary truth property, which is itself understood differently in different domains of discourse.

Wang Chong's theory of truth, I contend, offers us an alternative kind of pluralist view that fits Sher's requirements for "substantiveness" (which I think are good ones), but does it in a very different way. At basic, a substantive account is, according to Sher, "a theory that provides an explanatory, constructive, and systematic account of a rich, significant, and fundamental subject matter".<sup>36</sup> Wang's conception of *shi* 實 provides just this.

Wang Chong's view, although it entails that there are multiple different properties involved in truth-making in different domains of discourse, does not rely on a standard "second-order property" approach, with all the attendant problems of such. This is because *shi* 實 is a *substantive* second-order property. This enables it to resist some of the problems raised with second-order property views. It relies, of course, on something many philosophers may find problematic: the "basicness" of normativity. But I believe a good case can be made for this, and it can certainly be connected to earlier positions in Chinese philosophical literature concerning nonsemantic senses of truth (the true person, etc.) that are themselves very plausible. How acceptable we find the idea of the basicness of normativity and

<sup>35</sup> Sher, "In Search of a Substantive Theory of Truth", *The Journal of Philosophy* 101 (1).

<sup>36</sup> Sher, "In Search of a Substantive Theory of Truth", 5.

its existence in nature will to a large extent rely on how plausible we find the other philosophical assumptions on which it rests. While the view is that normativity is basic, it is *not* the case that this view came fully formed into the world, or that it is not dependent on a web of other positions. Normativity is *metaphysically* basic, not philosophically independent or inaccessible to reason.

The property of *shi* 實, being the property of having properties we do and should seek, as I mentioned above, is a substantive property. What makes it a substantive property, where the property of satisfying Wright-like platitudes is not, is that the *behavioral* aspect of truth here playing a role—in particular, alignment of proper action with *dao* 道 (way, ground of reality). The properties we do and should seek concerning statements (*yan* 言) should be understood as a proper subset of the ways we do and should *act* in general. That is, the normativity of truth is not simply a platitude, but is based on important facts about the nature of human activity with which truth is related. This does not make truth an anti-realistically construed concept, as humans are ourselves bound and to some sense determined by *tian* 天 (nature). We will assume for purposes of this that there are ways around the problems of agency generated by all of this. Such problems are at least no *more* difficult than those faced by Western theories, so if we do reject Wang’s view, it’s unclear we should reject it on this ground.

We can consider a test case—take two statements we will stipulate as true (as well as the conjunction!):

“Geumgang Mountain is in North Korea” and “The *guqin* makes a beautiful sound when played skillfully.”

Both these statements have properties we do and should seek. In the case of the first statement, perhaps it has the property of correspondence; however, we choose to determine correspondence (i.e., I’m swerving around the issue of what the relata in the correspondence relation are, and how we understand correspondence between them). In the second case, it may be the property of social acceptance. Both of these properties are properties that we do and should seek when appraising statements, according to Wang. But not in an uncoordinated way. It is not that we do and should seek correspondence in the domain of aesthetics, or social acceptance in the domain of physics. We do and should seek certain properties only in particular domains of discourse. This is all included in the concept

of what we do and should seek. There can be (and is!) plenty of explanatory depth to this. So then the idea that truth should be substantive such that it takes commitment and study and insight to understand the nature of truth can be made perfect sense of. There is much to say about why we do and should seek certain properties and why we do it in certain domains. To learn more about why we do this and how our doing of this mirrors reality (*dao* 道) is ultimately then to learn more about truth. A fully detailed picture of Wang Chong's theory of truth as *shi* 實 would say much more than "what we do and should seek"—this is an overview, a broad or "thin" description, that would be filled out by study of human nature, activity, and connection with the world. And within *each* of these different domains of discourse there are then further things to learn about the nature of truth, having to do with the nature of the properties we do and should seek in these areas. If we do and should seek correspondence in the domain of physics, it is not only the property of *correspondence*, the first-order property, that is substantive and a proper object of study, but the second-order property of having a property we do and should seek is itself interesting and substantive and a proper object of study—probably even *moreso!* (as it should be if we are calling *it* the truth property, rather than the first-order property).

Why do we and should we seek correspondence in physics and social acceptance (say) in aesthetics? The answer to this *for us* may differ from Wang Chong's answer or the standard answers we will find in early Chinese thought in general. We can adopt *parts* of Wang's theory without the whole. But let's follow Wang further along the path, and see what *his* answer might be. The "do and should" part of Wang's program traces back to the same thing we saw in the Mohists. The properties we do seek (within domains) are also ones that we should seek. This normativity is not explained by our nature, or the fact that we do so seek these properties, but is a separate and additional fact. We also cannot say that we *do* seek these properties because we should seek them, as it is not the normativity that explains our seeking. There certainly is no justificatory or motivational structure in which our understanding of the normativity of the properties drives our seeking of them (a structure we see in a number of Western theories going back to the ancient Greeks). The normativity and descriptivity is explained by the nature of *dao* 道. Thus, to answer the questions of *why* we do and should seek certain properties in particular domains, we must learn more about *dao* 道 itself, and the patterns (*tian li* 天理, "natural propensities") inherent in *dao*. *Dao*, as the early Daoist text



*Daodejing* and most similar texts after it hold, is ultimately ineffable. Yet there are discernible patterns in *dao*, manifest through the actions of the skilled person. Insofar as we can discern these patterns, however, we can do so through perception of and response to them.

There is a potential problem here, pointed out by Lajos Brons.<sup>37</sup> What we find in the *Lunheng* itself suggests not a substantial pluralism, in which terms such as “*shi* 是”, “*ran* 然”, and “*zhen*” express distinct properties all captured by the substantive second-order property of *shi* 實, but rather different ways of referring to the same property, just as we might (informally) refer to a statement as either “right” or “correct” and mean by that the same thing—namely that the statement is *true*. Brons argues that there is insufficient textual evidence to read the difference between properties such as *shi* 是 and *ran* 然 as substantive rather than simply terminological. He argues that the most we can gain from anything said by Wang is that “justification depends on evidence, not that truth (itself) depends on evidence or that evidence makes statements true”.<sup>38</sup> Brons is certainly right about this. But there are a couple of problems with applying this to my interpretation of Wang. First, everything Wang says about *shi* and *ran* in the *Lunheng* is consistent with another less theoretical interpretation in which the differences between the terms are simply stylistic or based in usage (though it is much more likely to be the former rather than the latter in Wang’s case). Nowhere do I attempt to demonstrate that my interpretation of Wang is the only possible one consistent with the text. Rather, it is one possible interpretation, with significant implications, illuminating a number of features of Wang’s overall project in the *Lunheng*, even independently of what it contributes to contemporary debates. It also makes sense of Wang within the overarching tradition, showing how his pluralist tendencies were influenced by earlier Han and Warring States texts—a position further bolstered by recognizing the particular terms Wang uses to discuss these issues and their grounding in earlier pluralistic texts, as I show above.

Another part of my argument here is that it turns out that Wang is doing something philosophically interesting and innovative if we read him in the way I do, while if we take his distinction between *shi* and *ran* to be due to stylistic or usage issues, his discussion of them appears as far more

<sup>37</sup> In a series of responses to my *Comparative Philosophy* article, in *Comparative Philosophy* 6 (1).

<sup>38</sup> Brons, “Wang Chong, Truth, and Quasi-Pluralism”, 143.

pedantic, of questionable import, and puzzling (why would anyone spend so much time and effort going on about that?). Since part of the task of the interpreter is to make a thinker explicable and render them as interesting or coherent as possible, it seems to me that we ought to err on the side of the more interesting or illuminating interpretation when there are not disqualifying considerations over some less illuminating interpretation.

Another difficult challenge Brons makes to my reading of Wang Chong is that given the lack of explicit discussion of the terms I associate with truth in the *Lunheng* as truth and definitions of such, this shows that Wang adopted something like a *primitivist* view of truth. Brons writes:

The fact that [Wang]—in a book in which truth plays such a central role—never even hinted at what truth *is* or what *shi*, *ran*, or *shi* mean strongly suggests that he (implicitly!) considered truth to be primitive.<sup>39</sup>

It is true that Wang does not anywhere offer *definitions* of the truth cluster terms he uses, or offer explicit analysis of these concepts in anything like what we find in contemporary philosophy. But this is not surprising, given that early Chinese philosophers generally do not provide such definitions of *any* concept. This is one of the unique features of early Chinese philosophy as compared to that of ancient Greece or the contemporary West. Conceptual analysis was not seen as the key to answering philosophical questions, even in areas such as metaphysics. This is partly because we do not see in early China the development of theories of truth or knowledge that take *definition* as part of what is necessary for either, as we see in the work of ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato. As discussed in Chap. 3, conceptions of knowledge in early China did not tend to rely on or involve *belief*, and propositional content in this sense was thus largely independent of considerations of knowledge (*zhi* 知).

As discussed previously, issues of truth and knowledge were based centrally in naming (*ming* 名) and distinction-making (*bian* 辯). Just as issues of definition did not arise in early Confucian discussions of the central virtues such as *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *xiao* 孝, and so on, they do not arise in Wang's work concerning the truth cluster concepts. Still, one might claim, early Confucian texts such as *Analects*, *Mengzi*, and *Xunzi* may not have engaged in definitional work, but they had quite a bit to say about concepts such as *ren*, including how *ren* could be recognized, who it applied

<sup>39</sup> Brons, "Wang Chong, Truth, and Quasi-Pluralism", 143.

to, how to bring it about, and so on. But we see just the same kind of discussion concerning truth in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*. The opening section of *Wenkong*, for example (translated in the final section of this chapter), offers us such a discussion.

A final criticism Brons makes of my view that is useful here is helpful to investigate an interesting yet often frustrating feature of Wang Chong's work—namely, his inconsistency. Above I argued that Wang Chong offers a pluralist theory of truth in which different properties constitute first-order truth properties in different domains, and Wang expresses these by using different terms, such as “*shi*” and “*fei*” in the case of ethics, and *ran* and *fou* in the case of physical claims, for example. However, Wang is not consistent in his usage of these terms. *Shi* and *fei* are used in ethical contexts, such as in the following passage:

世間為文者眾矣，是非不分，然否不定

Today's scholars do not properly discriminate between right and wrong, and do not establish the distinction between what is the case and what is not the case.<sup>40</sup>

Here *shi* and *fei* are discussed alongside *ran* and *fou*. Yet *shi* and *fei* also appear in nonethical contexts as well. How do I explain this discrepancy if Wang adopts a pluralist view that takes properties such as *shi* and *ran* as distinct truth properties applying to different domains of discourse (along with properties such as *zhen* as applying to different entities)? It is true that I privilege certain passages over others in my interpretation of Wang's theory of truth. However, certain patterns of use and regularity can be found within these passages that can be made best sense of if we take them to represent this kind of pluralist position about truth—incipient or not. It could very well be the case that Wang changed his mind about truth, or that he started the project of constructing a pluralist theory and abandoned it or left it only half-formed. Part of my project is to attempt a reconstruction of Wang's theory based on what he provides in the *Lunheng*. Not everything said in the *Lunheng* is consistent with the pluralist reading I endorse here. But there is a good reason for this. As discussed in Chap. 2, the *Lunheng* is most likely a compilation of Wang's work,

<sup>40</sup> *Dingxian* 30.

rather than a single thematically organized text.<sup>41</sup> Wang wrote the essays of the *Lunheng* at different stages in his life and career. He presumably held different views at different points of that life and career, developed greater sophistication, advanced and changed arguments, refined his understandings of concepts, and changed his use of terminology. Thus, we should expect such divergence across chapters. Classics scholars and specialists in Ancient Greek philosophy exercise themselves over the issue of the substantive differences between Plato's views and concepts in his early, middle, and late periods of intellectual production. We cannot assume that Plato held the same views, made the same arguments, and used terminology in the same ways throughout his entire productive life. Who among us does this? Yet, oddly, for some reason there is a much greater tendency among scholars of Chinese philosophy to assume the coherence of clearly collected works of an individual scholar, or even collections of multiple scholars, such as early texts like the *Analects* or the *Daodejing*.

Yet this is not a problem with Wang. As Brons points out, the very texts I use to establish this domain difference of terms like “*shi*” and “*wan*” are inconsistent, and sometimes use the terms together, in particular in the construction 是非之實 (*shi fei zhi shi* “the *shi* of right and wrong”).

This is indeed a difficulty, and on my account of Wang's pluralism, if *shi* is an endorsement of the properties we do and should seek, then 是非之實 (*shi fei zhi shi* “the *shi* of right and wrong”) would have to be understood in a less than literal way. *Shi* (right) and *fei* (wrong) don't literally have a *shi* 實, as the construction suggests. They can't, because they are not themselves statements. Instead, this would have to refer to the “truth about *shi* and *fei*”—the truth about whether statements have the properties we do and should seek, with reference to a particular domain. No doubt this is an awkward, and perhaps even flawed, usage. But it's far from clear that this construction rules out the kind of truth pluralism I attribute to Wang. Even though pluralism renders *this* construction more difficult, there is a trade-off, in that it makes Wang's other moves concerning the difference between these terms in different contexts, as well as his different usage of *shi* and the other truth-like terms, much more explicable. Good (or at least charitable) interpretation aims to interpret a thinker's positions as being as consistent or as strong as *possible*. Given Wang's

<sup>41</sup> As discussed in Chap. 2, the *Lunheng* referred to in the text itself, in chapters such as *Ziji*, likely refers to a distinct text that was a proper subset of the text currently known as *Lunheng*, which is the original *Lunheng* plus Wang's other known works.

clear tendency to be quick and uncareful, it shouldn't surprise us that there may be *some* difficulties engendered by his views. It's just a matter of how much awkwardness and inconsistency we're comfortable with attributing to him.

### THE CORRESPONDENCE INTUITION

Bo Mou offers a criticism of my position on Wang's second-order concept of *shi*.<sup>42</sup> He argues that in my explanation of Wang Chong's concept of *shi*, I cannot give an account of the "pretheoretic" understanding of truth, or what we might call a "folk" conception, that grounds the various distinct properties connected to truth in different domains of discourse. *Shi*, as a higher-order property, cannot play the role of the truth concept as it is understood and used pretheoretically. Because it is a second-order concept, Mou argues that it cannot be an elaboration of this pretheoretic concept of truth, but rather is a radical revision of it.

If this is the case, of course, it is more a difficulty for Wang Chong's view than it is for my interpretation of that view, but fortunately I think there is a response to this criticism. While I agree with Mou that Wang's concept of *shi* was intended to be an elaboration rather than a radical revision of the folk understanding of truth, I think that this understanding *can* be captured by a second-order concept (or many other kinds of concept), and also that second-order concepts can be basic in a theoretical sense.

*Shi* is an interesting term in early Chinese thought in part because of the variety of ways it was used and understood. It almost certainly shifted its meaning(s) between the early Zhou and the later Warring States period, often used in early texts to signify "fruit" (literally, of a plant), or the related concept of "result".<sup>43</sup> In other places, it is used in a sense suggesting "substance", which is what leads to its understanding as "ground" or "reality"—in this sense it is likely meant in the *Xunzi*'s considerations of the distinction between name (*ming* 名) and *shi*. We do see the *ming-shi* consideration made in texts throughout the Han dynasty, including after Wang's time in Xu Gan's *Zhonglun*, but Wang himself is not interested in

<sup>42</sup> "Rooted and Rootless Pluralist Approaches to Truth", *Comparative Philosophy* 6 (1).

<sup>43</sup> Even texts such as the *Analec*s and the *Liji* in multiple senses, "fruit" as well as "fullness", perhaps a literal and allegorical sense of 'fruit'. Thus, in *Analec*s 9.22 Confucius discusses 秀而不實者 ("blooms with no fruit"), while in *Analec*s 8.5 Zengzi describes a friend as 實若虛 ("full but seeming empty").

this distinction. He uses *shi* in distinction to *xu* most regularly, suggesting that he is using a concept that, while almost certainly related in some way to Xunzi's concept of *shi* and others, is quite different and noncontinuous with theirs. At the same time, Wang's use of *shi* and *xu* and particular application of them to statements differs from the uses of earlier thinkers in the Warring States, who apply *shi* to any entity, as any entity can have a purpose, value, or substance.

I don't think it's the case that there was a single agreed-upon usage of *shi* in Han and pre-Han texts, and it is one of the most diversely understood concepts of early Chinese thought. We see very different understandings of it in the *Xunzi* and the *Mengzi*, for example, and different understandings than these in early Han texts such as the *Huainanzi*. In the later Han, Xu Gan's use of *shi* is radically different from any of these earlier ones, even though he considers some similar issues such as the *ming-shi* distinction. *Shi*, like other contentious terms and concepts such as "*xing* 性" (inborn characteristics), "*ren* 仁" (humanity), and "*dao* 道" (way), is understood in a multitude of different ways in early China, and Wang's use, I argue, is a somewhat idiosyncratic one.

One way of understanding a relatively general use of *shi*, then, is as itself an evaluative term that is fundamentally *open*. That is, it may be fundamentally "pluralistic" at even the most basic level, in its folk conception, in the same way that a term like "result" or "goal" may be. That is, the term suggests a *general* concept, but can also be used to refer to a *particular* thing that fits a general description. "The result of crime is suffering", for example.<sup>44</sup> "Result" here is something general—the state or thing that is caused or otherwise brought about primarily by some action—while at the same time it refers in this case to suffering, as the particular result of crime. Each action has a result. And our understanding of an action's result, we might think, is more basic than our understanding of a *particular* result of a particular action, even if we come to this more general concept from our observation of the world and of actions and their particular results. The basic *concept* is the general concept that we derive from observation of particulars. Once we have such a concept, however, it is this concept that we use primarily, both temporally and conceptually. What is it to have the property of "being a result"? To have the property of being

<sup>44</sup>Note the structural similarity here to certain uses of *shi* 實 such as that of *Mengzi* 4A27, which discusses "the fruits of" a number of virtues, for example 仁之實, 事親是也 ("the fruit of humanity is service to ancestors").

a state caused by some action. Being the effect of some action is based on being the effect of *this* particular action (i.e., crime). While this is perhaps not a *second-order* property, it is not far removed, in that it is a general property that is arguably more basic than the specific property of “being a state caused by crime”. This latter property is that of “suffering”, not that of “being a result”. Thus, when we are concerned with the general concept of the “result”, we are already dealing with something either general or higher order. In fact, a higher-order view may simply be one way of expressing the generality of a concept.

The concept of *shi*, I think, given the early uses of the term, was always thought of as a general term with its property picked out by the particular object under discussion. Wang’s application of *shi* to statements in particular thus naturally suggests a kind of pluralist approach to truth, with *shi* operating as the general truth concept. But if we take *shi* in its sense as “fruit” or “result”, a basic and general concept, we can see how Wang’s conception, even though indeed divergent from earlier conceptions, does not radically break with earlier understandings of it in the tradition. That is, my reading of Wang does not attribute to him a view that comes out of the blue seemingly from nowhere. We see its roots in earlier Chinese thought. It would be odd, I think, to read Wang as completely sharing common understandings of concepts such as *shi*, given both his own admitted divergence from common ways of thinking and writing, as well as the body of textual evidence that seems to back up his claims concerning his uniqueness.

The pretheoretic conception of truth likely shares much with the idea that motivates correspondence theories of truth—that truth is somehow an expression of *the way things are*. Both Gila Sher and Terrence Horgan offer theories of truth that take *correspondence* to be the central truth property while allowing room to understand it differently in different domains of discourse, and thus making room for a kind of pluralism. There is some sense in which Wang Chong’s theory of truth can be thought of as endorsing a kind of correspondence, though it is unclear that we can take his *shi* 實 to be anything like Sher’s or Horgan’s conceptions of correspondence, or even that of a traditional Russellian correspondence theory. What we *can* say about Wang’s theory, however, is that it does have connection with what we might call a “correspondence intuition”, and a strong correspondence intuition, taking *shi* 實 to ultimately be about *reality* or *the way things are*, based in both human activity as well as other facts (or something like them) about the world, grounded in *tian li* 天理 (natural propensities or patterns).

The term “*shi* 實”, which Wang Chong uses as a truth term, can in earlier Chinese texts be translated as “substantiality”, “actuality”, or “reality”. The connection between conduct (*xing* 行) and statements (*yan* 言) in earlier texts explains why the property of *shi* 實 (having properties we do and should seek) would be taken as corresponding with reality in some way. Insofar as our (proper) action mirrors *dao* 道 (the ground of reality), then what we do and should seek is connected to this ground of reality. There is thus a kind of correspondence on Wang Chong’s theory of truth, but it is not this correspondence that characterizes the truth property itself—directly, at least. Notice, however, that this correspondence *does* meet a kind of correspondence *intuition*—there is a kind of correspondence *associated with*, if not definitive of, truth—and also that the correspondence involved here is a proper object of investigation and something we might learn much more about through this investigation. Truth, on Wang Chong’s account, turns out to be as broad and robust as human activity itself. This seems to match well with an intuition about truth that few of our theories have been able to capture—that truth is *complex*, requires connection of some kind between the truth bearer and reality, and is multilayered. A statement that has the property of having properties we do and should seek is a statement that represents “the way things are”. What we do and should seek is one way of construing “the way things are”. What would fail to be sufficiently basic is if Wang were to make the claim that we do and should seek certain properties *because* they represent the way things are. But he does not hold this at all. What we do and should seek is itself basic. There is no further fact about the connection between what we do and should seek and “the way things (actually) are”. Indeed, if what I have described above is correct, what we do and should seek shows us the way things are, and the further facts as to why we do and should seek certain properties are facts about *why certain things are true*, rather than about truth itself.

The substantive pluralism of Wang Chong, then, offers us a pluralist theory that gives us a plausible account of why we take truth to be so central, basic, important, and difficult.

### *Nonlinguistic Truth in Wang’s Pluralism*

Pinning down the general nature of truth will require understanding the ways in which nonsemantic aspects of truth inform semantic aspects. We find an account of the connection between these two, I argue, in the early Han text *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (particularly in the *Chuzhen* 椒真 chapter),



and find a further development of this concept of in Wang Chong's work. The concept of *zhen* 真 (often translated as "genuine") in the *Huainanzi* is the primary truth concept and is primarily understood as a feature of the perfected person. Evaluation of statements proceeds through evaluation of persons. In Wang's *Lunheng*, although *zhen* is not the primary truth concept, it plays a similar role to that in the *Huainanzi*, but is integrated into an overarching pluralist theory of truth, in which the concept of *shi* 實 is the unifying truth concept.

The *zhen ren* 真人 (true person), discussed in both the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, is offered as a standard for the truth of statements (*yan*). We first see this in the *Zhuangzi*, which connects *zhen yan* 真言 (true statements) and *zhen xing* 真行 (true behavior). This is developed further in the *Huainanzi*. The authors of that text take truth terms that are used in slightly different ways in earlier texts and understand them as manifestations of the same concept. In general, the *ben-mo* 本末 (root and branch) structure is used throughout *Huainanzi* to make sense of this. The various chapters of *Huainanzi* consider the features of the ideal person, and what makes such a person as they are. In offering a unified approach to persons and truth, the *Huainanzi* attempts to give an account of truth (through the cluster of terms I have mentioned) that takes it as being the *same kind* of property for persons, statements, conduct, and numerous other things. This is why we see statements of following the natural propensities followed by the ways in which this following constitutes truth in a variety of different things and situations. The attempt to unify various formulations of the ideal person in the chapters of the *Huainanzi* mirrors the attempt to unify different concepts of truth. The *Huainanzi* takes this one step further however and attempts to unify both the truth of statements and truth of persons in one property—one relationship of the person to the *dao*.

One seeming problem is that the *Huainanzi* appears to disparage *yan* (statements) in general, in much the same way we see in texts like *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. The highest understanding of *dao* (or *ben* for *Huainanzi*) is not a linguistic understanding—indeed, statements about the world always miss much of importance, as the *dao* itself is ultimately ineffable. Like the earlier Daoist texts, however, we can take this rejection of *yan* as rejection of a particular narrow conception of *yan*. The Zhuangists are masters of this kind of sleight of hand. The person and self are problematic, they argue, and thus should be eliminated—but when they describe the elimination of the self, a picture of a very different kind of self emerges.

Virtue and ritual are problematic, they argue, and should be scrapped. But in thinking about what life will be like without ritual and virtue, a picture of a very different kind of virtue emerges. The continual Zhuangist rejections of Confucian concepts such as person, virtue, the state, and ritual and responsibility, then, are not rejections of *thin* concepts of these things, but rather of the particular *thick* accounts that Confucians and others offer. Zhuangists encourage us to radically rethink how we understand these concepts.

Throughout the *Huainanzi* we find connection between linguistic and nonlinguistic senses of truth, or truth as a property of statements (*yan*), persons (*ren*), and objects in general (*wu* 物).

We see the *shi/xu* 實虛 structure (the central truth terms in the *Lunheng*) used throughout the *Huainanzi*. In *Jingshen*, we find 眾人以為虛言，吾將舉類而實之. *Jingshen* also speaks of *yan* being “fitting” (*dang* 當), and puts the fittingness of *yan* along with a number of other examples of following the natural propensities in other chapters:

精泄於目，則其視明；在於耳，則其聽聰；留於口，則其言當；集於心，則其慮通。

*Jing* is contained in the eye, thus the eye is able to see. It is in the ear, thus the ear is able to hear. It is in the mouth, the the mouth is able to speak. It is in the mind, thus the mind is able to understand.<sup>45</sup>

*Jing* 精 (essentiality, purity) here is the key—connected to *tian* 天 (nature), as contrasted with emotion (情 *qing*), which is connected with humanity narrowly. Being a person of *jing* 精 makes one’s *yan* fitting—a person who has refined their own essence will have statements that fit with nature somehow. Of course, this does not show that refined understanding or action is a necessary condition for fitting/true words, just that the person of refined understanding will act in ways that follow natural propensities and will also utter true/fitting statements. Is this because such a person understands *independently* what makes statements true? If this is the case, we would expect some account somewhere of what it is that makes statements true independently of the understanding and activity of the developed person. We do not find this in either the *Huainanzi* or the *Zhuangzi*. And given the overall aim of the *Huainanzi*, we can make sense of why this would be. The standards for truth of statements

<sup>45</sup> *Huainanzi*, *Benjing* 10.

have to be ones that can also serve as the standards for the adequacy/truth of any other entity, including teachings, persons, systems, and so on. *Yan* is often opposed to *xing* 行 (behavior) in *Huainanzi* (as in *Zhuangzi*), with *xing* being the fundamental standard, the key way in which one follows natural propensities.

A number of passages in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi* demonstrate this link between activity and truth (*zhen*) as a property of a person on the basis of proper activity. The concept of the *zhen ren* (true person) is used in both the *Huainanzi* and *Zhuangzi*, and for the most part the use in *Huainanzi* is similar to that in the *Zhuangzi*, from which it likely borrows. The *Jingshen* chapter of *Huainanzi* gives us a comprehensive statement about the *zhen ren*: 所謂真人者也, 性合於道也。 (“Those who are called *zhen ren* possess inborn characteristics that have been united with *dao*”).<sup>46</sup>

There seems general agreement in the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi* that becoming a *zhen ren* is a matter of understanding and following the patterns or propensities of nature, rather than opposing them through one’s own intention or ends.<sup>47</sup> The aim is to undermine the basis of human agency and become like nature itself, which responds to natural patterns in a spontaneous (*ziran* 自然) and automatic way. We find a claim linking the *zhen ren* directly to such responsive and imitative action in *Zhuangzi* chapter 24:

以順天下, 此謂真人 Using it to follow the world, this is one we call a *zhen ren*.<sup>48</sup>

In the *Huainanzi*, we find the *zhen ren* as such linked to knowledge (*zhi*):

所立于身者不寧, 是非無所形。是故有真人然後有真知。其所持者不明, 庸詎知吾所謂知之非不知歟?

If that which is established in oneself is not at peace, then *shi-fei* conceptualization cannot take shape. This is why only when there is a *zhen ren* there is there *zhen* knowledge. If that of which one takes hold is not manifest/clear, then how can I know that what I call knowledge is not non-knowledge?<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Huainanzi*, *Jingshen* 9.

<sup>47</sup> A few examples: Achieving *zhen* through following *dao*, the natural propensities, and the world. 循天之道, 以養其身, 謂之道也 (*Chungju Fanlu*, *Xun tian zhi dao*).

循天之理 (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 15) 然後乃至於大順。玄德與萬物反異, 故能至大順。順天理也。 (*Heshanggong* commentary of *Daodejing*).

<sup>48</sup> *Zhuangzi* 24.13.

<sup>49</sup> *Chuzhen* 12.

By “knowledge” (*zhi* 知) here, the authors likely have in mind the kind of skill in navigating action that other early texts often mean by “knowledge”, rather than anything like propositional knowledge in particular (although this may be included in *zhi*). The property of being *zhen* for the individual is such that the skill-knowledge the *zhen ren* possesses is itself *zhen* knowledge because the *zhen ren* possesses it, not vice versa. On a purely linguistic conception of truth, we might imagine that, even if we were able to make sense of the idea of a “true person”, it would have to be in terms of a person with knowledge of true statements. That is, *zhen* knowledge would be the basis of *zhen* in the person, opposite from what we see in this passage from *Chuzhen*.

What makes one a *zhen ren* is *not* a matter of knowledge either as skill or the right kind of belief of true statements, although it may involve a kind of deconstructive skill. Following the natural propensities, generally through undermining *shi-fei* conceptualization, a sense of self, and other fundamental aspects of agency, is what makes one a *zhen* person. The knowledge that one gains through this, as *zhen* person, is then *zhen* knowledge. There are no features of *zhen* knowledge such that it can be evaluated as such independently of *zhen* persons—it is simply the knowledge *they* (the *zhen* persons) have. As with other forms of exemplarism, of course, this generates some difficulties. If there is nothing independently of the *zhen* person that allows us to characterize knowledge (in terms of skill and justified true belief) as *zhen*, then the category itself is doing no work. There is nothing special or particular that it is to be *zhen* knowledge. There may be *secondary* or *inessential* features of *zhen* knowledge—that is, it may turn out that all *zhen* knowledge involves correspondence between beliefs and actual states-of-affairs (e.g.), but it cannot be this correspondence that makes the knowledge *zhen*. Which leaves a difficult explanatory problem—when we point to features of *zhen* knowledge and other properties of the *zhen* person as useful (otherwise why else is it desirable to be a *zhen* person?), either we cannot make sense of the usefulness of these properties independently of *zhen* personhood or we still do not have an account of just why it is we should strive to be *zhen ren*. Presumably, *zhen* knowledge has an independent value such that attaining it gives us motivation to become *zhen* persons.

In the *Huainanzi*, truth is grounded in *zhen* as a property of persons. There can only be true *statements* as a function of the actions and statements of the true (*zhen*) individual. Truth can thus be seen as a monist rather than pluralist concept. The truth property is a *single* property

regardless of domain of discourse or what the property belongs to. That is, there are no properties of *zhen* statements and *zhen* knowledge unique to them as statements or knowledge—rather, having the property of *zhen* for both consists in their belonging to a *zhen* person.

Though this relation of belonging is what makes a particular characteristic of the *zhen* person itself *zhen*, this is not all that can be said about the particularities of *zhen* characteristics. When we understand what the *zhen* person is like (which is also to understand what nature itself is like, given the above discussion), we understand why the *zhen* characteristics of the *zhen* person are useful or effective. The problem here becomes how to understand the usefulness of these properties in a way that does not also make it plausible that what makes them useful is what makes them *zhen*, rather than their ownership by the *zhen* person. Part of the problem here is that it is difficult to determine which of the two following interpretations of the *Huainanzi*'s position is the correct one: (1) possession by *zhen* persons is what makes a characteristic *zhen*; (2) *zhen* characteristics are *zhen* based on features intrinsic to them, such as what make them useful, but only *zhen* persons (i.e., those who can follow the natural propensities) are able to gain these characteristics. Or it could be that the *Huainanzi* simply does not distinguish between these two possibilities. We know that it is at least the case that only *zhen* persons can gain the *zhen* characteristics in question, *and* we know the effectiveness of *zhen* characteristics. Perhaps that, according to the *Huainanzi*, is all we *need* to know.

Yet the *Huainanzi* seems to phrase things in ways that put the person's activity in the center. There cannot be *zhen* knowledge without *zhen* persons—this suggests a definitional claim. Of course, in maintaining this, it is necessary to cut against the grain of much scholarship on early Chinese philosophy maintaining that early Chinese thinkers are not concerned with definitions. Much of my recent work is aimed at doing just this, using a number of texts, particularly Western and Eastern Han texts, but will have to be left merely suggestive here.

At any rate, however we interpret these passages of the *Huainanzi*, it is clear that evaluation of *zhen* statements, knowledge, or other characteristics will always refer to actions of *zhen* persons. To know whether a certain statement is *zhen* is a matter of knowing whether this statement is issued as part of the activity of a *zhen* person.

We find a different account of *zhen* as a truth concept linked to persons in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*. As I argue above, Wang's concept of *shi* 實 is understood as a higher-order property of having properties we do and

should seek. This allows for a broad application of the concept of truth—statements, persons, objects, and any other thing can be true, insofar as it has properties we do and should seek. This also allows for us to make sense of the close connection between usefulness or pragmatic considerations and truth in much of early Chinese thought. Finally, given that *shi* is a higher-order property of having other properties, it allows for distinct properties to be *shi*-making properties depending on the object they are properties of—statements (*yan*), persons (*ren*), or objects (*wu*), for example. There are further levels of the pluralism at the level of statements—different domains of discourse can have different *shi*-making properties for relevant statements. It is this aspect of Wang’s theory of truth that links it to pluralist theories of truth in the contemporary philosophy of language. The property or properties of an ethical statement that make it true (*shi*) can be different than those that make a statement of physics true. In one case, something like correspondence between statement and states-of-affairs might constitute truth, while in another something like coherence with accepted beliefs might constitute truth. The properties will be fixed by domain.

I have written much on Wang Chong’s pluralist theory as it concerns statements (*yan*), but this does not give the whole picture of his theory of truth. Wang’s account of truth extends to nonlinguistic entities, just as in the case of the *Huainanzi*. It is an important and useful aspect of his overall pluralist theory to understand how truth as predicated of persons and objects is understood as the same as truth predicated of statements. That is, the univocity of truth holds not only over linguistic domains. This is a virtue of Wang’s pluralism. The “true person” and the “true statement” (which can be rendered in Classical Chinese just as in English) can be understood such that true retains the same meaning in both cases. It is not that one is a special case of the use of “true” that works differently than the other. Rather, “true” is understood univocally, the same in both cases. In both cases, to be true is to have properties we do and should seek. But what does this mean in the case of the person?

The Daoists have a relatively easy answer to this question, as for the most part their conception of the ideal person is one who follows or mirrors the patterns of nature. The property of truth for persons (and objects) then is a kind of correspondence between the person’s actions and the propensities or patterns of nature (*tian li* 天理).

Wang uses *zhen* in ways that suggest it connects to earlier uses having to do with nonsemantic truth as a property of individuals. In *Wuxing*,

Wang says of a particular class 非真正人也 (they are not true and correct persons).<sup>50</sup> He also refers to the *zhen xian* (真仙), referring to Daoist immortals. *Zhen* is not only a property of persons, however. Wang speaks of *zhen xing* (true inborn characteristics),<sup>51</sup> *zhen se* (true colors)—in the sense of unchangeable and fixed colors,<sup>52</sup> *zhen wei* (true application). Sometimes *zhen* is emphasis, and paired with other truth-concept terms such as “*shi* 是” and “*ran* 然”.<sup>53</sup> The phrase “*zhen ren*” is used in connection with the Daoist perfected person, referring to Daoist exemplars. In the chapter *Luanlong* (Disasters Concerning Dragons), *zhen* is used more often than in other chapters, seemingly in the sense of “real” or “true” in an unqualified sense (as Wang more often uses *shi* 實 or *ran* 然).

The *application* case shows us a feature of human activity that is called *zhen*. *Shuaixing* 7 discusses the link between *zhen* activity and the *zhen* object, and makes sense of the link of the sense of “genuine” (as understood in English) to the concept as well. To be a *zhen* X is to have the essential properties of an X as such, to be an exemplar of X. This extends the understanding of *zhen* found in the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*.

There are some complications with Wang’s account, however. Although there are many passages that indicate that Wang understands *zhen* and its connections to persons in ways similar to the *Zhuangzi* or *Huainanzi* accounts, he also breaks with these accounts in holding that *zhen* objects or persons are not necessarily the most *effective* at bringing about particular results, and that non-*zhen* objects or persons may be as effective or even more effective.<sup>54</sup> It is difficult to square this with *zhen* as a truth property, as for a thing to be *shi* 實 (true) according to Wang, it must have properties we do and should seek. Wang’s position on the usefulness of non-*zhen* persons and objects suggests that these non-*zhen* things can have properties we do and should seek, in equal or greater measure (on occasion) to *zhen* things.

When Wang discusses the usefulness of non-*zhen* objects in the *Luanlong* chapter, particularly clay dragons (as artificial or nongenuine dragons), it seems he is trying to give an account of how artifice can be effective in bringing about certain effects generally connected with *zhen* objects. That is, we can achieve at least some of what *zhen* objects can through certain kinds of artifice.

<sup>50</sup> *Wuxing* 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Wuxing* 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Shuaixing* 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Bianxu* 6, *Daoxu* 27.

<sup>54</sup> He does this most explicitly in the *Luanlong* chapter, discussed below.

Wang argues that the ability of clay dragons to draw clouds (based on the resonance between *zhen* dragons) is akin to that of tools to create the effects generally attributed to *zhen* objects. For example, one can use a glass to focus the light of the sun and create a fire. The glass itself does not have the characteristics of the sun, and insofar as it acts in the same way as the sun, it can be understood as a non-*zhen* stand-in or replacement for the sun. This explanation, given early in the *Luanlong* chapter, seems consistent with the general efficacy of *zhen* things. In addition, it seems that in such cases, the non-*zhen* object is not *itself* effective, but rather modifies qualities of the original *zhen* object. Thus, it seems strange for Wang to use such examples as evidence that non-*zhen* objects can sometimes be more effective than their *zhen* counterparts.

A few passages toward the end of the *Luanlong* suggest possible resolution of this problem. In one key passage, Wang discusses ritual objects used as stand-ins for deceased ancestors:

禮、宗廟之主，以木為之，長尺二寸，以象先祖。孝子入廟，主心事之，雖知木主非親，亦當盡敬，有所主事。土龍與木主同，雖知非真，示當感動，立意於象。

According to the Rites the tablets in the ancestral temple are made of wood, one foot and two inches long, to represent a deceased ancestor. A dutiful son, entering the hall, worships them with all his soul. Although he knows that these wooden tablets are not his parents, he must show them the greatest respect, and they call for his veneration. A clay dragon is like a wooden tablet; even though it is not genuine, it exercises such an influence, that the image must be taken notice of.<sup>55</sup>

Here again, it seems that the non-*zhen* object has whatever effective power it has as a result of the features of the original *zhen* object being manifest in it in some way. This case is clearly different from the case of a glass concentrating the light of the sun, but Wang would have understood both in terms of *resonance* (*ganying* 感應), a concept developed in earlier Han texts such as *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu*. In both cases, it is resonance between the *zhen* object and the non-*zhen* tool in which features of the *zhen* object are manifest that is responsible for the effectiveness of the non-*zhen* object.

Notice that in both of these cases it is not merely *resemblance* to the *zhen* object that gives the non-*zhen* object its effectiveness. The non-*zhen* object has effectiveness only in that it manifests features belonging to the

<sup>55</sup> *Luanlong*. Forke trans., p. 354.



original *zhen* object itself. The effectiveness of the glass in starting a fire is based not in any light or heat that emanates from the glass, but from the operation of the glass on the light of the sun. Likewise, in the case of the wooden ritual stand-in, any respect owed to this object is not owed to it based on features of the object as non-*zhen* wooden object, but as representative of the features and memory of the deceased ancestor. It appears that what Wang offers here is a way to extend the theory of *zhen* found in earlier Han texts, offering an account of how the properties of *zhen* objects, properties we *do and should seek* (which make the *zhen* object true), can be effective and be grasped indirectly. Wang aims to show how these objects can be effective without being directly in contact with that on which they have effect, and also how the features of these objects insofar as they are *zhen* objects can be manipulated for other purposes.

Wang's view on non-*zhen* objects here is interesting for a few reasons. At first glance, such objects seem to operate like *tools*, artificially constructed objects meant to take advantage of and augment or change features of *zhen* objects in order to make them useful for particular purposes. But the tool analogy is not quite perfect. In the case of clay dragons, Wang says that the non-*zhen* object has a kind of symbolic effect. That is, the case is much closer to that of the ritual stand-in for a deceased ancestor. Insofar as the wood (or the clay dragon) generates particular effects, it is because other aspects of the world (persons, in the case of the ritual objects) are reminded of properties of the *zhen* object through contact with the non-*zhen* replica. The case of the wooden ritual particularly drives this home, as it does not gain its power through resemblance (as perhaps the clay dragon does). It is simply by arbitrary determination that the wooden vessel stands in for a deceased relative. The wooden vessel itself shares no features of the original ancestor other than its being placed into a particular ritual and communal context in a way the original ancestor would have been. This placement itself is enough to invoke the features and memories of the ancestor, and the reverence shown toward the ritual vessel in a ceremony is reverence shown to the ancestor, that is, the *zhen* thing itself, and not to the wooden vessel as such.

It looks like we have here a variety of ways that non-*zhen* objects can manifest the properties of *zhen* objects as *zhen*. One way is to serve as modifying tools, as in the burning glass case. Another way is to serve as representation or reminder of a *zhen* object, as in the case of the wooden vessel. In the case of such vessels, they command respect from persons on

the basis of that which they are meant to represent. In the vessel case, it is not resemblance but selection by caveat that gives the object this power. In other cases, resemblance can play this role. Wang discusses the situation of a student of Confucius, You Ruo, who resembled Confucius. After Confucius' death, You Ruo would take Confucius' seat, and the followers of Confucius would honor You Ruo in this position as a homage to Confucius.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Luanlong* 17.



## Naturalism: *Tian* and *Qi*

### NATURE AND NATURALISM IN EARLY CHINESE THOUGHT: WAS WANG A “NATURALIST”?

Along with “skeptic”, another moniker often applied to Wang is “naturalist”<sup>1</sup>. This, although somewhat misleading, is not, I think, as inappropriate as the former title. Wang did reject the operation of nondeterministic immaterial entities such as ghosts, spirits, and the efficacy of (transcendent) divination, and held that the patterns of nature in general are the same as the patterns of human life. The same regularities, substances, and phenomena that control the natural world also control human life and activity. In this sense, however, Wang cannot be taken as “iconoclastic”—in this he was really no different than most of the Chinese philosophers of his age, even if he diverged to some extent from less considered and more popular common views. Thus, to call Wang a naturalist is not really informative—it does not give us any unique information about Wang as distinct from other thinkers. Almost all of the Han thinkers were naturalists in Wang’s sense, as were

<sup>1</sup>Forke, Wing-tsit Chan (who labeled his discussion of Wang in his *Sourcebook* “The Naturalism of Wang Ch’ung”). Yiu-ming Fung refers to Wang’s thought as naturalist in his “Philosophy in the Han Dynasty”, in Mou ed. *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 293. Fabrizio Pregadio uses both “skeptic” in *Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*.

many of those before the Han. In addition, there are myriad problems with determining just what “naturalism” amounts to. Almost everyone who uses the term has a different conception of what it means.<sup>2</sup>

One title that in no way fits Wang is that of “materialist”, which has also occasionally been given to him.<sup>3</sup> Although Wang did have a deterministic conception of the operation of nature, one feature that seemingly matches up with contemporary Western scientific understandings, he did not have a strictly materialist conception of the operation of nature, and certainly did not accept a physical reductionist picture of nature. He accepted the existence and efficacy of decidedly nonmaterial entities, most specifically *qi* 氣 (vital spirit<sup>4</sup>), which, as we will see, was the most central metaphysical concept in Wang’s thought, along with *tian* (nature, heaven) itself. While *qi* cannot be considered transcendent or not subject to the laws of nature, it is also not a physical entity along the lines of bodies. Contemporary scientific naturalism and materialism or physicalism often go hand in hand and are often so closely linked that we can fail to notice the distinction between the two.<sup>5</sup> But there *is* a distinction, and a consideration of the early Chinese case just makes this even clearer. Part of the contemporary conception of naturalism that links it to materialism is the view (assumption) that only physical matter can act in lawlike ways, only relations between material objects can be determined, and explained resorting to laws. Physical causation is the paradigm for modern science, and the idea on which the entirety of the naturalistic system is built. This need not be the case, however. If there are truly nonphysical entities, there is no reason that these entities should not be able to interact with one another and with material in such a way as to also respect lawlike regularities. And this is just the view of Wang Chong and many other early Chinese thinkers.

<sup>2</sup>Akeel Bilgrami discusses the genealogy of the idea, which he says grows out of a debate in the Royal Society during the seventeenth century. See “The Wider Significance of Naturalism”.

<sup>3</sup>Tian Changwu, “Wang Ch’ung: An Ancient Chinese Militant Materialist”, *Chinese Studies in Philosophy* 7; see also the discussions of naturalism (唯物 weiwu) in Deng Hong, 日本的王充《論衡》研究論著目錄編年提要, 175; Chen Gong, 王充思想評論, 194.

<sup>4</sup>Occasionally also translated “psychophysical stuff”, which I think works best with Han correlative cosmological texts such as *Chunqiu Fanlu*.

<sup>5</sup>In part because some take physicalism as the basis of naturalism or assume as much.

There is a sense, then, in which the majority of Han thinkers as well as Wang Chong can be called naturalist, without being *materialists*.<sup>6</sup> In order to determine this sense, we have to backtrack to at least the Warring States Period, in particular to investigate the philosophical views of the Confucian thinker Xunzi, whose influence on subsequent Warring States and Han philosophy cannot be underestimated. Dong Zhongshu, often taken as the arch-correlativist in early Han thought,<sup>7</sup> was greatly influenced by Xunzi's thought, and wrote a no-longer extant poem praising Xunzi.<sup>8</sup>

Although much of later Confucianism is colored by the Mencian interpretation and can lead one to the view that Mencius was the dominant Confucian figure throughout the history of Chinese thought, in the early Han period Xunzi's thought was far more influential. Even if it were not for explicit statements to this effect, we would be able to clearly see the influence simply by noting the tenor of Han thought itself, which is almost completely Xunzian. Early Han thought (and later Han thought to some extent) accepts and extends Xunzi's naturalism and his understanding of the key concepts of the naturalistic system.

The reasons for the rise of naturalism in the Han dynasty, specifically correlative naturalism, as well as the rise of Xunzian thought, are numerous and complex. We might generalize to some extent, though, given that the main aim here is to understand its development insofar as it is relevant to Wang Chong's own conception of the operation of the world. The relevant similarities between Wang's philosophical background, his own naturalism, and the naturalism of our own time are numerous. We can profitably read many of the concerns Wang has and the problems he wishes to solve as similar enough to the philosophical problems of contemporary naturalist thought as to offer positions on these same problems, positions that we can appraise by Wang Chong's own lights, using

<sup>6</sup>Despite the fit of the "naturalism" moniker, there are nonnaturalist aspects of their thought as well. Joshua Brown and I argue in *Transcendence and Substance in Early Chinese Thought* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming) that reading early Chinese philosophers as naturalist has obscured important aspects of their thought.

<sup>7</sup>Although there is good evidence that Dong was not responsible for the *Chunqiu Fanlu*. See Loewe, who argues that the *Chunqiu Fanlu* was an aggregated text attributed to Dong because of his naturalism, and because he was an acceptable unifying figure. Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu, A "Confucian" Heritage and the Chunqiu Fanlu*.

<sup>8</sup>Noted in Goldin, "Xunzi and Early Han Philosophy", p. 135, evidence comes from Liu Xiang's preface to Wang Xianqian's *Xunzi Jijie*.

his method of questioning and challenging, and that we also might weigh against competing or alternative answers to these problems from contemporary philosophy or elsewhere in the history of philosophy.

A number of people have argued that the focus on correlative metaphysics in the early Han dynasty was linked to the state/empire building project of the Han court.<sup>9</sup> Although it is certainly hard to prove such a connection, there must be something to this, and it may also provide part of the reason for the embrace of Xunzian thought over Mencian thought in the early Han.

One common belief about early Han philosophy, however, needs to be dispelled. It is sometimes said that there is a “victory of Confucianism” in early Han thought, in which Confucianism is endorsed by the Han court as the official philosophy and eclipses schools such as Huang-Lao, Legalism, and so on. Although scholars who make this claim are certainly correct that the name of Confucianism was embraced by the Han court, the view that there was a victory of Confucianism is flawed, I believe fatally, by the shift in the conception of both “schools” (*jia* 家) and philosophical method in the early Han, which developed in part in response to the centralizing tendencies of the Han government. What we can see in the early Han, then, is not a victory of Confucianism, but rather a victory of a particular method of doing philosophy, what I call the “convergence method”, in the *name* of Confucianism. It turns out that the two schools, Huang-Lao and Confucianism, both adopted the convergence method and were in fact almost indistinguishable in content as compared to the radical differences between pre-Qin schools such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Mohism. This shift led to a situation in which Han philosophical works looked less diverse and less contentious than previous works, and this leads some scholars to determine that philosophical thought ended in the Han, or shifted to a focus on scholarship or “scholasticism”.<sup>10</sup>

The rise of naturalism and the rise of the convergence method of philosophy are two aspects of the same story, that both have their origin in Xunzi and the rise of Xunzian thought. In making the connection between

<sup>9</sup> Chun-shu Chang, in *Rise of the Chinese Empire, Vol. 1* (p. 104) argues this, for example.

<sup>10</sup> This position has been fairly widely held and is probably in part the result of many years of Han bashing, from the Song philosophers through twentieth-century reformers. [cite texts]. Philosopher Chad Hansen expresses this position most colorfully in his *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, when he calls the Han a “philosophical dark age” (p. 15).

Xunzi and early Han thought, Paul Goldin has done much of the heavy lifting, arguing that contrary to later (Song and post-Song) views, Xunzi was both highly influential on early Han thought, and not shunned as a Legalist in Confucian clothing.<sup>11</sup> Goldin argues that we see the clearest and most explicit influence of Xunzi in such formative texts as *Chunqiu Fanlu*, Jia Yi's *Xin shu*, Lu Jia's *Xin yu*, and Shusun Tong's *Han liqi shidu*.

While Xunzi's popularity declined in the later Han, his influence had already done its work, and much of the philosophical work of the late Han is clearly Xunzian in its naturalistic bent and much else. Particularly in the area of metaphysics, Xunzi's influence was deep, if not always acknowledged. The naturalistic thought of Xunzi became so entrenched in Chinese thought by the later Han that it was not always seen as Xunzian, and was often paired with ethical and political views that more widely diverged from Xunzi's thought.

As Goldin demonstrates, the addition of the concept of *qi* to the mechanistic system surrounding *tian* in the *Xunzi* is an innovation of Han thought, beginning with the work of Lu Jia. The mechanistic system of Wang Chong himself relies on these two central concepts of *tian* and *qi*, which we can see as connected to the mechanistic worldview of Xunzi and the later elaborations of Han philosophers such as Lu Jia. The concept of *qi* is further developed by Dong Zhongshu, but Wang Chong's conception of *qi* remains closest to that of Lu Jia, who leaves it fundamental and without (as does Dong) adding the elements of *yin* and *yang* or a more robust metaphysical explanation (for moral value explanation at least). *Qi*, for Wang just as for Lu, is basic and fundamental. In fact, for Wang *qi* is even simpler and more fundamental than it turns out to be for Lu.

The naturalism of Wang Chong is not, as pointed out above, a strictly *materialistic* naturalism, and in this way Wang's naturalism echoes some contemporary naturalistic views of philosophers who wish to move away from a kind of reductive materialism that associates naturalism with materialism. Wang's own conception of naturalism, I believe, can help us to formulate such a position in a plausible way, and in a way that helps us make sense of things like normativity as natural features of the world, which is one of the motivating aspects of such naturalist views.

<sup>11</sup> Goldin, "Xunzi and Early Han Philosophy".

TIAN AND ZIRAN IN EARLY CHINESE THOUGHT  
AND THE *LUNHENG*

The concept of *tian* is a foundational concept in Wang Chong's metaphysical system. His use of the concept in general closely follows the commonly accepted sense in much Han and late Warring States thought, influenced by the naturalism of Xunzi and (to a lesser extent) Zhuangzi.

Wang Chong's use of *tian* is that of a completely spontaneous natural agent. *Tian* does not, according to Wang, see, hear, or think, and thus has no concern for or knowledge of the human realm. He spends a great deal of space in the *Lunheng* debunking views of *tian* that saddle it with conscious agency or otherwise human characteristics. Although *tian* must certainly be thought of as the origin and creative principle of everything there is, *tian* has no agency, and its actions are completely *ziran* 自然 (spontaneous).

It is important to see here that *ziran* does not have the sense of the contemporary word "spontaneous" in its entirety. "Spontaneous" suggests that something happens without agency, and also perhaps without determination. This is not the case with *tian*. Although *tian* displays no conscious agency, it can be said to act in a deterministic rather than a frivolous way. This opens up a few difficulties, however. Wang considers *tian* as the creative principle behind the distribution of *qi* and the events of the cosmos, more like a mechanistic cause than that of a conscious agent. However, Wang also seems to suggest that the actions of *tian* are unknowable precisely because they are undeterminable. The following passage from *Minglu* suggests just this:

天命難知，人不耐審

Heaven's allotment (*tian ming*) is difficult to know, and people do not have the patience to investigate it.<sup>12</sup>

But if they are undeterminable (or overly difficult to determine), then how can they be considered mechanistic rather than frivolous, completely random? And if they are completely random, then how can they be attributed in any way whatsoever to *tian*, rather than just being "so of themselves" in the classical sense of *ziran*? That is, it seems as if Wang must redefine *ziran* here in such a way that it means nothing more than "happening without agency".

<sup>12</sup> *Minglu* 10.



But *tian*, in order to actually be responsible for the activities in the world, must have some mechanism by which it causes these activities, whether humans can understand the mechanism or not. It may be the case that the mechanisms through which *tian* creates (absent agency) are so subtle or complicated that humans could never understand them, and thus *tian*'s activities necessarily appear to us as incomprehensible or random, "self so". But it cannot be the case, if *tian* is causally efficacious, that there are no such mechanisms. And this raises another question as well. If the understanding of *tian*'s creative mechanisms is beyond our capacity, how can we know that they in fact exist and that *tian* is responsible, rather than the activities of the universe spontaneously coming into existence? How can we tell the difference between spontaneous generation and causal mechanism, without the ability to understand the operation of causal mechanism?

Perhaps one way out of this difficulty is to argue that we can know that *tian*'s causal mechanisms *exist*, that there is some efficacy of *tian* on events, but that the complexity of these is such that we cannot understand the mechanisms beyond the fact of their existence. Thus, we cannot determine the effects of *tian*, and to all appearances the effects of *tian* are random and undeterminable.

The early Han text *Huainanzi*, in the *Lanming* chapter, offers a possible way out of this difficulty along the lines of what I describe above. In discussing the concept of the connection between nature (*tian*) and the world, the chapter develops the notion of *ganying* 感應 ("mutual interaction"; "resonance")<sup>13</sup> *Ganying* can be seen as the mechanism through which *tian* causes effects in the world, including the human realm. However, *ganying* is fundamentally mysterious according to *Lanming*, and cannot be fully grasped by humans.<sup>14</sup> The crucial passage in *Lanming* reads:

夫物類之相應，玄妙深微，知不能論，辯不能解，故東風至而酒湛溢，蠶叫絲而商弦絕，或感之也。晝隨灰而月運闕，鯨魚死而彗星出，或動之也。

"That things in their various categories are mutually responsive is something dark, mysterious, deep, and subtle. Knowledge is not capable of assessing it, argument is not capable of explaining it. Thus, when the east wind arrives, wine turns clear and overflows its vessels; when silkworms secrete

<sup>13</sup> Major, Queen, et al. translate it as "resonance", see *Huainanzi*, p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Dong Zhongshu will further develop this concept to speak specifically of the *ganying* between *tian* and *ren*.

fragmented silk, the *shang* string [of a stringed instrument] snaps. Something has stimulated them. When a picture is traced out with the ashes of reeds, the moon's halo has a corresponding gap. When the leviathan dies, comes appear. Something has moved them."<sup>15</sup>

We notice, according to this passage, that there are certain regularities in nature, what David Hume referred to as “constant conjunction”, between certain events and other events. There is a rich history in Western philosophy of dealing with the problem of causation beginning in this basic human discovery. We notice constant conjunctions, such as that smoke always follows when there is fire. Beyond this, however, we are unable to understand anything about the efficacious causal mechanism that necessitates one event on the occasion of its “cause”. As philosophers such as Hume, and before him Descartes, pointed out, constant conjunction is not the same as causation.

Why is it not? Causation, if it is truly such, entails necessity—such that when the cause is present, and barring mitigating circumstances, the effect *must* come about. When a match is struck in a room with enough oxygen, without the match being damp, and so on (these are the mitigating circumstances), the match must catch flame, if there is truly causation involved. Not only does it entail necessity, though—it also requires a causal power that we cannot gain any understanding of simply through observation of constant conjunction. Observing that every time I flick a match in the right conditions the match lights does not show me any power in the match (or any other part of the process) that causes the flame. It simply shows me that one event (the match lighting) constantly follows the other (striking the match), and from this we *infer* a causal mechanism, without observing or understanding it.

Notice that the problem of causation here is not solved by gaining more elaborate and technical empirical understanding of the process of lighting a match. Improving our scientific understanding of events will still not show us a causal power. Say that we have determined now that oxygenation combined with the heat from friction and the chemical makeup of the surface of the match cause the match to light aflame. What have we really done here? This is simply a more complex statement of causal conjunction: every time we see that oxygenation, a certain friction level, a chemical makeup, and so on correspond in the right way, we find that a match lights aflame. This still gives us no explanation of any causal necessity

<sup>15</sup> *Huainanzi, Lanming* 2. Major et al. trans., 216–217.

or causal power leading to the lighting aflame of the match. Any scientific observation or theory is only based on induction, and can only be good for prediction, not for necessitation. No scientific theory (or law!) can tell us that the next time we observe the confluence of things that is supposed to light a match aflame, that it will necessarily light.

The above passage from the *Huainanzi*, and early Chinese thought in general, is much less concerned about the seeming human inability to access and understand causal mechanisms than what we see in modern Western philosophy, especially during sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. There is a good, solid historical reason for this. In Ancient Greece, just as in early China, there was not the same concern with causal mechanism that we see in sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Europe. In this period in Western thought, the mechanistic view of the universe that had begun with the investigations into the regularities of the heavens by astronomers such as Tycho Brahe, and Johannes Kepler and reached its peak with the mathematical and physical work of Isaac Newton, demanded necessity in its account of mechanism and natural determinism. Thinkers in this time demanded *laws*, and laws were seen as requiring necessity. The paradigm being Newton's laws, thought to be such that they could not be resisted—there simply were no exceptions to laws of nature as such.

Although the concept of *ganying* is an elaboration of the causal mechanism of *tian*, and more developed than earlier views of the efficacy of *tian*, the basic position that we can understand *tian* to have causal efficacy without being able to give a determinate account of the causal mechanisms or powers is a feature of earlier texts as well.

If Wang is read as developing the view of the *Lanming* chapter that *tian*'s causal efficacy, although it can be known to exist, cannot be known or determined beyond this, we can make sense of his seemingly contradictory claims about the deterministic and mechanistic efficacy of a *tian* without conscious agency on the one hand and the indeterminacy of the effects of *tian*'s activity on the other hand. The indeterminacy is only then an *apparent* indeterminacy. *Ziran*, then, is the sense in which *tian*'s causal mechanism is without agency and beyond human understanding. This is actually not very far from the sense of “spontaneity” discussed earlier as problematic. On a fully deterministic/mechanistic view of the world, there can be no actions fully “of themselves” in the sense that they have no cause,<sup>16</sup> even though there can be events the causes of which we are (and perhaps are *necessarily*) ignorant. Such actions can be considered

<sup>16</sup>The “Principle of Sufficient Reason” was stressed in the Western scientific/mechanistic era of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, as discussed above.

“spontaneous” not in the sense of their actual arising of themselves, but rather as an epistemological claim about our knowledge of their arising and the limits of this knowledge.

Wang discusses the concept of *ziran* specifically in the *Ziran* chapter, where he links it with the causal power of *tian*, and presents an argument for the view that *tian*'s activity must be *ziran*. The opening of *Ziran* reads:

天地合氣，萬物自生，猶夫婦合氣，子自生矣。

Heaven and earth unite *qi*, and the myriad things are created of themselves. It is just like the unity of the *qi* of a husband and wife leads to the creation of a child of itself.<sup>17</sup>

This statement should be taken as one expressing both lack of conscious agency and lack of access to causal mechanisms, but clearly here in *Zi ran* the emphasis is on the former, as Wang wishes to refute the position that *tian* manifests conscious agency or acts in a *wei* manner. We can see that he is after this as he continues in the next sentence:

萬物之生，含血之類，知飢知寒。見五穀可食，取而食之；見絲麻可衣，取而衣之。或說以為天生五穀以食人，生絲麻以衣人。此謂天為人作農夫、桑女之徒也，不合自然，故其義疑，未可從也。

Among the myriad things that are created, those things of the type that contain blood all know hunger and know cold. They see that the five kinds of grain can be eaten, and they cultivate and eat them. They see that silk and hemp can be worn, and they put them on and wear them. Some believe that heaven (purposefully) creates the five kinds of grain for humans to eat, and creates silk and hemp for humans to wear. This is like saying that heaven is the farmer or the mulberry girl servant of humans. This is not spontaneous activity, thus we can doubt its rectitude, and cannot consent to it.<sup>18</sup>

*Ziran* has the sense, in Wang's use, of marking the inability to control, determine, or effect changes.<sup>19</sup> That which happens *ziran* is that over which we have no control—we do not create it, and cannot alter it in any way. It happens regardless of the actions we take. The activities of *tian* are a prime example of this. Wang says, in *Ming lu*:

<sup>17</sup> *Ziran* 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ziran* 1.

<sup>19</sup> This understanding of *ziran* is continuous with what we find in Warring States texts such as *Zhuangzi*, where *ziran* is opposed to *wei*. In a number of passages of *Lunheng*, Wang expresses this connection. (*Onhui*—“In truth it is spontaneous, and without agency”; *Chubing*—“Spontaneity and being without agency—this is the way of tian”).

夫富貴不欲為貧賤，貧賤自至；貧賤不求為富貴，富貴自得也。春夏囚死，秋冬王相，非能為之也；日朝出而暮入，非求之也，天道自然

People of fortune and wealth do not desire poverty and disvalue, but poverty and disvalue can accrue of themselves. People of poverty and disvalue may not seek fortune and wealth, yet fortune and wealth can come of themselves. Whether one is imprisoned and killed in spring or summer, or invested in office by the king in autumn or winter, these cannot be brought about by one's efforts. The sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening, without anyone seeking it—rather, it is a matter of the spontaneity (*ziran*) of the way of heaven (*tiandao*).<sup>20</sup>

What Wang says here can be seen as fairly continuous with the passage above from the *Lanming* chapter of *Huainanzi* and Wang's claims in *Ziran*, although Wang does not use the term "*ganying*" to describe this.<sup>21</sup>

*Tian*, although responsible for the events of the world in terms of causation, displays no agency and no *wei*, and acts in a purely *ziran* manner. As part of this lack of agency, we can also say that there is no *conscious purpose* of the creative activity of *tian*. It simply acts—it does not act on the basis of reasons or choice. This is another feature of *ziran* that is continuous with contemporary naturalism. There have been many attempts to ground purposiveness in nature (teleological accounts of almost everything in philosophy abound), and any reductive account which an ancient naturalist (including in ancient China) would accept will have to be an account ultimately grounded in *ziran*, in purposelessness. *Tian* does not design the seasons with the intent of creating the growing periods or construct human hearts for the purpose of grounding the circulatory system. Although there may be purposefulness in these systems from the perspective of humans, *tian* itself creates without purpose, and any purposefulness of a thing must ultimately be reduced to and explained in terms of the purposeless activity of *tian*. Two passages from the *Taizu* chapter of *Huainanzi* express this:

天致其高，地致其厚，月照其夜，日照其晝，陰陽化，列星朗，非其道而物自然。故陰陽四時，非生萬物也；雨露時降，非養草木也。神明接，陰陽和，而萬物生矣。

<sup>20</sup> *Minglu* 8.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, *ganying* appears in only a single passage in the entire *Lunheng*, in *Bianrong*, and this in a much more conventional, colloquial sense seemingly with none of the technical meaning it is given in early Han texts.

Heaven extends to the highest; earth extends to the thickest. The moon illuminates the nights; the sun illuminates the days. The arrayed stars are bright and clear; yin and yang transform. There is no purposeful activity in this. [...] Yin and yang cycle through four seasons, but not in order to generate the myriad things. Rain and dew fall in season, but not in order to nurture grasses and trees. Spirit and illumination join, yin and yang harmonize, and the myriad things are born.<sup>22</sup>

天地四時，非生萬物也，神明接，陰陽和，而萬物生之

Heaven, Earth, and the four seasons do not purposefully produce the ten thousand things. Spirit and illumination join, yin and yang harmonize, and the myriad things are born.<sup>23</sup>

Wang's own statements of the agentless, *ziran*, material efficacy of *tian* can be found in multiple chapters of the *Lunheng*, often expressed in almost exactly the same way.

In *Ziran*, Wang writes:

天者、普施氣萬物之中，穀愈飢而絲麻救寒，故人食穀、衣絲麻也。夫天之不故生五穀絲麻以衣食人，由其有災變不欲以譴告人也。物自生，而人衣食之；氣自變，而人畏懼之。以若說論之，厭於人心矣。如天瑞為故，自然焉在？

Reasoning on Daoist principles we find that *tian* emits its fluid everywhere. Among the many things of this world grain dispels hunger, and silk and hemp protect from cold. For that reason man eats grain, and wears silk and hemp. That *tian* does not produce grain, silk, and hemp purposely, in order to feed and clothe mankind, follows from the fact that by calamitous changes it does not intend to reprove man. Things are produced spontaneously, and man wears and eats them; the *qi* changes spontaneously, and man is frightened by it, for the usual theory is disheartening. Where would be spontaneity, if the heavenly signs were intentional, and where inaction?<sup>24</sup>

Wang continues on in *Ziran* to give a number of fairly weak arguments to show that the activity of *tian* must be spontaneous. Wang's far-stronger arguments, and his strength in general, surround his negative arguments, in this case showing that it cannot be the case that *tian* has agency. The spontaneity of *tian*'s action follows directly from this. His positive arguments for the spontaneity of *tian*'s activity in *Ziran*, however, are hardly compelling.

<sup>22</sup> *Taizu* 4. *Huainanzi* Major et al, trans. pp. 799–800.

<sup>23</sup> *Taizu* 4. *Huainanzi* Major et al. trans., pp. 802–803.

<sup>24</sup> *Ziran* 2. (Forker trans.).

He argues that since *tian* does not have eyes or a mouth, it cannot possibly have the desires that make agency possible. In order for an action to be an action of an agent, Wang suggests, the action must be motivated by and aim at the desire satisfaction of the agent. Needless to say, there are a number of problems with this. First, Wang needs to argue that the lack of a mouth and eyes entail lack of desire, and also that agency requires desire of this kind, neither of which can be assumed. In addition, his argument to show that *tian* indeed lacks eyes and a mouth (earth doesn't have them, and *tian* and earth are counterparts, so *tian* doesn't have them either) is quite weak. If we admit that there are any differences between *tian* and earth at all, why can't we hold that this difference (the obtaining of ears and a mouth) may be one of them? How do we know it isn't? Wang needs an argument here.

In a second and more interesting argument, Wang confronts the position that any activity of movement must originate in some desire (even if it doesn't *directly* follow from a desire), and thus there must be agency in *tian* to ground and explain this desire. This position might remind us of similar arguments from Aristotle, especially his argument for the existence of an "unmoved mover". Wang responds to this by offering an account of an action he thinks is a clear example of spontaneous generation, the birth of a child from the combination of sperm and egg (Wang actually attributes the creative activity to the male *qi*, the sperm, a common misconception in the ancient world in general). Wang uses this example throughout *Lunheng* as an explanation of *ziran* action. It is curious that he uses it as an attempted response to the "unmoved mover" argument, however, mainly because it is a problematic as a response given the initial intuition behind the "unmoved mover" argument.

Wang argues that not every action must be the action of a conscious agent, because there are some actions of humans, such as the emission of semen and the subsequent generation of children, that are not directly intentional and happen *ziran*. The generation and growth of a child in the womb do not happen through any conscious operation of either the male or the female, and can happen despite their intentions to either avoid or create a child. Here, Wang is clearly talking about the generative act itself—the process by which the sperm fertilizes the egg and begins the process ending in the generation of a child. Neither party has control over this—they do not cause it to happen, nor can they control it.

If nothing else is said about the case, however, it proves problematic. The idea seems to be that there is no conscious control over the generation of a child in this case. But it seems we can make this claim for *any*

activity the causation of which we generally attribute to humans and claim arise through actions of agents. There is decision and desire involved in the act, in most cases at least, and seemingly the only difference between this case and paradigm cases of human causal agency is that the generation of children *takes longer*, so does not directly and immediately follow upon its inciting action.

Take the example of punching a plaster wall. It may appear, because of the brevity of all of the various causal connections, that one's fist hits the wall, and this directly causes the wall to crumble around it. But if we investigate what is actually going on, this is not true. One's fist hits the wall, and the force imparted to the wall by the fist is transferred to the wall ( $F=ma$ ), while the reverse happens as well. The strength of the wall is either enough to withstand the force in the particular spot punched, or is not, and if it is not, it crumbles in that spot. Let us consider what it actually is that the puncher does in this case. We might say that the puncher's action extends to all of the functions and movements of his own body, which include the first hitting the wall. Following the structure of Wang's example of generation of children, however, we should be able to say that the *force* generated by the puncher's fist is not controlled by him, and it is the force that is ultimately responsible for the breaking of the wall, not his fist (a fist alone cannot break a wall—a force can). Since the man cannot be said to have control over this (the force generated by his fist is the cause), then isn't this a parallel to the case of child generation, and mustn't we then say that the man did not cause the wall to break, but that this was *ziran* based on the confluence of force and the wall?

Clearly, there is a problem with the above argument. Part of the problem is that we are clearly not allowing agency to extend deeply enough into the causal structure of the world in this case. It cannot be the case that every agent-caused action must be directly caused by some intention or other, or else the only agent-caused actions would turn out to be the tiniest connection between neurons representing initial intentions and the motor system, if even that. Intentions have to be able to penetrate causally into the world, if we are to make sense of conscious agency at all. And if this is the case, then to determine agency in many cases we need not find a *directly* causal intention (again, this would all be within the brain), but would need to find an initial intention connected to a relevant action in a chain of causes. This is why we can seemingly plausibly say that the generation of children might be the act of



agents—two people may have engaged in the sexual act with the intention of creating a child, and so on.. Alternatively, it could also fail to be the act of any agent (say two nudists fell into each other in the wrong way, mated while asleep, or some other crazy scenario), or perhaps only the act of a single agent (in cases of rape, etc.). It does not need to be merely a manner of speech to say that a person or people *intentionally* created a child. Their causal role in this generation should be good enough to confer agency, if it can do so in any other human action, for which there is always a causal chain in which the final outcome is not directly linked to an intention.

Of course, Wang Chong could not have been expected to know scientific facts about the operation of the brain or the details of modern mechanics, biology, and so on. Still, there are plenty of cases of agent-caused action in which intentions pretty clearly “emanate” into the world. Consider the case of a game of billiards—a person strikes a ball, which then rolls into another ball and moves it. Even without a knowledge of physics, clearly the second ball is moved by the first ball, and not by the initial movement of the cue stick by the player. Does sinking the eight-ball in the corner pocket then *not* count as the action of the billiard player? Should we declare the defeat of the player on this account?

The case of generation of children can be considered as analogous to the billiard game example, albeit with much more time in between the initial intention of creating a child and the outcome of generation of a child. But, given that there was this initial intention and the sexual act engaged in as a means, why should we deny agency here if we wouldn't deny it in the billiards case? What, that is, makes the generation *ziran* in a way that sinking the eight-ball is *not ziran*, or punching through a wall (which happens faster but is no less the result of a causal chain in which intention is not involved in each step of the chain) is not *ziran*?

In addition, if we deny agency in the case of generation of children, how can we make the distinction between intentional and unintentional generation of children? This seems to be the whole purpose of the concept of agency altogether—to be able to attribute responsibility, often for moral and forensic purposes<sup>25</sup>. Wang himself uses a similar argument in *Tantian*, arguing that if we attribute agency in the case of every action and

<sup>25</sup> See Locke's *Essay*—Locke attributes the concern with personhood, which involves the issue of agency, to forensic concerns as well. I think Locke's position is very close to a prevalent position on agency and personhood in early China, most visibly championed by early

event, we lose the ability to distinguish between intentional and unintentional events.<sup>26</sup> I argue, however, that Wang's denial of agency in cases of generation of children can lead to the same difficulty. Should we hold that generation of children is *ziran*, agentless, in cases of intentional procreation as well as unintentional (the two people falling into each other in the right way)?

Wang's account of *ziran* action, then, although it might apply to certain actions in nature, cannot show that there is *not* agency manifested in nature. Agency cannot require direct intention. Surely we want to admit that certain actions *are ziran*, but determining just which actions are *ziran* will prove difficult, especially if all we have access to are the events themselves. Even if one observed a game of billiards, for example, and had no idea that humans formed and operated on intentions, one would not necessarily be able to discover agency.<sup>27</sup> Whether we recognize agency is going to be dependent on our recognition to activity similar enough to what our *own* agent-caused activity looks like, simply because by their very nature, one cannot *observe* intentions.<sup>28</sup> Given that *tian*, whatever it is, is going to have to be a very different kind of entity from humans, we likely would not recognize the kinds of actions that would suggest intention to something more familiar with the workings of the mind of *tian*. When we see another human blush, we safely assume they feel embarrassment, simply because we recognize this mental state from our own cases. If an alien were to see a human blush, however, they may simply think this is a random biological effect like tanning or acne that is completely independent from mental state.

Thus, Wang's position of *ziran* as a feature of the activity of *tian* had not been proven. As mentioned previously, however, Wang is at a much greater advantage when giving his negative arguments. His opponent has also failed to demonstrate (and presumably never *could* demonstrate) that

Confucians (see my "Ren as a Communal Property in the *Analects*" and "In the World of Persons: The Personhood Debate in the *Analects* and *Zhuangzi*").

<sup>26</sup> *Tantian*.

<sup>27</sup> It is this difficulty that serves as the basis of the brilliant fictional move in Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*—humans encounter an alien intelligence, that acts as a cloud, and each species is unable to discern agency in the other, as their expectations of what is intentional is tied to physical appearance and activity similar to their own.

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, there has been a long and contentious debate through history about whether nonhuman animals have agency or personhood, with the most sophisticated and compelling arguments that many do coming in recent work.

*tian* does exhibit agency. Wang can and does show, given his examples, that any agency *tian* might have could not be similar to human agency, and thus arguments to demonstrate *tian*'s agency that take it to manifest agency on the basis of performing actions similar to those in which humans manifest agency founder on the objections such as Wang's that *tian* has no mouth or eyes, no hands or feet, and is far distant from humans.

On the nature of *tian* as specific entity, Wang makes a somewhat strange argument in the *Tantian*, arguing against the *ru* position that *tian* is a form of *qi* (in the sense of "air" or "vapor"). Instead, Wang argues, *tian* should be considered as a body (身 *shen*), one that is far distant from humans, which in part explains its inability to directly intervene in human affairs in the ways the "common beliefs" hold that it can. It is unclear, however, if *tian* is far removed body, in what way it can be causally or otherwise responsible for the distribution of *qi* to objects in the world and constitute the fundamental explanation of events in the world. It is, after all, the supposed distance of *tian* from us that makes it implausible, according to Wang, that *tian* intervenes in human affairs. Wang says, in the closing section of *Tantian*:

人生於天，何嫌天無氣？猶有體在上，與人相遠。祕《傳》或言：天之離天下，六萬餘里。數家計之，三百六十五度一周天。下有周度，高有里數。如天審氣，氣如雲煙，安得里度？又以二十八宿效之，二十八宿為日月舍，猶地有郵亭為長吏廨矣。郵亭著地，亦如星舍著天也。

Men are created by *tian*, why then grudge it a body? *Tian* is not air, but has a body on high and far from men. According to private traditions *tian* is upwards of sixty thousand *li* distant from the earth. Some mathematicians reckon the entire circumference of *tian* at 365 degrees. Thus the world all round is divided into degrees, and its height measures a certain number of *li*. If *tian* were really air, air like clouds and mist, how could then it be so many *li* or so many degrees? Besides we have the "twenty-eight constellations" which serve as resting places for the sun and moon, just as on earth the couriers lodge in postal stations. The postal stations on earth correspond to the solar mansions on *tian*. Hence the statement found in books that heaven has a body is not baseless.<sup>29</sup>

If all of this is so, and *tian* is a body at such a remarkable distance from humanity, then how can it be responsible for the creation of humans from afar? By removing *tian* to undermine the *ru* and common claims about its

<sup>29</sup> *Tantian* 13 (Forker trans.).

knowledge of our actions and ability to reward and punish, Wang also seems to take it so far away that it could not possibly be responsible for our creation. He at least owes us an account of how it is that *tian*'s supposed creative power can bridge that distance, but no purported governing power could.

This discrepancy is, I think, due to the influence and Wang's changes of the earlier concept of *ganying* as we find it developed in the *Huainanzi* and later in the *Chunqiu Fanlu*. As I mentioned above, Wang does not use the concept of *ganying* in the *Lunheng*, and he is carefully reticent about it—it appears only once in the entire work. Clearly, then, Wang was aware of the concept, and much of what he says and develops in his theory of *tian* seem to rely on aspects of *ganying*. However, Wang's arguments against the agency of *tian* include the premise that *tian* is so far distant from humans that it could not possibly interact with them as intimately as the *ru* and other claim. *Ganying*, however, allows for just this. Wang, as offering a naturalistic and mechanistic picture of the world, has no room for such an extra-mechanistic concept that allows for nonmechanistic causal activity. While he does away with the notion of *ganying*, however, Wang implicitly retains a number of features of it in his own view, and it is these features that create a tension with Wang's stated naturalistic and mechanistic view of *tian* and its creative power.

Sarah Queen, John Major, and the other translators of the Columbia University Press *Huainanzi* explain the concept of *ganying* operative in the *Huainanzi* in their appendix on terms in their translation. They write:

Fundamentally, “resonance” [*ganying*] is a process of dynamic interaction that transcends the limits of time, space, and ordinary linear causality. Through the mechanism of resonance, an event in one location (the “stimulus”) produces simultaneous effects in another location (the “response”), even though the two phenomena have no direct spatial or mechanical contact. They may indeed be separated by vast gulfs of space. For example, connections between celestial events (eclipses, planetary motions) and events in the human community were understood as examples of “resonance”.<sup>30</sup>

Wang seems to have accepted the efficacy of something like *ganying* in cases of the connection between celestial events and events in human society,

<sup>30</sup> *Huainanzi*, Major et al., p. 875.

as he seems to endorse the various views about the portentous nature of celestial events.<sup>31</sup> Wang seems to accept the causal efficacy of *ganying* in one direction, that is, the *tian* to *ren* direction, in certain cases, but consistently denies the efficacy of *ren* to *tian* causal efficacy. *Tian* does not respond to human actions, and humans have no power over the activities of *tian* (though as I show in the following chapter, Wang tries to carve out room for *some* level of efficacy of human activity).

<sup>31</sup>For example, in *Biandong*: “The fact that the ‘Hook’ star (Mercury) is amidst the ‘House’ constellation forebodes an earthquake” (Forke 112).



## Free Will, Allotment, and Inborn Characteristics

The question of free will in early China manifests itself in somewhat different ways than it does in much of contemporary analytic philosophy, based in certain historical (mostly but not exclusively Western) philosophical work. Some scholars argue that there is no problem concerning the tension between free will and determinism in early China,<sup>1</sup> but I think there is a great deal of evidence that this is wrong. In other work, I argue that the lack of specific terms corresponding to concepts as they appear in contemporary philosophical contexts does not show that a thinker or tradition does not have such concepts. The issue of the tension between free will and determinism arises in a number of different ways in early Chinese texts, and there is no *single* problem of free will and determinism that we can narrow down as such. But then again, it is unclear that there is such a single problem in Western traditions either. We generally discuss a particular *class* of problems under the heading of problems concerning free will. If we required a single conception of this problem in Western traditions in order to demonstrate that Western traditions are concerned with this problem, it is unclear we could find it there any more than we can in early Chinese traditions.

As with truth, there is a *cluster* of concepts and problems in the early Chinese tradition that we can understand as free will-determinism problems. The problem of the conflict between free will and determinism arises in

<sup>1</sup>For example, Chenyang Li, “The Confucian Conception of Freedom”, *Philosophy East and West* 64 (4), Kai Marchal and Christian Wenzel, “Chinese Perspectives on Free Will” in Timpe, Griffith, and Levy, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*.

different ways in particular texts and periods. In the early Han (following the origins of the discussion in the Warring States), texts such as *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu* discuss the issue of the ability of humans to act differently than the ways specified by the patterns of nature (天理 *tian li*). These texts generally understand this human agency as on the whole a *bad* thing, a problematic feature of an initial decline from a utopian period of “grand unity” (太一 *tai yi*).<sup>2</sup> The *Huainanzi* suggests that during this period, humans flourished because everyone followed the patterns of nature with no divergence, and during the decline human actions began to diverge from this proper way. This is continuous with the message of *Zhuangzi* and other texts that the key to thriving, to becoming perfected (至 *zhi*) and genuine/true (真 *zhen*) is to follow the patterns or propensities of nature.

Some may deny that this issue is one involving free will and determinism because of the seeming lack of any discussion of choice. However, the early Chinese thinkers must have recognized that the ability to fail to follow natural propensities is itself a matter of agency and self-directedness. After all, were this not the case, then it would be an exercise in futility to write texts enjoining people to act in certain ways, or making normative claims at all, which *most* early Chinese texts are doing. Our failure to follow the natural patterns or propensities is not a matter of a decaying pattern, itself revealing a determined outcome, but rather a matter of our improper motivations, our lack of understanding, and failures of various kinds. That is, failing to follow the natural propensities is an outcome of human *agency*, and indeed it is only an agent who is able to act counter to such patterns and propensities. Inanimate objects such as rocks, or even living things such as plants or animals, have no such ability.<sup>3</sup> Free will, insofar as such is a component of agency, thus appears in a number of early Chinese texts as a *problem*. Solving this problem, according to Zhuangists and a number of early Han thinkers, is a matter of eliminating or subduing the “self”,<sup>4</sup> which can be seen as the locus of agency, and thus an impediment to the direct and automatic following of the natural patterns and propensities, which Zhuangists understand as the cultivation of *ziran* (spontaneous) action.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Huainanzi* discusses the decline, linked to the cosmogony of the first two chapters.

<sup>3</sup> Erica Brindley discusses early views of agency in *Individualism in Early China*.

<sup>4</sup> *Zhuangzi* 4.

<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with strains of the *Daodejing* and other early texts as well. It can also be found in Confucian texts.

Wang Chong deals with a different difficulty concerning free will and determinism that is much more robustly discussed in the Han—the question of the general efficacy of human effort, in terms of self-cultivation, including moral training, medicine, and virtuous government (among other activities). We find concern with this issue as far back as the earliest commentaries on the Zhou texts, and throughout a wide range of different kinds of philosophical text in early China. The question is perhaps more broadly approached than the other question of agency mentioned above. Texts as wide ranging as the commentaries on the *Chunqiu*, early Confucian texts such as *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, the *Mozzi*, and in the Eastern Han, *Lunheng*, Xu Gan's *Zhonglun*, and Wang Fu's *Qianfulun*, to name just a few, deal with the question. In some of these texts, no problem is discussed—there is simply an acknowledgment that human effort or cultivation might be (either on occasion or often) thwarted by external factors such as the times (時 *shi*), which include poor rulership and a host of other situational features not under control of the agent.<sup>6</sup> Where Wang Chong diverges from many of these earlier discussions is the stress he puts on the deterministic aspect of this relationship, while attempting to make sense of the efficacy of human effort within such a deterministic system. It is this discussion through various chapters of the *Lunheng* that I am concerned with in this section, for a number of reasons. First, we see Wang here adopting a unique and interesting approach to the problem of human efficacy in the face of deterministic systems. Second, the issues he discusses suggest recognition of an implicit problem that is not tackled head on in many other texts. Third, Wang's response to the problem he finds concerning the efficacy of human activity, if not successful on its own, suggests a response that we can situate with respect to contemporary philosophical work on the topic. Understanding Wang's solution as that to a problem of free will allows us to understand how his thinking on the issue may be useful in suggesting new approaches to answering these questions.

### HUMAN AGENCY AND FREE WILL

The concept (or concept cluster) of free will is connected closely to that of agency, and centrally involves the issue of *choice*. A free agent is one with control over his or her own actions, such that he can select between multiple courses of action. Notice that the choice of action does not entail the

<sup>6</sup> *Xunzi* 32.7.



success in performance of an action—one's will can be thwarted by external circumstances (indeed, such cases are exactly the one Wang worries about). But there are interesting questions here concerning freedom of will in case of external constraint. On certain conceptions of personhood and mind, freedom of will cannot be consistent with constraint in action, and there is no distinction between free will and free action. On views associating mind with organic activities of the person (which turn out to be more common in early Chinese philosophy than in modern Western philosophy), there can be no such distinction between will and behavioral patterns, which turns out to be part of the reason for the difficulties that arise concerning free will in Wang Chong's *Lunheng* and other early texts.

Much of the Western discussion on free will, ever since the ancient period, has focused on the *reasons* for choice of some actions over others, in part because of the link in much of the Western tradition between free will and moral responsibility, which grows out of the concern with divine reward and punishment. Such a position cannot be found in much of early Chinese thought, and for this reason, some have concluded that problems of free will and determinism did not arise in early China. Kai Marchal and Christian Wenzel, for example, argue that:

Ideas of physical atomism and all-pervading deterministic laws of nature did not emerge in Ancient China. Neither was there the Christian idea of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent creator god. Thus, without the threat posed by physical determinism or divine foreknowledge, no worries about free will arose.<sup>7</sup>

This assumes a *particular* free will problem, one involving divine foreknowledge or scientific determinism as the grounds of determinism, and (implicitly) human divergence from divine will as the origins of the consideration of free will in the Western tradition. While Marchal and Wenzel are certainly right that early Chinese thinkers had neither modern science nor a conception of a God with divine foreknowledge, these are not the only two ways to generate a problem of free will. The problem manifested itself in the early Chinese tradition on the basis of two very different considerations; nonetheless, the free will problem engendered by these considerations is very much the same one that emerges in Western traditions, which at its base boils down to the question of how we can make sense of

<sup>7</sup>Marchal and Wenzel, in Tempe *Routledge Companion to Free Will* (2017), p. 384.

the human ability to choose *different* courses (free will), given aspects of the world that seem to suggest that only a single course (determinism) is possible. My use of “course” here should remind us of the concept of *dao*<sup>8</sup>. Numerous early Chinese schools discuss the possibility of different *daos*, based on choices, external factors, and individual or social character. Free will in its early Chinese character most often focuses on this issue of the possibility of following a number of different *dao*, and the idea that there are some *dao* that are proper and some that are not. In addition, as I discuss below, the issue of *how* humans can fail to follow the proper *dao*, especially when this is one that is built into natural patterns by themselves (as numerous early Chinese texts claim), as well as the issue of how human activity and outcomes often appear determined *despite* our efforts and moral cultivation (discussed as *ming*, “allotment”), all demonstrate concern with the problem of free will in early China.

As mentioned above, the reasons guiding one’s choices tends not to be a major consideration in early Chinese discussions of free will, in part because the conceptions of agency we find in early Chinese text all seem to accept the view that the individual person cannot be taken as an autonomous and independent atom, but is necessarily linked to its environment and community. In much of the historical discussion of agency in the West, philosophers have struggled to make sense of what it means for a willed act to be attributable to an individual rather than having some other cause, in ways that originate in that individual. One common response has been to ground free will in choice on the basis of reasons or desires. Immanuel Kant famously defined agency in terms of autonomy and rationality, which has pervaded the Western tradition ever since. The close link in the Western tradition between moral responsibility and free will confuses the picture for early China. Part of the reason that goal-directedness or basing in reason or desire is necessary is because of this necessity of tying free will to moral responsibility, and the denial of responsibility in nonrational creatures (or ones historically deemed nonrational). It is unclear to me that this is necessary to consider freedom of will, and in the early Chinese literature, we tend not to see this consideration.

There are a couple of reasons for this: (1) free will is not often tied to the issue of moral responsibility and (2) moral responsibility does not require individuality or causal autonomy (which we can likely show is impossible anyway). We can sidestep, then, one question of free will in the

<sup>8</sup>Which Brook Ziporyn as “course” for similar reasons. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*.

Western tradition—that of what it is that makes the will free, in terms of the autonomous choice of an individual, rather than the cause of extra-personal features of the world. This formulation of the problem of free will is not one we tend to see in early China. Rather, the principal issue there is the focus on the ability to *do otherwise*, independently of consideration of whether it is features of an individual distinct from its environment that cause this ability. Most early Chinese thinkers would reject the possibility of this kind of autonomous activity based in reason or desire. The ground of the agent's free will is the possibility of action inconsistent with the action of determinate processes, such as the falling of a rock or the growth of a plant. One might argue that a falling rock or growing plant could also be made otherwise—for example, something could grab the rock, or the plant could be smashed by a rock or lack sunlight and wither. The key is that given the proper conditions for its natural development, a plant will *necessarily* develop in a certain way, and the rock will *necessarily* fall in a certain way. This is different in the case of humans. The suggestion in numerous early texts is that, given proper conditions for natural development (which we might understand as “freedom from constraint”), there are still multiple ways humans might act or develop. Freedom in the early Chinese tradition then is much more commonly understood as possibility of multiplicity of possible *daos* (courses) in unconstrained situations, or when situational features are equal (i.e., given two identical situations, humans could act differently in each case). In response to the question, “How is it that humans are able to act thus differently, given the exact same causal background in both cases?”, numerous early Chinese texts conclude that a degradation of an initial natural process creates the kind of multiplicity necessary to make possible such diversion.<sup>9</sup> This is a kind of *incompatibilist* approach to free will, such that free will is inconsistent with determined cause.

Thus, natural processes may well be responsible for this multiplicity and possibility, but this does not undermine problems associated with free will. This is partly because human activity tends not to be understood as independent of natural processes. We can devise a free will problem completely independently of the issue of the distinction between autonomous agency and natural or deterministic processes, by asking the question of how certain natural processes involved in human action can diverge from earlier patterns of natural processes that did not allow these diversions. That is,

<sup>9</sup> *Huainanzi* 1,2. *Taiyi Sheng Shui*.

determinism suggests a single possible and necessary action and outcome, while we see *multiple* possible actions and outcomes, none of which are necessary. The problem of free will can then be understood as a version of the problem of *indeterminacy* of particular effects, particularly as it involves human agents. Given a particular cause or initial state, multiple outcomes are possible. What makes the difference between whether one of other outcome comes about does not have to be understood in terms of choice or will, but might be on the basis of other unconditioned aspects of the world. As I argue below, this is one of the ways *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity, natural action) is understood in certain early thinkers, and Wang Chong builds on this approach. Will, however, can also play such a role. This will need not be an *unconstrained* will, however. Many early Chinese thinkers hold a view that humans are caused to act on the basis of a number of features, including situation, quality of government, and so on, but that this is consistent with choice and activity on the basis of features of the agent, such as character (early Confucians discuss the petty person and the morally exemplary person in this way). Wang Chong also seems to offer such a view, though his commitment to a seemingly hard determinism muddies the water, as I discuss below.

One interesting feature of early Chinese discussions to note, particularly for Zhuangists and Han syncretists, is the sense in which the perfected person seems to be a completely *determined* agent. This is the very problem that taxes theists in the West from the medieval period onward—if God is a perfect agent, then God always acts perfectly good—but does this mean that God does not have the ability to act otherwise, and is unfree? The answer to this question given in much of the early Chinese tradition would appear unacceptable to most of the Western thinkers who considered this problem—that is, the perfected person *is* unfree. But this need not present itself as a problem, if there is no intrinsic value to free will of itself. Given that early Chinese texts present free will as a problem, because it allows us to diverge from the proper *dao* (or, if you will, the Good), a determined entity always tracking the Good is thus a more perfect entity than those that have the ability to do other than the Good. Not every ability is positively valuable.

The particularly pressing problem for Wang Chong is a different problem of free will and determinism that has deep roots in the early Chinese philosophical tradition. A question that taxes early Chinese thinkers is that of whether humans have any effect on their own allotment (命 *ming*), the outcomes of their actions, or their actions themselves. Does self-cultivation

change our character, or are these characters determined on the basis of features of our inborn characteristics (性 *xing*)? The efficacy of agency to make a difference in outcomes can be understood as an issue concerning the *possibility* of free will as it connects to conduct. As we can see in many early Chinese texts, the issue of intention or will (*zhi* 志) is not independent of that of behavior (*xing* 行).

### DE 德 (POTENCY)

We see cultivation in terms of the generation of potency (*de* 德), an ability or power to have a greater effect on one's world. A general picture seems to be that one operates on oneself through cultivation (*xiu shen* 修身), and that this cultivation allows one to become more effective in altering the world through the generation of potency (*Analects* 16.1). In early Confucian texts, *de* is something that some have naturally, and that for others can be learned (*Analects* 7.3; 7.23), and is specifically connected to moral virtue (thus the translation of *de* as “virtue” for many translators of early Confucian texts).

In the *Mengzi*, we see an emphasis on the aspect of *de* as a motivating force on others, an influence that suggests a power to change other people and aspects of the world. The greatest, most effective, and desirable *de* is that of the morally exemplary person (*junzi*) or the sage, but even undeveloped people have *de* according to *Mengzi*—the difference is that their *de* is not as potent as that of the developed and exemplary person.<sup>10</sup> In 3A2, *Mengzi* explains that the difference between the *de* of the morally exemplary person and that of the petty person is that the exemplary person's *de*, like the wind, has an effect on everything around it—it reshapes and moves that on which it blows. The *de* of the petty person on the other hand is like the grass that gives way to the wind, bending along with its blowing. The suggestion here (reminiscent of *Analects* 12.19) is that the effectiveness or causal potency of the morally exemplary person is greater than that of the petty person. Development of an *authoritative de* is then a matter of the kind of moral learning *Mengzi* enjoins.<sup>11</sup> One's *de* can be good or bad, with the attendant effects.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Mengzi* 3A2: 君子之德，風也；小人之德，草也。

<sup>11</sup> This is brought out by the Ames and Rosemont translation of *de* as “authoritative”.

<sup>12</sup> *Mengzi* 4A14.

A number of other texts discuss the *de* of less-than-exemplary persons, and what this is like.<sup>13</sup> In these texts, the suggestion is that *de* elicits certain responses from others, whether positive or negative. The vicious person, then, has a *de* that elicits a proper response that leads to punishment or harm. A passage from the *Shijing* suggests this in terms of repayment or reciprocation (*bao* 報) for one's *de*.<sup>14</sup>

In Daoist texts, *de* also has the connotation of potent ability—the person possessing *de* has a kind of power (whether causal or otherwise is unclear) that leads to particular effects in the world, most often linked to success in achieving one's will or goals. In Chap. 4 of the *Zhuangzi*, Yan He speaks of the *de* of the son of Duke Ling of Wei, saying 其德天殺 (his *de* could kill heaven itself). The *Daodejing* speaks of the *de* that comes from proper knowledge the *xuan de* 玄德 (“mysterious potency”), which has its power and efficacy in terms of its lack, of its primordial nature, of its backward facing.<sup>15</sup> This theme is echoed throughout Daoist texts, as well as in later texts inspired by aspects of them, such as *Huainanzi*.

There is a question of the role of *de* in having an effect on the world beyond what is contained in the patterns of the world themselves. That is, while texts such as the *Daodejing* cannot deny that human will plays some role in the world, making things different than they otherwise would be, it is not clear in the text whether *de* is understood as a kind of power that allows one to *alter* the patterns of the world, or whether *de* is a move away from the ability to diverge and alter these patterns, such that the human becomes deterministically bound, free will and agency are undermined, and thus the power of the individual is understood as identical to the power of nature itself.

Erin Cline discusses two alternative interpretations of *de* in the *Daodejing* along these lines, the first of which she attributes to P.J. Ivanhoe, and the second to Roger Ames. In both views, *de* brings with it a certain effectiveness or ability, but the grounds of this ability are different. For Ivanhoe, *de* is a kind of power accruing to the individual, while for Ames *de* is an integration with nature such that the particularity of the individual represent and thus also contain the effective elements of the whole. Notice that on

<sup>13</sup>As Michael Ing points out (*The Vulnerability of Integrity in Early Confucian Thought*, p. 219), these discussions of the *de* of vicious persons are found mainly in texts before the late Warring States, when *de* as specifically moral potency becomes the dominant conception.

<sup>14</sup>*Shijing* 3.3 26: 無德不報 (“there is no *de* that goes without reciprocation”).

<sup>15</sup>*Daodejing* 1—the mysterious (*xuan*) has the fundamental creative power.

both interpretations *de* is connected to effectiveness and potency, an ability to *have an effect* on the world in a tangible way. While there are differing views about the reasons for this potency and its source (whether moral cultivation and character, following natural propensities, undermining of individual concern, abandonment of *shi-fei* conceptualization, etc.), most early thinkers seem to share the *thin* conception of *de* as a property that has some effect on the world in terms of compelling or causing outcomes.

In Han and later texts, *de* becomes associated with morality itself, including the norms and character of cultivated persons or groups. It retains the sense of potency and transformable efficacy of earlier texts, but also takes on new connotations.

Likely, then, much of the reason behind the widespread view in early China that *de* could make a difference in terms of individual fortune is the association of *de* with an effective power of some kind, based in the quality of individual actions or character. *De* is supposed to elicit certain responses, to create certain effects. When *de* fails to do what it is supposed to, some explanation is needed as to how it failed to have its claimed causal power.

Some texts oppose other causal powers to one's *de*, including the times (*shi*), or even *tian*. The problem Wang Chong takes up in the *Lunheng* has its beginning in these considerations. *De* is sometimes (or perhaps even often) ineffective in making a critical difference in the world as it is supposed to (either for good or bad, but the focus in early texts is more often on the moral situation).

Early texts have different things to say on the issue of how one generates *de*, or even if *de* can be generated rather than being something inherent. Given the view we see in *Mengzi* and other texts<sup>16</sup> that suggest one can have a good or evil *de*, cultivation seems necessary to generate a certain kind of *de*, but this is consistent with the view that everyone has a *de*, and that it is the character of this *de* that differs with each person. Only morally cultivated persons have the *de* of a *junzi* or a sage—most of us have the *de* of the ordinary or even the petty person. It is unclear whether this is Mengzi's view, or whether instead he holds that *de* is cultivated in every case, and that while the sage as well as the petty person has *de*, the uncultivated person does not possess *de*. If this is the case, the *de* of the petty person is explained by a kind of improper cultivation. The view here would be that character, either virtuous or vicious, issues only

<sup>16</sup>Including *Liji*, *Ziyi* 3, 25; *Kongcongzi* 23.7; *Wuzi* 1.5; *Shangshu*, *Zhuoming zhong* 5.

from cultivation. Part of the reason one might hold such a view (as seen in some contemporary accounts) is that character seems to require stable dispositions to act and think in particular ways across a variety of situations. The virtuous person is not virtuous only in friendships, for example, but also in business interactions and in familial relations. To have stable dispositions that do not simply shift with situation, one must cultivate this character on the basis of ritual and practice. Thus, if *de* is a matter of an effective power connected to character in this sense, the uncultivated do not have it (beside those few people endowed with a nature such that they have stable dispositions—the people “born knowing it” of *Analects* 7.20 and 16.9). Of course, this view has difficulties of its own. The description of the *xiao ren* 小人 (petty person) in a number of passages in early Confucian texts suggests just the kind of uncultivated person described above. The *xiao ren* is a person who perhaps *sometimes* acts in a perfectly respectable or proper way, but who can be swayed by situation and brought to act viciously when things change. They do not have a stable character. If this is the case, then attributing a *de* to the petty person means that even the uncultivated and those who do not have stable dispositions underlying developed character possess a *de*, if not a *de* that has the kind of potency and influence of that of the sage.

Given early claims about the *de* of the sage or the knowledgeable person, we might wonder how a person deemed as a sage could fail to be effective in achieving their goals. This becomes a major difficulty for Confucians in the Warring States and Han. The exemplars early Confucians raise up as examples of sagehood, such as Boyi,<sup>17</sup> Jizi, and Bi Gan<sup>18</sup> or even Confucius himself, were sometimes also striking in their failure. The common response offered to this difficulty can be seen in texts such as the *Xunzi*. There, Xunzi’s lack of success is explained by his failure to meet with the right times (時 *shi*):

天下不治，孫卿不遇時也。德若堯禹，世少知之；方術不用，為人所疑；其知至明，循道正行，足以為紀綱。嗚呼！賢哉！

<sup>17</sup>Who starved to death in moral protest of vicious rule, and was used as an image by those suffering on the basis of moral convictions throughout history. A key example of this is the use of Boyi in the laments of Qu Yuan in the *Chuci*. Boyi is raised up as a sage in *Mengzi* 5B1.

<sup>18</sup>*Analects* 18.1. Jizi and Bi Gan were famously persecuted—their remonstrance with the king of Shang led to Jizi’s feigning of madness and escape and Bi Gan’s brutal execution. The story is recounted in the *Yinbenji* (“Annals of Yin”) in the *Shiji*.



The world was not ordered, and Xunzi did not meet with the right times. Even though his virtue (*de*) was like that of Yao and Shun, few in the world recognized this. His methods and techniques were not used, and this caused people to doubt him. His knowledge was clearly perfected, and he followed the *dao* with correct action, and should have been considered a sufficient standard (for the people to follow). Alas—what a virtuous person!<sup>19</sup>

Given this common response, a problem of efficacy arises, a version of a free will and determinism problem. How is it, given that such situational features of the world as the times, good or bad government, and the receptiveness of others to the *dao* are decisive aspects of whether a sage is successful, that the sage's (or anyone's) *de* or cultivational activity can be said to make any difference in the world at all? If the sage is unsuccessful, the times and other features of the world are thwarting them. But in the absence of these obstacles, the *dao* would be followed, and the activity of the sage could not be said to then have any effect either. It looks like in their attempt to explain the seeming impotence of the sage in important cases early Confucians have created a dilemma for the idea of the efficacy of human action, moral cultivation, and the power of *de*.

### XIU 修 (CULTIVATION)

The other half of the coin here is the question of cultivation (*xiu* 修), linked to *de* in a number of texts. In *Analects* 7.3, Confucius links *xiu* to *de* as extension or practice of *de*.<sup>20</sup> He says that people “failing to cultivate virtue” (德之不修 *de zhi bu xiu*) is one of the things that causes him most grief. *De* comes about (at least partly) through this process of cultivation, aimed at generating *de*. *Xiu* has the sense of both creating positive traits and actions and correcting negative ones. In *Analects* 12.21, Fan Chi and Confucius discuss “cultivating [away from] evil” (修慝 *xiu te*). *Xiu* does not always entail the creation of *de*, as different things can be cultivated depending on one's practices and aims. While “self-cultivation” (*xiu shen* 修身 or *xiu ji* 修己) generally refers to cultivation of *de* in early Chinese

<sup>19</sup> *Xunzi* 32.7.

<sup>20</sup> Despite this connection, the explicit claim that *de* specifically results from *xiu* is rarely made in early Confucian literature. *Chunqiu Fanlu*, *Jinghua* 4, *Wangdao* 1 include such a claim.

texts,<sup>21</sup> other qualities independent of *de* can be cultivated in the sense of *xiu*, such as refinement (*wen* 文)<sup>22</sup> or heavenly rank.<sup>23</sup> *Xiu* can also refer to the development, perfection, cultivation, or repair of nonpersonal objects, such as the building of strong walls and defenses,<sup>24</sup> or graves,<sup>25</sup> or more abstract entities like teachings, methods,<sup>26</sup> or even the *dao* itself.<sup>27</sup> In some of these cases, *xiu* suggests a construction or creation of something new, while in others it has the sense of recapturing a lost integrity.<sup>28</sup> *Xiu* then can have the connotation of “fixing” something, with the idea that prior to cultivation, the object in question was properly constructed or operating properly and went into decline. The use of *xiu* in modern Chinese retains this sense—*xiu* being used mainly in the sense of repair, rather than building from nothing. This sense, of course, fits well with Mengzi’s view of moral self-cultivation as the removal of obstacles from the natural development of the sprouts (*duan* 端) of virtue inherent in one’s inborn characteristics (*xing* 性). *Xiu* can also have the sense of “teaching” or “instruction”. *Chunqiu Fanlu* discusses the Zhou classic *Chunqiu* as “teaching the righteousness of root and branch” (修本末之義 *xiu ben mo zhi yi*).<sup>29</sup>

An interesting distinction between internal and external cultivation is made in the *Wenwang shizi* chapter of *Liji*. The passage links music with internal cultivation (*xiu nei*) and ritual (*li*) with external cultivation (*xiu wai*):

凡三王教世子必以禮樂。樂，所以修內也；禮，所以修外也。禮樂交錯於中，發形於外

All of the three kings instructed the people using ritual and music. Music is that with which one cultivates the internal, and ritual is that with which one cultivates the external. Ritual and music interact with one another within, they extend and take shape externally.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*, various chapters of *Liji*, *Hanshi Waizhuan*, and so on. *Mozi* includes a chapter on self-cultivation (*Xiushen*). *Xiu shen* is the most common phrase to describe self-cultivation in early texts. The construction *zi xiu* 自修 (“self-cultivation”) is also sometimes used.

<sup>22</sup> *Analects* 16.1.

<sup>23</sup> *Mengzi* Gaozi A, 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Mengzi* Lilou B, 59.

<sup>25</sup> *Liji*, *Tangong* 1, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Liji*, *Wangzhi*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> *Liji*, *Zhongyong*, 1. *Xunzi* *Jundao*, 8; *Zhenglun*, 5. *Shuoyuan*, *Jingzhen* 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Xunzi*, *Yuelun* 5 discusses cultivation of laws and orders.

<sup>29</sup> *Chunqiu Fanlu*, *Yubei*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Liji*, *Wenwangshizhi* 10.

Another relevant passage concerning cultivation and its aims is found in the *Daxue*:

古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國；欲治其國者，先齊其家；欲齊其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先誠其意；欲誠其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。

The ancients, desiring to propagate virtue through the entire world, first looked to bring order to their states. Desiring to bring order to their states, they first improved their families. Desiring to improve their families, they first cultivated (*xiu*) themselves. Desiring to cultivate themselves, they first regulated their minds. Desiring to regulate their minds, they first made their thoughts sincere. Desiring to make their thoughts sincere, they first attended to gaining knowledge. Gaining knowledge can be found though investigating things (*gewu*).<sup>31</sup>

Yang Xiong discusses the cultivation of *xing* (inborn characteristics) in the *Fayan*. It is through learning (學 *xue*), he says, that one cultivates one's inborn characteristics such that they become correct (正 *zheng*).<sup>32</sup> This is connected to Yang's view of the initial neutrality of human inborn characteristics, which become good or evil depending on one's cultivation. On Yang's view, *xiu* is necessary for inborn characteristics to have any particular moral value, since such characteristics contain both good and evil elements.<sup>33</sup>

In Daoist texts, such as the *Zhuangzi*, *xiu* is mainly disparaged, as an attempt to undermine one's nature or natural responses. 'Cultivation' in the sense Confucians use the term requires learning, conceptualization, and rigid or otherwise artificial standards of action that Zhuangists and other Daoists in general reject. This issue is raised in the *Renjianshi* (In the World of Persons) chapter of *Zhuangzi*, in the discussion between (the Zhuangist versions of) Confucius and Yan Hui. Zhuangzi's Confucius explains to Yan Hui that *xiu* and the desire to make a name (*ming* 名) for oneself leads inevitably to disaster. He discusses the famous cases of Guanlong Feng and Bi Gan,<sup>34</sup> saying that in both cases it was the cultivation of these men that led to their demise. Their cultivation was motivated by their desire for a name, rather than their desire to actually effect change. The text reads:

<sup>31</sup> *Liji*, *Daxue* 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Fayan*, *Xuexing* 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Fayan*, *Xiushen* 2.

<sup>34</sup> The stories of both men are recounted in a number of sources, including *Xunzi*, *Hanfeizi*, *Liji*, Shuoyuan, *Hanshi Waizhuan*, *Lushi Chunqiu*, *Confucius Jiayu*, and others.

是皆脩其身以下偪拊人之民，以下拂其上者也，故其君因其脩以擠之。是好名者也。

They cultivated themselves for the sake of the lowly people, and for the sake of these they brushed off their superiors. Therefore because of their cultivation their lords opposed them. All this because they [Guanlong Feng and Bi Gan] cherished having a name.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the suspicion about the true motivations of those (like Confucians and Mohists) who advocate cultivation, we see here also a rejection of the view that cultivation is ultimately effective at all in changing outcomes. In the case of Guanlong Feng and Bi Gan, they cultivated themselves in order to help rectify the behavior of vicious rulers, but neither was successful in his aim, and instead only brought disaster upon himself. Wang Chong's own view of cultivation and its connection to deterministic factors such as allotment (*ming* 命) is very close to the Zhuangist view on this second point, and may have been influenced by it.

Wang Chong's understanding of *xiu* parallels those of almost all of these earlier philosophers. He uses many of the same constructions found across text, including *xiu shen* 修身, *xiu ji* 修己, *xiu xing* 修行, and *xiu dao* 修道. Wang's familiarity with the concepts and views of earlier philosophers is impressive (he clearly was widely read in the classics and earlier literature), and part of the reason that there seems inconsistency between his various uses of terms across the *Lunheng* may be that he uses these terms in so many of the earlier senses at once, depending on his target in any particular chapter. Concerning *xiu*, Wang admits the possibility of cultivation as change of one's state, from a corrupted to a perfected one, or vice versa. However, Wang ends up subordinating even cultivation to the deterministic system involving *ming* 命 (allotment) he discusses in numerous chapters of the *Lunheng*. In the *Chubing* chapter, for example, Wang denies that the cultivation of the former sage emperors Wen and Wu was responsible for their attainment of heaven's favor in the form of allotment.<sup>36</sup> While humans might change their state (or the state of other

<sup>35</sup> *Zhuangzi*, *Renjianshi*, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Chubing* 3. The term "*ming* 命" here is often translated as "mandate" when linked with *tian*. I translate the term "allotment" because Wang understands *ming* more broadly across chapters, as explained below, though he does hold the view that *ming* is something that is bestowed by *tian* or that *tian* is somehow responsible for. This responsibility is not will-based, however, and allotment is given through *ziran* activity, which exemplifies the activity of *tian*.

things) through cultivation, given that human development is constrained by the mind (*xin* 心) and the inborn characteristics (*xing* 性) they receive from nature, cultivation itself is subject to determination by the allotment given to the individual by *tian* (which includes facts about their inborn characteristics and mind). Just as human physical ability or health can be gleaned even from birth as a matter of one's constitution, mental features such as willingness and ability to engage in *xin* can be so known. Wang's discussions of such determinism tend to center on epistemological questions surrounding outcomes. For example, in discussion of the *ming* 命 (allotment) of people in the *Mingyi* chapter, Wang discusses signs in a person's body through which one can know what kind of allotment they possess. This is not just in the case of allotment connected to things like health and long life (which may seem more obvious), but also with allotment connected to wealth, fortune, status, and moral talent.<sup>37</sup> *Xin*, then, even if it can alter the qualities a person has, cannot change a person's fundamental constitution or *ming*, as one's capacity for cultivation is already given as part of their *ming* from nature, as I discuss further below. This, as I show, causes a problem for Wang's view of cultivation and efficacy. Wang posits three different kinds of *ming* as a way to make room for the efficacy of cultivation, but as I show below, it is unclear that this move succeeds in softening Wang's determinism or turning it into a kind of compatibilist view of free will and determinism.

### ZIRAN 自然 (SPONTANEITY)

Opposed to the notion of responsive action on the basis of cultivation or the possession of impelling features such as *de*, Wang Chong as well as earlier philosophers use the concept of *ziran* to explain activity that does not proceed on the basis of intention or as a response to features of individuals. While the concept of *ziran* is developed in the earlier tradition to handle particular kinds of activity, Wang Chong offers an account that extends this notion to seemingly all action in the cosmos. The causal forces active in the world, according to Wang Chong, operate in a fashion he calls *ziran*. We can understand this in Wang's case as both "spontaneity" and "naturalness". *Ziran* activity is activity that happens without intention behind it, with no goal-directed aim, and without the origination of an agent. Agency here seems clearly associated with *intention* or will, which

<sup>37</sup> *Mingyi*, 2: 人有壽夭之相,亦有貧富貴賤之法,俱見於體。

is why we can see Wang's concern with *ziran* as playing a role in his position on free will and determinism.

*Ziran* is what happens *without* cultivation, and without intention or plan. Can this also be understood as happening without a *specific necessitating cause*? Xunzi in *Zhengming* chapter says: 不事而自然謂之性 (That which happens *ziran* without directed effort is called nature).<sup>38</sup> Nature can be understood as the cause of *ziran* activity, the inherent characteristics of a thing. Do inherent characteristics develop only in a singular way?

*Ziran* also appears as a state of things, the regular organization of the world. Here, there also seems to be the indication of how things are or would be absent willful interaction in the world, cultivation of character, following of a *dao* (other than that of *Ziran* itself). Yang Xiong's *Fayan*, from the Western Han, reads:

或曰：「刑<sup>39</sup>名非道邪？何自然也？」曰：「何必刑名，圍棋、擊劍、反目、眩形，亦皆自然也。由其大者作正道，由其小者作奸道。」

Some say: "can it be that form and name goes against the *dao*? If that is so, how are these so natural/regular (*ziran*)?" The response is: "Why must you say only form and name? Weiqi,<sup>40</sup> fencing, acrobatics, and magic—all of these are also natural/regular. Using what is greater is the correct *dao*, using what is lesser is the corrupted *dao*."<sup>41</sup>

In the *Ziran* chapter, Wang lays out the broad strokes of his view of the concept. *Ziran* activity, he writes, is connected with generation and with the activity of nature (*tian*). Wang distinguishes such action from purposeful or intentional action, which is caused by desires. Desires are brought about by particular human organs such as the mouth and the eyes. His view of intention and desire here is informed by the idea that it is the human organs themselves that contain in them the aim to be satisfied<sup>42</sup> and thus cause desires in the individual. The eye has a disposition to as to see, and thus has that at which it aims—that is, visible things. Desires originate from the contact between organs and the rest of the human

<sup>38</sup> Xunzi 22.2.

<sup>39</sup> Reading 刑 as 形.

<sup>40</sup> The game better known in the West by its Japanese name, Go.

<sup>41</sup> *Fayan* 5.23. My translation of this passage follows Bullock (for the most part). According to Yang Xiong, *ziran* itself also has a *dao*: 有生者必有死，有始者必有終，自然之道也。 This *ziran zhi dao* construction is also used in Xu Gan's *Zhonglun*.

<sup>42</sup> An account found prominently in the *Huangdi Neijing* medical texts.

organism, particularly the mind. We see in the *Huangdi Neijing* literature the view that the organs are responsible for (and the seat of) human emotions, connected to desires.<sup>43</sup> *Tian*, as such, cannot have intentions because *tian* does not have organs such as a mouth and eyes.

Wang's seeming determinism is based in his solution to the problem of the ineffectiveness of cultivation and his views concerning *ziran* throughout the *Lunheng*. It is unclear that Wang had an independent commitment to a deterministic worldview based on considerations like those of modern scientific or materialist determinism. Wang has no particular focus on the category of material as opposed to spiritual or nonphysical. Indeed, this very distinction is a problematic one in much early Chinese thought. This is not to say that there was no distinction between material and nonmaterial aspects of the world in early China,<sup>44</sup> but rather that there would have been no materialistic reduction of the kind found in other contexts. Deterministic views today (and in the West since the Renaissance) are generally based on materialism. Wang's determinism was not—rather, it was based on the inefficacy of alternative activity including goal-based will and the primacy of *ziran* activity in explaining the actions of parts of the cosmos. These actions inevitably overcome human attempts to alter our situation, and thus such activity is determinative in shaping the world. *Ziran* activity, however, as not goal based, is also lawlike and deterministic, not open to being alternative ways. When the conditions for *ziran* activity are in place, particular actions will take place unless there are other mitigating factors. While Wang approaches a similar place as determinists in other traditions including those of the

<sup>43</sup>For example, *Huangdi Neijing, Suwen, Wu cang sheng cheng* 4.

<sup>44</sup>Numerous scholars claim that there was no mind/body distinction in early China, but I think this is wrong. I argue in forthcoming work that such a distinction can be found in a number of texts, most importantly the *Huangdi Neijing* medical literature. Martha Li Chiu (*Mind, Body, and Illness in a Chinese Medical Tradition*) also takes this position. She writes (p. iii): “Many investigators, especially those who try to explain why Chinese ‘somatize’ mental disorders, generalize that Chinese always regard man as a unity without differentiating between his mind and body. Close analysis of the language in the [*Huangdi Neijing*] reveals diversity and change in Chinese thinking about ‘the mind-body problem’. Dominant levels of discourse do portray the mind and body as unified, but other levels of discourse treat mind and body as distinguishable, though still related, categories.”

postscientific West, his route to this place is very different, and his determinism rests on different grounds.

Wang's conception of will or intention (*zhi* 志) is a key part of the picture here. While this concept comes closest to capturing "will" as it is understood in contemporary (analytic) philosophy, there are unique and dissonant features of this concept. Understanding how Wang Chong conceives of will or intention informs our understanding of just how we might take him to advance a deterministic view, and to what extent that view might be compatible with possession and even efficacy of will.

### ZHI 志 (WILL/INTENTION)

The way Wang discusses the successful minister, one who is advanced, and who has the opportunity to influence their superior, is that one must cultivate oneself in ways consistent with the desires of the superior, wait for the right moments to use one's abilities, and make one's own mind harmonious or in line with that of the superior. Wang does not endorse this position as the proper way to proceed but rather offers it as an explanation of the facts concerning who is advanced to position and who is not. This is part of a broader position developed throughout the *Lunheng* that cultivation and talent or ability do not ensure elevation to important position, nor do they ensure success in persuasion of superiors. This success is a matter of luck, and even understanding and thus conforming to the desires of the ruler cannot ensure that one meets with success. Wang writes:

偶合為是，適可為上。進者未必賢，退者未必愚；合幸得進，不幸失之。

Meeting with and harmonizing with a superior is [fortuitous], and it is just through this that one attains position. Such a person is not necessarily worthy, and one who does not achieve this is not necessarily stupid. Those who meet and harmonize such attain advancement, and those who don't lose it.<sup>45</sup>

There are echoes here of a couple of earlier sources—the discussion between Confucius and Yan Hui in Chap. 5 of the *Zhuangzi* concerning the subtlety required for persuasion of an unvirtuous ruler, and Han Feizi's discussion of persuasion. In all of these texts we find the view that

<sup>45</sup> *Fengyu* 6.



persuasion (understood broadly in terms of having an effect on the actions of another), if it can happen at all, can only happen through subtle redirection that is not recognized as redirection by the target of persuasion. Wang Chong seems to add another element here—the role of *luck* (*yu* 逾). Oftentimes actions are successful or not depending on uncontrollable features of situations. The character of a particular ruler, or the geography of a particular state, for example, may turn out to play a pivotal role in the outcome of one's actions, despite one's intentions. Luck, for Wang, is a force that can thwart human will in terms of achieving success. We might be inclined to ask the question “how can determined outcome have any effect on one's conception of *will*?” This question occurs quite naturally in Western and Indian contexts, in which we find more radical dualism about mind or soul and body throughout history. What humans can will is often understood as independent of outcomes of action, even if these actions are completely physically determined.

In much of the early Chinese tradition, and particularly in the *Lunheng*, will is not considered independently of action or outcome. Will, or intention *zhi* 志, is not a solely mental concept, where mind is conceived of independently of the rest of the human organism. While some have gone so far as to deny any kind of mind-body distinction in early Chinese philosophy<sup>46</sup>, we can make sense of a distinction between the two both on a folk level<sup>47</sup> and in terms of human properties attributable to mind or body in distinct ways, as we find in philosophical texts, but even more prominently in medical texts such as the *Huangdi Neijing*, which parties to the debate often fail to consult.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Recent examples include Ames and Rosemont, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 66; Ames, “The Meaning of Body in Classical Chinese Thought”. Franklin Perkins writes: “the consensus that Chinese philosophers avoided ontological dualisms is so strong that it is rarely questioned.” (“Metaphysics and Methodology in a Cross-Cultural Context”, in Tan. ed. *Bloomsbury Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*, p. 194).

<sup>47</sup>Edward Slingerland argues for this in “Interdisciplinary Methods in Chinese Philosophy: Comparative Philosophy and the Case Example of Mind-Body Holism”, in *Bloomsbury Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*, p. 326–327; “Body and Mind in Early China: An Integrated Humanities-Science Approach”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (1), 2013; Paul Goldin, “A Mind-Body Problem in the *Zhuangzi*” in Cook. ed. *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi* SUNY Press, 2003.

<sup>48</sup>Martha Li Chiu argues, using the *Huangdi Neijing*, for a robust conception of mind-body distinction in early China. I also offer argument for this in forthcoming work on Madness. This also shows why we should avoid making the hard distinction between philo-

The concept of will as understood in Wang Chong's work and other early Chinese texts is connected to action and not independent from it as it sometimes appears in Indian or Western texts. Intention or will is manifest in the ability of an agent to contribute to outcomes in the world. The concept of *zhi* 志 (will, intention) is connected with that of an aim or end, entailing a particular kind of action. Wang discusses *zhi* in connection with luck in the *Fengyu* chapter of *Lunheng*:

夫賢聖道同，志合趨齊，虞舜、太公行耦，許由、伯夷操違者，生非其世，出非其時也。道雖同，同中有異；志雖合，合中有離。何則？道有精麤，志有清濁也。

The way of worthies and sages may be the same, and their intentions may be unified and what they pursue the same, but the actions of Shun and Duke Tai were in accordance, while those of Xuyou and Boyi both lacked integrity. They were born in the wrong generation, and went forth in the wrong times. Even though ways might be the same, in this similitude there is difference. Even though intentions may be unified, in this unity there is divergence. How is this? The way can be quintessential or unrefined, and intentions can be pure or soiled/turbid.<sup>49</sup>

Here, Wang attributes even the moral evaluation of the actions of individuals to features of their environment such as the times or generation. *Zhi* here is understood in terms of the active and apparent efforts of the individual, which may lead to different outcomes depending on these relevant features of the world. *Zhi* is clearly active, as connected with motivation, and mentioned alongside the behavior (行 *xing*) connected to it.<sup>50</sup> *Zhi* can be understood in this grouping as the *internal* or *mental* aspect of human behavior, with *xing* as the physical manifestation. The dualism here tracks that of mind/body or internal/external. And as with these, it can be considered a dualism *not* in that it renders the two different substances or features of independent and causally unrelated realms (surely Descartes went way too far here, even by Platonist lights), but a dualism in that it represents two main aspects of human behavior, just as mind and body represent the two fundamental (though still interrelated) aspects of the human organism. Even Descartes in the end tried to make sense of such a

sophical and nonphilosophical texts in ancient China, as much of philosophical significance is covered in primarily medical, astronomical, historical, and other texts, and vice versa.

<sup>49</sup> *Fengyu* 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Shuaixing* 6.

position, by edging back from the ledge of extreme substance dualism by claiming the human being a *mind-body unity* rather than a thinking thing alone or a mind connected to a body.<sup>51</sup> But the damage had already been done—once we isolate substances as radically as Descartes did mind and body, it is unclear we can make any sense of their interaction, or how we might have any substance in any way understood as a unity of both, without a new and distinct substance that is ultimately *neither*.

In a number of passages, *zhi* is linked with the aim or end of a particular person. In *Shuaixing*, Wang writes: 三戰得志,炎帝敗績 (After three battles, [Huang Di] obtained his *zhi* and defeated Yan Di).<sup>52</sup> Having a *zhi*, then according to Wang, runs counter to *ziran* activity that happens of itself, unconnected with a goal or intention. As discussed above, since lacking organs such as mouth and ears necessitates *ziran* activity on the part of *tian*, it follows that possessing *zhi* requires possession of desire-generating organs.<sup>53</sup> Goal-oriented action is central to will, and thus it is not the kind of thing that can be consistent with determined activity of the kind described in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

*Zhi* thus contains the senses of (internal) will or intention, goal, and goal-directed action. Given this, it becomes much more clear why *zhi* would generally be expected to issue in the achievement of particular goals. In cases in which there is genuine *zhi* yet effective action or achievement of goals fails to obtain, intention (*zhi*) can be thwarted through times, being in the wrong generation, or a number of other reasons. Indeed, it seems that Wang extends the list of situations and features that can thwart *zhi* (as intentional goal) such that almost any externality might thwart one's *zhi*. Indeed, given his discussions in chapters I discuss below, it is unclear when one might *ever* be successful in obtaining one's *zhi*, despite whatever potency (*de*) one may possess. In a number of chapters on luck, allotment (*ming* 命), and inborn characteristics, Wang offers an account of success and outcomes of action that seem to offer a hard deterministic position, in which not only success and failure are determined by situational and non-*zhi* features, but even aspects of individual and communal character. However, Wang also seems to recognize that this position commits him to the extreme position that self-cultivation, *de*, and will can have no effect at all in nature and are rendered completely impotent. His discussions of *ming* and *xing* are in part designed to solve this problem.

<sup>51</sup> In the Sixth Meditation of *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

<sup>52</sup> *Shuaixing* 8. In *Guxiang*, this language is also used.

<sup>53</sup> *Ziran* 2.

## WANG'S THREE KINDS OF ALLOTMENT AND INBORN CHARACTERISTICS

Wang seems to want an explanation of human activity and outcomes based on *ziran* (spontaneity) rather than intention, on facts about our situations rather than self-cultivation. To explain intention in deterministic ways, Wang adopts a three-tiered approach using *ming* (allotment), *xing* (natural characteristics), and incident/luck. It is unclear that this ultimately solves two key problems with the system that I mention below, but I argue that Wang seems aware of them and *attempts* to solve them.

In *Zhiqi* (“Periods of Government”), Wang offers a picture of human behavior seemingly in conflict with some of the things he says elsewhere about behavior based on both *xing* 性 (inborn characteristics) and moral training. His position in *Zhiqi* seems a hard determinist one in which quality of behavior is based not on character but on external circumstances. According to Wang in *Zhiqi*:

穀足食多，禮義之心生，禮豐義重，平安之基立矣。故饑歲之春，不食親戚，穰歲之秋，召及四鄰。不食親戚，惡行也，召及四鄰，善義也。

When grain is sufficient and there is enough to eat, adherence to ritual and righteousness are born in the heart. When ritual flourishes and righteousness is abundant, the foundations of peace are established. Therefore in spring of a year of famine, one does not even feed one's relatives, whereas in the autumn of a year of abundance, one calls together one's neighbors from the four directions to feast. Not to feed relatives is evil conduct, while to call together neighbors from the four directions is good, righteous conduct.<sup>54</sup>

He explains this further:

為善惡之行，不在人質性，在於歲之饑穰。由此言之，禮義之行，在穀足也。案穀成敗，自有年歲。年歲水旱，五穀不成，非政所致，時數然也。

*The formation of good or bad conduct is not a matter of the substantive nature of the person (zhi xing), but is a matter of collection of grains. Because of this we can say that adherence to ritual and righteous conduct is a matter of the grain being sufficient. The grain being abundant (full) or lacking depends on the year. If the rains come early in a given year, the five grains will not be abundant (full). This is not caused by governing, but is a matter of the circumstances of the times.*<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Zhiqi* 6.

<sup>55</sup> *Zhiqi* 6.

We can see that he adopts a common view in the idea of the efficacy of the times, and he clearly wants to put the blame for bad conduct on the part of individuals on these times rather than good or bad government, but he attributes *everything* to the times—not just the outcomes of good or bad conduct, but the cause of such conduct in the individual person (as he grounds this in *zhi xing* 質性, which is a basic feature of any person).

Here Wang makes a strong claim about the general behavior of the community that disconnects virtuous government from moral behavior. He is concerned in *Zhiqi* with arguing against the Confucian view that virtuous rule is effective in creating virtue in the population, by establishing that the behavior of people in the state is dependent on external circumstances. It is this last position that is Wang's primary target, and the other positions given in *Zhiqi* are ultimately in the service of it. But does the radical determinist position Wang seems to commit himself to in *Zhiqi* conflict with what he says about *ming*, learning, and the formation of character elsewhere in the *Lunheng*? Does Wang see the problem? And how does he solve it? The *Zhiqi* view clearly conflicts with what he says about conduct in other chapters like *Mingyi*, where he writes that good or bad conduct *is* a matter of inborn characteristics. We find inconsistencies like this across the text, but the reason may be in part due to the aim of the story in the *Zhiqi* chapter. Can these positions be made consistent? That is, is there a way he can insist on a kind of hard determinism concerning conduct and outcomes of lives while still making room for different elements of the individual being responsible for different things?

Some of what he suggests in *Zhiqi* leads me to believe that Wang was aware of a possible problem here, and, although his solution to this problem is not completely developed (he seems to have left most of it merely suggestive), what I propose below is a suggestion as to how I think Wang was thinking about the problem, how he tried to solve it, and whether or not this proposed solution is effective.

First, we have to look to the passages elsewhere in the *Lunheng* that appear to conflict with this bold statement of moral determinism. Part of the problem is the direct contradiction between what Wang says about *xing* here and what he says in other essays. *Xing* is his primary topic in *Benxing*. The very first sentence of the essay seems to contradict what Wang says in *Zhiqi*:

情性者, 人治之本, 禮樂所由生也。

Essences and characteristics (*qing xing*) are the root of human orderliness, and from them ritual and music are born.<sup>56</sup>

Wang goes on in *Benxing* to explain the connection of *xing* to *ming*, another concept determinative of behavior in various chapters of Wang's work.

實者，人性有善有惡，猶人才有高有下也。高不可下，下不可高。謂性無善惡，是謂人才無高下也。稟性受命，同一實也。命有貴賤，性有善惡。謂性無善惡，是謂人命無貴賤也。

The truth is that in the natural characteristics of persons there is good and bad, just like concerning the talents of persons there is high and low. The high is unable to be low, the low unable to be high. To say that natural characteristics (*xing*) are not good and bad is (like) saying that talents of persons are not high and low. Natural characteristics and the receipt of one's allotment (*ming*) are one in the same. Allotment determines whether one is wealthy or impoverished, natural characteristics whether one is virtuous or vicious (good or bad). To say that natural characteristics are not good and bad is to say that the allotment of persons does not determine whether one is wealthy or impoverished.<sup>57</sup>

In this chapter, unlike in *Zhiqi*, Wang claims that it is *xing* (inborn characteristics) that determine the moral quality of a person's actions, not the state of the grains. In *Mingyi*, he goes further, claiming 操行善惡者，性也；禍福吉凶者，命也 (whether conduct is good or bad is a matter of *xing*, whether one encounters fortune or misfortune is a matter of *ming*).<sup>58</sup> Presumably, a person who has a good *xing* will act properly, even in years of famine. If this is not the case, how can Wang claim that *xing* plays any role in moral behavior? That is, if all persons, regardless of *xing*, will act properly in years of abundance and poorly in years of famine (as he suggests in *Zhiqi*), there seems to be no role for *xing*. And in fact, as we see in the passage above from *Zhiqi*, Wang there explicitly states that *xing* plays no role in moral behavior. He does make one slight distinction though, that we will discuss below. He says in the *Zhiqi* passage in question that moral behavior is not due to the *zhi xing* (substantial characteristics) of persons. What is *zhi xing* and how does it differ from *xing*? Was Wang leaving open the possibility that *xing* might play a role after all in moral behavior? It is

<sup>56</sup> *Benxing* 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Benxing* 19.

<sup>58</sup> *Mingyi* 5.

difficult to see what is going on here. If Wang is leaving open the possibility of shaping this substantial *xing* such that it can be completed in a certain way, then *Zhiqi* seems to suggest that *xing* is completed through circumstantial events such as famine or abundance, and thus we basically have no control over the formation of our character. In *Shuaixing*, however, he offers a very different picture, providing an important role for moral education. There he argues for the necessity of such education to “complete” the nature of persons with bad natural characteristics and uses an agricultural metaphor to describe the efficacy of moral learning. The three-tiered system he sets up (mentioned below) plays a similar role. Wang writes:

夫肥沃墾塿，土地之本性也。肥而沃者性美，樹稼豐茂。墾而塿者性惡，深耕細鋤，厚加糞壤，勉致人工，以助地力，其樹稼與彼肥沃者相似類也。地之高下，亦如此焉。以鍤鑿地，以埤增下，則其下與高者齊，如復增鍤，則夫下者不徒齊者也，反更為高，而其高者反為下。使人之性有善有惡，彼地有高有下，勉致其教令之善，則將善者同之矣。善以化渥，釀其教令，變更為善。善則且更宜反過於往善，猶下地增加鍤更崇於高地也。

When one irrigates the fields and rock, this is the source of the birth of the soil or earth. When the soil becomes fertile and rich, trees and grains grow thick and abundant. Barren and rocky natural characteristics are bad. For such land, deep plowing and detailed grating, rich fertilization of the soil, and arousing energy to work in the fields are necessary. In this way the trees and grains can be made to be like those of the fertile and rich land. It is like this for both good and bad land. Using a shovel to dig into the earth in order to improve bad land makes the bad equal to the good, but if one neglects the shovel then the bad cannot be made equal to the good. The opposite of the bad is good, and the opposite of the good is the bad. The inborn characteristics of persons can be good or bad just like land can be good or bad, and *can be affected by education*. Pursuing goodness one becomes the same as those who are good. Goodness transforms one's character, through education, one becomes changed into one who is good. Goodness also causes one to abandon faults in adhering to goodness. It is like the improvement of bad land through shoveling, transforming it to good land.<sup>59</sup>

Underlying the difficulty is the seeming commitment to a thoroughly determinist system. Wang reads such key concepts as *qi*, *ming*, and *xing* as deterministic principles and ties human behavior to materially determined elements in all of his chapters, including in the discussion of *xing* and its role in moral behavior. He wants to allow for the efficacy of human effort in the creation of moral behavior, but his system deterministic system forces him to

<sup>59</sup> *Shuaixing* 5.

take behavior as the result of external situations molding one's character. In particular, he seems to understand *ziran* (spontaneous) activity in terms of deterministic activity, in which there is no will or choice. He describes the generation of children as an example of such *ziran* activity—it happens of itself, as a result of no decision or will. In his strong statement of determinism in *Zhiqi*, however, he seems to rule out the possibility of moral education to produce moral action, given that virtuous action is produced by the circumstances of one's situation. Perhaps Wang has overstepped here, making his deterministic case about the times and moral conduct (and the inessentiality of government) such that he's forced himself into a corner and contradicts his own views about the efficacy of moral education elsewhere.

There is some reason to think that Wang was aware of the problem and also that he suggested a solution to it, within the *Zhiqi* chapter itself. It is hard to see the shape of this response by looking at the *Zhiqi* alone, however, because the response is undeveloped and only suggestive. Indeed, it might never occur that Wang may be suggesting a response to the problem until we look at the problem concerning *xing* in light of a similar problem concerning *ming* (allotment) that Wang more explicitly responds to, and his attempted solution of this problem.

According to Wang in *Mingyi*, there are three different kinds of *ming*, which can cancel one another. He writes:

《傳》曰：「說命有三，一曰正命，二曰隨命，三曰遭命。」正命、謂本稟之自得吉也。性然骨善，故不假操行以求福而吉自至，故曰正命。隨命者、戮力操行而吉福至，縱情施欲而凶禍到，故曰隨命。遭命者、行善得惡，非所冀望，逢遭於外而得凶禍，故曰遭命。

Tradition says that there are three types of allotment: natural allotment, consequent allotment, and incidental allotment. Natural allotment is said to be when good outcome issues from the original constitution of itself. Based on natural characteristics in themselves the bones are healthy, therefore one does not have to move away from and transform one's conduct to seek good fortune, but a good outcome is achieved from one's own characteristics. This is why it is called natural allotment. Those with consequent allotment exert effort to control their conduct and through this achieve good fortune and outcome. If they were to allow free rein to their emotions and desires they would come upon misfortune. This is why it is called consequent allotment. As far as those with incidental allotment, their conduct is good but they obtain evil, and they are without hope for any help. Meeting with incident externally, they obtain misfortune. This is why it is called incidental allotment.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Mingyi* 4.



Wang's reason for positing such a distinction between three kinds of *ming* in the first place is a difficulty that arises in considering natural constitution and its relationship to longevity. If it is the case that the longevity of persons is due (as Wang says it is) to their *ming*, which is given at birth and can be determined by observing physical and mental features of the person (a person of weak constitution will be frail and sallow, for example, which shows a *ming* determining shorter life), then how do we explain cases such as people with seemingly different *ming* all dying in an earthquake or famine, or cases in which weak people build their health and constitution through effort, exercise, and so on?

There are some questions that arise here concerning just how Wang understands these three kinds of *ming*. Some passages in *Minglu* suggest that natural *ming* is a fortunate *ming*, associated with long life, wealth, and success, while the two other kinds of *ming* are successively less fortunate kinds of *ming*. But he also appears to understand natural *ming* in other passages as a kind of *uncultivated ming*, one that obtains just on the basis of one's *xing*, one's natural characteristics, and without any cultivated effort to change this *xing* (this is why I translate *zhengming* as *natural* allotment). It can only be the case that natural characteristics will lead to a fortunate *ming* of themselves if these natural characteristics entail a kind of proper and full development. For example, Wang must hold that the *xing* (natural characteristics) of a human being are such that a human lives to the age of 100 years given the operation of their original constitution (which he indeed claims later in the *Minglu* chapter). Given that this is the case, any divergence from this 100-year life span must be either through improper activity (thus leading to early death at 50 through *swimming* [consequent allotment]), or incidents independent of one's activity (incidental allotment), which Wang says will suggest difficulties even from birth. What we *don't* see here is any position that suggests that natural characteristics (*xing*) might be different for different people, such that the natural length of one person's life may be only 50, based on their constitution, while that of another may be 100. It seems that Wang wants consequent and incidental allotment to take care of those cases, but it is unclear that they can. The person with a congenital disorder that makes it impossible for them to live past 50 years old does not *cultivate* this end through their activity, nor does it seem right to say that their lives are cut short based on external incident. It seems a matter of *xing*. Wang ultimately does give an account of different kinds of *xing* meant to handle this.

Another difficulty concerns consequent allotment. As Wang explains it in the above passage, consequent allotment seems to involve cultivation to *improve* one's *ming*. Later in the chapter, he discusses it in a way that suggests that consequent allotment is less fortunate than natural allotment. Likely what he's attempting to get at here is the idea that one can improve or worsen one's allotment through one's own activity. But if one can *improve* one's allotment, rather than only worsening it, this requires *different* natural characteristics for different people. That is, Wang needs a way of distinguishing types of *xing*. This is just what he offers us later in the *Mingyi* chapter, a distinction between three types of *xing* that mirror the three types of *ming*. That is, he offers an account of natural, consequent, and incidental *xing* (natural characteristics).

此謂三命。亦有三性：有正，有隨，有遭。正者、稟五常之性也；隨者、隨父母之性；遭者、遭得惡物象之故也。故妊婦食兔，子生缺唇。

These are what are called three kinds of allotment. There are also three kinds of inborn characteristics. There are natural, consequent, and incidental inborn characteristics. Natural inborn characteristics are the five bases of virtue. Consequent inborn characteristics are what we gain from our mother and father. Incidental inborn characteristics are a matter of meeting with incident and obtaining bad things as a result. For example, when a pregnant woman eats rabbit, her child can be born with a hare lip.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike in the case of *ming*, it seems necessary that all humans possess at least the first two types of *xing*, natural and consequent, and it is differences in consequent and incidental *xing* that explain the differences between people in natural *ming*—why the natural *ming* of one person will be to live to 100 years, and that of another person will be to live to 50 years.

One's *xing* is thus just one element determining the outcome of one's life concerning longevity, or determining one's natural allotment. One's natural constitution, weak or strong, sickly or healthy, is a matter of all three kinds of *xing*. But there are other kinds of *ming* that can alter the results of the *zheng ming* of a given individual. One might have a *zheng ming* that would lead to long life, being healthy and robust, yet might still be cut down early in battle, for example, or in a natural disaster. For a person to have such a fate would then be a matter of *zao* (incidental) *ming*

<sup>61</sup> *Mingyi* 7.

trumping, if you will, this person's natural allotment (and their inborn characteristics). Had this person not been in a situation of warfare, he would have lived to a ripe old age. That is, his natural *ming* alone would have resulted in long life. But in the case of such a person there are other *ming* at work as well, and his incidental *ming* counteracted natural *ming* in this case. Each type of *ming* is just one factor determining the outcome of one's life concerning longevity.

Perhaps the most interesting of the three kinds of allotment Wang distinguishes, for my purposes here, is consequent allotment (*sui ming*). Natural and incidental allotments are external, completely independent of human action and effort. I have a certain constitution, and I can meet with certain incidents that may effect my life, for better or worse. This is all so far consistent with Wang's general determinism. Consequent allotment is meant to allow room for the efficacy of willful effort to effect the outcome of our lives, concerning longevity and other outcomes. We can consider the case of medical care, for example, or of health consciousness. One might have a *xing* suggesting an early death, a weak and frail constitution, yet one can extend one's life through medicine and medical care, perhaps well beyond what would have been possible given one's *xing* alone. This is an example of consequent allotment, which can overcome what is determined by our *xing* (inborn characteristics).

Wang seems to think of *zao ming* (incidental allotment) as wholly negative, even though it might seem to us possible that one could meet with fortunate circumstances that could positively affect the outcome of one's life concerning longevity. A frail and sickly person might accidentally be exposed to an element, through working near a mine, that aids his health and thus extends his life. Wang doesn't consider such cases, however, and manifestly takes incidental allotment to be connected to disasters or otherwise negative incidents. Perhaps this is due to the nature of and the concerns of the view he is responding to, which is often the case with Wang's work. Although he does offer interesting and well-considered positive views, they are almost always primarily motivated by objection to some "common" or scholarly position Wang aims to refute, and thus Wang sometimes fails to consider aspects of the positive views he develops that are necessary to the coherence of his view but not strictly necessary for purposes of countering the opposing view(s).

Wang's discussion in *Mingyi* has the feel of both a criticism (in this case of *ru* views on allotment) and a proposed solution to a problem that arises even within Wang's own system, concerning allotment, and, as we see

above, inborn characteristics. In *Minglu*, another chapter dedicated to the discussion of allotment, Wang says nothing at all about the three types of *ming* he carefully distinguishes in *Mingyi*. Given the difficulty of dating the various essays in the *Lunheng* (although we might attempt to do this based on similarity of concepts, sophistication, and assumptions about previous statements), it is hard to say with a high degree of confidence that *Mingyi* is later and in part a response to problems arising in *Minglu*, but the system Wang outlines in *Mingyi* does conveniently happen to solve a problem that arises on the view of allotment developed in *Minglu*.

The proposed solution to the problem of determinism for *ming* that Wang offers in *Mingyi* sounds very similar to something Wang does in *Zhiqi*. Without seeing this response to the problem for allotment, however, it might be more difficult to see what Wang is trying to do in *Zhiqi*.

Wang likens the role of government in order to that of the doctor in health and says that the success of either of these is constrained by the *ming* (allotment) of the “patient” in question. He says:

良醫能行其針藥，使方術驗者，遇未死之人，得未死之病也。如命窮病困，則雖扁鵲末如之何。夫命窮病困之不可治，猶夫亂民之不可安也，藥氣之愈病，猶教導之安民也，皆有命時，不可令勉力也。

A good doctor is able to use needles and medicines and is successful in his arts when he meets with a person who has not yet died who has an illness that does not lead to death. If the person’s illness is fatal, the doctor can do nothing, even if he is a master. The allotment connected to a serious illness is such that it cannot be cured, just as disorder among the people cannot be undone. Medicine cures illness just as instruction guides and pacifies the people. They are both a matter of allotment (*ming*) and the times, and cannot be attained by ordering or using force.<sup>62</sup>

This is suggestive of the “three types of *ming*” response developed in *Mingyi*. It is left only suggestive here in *Zhiqi*, however. Elsewhere he says other things suggesting that moral learning and effort might have some effect on moral behavior, but that the fate of the state (something like the incidental allotment of the state) overcomes this. But why not develop this response more fully along the lines of that offered in *Mingyi* for the related problem concerning outcomes of life?

Part of the reason for not developing the response here may be the stated purpose of *Zhiqi*—to show that virtuous rulership has nothing to

<sup>62</sup> *Zhiqi* 3.

do with the order or flourishing of the state and that bad rulership has nothing to do with disorder and decline of the state. Right after the passage above, Wang launches into an insistence that the situation of the state, fortunate or disastrous, is independent of the quality of one's rule. Given that the primary aim of *Zhiqi* is to present an argument against the view that virtuous rule has an effect on the outcome of the life of the state, we might conclude that Wang simply wasn't concerned with the potential problem engendered by his determinism and a response to it here.

It also could have been the case, however, that Wang saw that there is a problem with his response, and so he merely left it suggestive in *Zhiqi* so as to avoid the difficulty. Earlier, Wang links the circumstances of the times (famine or plenty) to the moral behavior of the people, and this behavior is supposed to play a role in the fortunate or disastrous outcome of the state. But in the case of individuals (and the state), Wang claims, fortune and disaster are governed by allotment, goodness and badness governed by inborn characteristics. While *sui ming* (consequent allotment) is clearly meant to capture the role of human effort and cultivation in shaping our fate, *sui ming* seems almost impotent in the face of external circumstances (as Wang describes it), because it turns out to be overcome by almost any incidental circumstance. And because of his insistence in other chapters that goodness and badness have no effect on fortune or disaster in the individual case (he argues this to counter the position that we can tell whether a person is good or talented based on their ability to advance to high office and gain accolades, a position Wang certainly has personal reason to oppose), he is left in the awkward position of having to explain how moral learning and individual talent or effort can have some effect on outcomes of one's life (happiness or unhappiness, fortune or disaster), yet fail to have *decisive* effects such that they would make happy the person who would otherwise be unhappy, or make the life that would otherwise end in disaster into one of fortune.

Wang never completely resolves this basic difficulty in the *Lunheng* concerning the efficacy of human effort and cultivation in allotment and in outcomes more generally. He does, however, seem aware of the difficulty, and is careful to dance around it in many of the chapters in which he discusses human inborn characteristics and allotment. However, this can help us understand Wang's commitment to a deterministic system and the way he attempts to account for human activity within this system.



## Conclusion: The Significance of Wang Chong's Philosophical Thought

My attempt in this book has been threefold: first, to demonstrate the uniqueness and importance of the work of Wang Chong within the early Chinese tradition; second, to demonstrate the value of Wang Chong's work for contemporary philosophers; third, to demonstrate how engaging with the philosophical thought of early Chinese philosophers using philosophical methodology is a valuable historical and constructive project.

To demonstrate the uniqueness and importance of Wang's work in its historical context, I looked in previous chapters for the connection between Wang's positions and those of his predecessors. I discussed the ways in which Wang Chong developed and built upon conceptions of truth, methodology, knowledge, and pluralism (of multiple kinds) inherent in the tradition. While Wang did follow this tradition more closely than he is sometimes claimed to have, he innovated in ways that contributed to development of a number of concepts such as *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity) in the later tradition (particularly in *Xuanxue* "Neo-Daoist" thought). As I showed in Chap. 3, his innovation was often so clear that he felt himself forced to defend it, in chapters such as *Duizuo*. While this was the case, however, Wang's claims about his own divergence from "common" beliefs can be understood partly as self-aggrandizing. As I also showed in a number of chapters, his views and arguments are not completely independent of those of earlier thinkers, and his acceptance of numerous common and traditional positions, as well as his commitment to the authority of texts and figures in the tradition, is evident throughout the *Lunheng*.

Wang Chong's views on the topics discussed in this book built upon the positions of earlier thinkers. One of the main ways his influence by earlier Han thinkers is apparent is in his development of a number of pluralist views. Even his methodology, which comes across as quite against-the-grain, develops strains of thought inherent in the earlier tradition. Wang can then in some sense be seen as a systematizer of a somewhat different kind than those of the early Han, represented in such texts as the *Huainanzi* or *Chunqiu Fanlu*. Wang's development of deterministic and seemingly "naturalistic" views on human agency and its relationship to nature are both in line with the correlative metaphysics of the early Han, and critical of them. Wang is a difficult thinker to make sense of in part because he seems to offer with one statement what he takes back with another, but in this book I have offered an alternative to the view that he was merely inconsistent or concerned only with winning narrow debates. While the *Lunheng* is not always consistent in its views (and much of this is certainly due to the fact that its chapters were written at different stages in Wang's long career), it does develop unique and often ingenious solutions to problems in the early Chinese philosophical tradition.

As mentioned in Chap. 2, Wang Chong's influence on the later Chinese tradition was modest, at least in terms of explicit admission of influence by later philosophers. Though his conception of spontaneity, as well as his accounts of *ming* (allotment) and *xing* (inborn characteristics) seem to have been adopted by later thinkers, particularly the "Neo-Daoist" thinker Guo Xiang, who adopts a conception of spontaneity that seems much more in line with Wang's explanation of the Daoist view in his chapters on spontaneity in the *Lunheng* than it does with views in the *Zhuangzi*, *Daodejing*, or other early texts. Of course, insofar as there is influence here, it is unmentioned. We are left mainly to fill in the gaps of history. Wang Chong's work, according to the traditional story, was boosted by the scholar Cai Yong (132–192 CE) in the later years of the Eastern Han, and it found some audience at this point, where it likely had its formative influence on thinkers who formed the core of the *Qingtan* 清談 ("Pure Conversation") movement that developed in the late Han and was related to the later *Xuanxue* Neo-Daoist movement. After this, we find little explicit mention of Wang Chong or his work throughout Chinese history. As mentioned earlier, Wang's lack of a clear "school" affiliation is likely a large part of the reason for this neglect. No one could use Wang to argue for the tenets of their own school or advance their own agenda or ideology. Wang was concerned, according to his own words, with the *truth*

primarily, rather than with affiliation, flowery and memorable style, or advancement of the interests of a group. Ironically, it is likely this that led to his neglect in the tradition. It is time, however, for us to rediscover Wang's work. The strength of his best arguments and ideas is sufficient to accord him a place of significance among the philosophers of early China.

I also argued throughout the book that Wang Chong's views can help us think about philosophical problems in a contemporary context. As I have shown, many of the issues Wang and other early Chinese philosophers struggled with are the same or very close to those contemporary philosophers struggle with. Wang offered positions on methodology, truth, knowledge, determinism, and a host of other philosophical issues that are unique in the history of philosophy. Engaging with Wang's views and arguments can suggest new ways of developing answers to these outstanding philosophical issues today. Wang's views on truth give us a particularly useful example of this. His pluralist conception of truth fits with the spirit of contemporary pluralist theories of truth in the philosophy of language and metaphysics. At the same time, it does not match any of the contemporary theories on offer I know of and also has the potential to resolve some difficult problems facing pluralist theories of truth (and pluralist theories in general).<sup>1</sup>

Another way that the work of Wang Chong, and that of other important early Chinese thinkers, can be helpful is to help us reconsider the way we formulate philosophical questions. Encountering early Chinese thinkers like Wang Chong, as well as other thinkers, texts, and traditions that fall outside of the Western traditions dominant in the English-speaking world, can show us very different concepts, intuitions, and assumptions. This can challenge our own views, helping us to recognize that what we take as obvious has not been to everyone, and that what we see as intuitive has not always and everywhere been seen as such. Recognizing our own locatedness in this way can help us to avoid entrenchment and unbending dogmatism in our views. When we see other possible ways of thinking about the world, it disrupts our belief that our own way is the One True Way, and helps us recognize that there are other ways of thinking about the world, and that these ways have much to recommend them as well. David Wong calls this phenomenon in the realm of morality "moral

<sup>1</sup> Earlier "pluralist" texts like *Huainanzi* contain additional resources. I discuss some of these in Chaps. 3 and 4 of this book, as well as in Chapters Five and Six of *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy*.



ambivalence”.<sup>2</sup> When we encounter other moral systems, he says, we begin to recognize the ways in which those moral systems, even though different from our own, can be understood as reasonable. If we take these different views and intuitions and see where they lead, perhaps combined with aspects of our own previous worldview, we may discover new and greater things. I hope I have shown that encountering the thought of Wang Chong, especially through the frame of philosophy, provides much of great value.

<sup>2</sup>Wong, *Natural Moralities*, p. 5. Wong writes: “We see that reasonable and knowledgeable people could have made different judgments than we are inclined to make about these conflicts, and any prior convictions we might have had about the superiority of our own judgments get shaken.”

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