

negative: there is no room for argument. And if that which is so really is so, it must necessarily be different from that which is not so: there is no room for argument.

"Take no heed of time, nor of right and wrong. But passing into the realm of the Infinite, take your final rest therein."

The Penumbra said to the Umbra. "At one moment you move; at another you are at rest. At one moment you sit down; at another you get up. Why this instability of purpose?" "I depend," replied the Umbra, "upon something which causes me to do as I do; and that something

depends in turn upon something else which causes it to do as it does. My dependence is like that of a snake's scales or of a cicada's wings. How can I tell why I do one thing, or why I do not do another?"

Once upon a time, I, Zhuangzi, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.

13.2 THE EMPIRICISM OF WANG CHONG

Chinese philosopher Wang Chong (Wang Ch'ung, 27–97 CE) articulated the central doctrine of empiricism. Wang, an orphan, lived in poverty for most of his life. He read books at a bookstore, studied at the national university, and returned to his hometown to teach. He earned a reputation as a genius. He was awarded a job as district secretary but promptly lost it due to his rather difficult personality.

By Wang Chong's time, during the Han Dynasty, both Confucianism and Daoism had accumulated a thick layer of superstition. Confucianism was China's leading philosophical school, rapidly developing into a religion and attracting a set of superstitions. Daoism was becoming a mystical religion with an elaborate set of rituals. Confucius and Laozi were worshipped as gods. People believed in divination and destiny. They thought gods routinely interfered in human affairs to reward the good, punish the bad, and enforce a variety of seemingly pointless rules. People arranged their houses and lives according to the principles of *feng shui*.

Wang Chong believed that all this violated the basic principles of Confucius and Laozi—and, for that matter, common sense. He advanced skeptical arguments, especially against the Confucians. Wang, a thoroughgoing naturalist, argued that nature is spontaneous, acting according to its own laws without divine intervention or interference. Natural events have no religious meaning. Nature has no discernible purpose; we can understand things only by understanding their causes. And we can gain knowledge of those only through experience. That is the key thesis of any empiricist: Everything we know about the world comes from experience. Though the science of Wang's time remained primitive, he stressed the importance of scientific method. His writings received little attention during his lifetime but influenced Confucianism and Daoism profoundly after his death, stripping away much of the superstition that surrounded them and returning them to their roots in the works of Confucius and Laozi.

13.2.1 Wang Chong, from *Balanced Enquiries*

Spontaneous Action

Why must we assume that the heavens act spontaneously? Because they have neither mouth nor eyes. Intentional activity is associated with a mouth and with eyes: the mouth wishes to eat, and the eyes to see. These desires manifested outside come from inside. When the mouth and the eyes are craving for something considered advantageous, it is due to those desires. Now, when the mouth and the eyes are not activated by desire, there is nothing for them to seek. Why should there be activity then?

How do we know that heaven possesses neither mouth nor eyes? From the earth. The body of the earth is formed of rocks and soil, and rocks and soil have neither mouth nor eyes. The heavens and earth are like husband and wife. Since the body of the earth is not provided with a mouth or eyes, we know that the heavens also have no mouth or eyes. Supposing that the heavens have a body, then it must be like that of the earth. As a vital force, it should be air alone, and this air would be like clouds and fog. How can a cloudy or nebular substance have a mouth or an eye?

Someone might argue that every movement originates from inaction. There is desire provoking movement and, as soon as there is motion, there is action. The changes in the heavens are similar to those of man; how could they be spontaneous without intention or purpose? I reply that, when the heavens move, they bring forth matter and energy. The mass of the heavens move, matter and energy come forth, and things are produced.

When the heavens are changing, they do not desire to produce things thereby; things are produced of their own accord. That is spontaneity.

Releasing matter and energy, the heavens do not desire to create things, but things are created of themselves. That is spontaneous action without intention or desire.

The Purposeless Heavens

By the fusion of the matter and energy of the heavens and earth, all things of the world are produced spontaneously, just as by the mixture of matter and energy of husband and wife children are born spontaneously. Among the things thus produced, creatures with blood in their veins are sensitive to hunger and cold. Seeing that the five grains can be eaten, they use them as food; and discovering that silk and hemp can be worn, they take them and wear them. Some people are of the opinion that the heavens produce grain for the purpose of feeding mankind, and silk and hemp to clothe them. That would be tantamount to making the heavens the farmer of man, or his mulberry girl; it would not be in accordance with spontaneity, therefore this opinion is very questionable and unacceptable.

Reasoning on Daoist principles we find that nature imbues all things with matter and energy. 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. The heavens do not produce grain, silk, and hemp purposely, in order to feed and clothe mankind, just as by calamitous changes they do not intend to reprove man. Things are produced spontaneously, and man wears and eats them; natural forces change spontaneously, and man is frightened by them. The usual theory is disheartening. Where would spontaneity be,

if changes in the heavens were intentional, and where would be spontaneous action without aim or purpose?

The Indifferent Heavens

King Xiang of Chin sent a sword to Po Chi, who thereupon was going to commit suicide, falling on the sword. "How have I offended Heaven?" he asked. After a long while he answered, "I see why I must die. At the battle of Chang-ping, the army of Chao—several hundred thousand men—surrendered, but I deceived them, and caused them to be buried alive. Therefore I deserve to die." Afterwards he killed himself.

Po Chi was well aware of his former crime, and acquiesced in the punishment consequent upon it. He knew how he himself had failed, but not why the soldiers of Chao were buried alive. If heaven really had punished the guilty, what offence against heaven had the soldiers of Chao committed, those who surrendered? If, instead, there had been wounding and killing on the battlefield by the random blows of weapons, many of the four hundred thousand would certainly have survived. Why were these also buried in spite of their goodness and innocence? Those soldiers being unable to obtain heaven's protection through their virtue, why did Po Chi alone suffer the condign punishment for his crime from heaven? We see from this that Po Chi was mistaken in what he concluded.

If the heavens had produced creatures on purpose, they ought to have taught them to love each other, and not to prey upon and destroy one another. One might object that such is the nature of the five elements, that when the heavens create all things, they are imbued with the matter and energies of the five elements, and that these fight together, and destroy one another. But then the heavens ought to have filled creatures with the matter and energy of one element alone, and taught them mutual love, not permitting the forces of the five elements to resort to strife and mutual destruction.

Destiny

It is said that three different kinds of destiny can be distinguished: the natural, the acquired, and the adverse. One speaks of natural destiny if somebody's luck is the simple consequence of his original organization. His constitution being well ordered, and his bones good, he need not toil in order to obtain happiness, since his luck comes of itself. This is what is meant by natural destiny. Acquired destiny comes into play when a man becomes happy only by dint of hard work, but is pursued by misfortune as soon as he yields to his evil propensities, and gives rein to his desires. This is what is understood by acquired destiny. As for adverse destiny, a man may, contrary to his expectations, reap bad fruits from all his good deeds; he will rush into misfortune and misery, which will strike him from afar. In this case, therefore, one can speak of adverse destiny.

Natural Destiny

Every mortal receives his own natural destiny; already at the time of his conception, he obtains a lucky or an unlucky future. Man's nature does not correspond to his destiny: his disposition may be good, but his destiny unlucky, or his disposition bad, and his fate lucky. Good and bad actions are the result of natural disposition, happiness and misfortune, good and bad luck are destiny.... A favorite of fate, though not doing well, is not, of necessity, deprived of happiness for that reason, whereas an ill fated man does not get rid of his misfortune, though trying his best.

Acquired Destiny

In acquired destiny, bad deeds are followed by misfortune. Yet the robbers Che and Chuang Chiao were scourges to the whole empire. With some thousands of other bandits whom they had collected, they assaulted and robbed people of

their property, and cut them to pieces. As outlaws they were unequalled. They ought to have been disgraced; far from it, they finished their lives as old men. In the face of this, how can the idea of an acquired destiny be upheld?

Adverse Destiny

Men with an adverse destiny do well in their hearts, but meet with disasters abroad. . . . Chu Ping and Wu Yuan were the most loyal ministers of their sovereigns, and scrupulously fulfilled their duties as servants to the king. In spite of this, the corpse of Chu Ping was left unburied in Chu, and in Wu Yuan's body was cooked. For their good works they should have obtained the happiness of acquired destiny, but they fell in with the misfortune of adverse fate. How is such a thing possible?

Consequently, there is no guarantee whatever that men of high endowments and excellent conduct will in any case attain to wealth and honor, and we must not imagine that others whose knowledge is very limited, and whose virtue is but small, are therefore doomed to poverty and misery. Sometimes, men of great talents and excellent conduct have a bad fate, which cripples them, and keeps them down, and people with scanty knowledge and small virtue may have such a propitious fate that they soar up and take a brilliant flight.

Ghosts

People say that the dead become spirit beings, or ghosts, that they are conscious, and can hurt men. Let us examine this by comparing men with other beings.

The dead do not become ghosts, have no consciousness, and cannot injure others. How do we know this? We know it from other beings. Man is a being, and other creatures are likewise beings. When a creature dies, it does not become a ghost, for what reason then must man alone become a ghost when he expires? In this world you can

separate man from other creatures, but not on the ground that he becomes a ghost. The faculty to become a ghost cannot be a distinctive mark. If, on the other hand, there is no difference between man and other creatures, we have no reason either to suppose that man may become a ghost.

Man lives by virtue of his vital force. When he dies, this vital force is exhausted. It resides in the arteries. At death the pulse stops, and the vital force ceases to work; then the body decays, and turns into earth and clay. By what could it become a ghost?

Without ears or eyes men have no perceptions. In this respect the deaf and the blind resemble plants and trees. But are men, whose vital force is gone, merely as if they had no eyes, or no ears? No, their decay means complete dissolution.

When men see ghosts, they appear like living men. Just from the fact that they have the shape of living men we can infer that they cannot be the spirits of the dead, as will be seen from the following.

Fill a bag with rice, and a sack with millet. The rice in the bag is like the millet in the sack. Full, they look strong, stand upright, and can be seen. Looking at them from afar, people know that they are a bag of rice, and a sack of millet, because their forms correspond to their contents, and thus become perceptible. If the bag has a hole, the rice runs out, and if the sack is damaged, the millet is spilt. Then the bag and the sack collapse, and are no more visible, when looked at from afar.

Man's vital force resides in the body, as the millet and rice do in the bag and the sack. At death the body decays, and the vital force disperses, just as the millet and the rice escape from the pierced or damaged bag, or sack. When the millet or the rice are gone, the bag and the sack do not take a form again. How then could there be a visible body again, after the vital force has been scattered and lost?

The nature of heaven and earth is such that a new fire can be lighted, but a burnt-out fire cannot be set ablaze again. A new man can be born, but a dead one cannot be resurrected. If burnt-out ashes could be kindled again into a blazing fire,

I would be very much of opinion that the dead might take a bodily form again. Since, however, a burnt-out fire cannot burn again, we are led to the conclusion that the dead cannot become ghosts.

The Dead

Since the dead cannot become ghosts, they cannot have any consciousness either. We infer this from the fact that before their birth men have no consciousness. Before they are born, they form part of the primigenial force, and when they die, they revert to it. This primigenial force is vague and diffuse, and the human spirit, a part of it. Anterior to his birth, man is devoid of consciousness, and at his death he returns to this original state of unconsciousness, for how could he be conscious?

Man is intelligent and sagacious, because he has in him the forces of the five virtues. These are in him because the five organs are in his body. As long as the five parts are uninjured, man is bright and clever, but, when they become diseased, his intellect is dimmed and confused, which is tantamount to stupidity and dullness. After death the five inward parts putrefy, and, when they do so, the five virtues lose their substratum. That which harbors intelligence is destroyed, and that which is called intelligence disappears. The body requires the vital force for its maintenance; and with this, the body becomes conscious. There is no fire in the world burning quite of itself, how could there be an essence without a body, but conscious of itself?

Man's death is like sleep, and sleep comes next to a trance, which resembles death. If a man does not wake up again from a trance, he dies. If he awakes, he returns from death, as though he had been asleep. Thus sleep, a trance, and death are essentially the same. A sleeper cannot know what he did, when he was awake, as a dead man is unaware of his doings during his lifetime. People may talk or do anything by the side of a sleeping man, he does not know, and similarly the dead man has no consciousness of the good or bad actions performed in front of his coffin. When a

man is asleep, his vital force is still there, and his body intact, and yet he is unconscious. How much more must this be the case with a dead man, whose vital force is scattered and gone, and whose body is in a state of decay?

No Messages from Beyond

Nowadays, living persons in a trance will sometimes act as mediums to speak for those who have died; and diviners, striking black chords, will call down the dead, whose souls then will talk through the diviner's mouth. All that is bragging and wild talk. If it were not mere gossip, then we would have a manifestation of the vital force of some being.

Some say that the spirit cannot speak. If it cannot speak, it cannot have any knowledge either. Knowledge requires a vital force, just as speech does.

Human death is like the extinction of fire. When a fire is extinguished, its light does not shine any more, and when man dies, his intellect does not perceive any more. The nature of both is the same. If people nevertheless pretend that the dead have knowledge, they are mistaken. What is the difference between a sick man about to die and a light about to go out? When a light is extinguished, its radiation is dispersed, and only the candle remains. When man has died, his vital force is gone, and the body alone remains. To assert that a person after death is still conscious is like saying that an extinguished light shines again.

Fictitious Influences

We learn from historical books that the wife of Chi Liang turned towards the city wall, which collapsed in consequence. This implies that when Chi Liang did not come back from a military expedition, his wife cried out in despair in the direction of the city wall; so heart-felt were her sorrow and her laments that her feelings affected the wall, which tumbled down in consequence.

That the woman cried, turned towards the wall, may be true, but the subsequent collapse of the city-wall is an invention. . . . The city-wall is of earth. As earth, like cloth, is devoid of a heart and intestines, how could it be moved by sobs and tears and fall down? Should the sounds of genuine grief be apt to affect the earth of a wall, then complaints uttered among the trees of a forest would tear apart plants and snap trunks.

If somebody should weep, when turned towards a water or a fire, would the water boil up, or the fire go out? As plants, water, and fire do not differ from earth, it is plain that the wife of Chi Liang should not have to answer for the dissolution of the wall.

Perhaps the wall was just going to tumble down of itself when the wife of Chi Liang happened to cry below. The world is partial to fictions and does not investigate the true cause of things; consequently this story of the downfall of the city-wall has, up till now, not faded from memory. . . .

Neither ancient nor modern history affords any instances of men knowing spontaneously without study or being enlightened without inquiry. . . . When a man of great natural intelligence and remarkable parts is confined to his own thoughts and has no experience, neither beholding signs and omens nor observing the working of various sorts of beings, he may imagine that after many generations a horse will give birth to an ox, and an ox to a donkey, or that from a peach-tree plums may grow, or cherries from a plum-tree. . . . Let us suppose that somebody standing at that east side of a wall raises his voice, and that a sage hears him from the west side, would he know whether he was of a dark or a pale complexion, whether he was tall or short, and which was his native place, his surname, his designation, and his origin? . . . Not that a sage is devoid of knowledge, but this cannot be known through his knowledge. Something unknowable by knowledge may only be learned by inquiry.