Life = Body Plus X

Let us assume the following. We want to understand the functions of the human body. Then, we want to explain these functions to other people. Where do we begin? What does the body disclose to us? A fair amount. Our senses tell us much: there is color in the face and on the body, seen with our eyes. There are odors that we smell with our nose. There are sounds in the chest and the abdomen that we hear with our ears. None of this is static; it is always changing, day and night, in times of health and illness. We see that food is absorbed in the body and then excreted in an altered form. The body surface is sometimes dry. Following exertion, in frightened states, and during fever, sweat comes out of the pores. Fever shows that temperature also fluctuates. Skin can break open, and a wound can also close up again. Hair grows and falls out. Tears flow and dry up. The body discloses a fair amount to us.

We do not have to restrict our observation to the living body. The dead also disclose a fair amount to us. In an opened corpse, in addition to the external organs that we can see in a living person—the nose, eyes, ears, and mouth—there are also the internal organs. Here again we see colors, outlines, fluids. A fair amount is offered to the senses. But is that all? And what is it all there for? How does the whole thing work? There are conditions that prevent us from pursuing our daily activities. We denote some of these conditions as “illness.” We would like to know why such conditions arise. For that, we must know what is “healthy.” There are various criteria for separating the “normal” from the “abnormal” and the healthy from the sick.

Then there is another problem. Humans, like every living organism, have a material body. But at the same time, there is also something intangible, which is life itself. The body seems to be directed by life. Life can escape a person, and his or her body ceases to function. Thus, in our endeavor to understand ourselves and our functions, we already
have three levels. We perceive the material body. We assume that in this material body, certain processes occur that we can classify as normal or abnormal. Then there is also a directing level. Something directs the body in its functions. Something is responsible for certain processes occurring in the body. The body can lose this “something.” Then it dies. But what is this “something”?

We cannot see it. But it has many names—a different one in every culture. The designations have also changed through the ages. Let us focus on the human body and simply take from the multitude of designations a commonly used name for the invisible something: the spirit. We could also say soul. We assume that the body cannot live without a soul. The soulless body exists only as a dead body. It makes no difference whether we speak of body and spirit, body and soul or corpus and spiritus. One thing we can see, the other we cannot.

The assumption of the existence of a spirit, a soul, a spiritus in the body is a first indication: when we speak of the human body and its functions, we must fall back on ideas that do not originate in what we can see in a tangible substrate, or in the conceivable matter, whatever its nature. An endeavor to explain certain functions of the body, and with that to explain certain human behaviors, inevitably leads to the assumption of invisible, intangible, but nevertheless real parts of the living body. What is the basis for this assumption? Possibly a comparison of the living body with the dead body.

Viewing a peacefully dying or newly deceased person, one can hardly see any difference between life and death. Death first appears as sleep; only the act of touching the dead person and the further development of the corpse show us that death is another state. Yet there is no doubt: the corpse seems to be missing something; something seems to have escaped from the dead body. What is now missing once gave the person the ability to live. It is not visible or tangible.

The observed death is not necessarily accompanied by a loss of blood. It is even the rule that no material, tangible substrate leaves the living body at death. Today, we still do not know exactly what threshold separates life from death, what element of life must be lost for death to occur. Even in prehistoric times—though the exact origin is unknown—the formula already seemed plausible: life is a body augmented by X.
So far, the identification of X has come no further than an assumption, a construction. When we speak of the “soul,” the “spirit,” or the “psyche,” we use metaphors. For example, the soul can be “dirtied” or “black,” and should be “pure.” Such a statement, for many centuries associated with very real circumstances, likely seems to many today to have validity only as a metaphor. However, today’s same enlightened thinkers will unabashedly acknowledge contemporary derivations of X, in accordance with which the “psyche” is “vulnerable” and should be “protected from harm.” It is no use: the soul, psyche, spirit, or whatever else we have called X or want to call it seems to be a necessary element of life, an indispensable attendant to the living body. If we want to explain the functions of the living body, we cannot do without X, the invisible, the intangible. At least not yet.

The names for X are adapted to their context of interpretation, sometimes religious, sometimes secular. Certain conventions can impress themselves in a cultural context. Referring merely to “X” is not sophisticated enough. Better to speak of X₁, X₂, … Xₙ. Let us call X₁ “soul,” which is responsible for different functions than X₂, which we call “spirit.” X₃, “psyche,” is in turn responsible for different functions than X₁ and X₂. Further differentiations are not out of the question. The ethereal and astral parts of the body, so clear to students of Rudolf Steiner, are differentiations of X. Likewise, the construction of qi, now widely accepted in Europe and North America, was conceptualized in its Chinese homeland about two millennia ago as a fine material breath, and has now contributed in the West to a further differentiation of the invisible X into a kind of life force or energy. Today, the life formula therefore needs to be corrected. The precise formula is now: life is a body augmented by X₁, X₂, X₃, … Xₙ. Whether every X₁ as the many names seem to suggest, actually exists alongside the others, or whether X₁ to Xₙ are actually all just one single X for which we know no comprehensive name or do not dare to name, all of this remains unknown. X is X, after all.

Everything points to this: the loss of the ability to participate in daily life unhindered; the loss of the ability to accomplish one’s tasks and to fulfill routine duties appropriate to one’s place in the arc from birth through adulthood to the end of life. This was the earliest criterion for the identification of the condition categorized as “illness.” Today, there is
a more differentiated perspective. We differentiate between underlying diseases on the one hand, and visible or tangible ailments on the other. An invisible disease can be the cause of a visible or tangible ailment. Fever is consequently not a disease in itself; it is an expression, a symptom of a more profound disease. The underlying disease is not necessarily detectable by the patient—at least not in the beginning stages. Thus the disease hypertension, for example.

Even in very early times, there was a differentiation between illness of the tangible, visible body and illness of X, the intangible, invisible spirit. X, as we have seen, is hidden from perception by the eye and other sensory organs, but it actually exists. It is so real to us that we grant that X can be healthy or sick—just as the body can.

If the body is in a condition that prevents us from fulfilling our daily tasks, for instance when we have a high fever or a broken leg, then it is sick. If the body is apparently unharmed, but a person’s behavior is such that he is unable to fulfill his daily tasks, then X is sick. To illustrate this, let us again give X a name. We refer to people as being “insane,” “mentally ill,” and “emotionally disturbed.” What is actually supposed to be ill when we say “the psyche is ill”? No one knows. It is an assumption, a construct stemming from the parallel to harm of the body, which can be ill. It is possible that something else is behind “diseases of the spirit,” something much different from what we can presently imagine. There is no discernible short- or long-term way out of the dichotomy between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, between the physically tangible and the intellectual construct.

Let there be no doubt: both the body and X can be healthy or sick. At the same time, a healthy body can accommodate a sick X and vice versa. Since antiquity, observers of human life have been convinced that a sick body can cause an initially healthy X to fall ill, just as an initially sick X can subsequently cause the body to fall ill. Depending on the direction of this process, we speak of psychosomatics or somatopsychics. These terms summarize what this is all about. Reality (soma) and speculation (psyche) are linked in one word, as if this were a matter of two partners of the same rank. And they are in fact partners—only death can separate the body and X. It is a widely held misconception that Descartes was
the first to separate body and soul. It is true that his physiological ideas shone new light on the separation of body and soul in a different way than any thinker before him. But the first separation took place millennia beforehand, at a time when the body and X were given different names. And that is an event that can be traced back to antiquity.

Very early on, the idea emerged that a body and its X could seem totally normal or healthy to the naïve observer, but still be classified by experts as sick or abnormal. Perhaps the oldest record of this conceptual expansion is found in the Records of the Grand Historian of Sima Qian, written at the turn of the second to first century BC in China. In his history of ancient China, Sima Qian included a biography of the itinerant physician Bian Que. When he was first admitted for an audience with Marquis Huan of Qi, Bian Que at once informed the marquis that the latter was sick and required treatment. Neither the marquis nor his royal household suspected any illness, and the marquis replied tersely that he was not sick. The rest of the story has been recounted many times. It ends with the death of the marquis and the itinerant physician’s explanation of the hidden course of illness.

In ancient times, being able to detect a disease invisible to laymen that did not hinder the sick person from pursuing his daily business but was nevertheless present was clearly an exceptional skill. Today it is hardly worth mentioning, since it happens every day. The body can be sick with hypertension, without the patient or his neighbor noticing any reduction in his fitness or any behavioral change. The body can be sick with a hidden tumor growing deep in a lung, without the affected person having any discomfort.

Bian Que detected the marquis’ illness, and today’s physician can diagnose hypertension or early lung cancer, because of something at their disposal that was unavailable to their predecessors: a theory of the processes in the body. This theory is medicine. Only the emergence of medicine could make it possible to recognize early processes in the body as “pathological.” At an early stage, it is not any interference with the body’s daily efficiency that leads these processes to be called pathological; thus, these processes do not fulfill the first criterion of illness. They are classified as pathological because the expert knows something the layman doesn’t.
The physician, with his or her theoretical education, is able to predict the way that these processes, invisible to the untrained eye, will eventually develop so that the original criterion of illness will be fulfilled and the body (and perhaps also X) will be partially or completely deprived of the ability to function.

2 | Medicine, or Novelty Appeal

We can now ask the central question that will concern us for the rest of this book: What is medicine? What provides the theoretical foundations for Bian Que in ancient China to make his prediction, or for today’s physician to make his or her evaluations?

Medicine is nothing but the endeavor to understand the normal and abnormal states of the body and of X in their origins and development, to attain the knowledge that is required to promote the normal or healthy states, to prevent the abnormal or sick states, and if a sick state has arisen, to alleviate its effects or even to reverse them completely. All this serves to preserve life, so that a person feels well and can accomplish his daily tasks to the fullest possible extent.

To attain this knowledge, medicine uses the scientific study of nature—the nature of man and his habitat. The science of nature, in turn, is based on the assumption of laws of nature that are valid independently of time, space, and person. As such, medicine is merely a part of healing. Healing is the overarching concept. Healing includes all efforts to heal the body and X or to preserve health. These might be prayers to a god or gods, exorcism of demons, massage, or administration of substances known to influence certain functions of the body. Healing of this kind is not medicine. Healing becomes medicine only when its practitioners recognize laws of nature and use only these laws of nature to investigate possible explanations of the body’s functions.

Healing is, generally speaking, the endeavor to prevent abnormal states of the body and to treat them if they occur. Healing can consist merely in performing a healing activity, such as cooling a hot place on the body. No theory is needed for this. It is pure empiricism. However,
healing can also have a theoretical, interpretive aspect. If a certain type of healing is to be considered medicine, then the interpretive part of this healing relies solely on the laws of nature for its interpretations. With nonmedical healing, the interpretive part may be based on the numerous, that is, on the existence of spirits, gods, ancestors, or a single god.

Medicine is a relatively young cultural construct. Healing has existed since the prehistoric era; its beginnings are lost in the darkness of a time from when no documents remain. In ancient Egypt, healing existed, but not medicine. Today, healing is still pursued in manifold ways. Only a part of all healing efforts today can be considered medical. Much is undertaken without the known laws of nature being used as the guiding principle. Medicine in Europe began to emerge around the fifth or fourth century BC. At the other end of the Eurasian continent, in China, medicine also emerged two or three centuries later out of the older healing. It is not yet known whether there was a relationship between these two events.

The emergence of medicine from healing seems to be a logical development. People in antiquity, so we read in the conventional history books, discovered laws of nature and immediately applied these to the functions of the body—and voilà, medicine was born. It sounds convincing, and yet it is not convincing at all. First of all, why should anyone have questioned the previous healing? Did it not offer an explanation for everything? If someone got sick, either the gods or the ancestors had sent the ailment. Perhaps as retribution for human lapses. Countless prayers to the gods or ancestors for forgiveness had brought the desired recovery and reattainment of health. Illnesses that led to death despite prayers were one’s unavoidable fate. In those cases, the wrath of the gods or the ancestors was too severe for human sacrifices and pleas to have an easing effect. It is also not as if the other type of healing was relegated hopelessly to the background and forever repressed into oblivion following the emergence of the new medicine. It was quite the opposite, as with the healing cult of Asclepius, which recommended healing sleep on the temple grounds, during which the god himself visited the sick and freed them of their suffering. This cult and many other methods of nonmedical healing came into being only after the emergence of medicine.
One could object that at its beginning, medicine was still helpless in the face of so many problems that it could not prove itself to be a 100-percent-effective alternative to the antiquated forms of healing. This objection, incidentally valid even today—and we will need to return to this—should give us pause. From the healing considered effective for centuries, if not millennia (why else would it have been practiced?), an alternative method developed, one that was initially hardly more effective than the already known healing methods.

Given the fact that today every scientifically trained physician would dismiss most of the supposedly effective remedies and methods described in the documents of this “young medicine” as senseless, one wonders what the novelty appeal of the new medicine was. It could not have been its convincing clinical effectiveness. If we look at this carefully, we can determine a first principle of medicine here: novelty appeal in medicine does not follow from proof of clinical effectiveness, but from other stimuli. We need to identify these stimuli if we want to understand the history of medicine—then and now.

Of course, when talking about novelty appeal, we are not referring to new substances or operative techniques discovered through intense research, or chance discoveries aiming to have effects that would make sense to anyone and which are therefore immediately convincing. With novelty appeal, we mean the new thinking, the great new attempt to explain why people are healthy or sick, and following this attempt at explanation, the measures recommended to protect health or to heal sickness. Such great ruptures are more infrequent than one might assume considering that there is more than two thousand years in the history of medicine.

We can also mention a second aspect of novelty appeal. Even within an accepted, dominant model of explanation, fundamentally new thoughts can arise and find acceptance. Examples of such novelties on the second level include the emergence of bacteriology in the late nineteenth century and the emphasis on the role of the immune system in the second half of the twentieth century. We must always ask ourselves where the novelty appeal of the time lay.

But let us stay with antiquity for the time being. The clinical applica-
tion of the new medicine could not have been so convincing at first—it could not have justified the radical upheaval and the urgency with which its new advocates defended their views. One might have expected humility, modesty. We might expect the authors of the time to have argued something like this: "We believe in the gods, and praying to the gods often helps us heal our patients." Or: "We know about the importance of the ancestors, and the petitions to the ancestors to relieve us of our suffering are often helpful. But now we have the help of an additional new method that we want to use in cases where it has shown itself to be useful and effective and where the former methods fail."

Some people may have thought and acted this way. More than a few people take action this way even today. Yet these people are not those who are responsible for what is new. People who think and act this pragmatically are hangers-on, beneficiaries, not the proponents of what is new, not creators. The creators of what is new speak a different language. They think only in terms of either/or. The creators disdain the old; they are interested only in what is new. Where does this deep conviction come from? Since it is not derived from the clinical effectiveness of the new thinking, it must have another source. Once we find this source, we will know the stimulus for what is fundamentally new in medicine.

Let us explore the two ancient cultures for which there is ancient evidence that can be dated quite precisely, documenting the emergence of medicine from the healing that had long been known.

3  Why Laws of Nature?

In China, medicine developed in the early second century BC, a time that was well removed from the beginning of the historical era and well documented. Rich source material gives us a good idea of the previous era. We are familiar with healing in China, out of which and against the backdrop of which Chinese medicine developed. In the present state of research, we can also redraw the beginnings of science, the precondition for the emergence of medicine in the narrower sense defined above.

Let us start with the emergence of science in China. The essence of sci-
ence lies in the assumption that inherent laws determine all events in the universe—irrespective of place, time, and person. He who assumes such inherent laws must initially pay a high price. He must defend himself against those who maintain that events are the more or less arbitrary work of gods, ancestors, or demons.

From time immemorial, knowledge of the power of the gods, ancestors, and demons determined much of human individual and social interaction. The gods were capable of intervening in the course of events, of sending rain or punishment with drought, of making a harvest possible or destroying it, of imposing death on a person or allowing someone to recover from illness. And was there not enough evidence to prove that this knowledge corresponded to reality? Hadn’t prayers, if they just lasted long enough, often brought the desired rain? Hadn’t sacrifices ended the series of bad harvests? Did not father recover from his grave illness, despite his high fever, once the demons had been expelled with the proper methods? Anecdotal evidence. There weren’t any precise statistics then; the appearance of many cases sufficed.

So why risk radical change? This was no mere matter of opinion; it was a matter of power—hard, political power. Those who positioned themselves between the people and the gods, those who claimed to know the will of the gods or ancestors, promulgated detailed rules on how people should live—rules that bestowed benefits on the mediators themselves. The interpretation of misfortune, or the wish to influence a future event in one way or another with the help of the numinous powers, brought advantages to those who declared themselves mediators and knew the right prayers—advantages that amounted to power. Through the mediators’ pronouncements on the demands of the gods, spirits, and demons, the supplicants’ behavior could be controlled and certain social structures were consolidated.

All this was called into question by the conviction that events in the world are controlled by laws, not by the arbitrariness of the numinous powers. The motives to produce such utterly subversive postulates, overthrowing past ways of thinking, must have been important ones. But the fundamental question is: How did anyone ever get the idea that it is not angry, loving, punishing, or compassionate gods, ancestors, or demons...
who determine events, but rather absolute inherent laws, whose author is unknown? Appearances never seem to suggest the existence of laws. Whether in the family, the clan, or the state—it had always been a matter of personal relationships in which the emotions of anger, love, revenge, or sympathy were responsible for interpersonal actions. Why would this not be valid for the whole universe?

Besides, are the laws of nature really so evident that they are visible by themselves? Assume we knew nothing about such laws and were requested to rely only on our senses of sight, hearing, touch, and smell. Would nature become so transparent to us that the laws governing it would be recognizable? What inherent laws would be discernable to us through these senses, without any prior knowledge?

Let us take a look around. What we understand today to be the laws of nature, the inherent laws of physics and chemistry, has been taught to us in school, if not by our parents. When the natural sciences emerged two millennia ago in ancient China, it was initially a matter of recognizing any laws at all in nature—laws convincing and clear enough to prevail over the notion of events being influenced by gods, ancestors, and demons.

We could point out the simplest regularities. To start with, there is the succession of day and night. This is the most basic pattern noticeable to any attentive observer: each day is followed by a night; each night is followed again by a day. In an agrarian culture, the succession of the seasons is just as impressive in its regularity. There are regions in China where, in contrast to Europe, a succession of distinct seasons can be followed quite accurately to within about fourteen days. But what does that prove? Why should such occurrences lead to the assumption that there are laws explaining everything, controlling everything that happens in nature? For millennia, there was this alternation between day and night. For just as long, the steady sequence of the seasons determined the habits of sowing, cultivating, and harvesting field crops. For just as long, people noticed that objects fall downward, not the other way.

So why was China the place where people created a science in the third century BC? Why was it at this time that people in China doubted the influence of the numinous on events and claimed that inherent laws
controlled everything past and present? It is unlikely that people's intelligence suddenly changed at that time. The inherent laws now postulated were just as recognizable or unrecognizable as they had always been. What event might have occurred to open people's eyes? What circumstances in 300 BC, against the backdrop of only the visible and eternally valid banalities of the alteration of day and night and the sequence of the seasons, might have led people at precisely that time to assume a linking of all phenomena and inherent laws pervading everything?

It is very astonishing that so many textbooks on the history of science so blithely ignore this volatile question, which touches on science's very understanding of itself. It also touches on medicine's understanding of itself, since medicine uses science for the endeavor to interpret the "normal" and "abnormal," healthy and sick processes in the body, and to derive instructions for action from such interpretations—instructions that should protect health and keep illness at a distance, or if illness has occurred, to heal it.

So let us ask ourselves what event might have occurred in 300 BC in China to open the eyes of first a few and then ever more people to the idea of a sweeping pattern in the events of the universe. Nature itself had not changed, nor had people's intelligence. Neither the observer nor the observed experienced any sort of change that would be grounds to recognize laws of nature.

4 1 Longing for Order

The only thing in humankind's visible environment that is constantly changing is society—society in the sense of the entirety of the structures within which humans live together. Today, we are used to the fact that society changes fundamentally in a person's lifetime. As a child, a ninety-year-old person in Germany today might have seen the emperor. Certainly he or she will have witnessed the incredible changes in communication and technology, from the blackboard to the personal computer and from the horse and cart to the international space station. These and many other similarly breathtaking technical innovations are
part of the social changes of the past century. We accept these changes and can hardly imagine the tranquil times when a long life could begin and end in the same era and society.

Despite constant change in history, the intensity of change has varied. The era in ancient China that saw inherent laws of nature being recognized and formulated lasted for a century or two. It was a turbulent era marked by far-reaching, radical change. At the end of this era, a very decisive event led to a completely new kind of social order. From these long-term changes, the Chinese laws of nature were developed; from this decisive event, a new medicine emerged. What happened?

In the eighth century BC, a political structure in China collapsed due to disputes over succession to the throne—a political system that, if the sources do not deceive us, had long supported a stable feudal system. From about 500 BC, many states of varying populations and sizes battled with increasing resoluteness for dominance. An ever smaller number of increasingly larger kingdoms fought on, changing alliances back and forth, for a long time. Eventually, in the third century BC, the ruler of one of the remaining states, Qin, won the struggle. In 221 BC, he achieved the first unification of China as a single empire under Qin rule. This centuries-long process was both traumatic and creative, particularly in the final three centuries, which historians call the Warring States period. Traumatic, because the changes destroyed the obsolete order. Creative, because they brought forth the foundations of the culture that we call Chinese today.

What relation did these processes have to the emergence of science? The discovery of inherent laws in nature falls in the final century prior to the unification of these kingdoms, and we may wonder whether this is a meaningless coincidence. Let us allow an authority on the social changes of the time—the only changes that took place—have a say. Sinologist Ralf Moritz of Leipzig has researched the fundamentals of Confucianism, the social philosophy advanced by Confucius and his contemporaries in reaction to generations-long turmoil and the maelstrom that threatened to devour all traditional structures. Confucianism, just one of many philosophical systems at the time, sought to guide the return to social harmony. The order they created in the end was admittedly
completely different from what some of the social philosophers were hoping to restore.

The ideas of Confucius (551–479 BC) ... are a reaction to cataclysmic turmoil in the wake of structural change in the old Chinese society. The world collapsed in which the intra-familial morality was simultaneously the state moral code. ... The Master responded with his therapy of world-healing, a reconstruction program targeting the “restoration of rites.” ... The original meaning of rites is religious: rites as communication with the spiritual world, having the goals of attaining well-being and averting harm. Thus, thanks and intercessions gain ceremonial expression in the rites. ... As rites acquired the important function of regulating the relationship with ancestors, the transfer of ritual rules to the relationships between living family members, above all within the aristocratic elite, was an inherent consequence. ... [Rites] became the embodiment of correct behavior in the sense of the ... morality that had become conventional, while expressing socio-political structures.¹

Thus, the world was put in order. Society included the living and the dead. Rites were the expression of communication between the living and their ancestors, but even more, they provided a basis for orderly human relations. It seemed to the philosophers that during the centuries-long war, when every man fought against his neighbor, communication and order had both failed. The philosophers strove for the image of the right path or “way” (dao) of behaving that people had strayed from. To the philosophers, the Way was the essence of order. Thus, following the Way would produce order—to Confucians, order in society; to Daoists, order in the universe. When the Way was lost, not only was order itself lost—the enduring wars had shown this all too clearly—but the vertical structures also broke down. Confucius, like the other philosophers of the era, saw that humanity must be guided anew in the right direction, leading to the Way, and with that, to order. As Ralf Moritz wrote:

This suffering [of Confucius] due to disorder, and his resulting attempt to restore order in the world, forced the drafting of regulating strategies. ... Thus, Confucius' teachings form the first argumentative concept of people living together, the first produced in the history of China. ... In Lunyu [The Analects], rites appear as methods: children serve their parents, the living serve their ancestors; also as the guiding principle of politics ... respect for
others... abstinence from despotic power at the top... mirroring a new kind of need for social order. Against this backdrop, a new ethic was developed, resting on the idea that the individual makes a conscious decision to functionalize himself for the order of a greater structure, and sees himself in this context... The generalization of Confucius' order principle not only required a general framework, but in addition proposed the realization of this principle to always be the suitable response of a social subject to a concrete situation.²

A philosopher recognized the need for order. To change the plight of the time, order was needed. He gave the term dao to this order. With the image of the dao, the Way, he coined the term that would become the foundation for Chinese ideas of order, for interpersonal relations just as for all other events in the universe. The "cataclysmic turmoil" of the Warring States period led Confucius to assume that healing could be attained if man again saw himself to be part of a whole. The individual, it follows from the teachings of Confucius, must be brought to realize that his actions are meaningful for the well-being of the whole entity.

This is the first decisive point we need to grasp. An order exists, according to the new insight of Confucius and many of his contemporaries, and this order does not consist of a random juxtaposition of countless details. This order can only be imagined using the realization that every individual, because of his or her involvement with all others, has a responsibility to contribute to the greater order through his or her behavior.

5 Ethics and Legality

It seems that this realization caught on. It did not stop with people; it spread to the totality of everything. Was not the whole universe an edifice of correlated and corresponding phenomena? The concept of systematic correspondence, the foundation of Chinese science, was born. There is no indication that what primarily impressed a person like Confucius was the order of nature itself or an actual system of correspondences in nature that later found entrance into the social philosophy. Rather, the
distinct opposites of order and disorder, harmony and chaos were only knowable from social reality, after looking back at centuries of human behavior. It was only after this knowledge had been attained that the simultaneous projection of the concepts of order and of systematic correspondence from society onto nature could occur.

This is the origin of the doctrines of yin-yang and the five agents. The latter was initially conceived of expressly—and the sources are very clear about this—to explain social and political change. Only in a second step was the doctrine of the five agents expanded to explain all kinds of change. Change is the temporary dominance of certain agents. This inspired the great Sinologist and physician Franz Hübterdam to speak, at the start of the twentieth century, of a doctrine of five phases of change. Today, one generally speaks of the doctrine of the five agents. The yin-yang doctrine of the dualistic correlation of all phenomena seems to have avoided taking this initial detour through the explanation of social relationships. From its earliest appearance in historical sources, it has been applied to the totality of natural phenomena. We will examine these two doctrines in more detail when we consider the origins of Chinese medicine.

We can now explain why the foundations for Chinese natural sciences were laid by 300 BC; but, so far, we have no indication of how this led to the assumption of inherent laws.

Law is the opposite of arbitrariness, or the randomness of actions, in which the decisions to act in one way or another follow no schematic instructions; they could arise from either emotions or from considerations of the present moment. Law, on the other hand, obligates action to follow a certain pattern. Someone who steals can be sentenced as a thief in accordance with the law. Emotions toward the individual perpetrator should not play a role. A judge who lets emotions enter into his judgment departs from the law and acts arbitrarily.

Such arbitrariness is a characteristic feature of the usual behavior of people and also of the gods created in their image, indeed of the numerous powers in general. In human society, the arbitrariness of rulers can become a nightmare. In the family alliance or clan, in the small, manageable scope of daily interpersonal relationships, one can know
who likes or dislikes whom. Advantages or disadvantages conferred upon one person from the attitudes or activities of another unavoidably lead to affection or aversion. These feelings, in turn, result in certain patterns of behavior. Since the origins and expression of affection or aversion are known in the family or clan, there is a predictable pattern of interpersonal behavior arising from such emotions. When behavior unfolds that one would not have predicted, it is explainable, at least in retrospect. Arbitrariness on this level is therefore foreseeable, and not frightening.

If the ruler of a large political entity acts arbitrarily, it is a different matter. The ruler is too distanced from his individual subjects for the latter to be able to predict or know in retrospect what motives gave rise to a particular arbitrary action. As long as the action is considered pleasant, this can be overlooked. However, life for the subjects becomes a nightmare when—and experience has shown this to be the rule—the ruler’s arbitrary actions intervene in a way that are felt to be unpleasant. Military service, corvée, and tax burdens are examples of this.

Why this digression on law and arbitrariness? Chinese sources allow us to look back into a time when the relationship of the rulers and the ruled was still defined by an “intrafamilial moral code” that also served as the state moral code. The structures were still of manageable scope, and arbitrary actions by the ruler were understood by the ruled in the same way as arbitrary actions in the family or clan. With the emergence of ever larger political units during the centuries of the Warring States, the distance between rulers and subjects grew. The family remained the ideal model for the state. But intrafamilial morality was no longer a suitable foundation for the rule of increasingly complex state structures. Governing growing numbers of people made it impossible for rulers to deal with individual cases at their own discretion, as the head of a family would. The schematization of interactions between rulers and ruled and between the rulers among themselves was born.

Not all contemporary Chinese thinkers and philosophers were convinced that the schematization of actions and the accompanying establishment of governing structures was the best future course. We will hear from the Daoists, who were vehemently opposed to this develop-
ment. In the end, those whose views corresponded to the new political circumstances prevailed, and their philosophies paved the way for the necessary schematization of human interactions in the new and increasingly complex structures of the state.

Reliable decisions are required for large state units to function. Such reliability is attainable only through commitment to laws, rules, and regularity. It is possible that this requirement opened some Chinese thinkers’ eyes to the fundamental existence of regularities in nature and to the requirement to conform to this regularity for survival. It now seemed that obedience was not best directed toward an arbitrary ruler. Obedience should rather be an adaptation to the patterns that are the basis for the regularity of all existence. Traditional obedience to the ruler was supplemented by an obedience that the ruled has the good sense to bring to all existence.

Until now, happiness and survival were primarily dependent upon obedience to the ruler. Now a further precondition for well-being was added: integration into regularity, a life in harmony with the rules. Numerous written statements from the third to the first century BC offer evidence for social theorists’ attempts to cope with the new circumstances. For example, Shen Dao (350–275 BC), an influential philosopher, recognized: “Presently, the Way [Dao] of state leadership and the laws [fa] of the rulers are not influenced by regularity [chang].”

The Chinese word fa probably originated in a military context, where it referred to the strategic rules troops followed to gain victory. During the Warring States period, the term was expanded to include the regularity of rule of an entire state. It implies a pattern or system and law-abiding behavior, as well as the idea of law in the sense of penal law, the Latin lex. This is why the terms Legist or Legalist designate representatives of the ancient Chinese philosophical school that emphasized the society-building power of schematized behavior.

Schematic, impersonal, regulated—these were the new qualities of successful governance. It was a radical rupture. The new era no longer needed intrafamilial morality to double as state morality; it now needed an order based on laws and rules. Sociopolitical writings mostly written in the third century BC or later were united under the name of Guanzi (stated as seventh century BC). The author of the following quotation,
like several other philosophers of the time, had lost his belief in the
good in people. Laws, above all else, were to become the foundation of
any fairly peaceful society: “From time immemorial, men have hated
each other. The heart of man is cruel. This is why the ruler makes laws
[fa]. From the application of the laws, rites arise. From the performance
of rites, order grows.”

This certainty was united with the Confucians’ ideas of order, as the
schematization of behavior embraced Confucius’s new morality anchored
in the “restitution of rites,” which was tailored to the complex state.
The outline of a social philosophy had been developed, one that would
prove to be a most suitable foundation for the united and highly complex
empire that arose in 221 BC following the Warring States period.

Let us pause for a moment and consider the conditions surrounding
the development of medicine in ancient China. Medicine is the linking
of healing with science. Healing that lacks a scientific basis is not medicine
in this sense. There had been healing in China since prehistoric times:
Sources reveal ancestor healing, demon healing, and pharmaceutics in
premedical theory and practice. But the emergence of medicine required
the development of science; that is, the idea that nature is governed by
a regularity, in accordance with certain laws. These laws are not issued
by men or gods. They are patterns that cannot be questioned and that
always give rise to the same effect from the same cause. Postulating the
existence of such rules and regularities, then determining their charac-
teristic features, and finally understanding their specific effects on
the health and sickness of the human body—these are the steps in the
development of medicine in ancient China.

Xunzi (ca. 300–230 BC), a philosopher who contributed substantially
to converting Confucius’s philosophical ideas into practicable political
teachings, did not believe in spirits, nor did he believe that humans
could influence the course of nature. He writes: “The course of heaven/
nature [tian] follows a regularity. [This regularity] does not exist because
of [the good ruler] Yao. And it is not lost because of [the bad ruler] Qie.
He who conforms to this [regularity] to produce order will have good
fortune. He who responds to this [regularity] by allowing disorder will
have bad fortune.”
The change in the meaning of the Chinese term *tian* mirrored the new trend. Originally, the character *tian* referred to a higher ancestor, then to the ancestors’ dwelling place. Later, the personal aspect was dropped, and the character took on a meaning that, though it is usually translated as “sky” or “heaven,” is very close to “nature.” As Masayuki Sato appropriately formulated: “The movement of the sky/heavens now became a metaphor for unchangingness and regularity.” It was now one’s duty to conform to this regularity, initially as a ruler caring for the welfare of the state, and later as an individual caring for one’s personal health.

Let us summarize what has been said so far. What reason is there to assume that the insight process could have gone the opposite way? What evidence is there that it was nature or the body itself that suggested the discovery of higher inherent laws? The development of science in ancient China can be attributed to two certainties: First, to the certainty of the linking and correlation of all things. Second, to the certainty of the necessity of regular, schematized relationships of all things among themselves. Both certainties grew out of the stark impressions that the fundamentally changed social structures had made on some Chinese philosophers, and in turn from the impressions that their teachings made on further thinkers. Now we can understand why it was just at that time that such ideas emerged.

6. Why Here? Why Now?

Let us continue to reflect upon the conditions that secured the acceptance of this thinking. Indeed, this is the most important development in the history of ideas. In every era, innumerable ideas are expressed, like seeds sown in the field of cognitive dynamics. But most of them dry up right away. Some ideas experience a short growth period, some enjoy limited attention before declining. The historian asks: What conditions make the soil receptive? Why do some ideas fall on fertile soil, flourish rapidly, and become viable for survival, perhaps even for centuries? Other ideas, while they might be taken into the soil, seem to find no reception, and their “truth” that is closed to contemporaries may only