

Barry Allen

VANISHING INTO
THINGS

*Knowledge
in Chinese
Tradition*

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Knowledge in Chinese Tradition

BARRY ALLEN



Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

2015

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Printed in the United States of America

First printing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Allen, Barry, 1957–

Vanishing into things : knowledge in Chinese tradition / Barry Allen.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-674-33591-2 (hardcover)

1. Knowledge, Theory of—China. I. Title.

BD168.C5A45 2015

121.0951—dc23 2014035114

For Jeanne

翁海貞

Don't you remember, Oh Zarathustra, how once your
bird called out above you, as you stood in the forest,
indecisive, not knowing which way to turn?

—NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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VANISHING INTO THINGS

Introduction: To Really See the Little Things

What makes knowledge a thing of beauty is that it benefits life
and does not go beyond that.

—JI KANG

Duke Huan, ambitious ruler of Qi during China's tumultuous Spring and Autumn period, and his chief adviser, the sage statesman Guan Zhong, had met in secret to plan an attack on the state of Jü. Before they could make their first move, however, they discovered that everybody knew their plan, leaving them defeated before they even began.

The Duke said to Guan Zhong, "You and I closed the doors and planned an attack on Jü. Although the plan has not yet been put into action everybody knows all about it! How can that be?" Guan Zhong replied, "There must be a sage in the state." But how could even a sage penetrate so closely guarded a secret? The Duke thought back to the day of their planning. "On that day there was an attendant who in placing the mat and serving the food looked up at us. It must be him!"

The Duke reassembled the servants. Recognizing the attendant, he had the chief of protocol bring him forward, respectfully seating him in the place for honored guests. He asked, "Are you the one who revealed our plan to attack Jü?" The servant replied, "Yes." "I didn't speak publically about attacking Jü," the Duke said, "yet you have informed the world. How did you know?" He gets a cheeky answer: "I have heard that the perfected man is good at making plans, and the common man is good at figuring them out. I figured it out." *But how could you? How could anyone?* Eventually he gives this explanation: "Happiness and joy are the appearance of bells and drums. Profundity and quietness are the appearance of mourning attire. Effusive fullness with the fingers and toes moving is the appearance of military affairs. On that day when I saw you two in the tower, your mouths were open and not closed. This was talking about Jü. You raised your hand and

pointed, your power will be inflicted on Jü. Moreover I have observed that among the minor feudal lords only Jü is not submissive, so I said you would attack it.”

With no weapons or troops, this mere servant defeats the Duke’s plans and preserves the peace, sparing the people a war. Guan Zhong called him a sage. What makes him sagacious is the canny knowledge by which he sees what is coming and modifies its course with near-invisible subtlety. Hearing the man’s explanation the Duke exclaims, “Excellent! ‘From the inconspicuous he hits upon brightness’—that’s what the saying refers to!”¹

This proverb, “From the inconspicuous he hits upon brightness” (*yi wei she ming*), epitomizes what Chinese tradition tends to expect and esteem in wise knowledge. It is the cognitive accomplishment of a sage. Highly effective yet infinitely subtle, there is almost nothing to it. A variation on the proverb occurs in the *Daodejing*: “To really see the little things is called enlightenment” (*jian xiao yue ming*). To really see the little things is to see the big things they betoken, and see them well before their development becomes obvious. Such seeing penetrates to the virtual depth of the world, perceiving incipient mutation, recognizing opportunities to align and transform with the changes. In the words of the *Huainanzi* (*Book of the Huainan Masters*): “Since the beginnings of good and bad fortune are tiny as a sprout, people overlook them. Only sages see their beginnings and know their ends. . . . The sages’ perception of outcomes at their origin is subtle!”²

No one keeps a secret from a sage. Kongzi (Confucius) says, “Look at the means a man employs, observe the basis from which he acts, and discover where it is that he feels at ease. Where can he hide? Where can he hide?” The knowledge is not an oracular premonition, but a canny presagement from inconspicuous indications. “The sage does not value foreknowledge,” says Ming dynasty thinker Wang Yangming. “When blessings and calamities come, even a sage cannot avoid them. He only knows the incipient activating force of things and handles it in accordance with the circumstance.” The small and inconspicuous are resources to the keen and alert, who discern the mutations they discreetly herald. Mere dust speaks volumes to the wise, as this Chinese general explains:

When the enemy first approaches, if the dust rises in streams but is dispersed, they are dragging brushwood. If it rises up like ears of grain and jumps about chaotically, chariots are coming. If the dust is thick and heavy, swirling and turbulent as it rises up, cavalry are coming. If it is low and

broad, spreading and diffuse as it rises, infantry are advancing. When the army is small and the dust is scattered and chaotic, it means the units are not closely ordered. If the troops are numerous but the dust clear, it means the units are well ordered and the general's commands systematic. If the dust rises to the front and rear, left and right, it means they are employing their troops without any consistent method. When the army moves and the dust rises in streaks without dispersing, or when the army halts and the dust also stops, it is because the general's awesomeness and virtue have caused the units to be strictly ordered. If when they decamp or set out their deployments dust rises up and flies off, mount defenses against those places where it originated because enemy forces will certainly be approaching in ambush there. Observing the enemy through rising dust is thus a technique for estimating the enemy's forces and seizing victory.³

Such knowledge belongs to what this general calls "the acumen of strategists," which, he says, "[lies] in penetrating the subtle amid unfolding change, and discerning the concordant and contrary."

Penetrating the subtle—seeing a lot in little things. *Discerning the concordant and contrary*—knowing the resonance among things, and how to amplify or dampen emerging tendencies. This commander is not alone in esteeming such knowledge. It is the ecumenical understanding of sage knowledge in Chinese tradition; it is not strictly universal—there are exceptions—but it is the leading idea. In the words again of the *Huainan Masters*, "The commander must see singularly and know singularly. Seeing singularly is to see what is not seen. Knowing singularly is to know what is not known. To see what others do not is called enlightenment" (*jian ren suo bu jian wei zhi ming*).⁴

The problems of knowledge that philosophers tend to be familiar with—problems of justification, skepticism, and the possibility of truth—depend on seldom-articulated assumptions concerning the value of knowledge: for instance, that the best knowledge, the knowledge that matters most to philosophy, has to be true; that this "truth" should be understood ontologically, in terms of adequacy to its object; and that the secure enjoyment of knowledge and truth are conditions on virtue and happiness. Without these assumptions the textbook problems of epistemology are difficult to motivate. Yet the assumptions are not without difficulties of their own, which has made the problems of epistemology increasingly hard to take seriously.

Chinese tradition does not share the problems of epistemology because it does not share the evaluation of knowledge that makes those problems perplexing. Knowledge poses different questions—not about essence or conditions of possibility, but about point and value. What makes knowledge wise and worth pursuing? What is its relationship to other values—good government, say, or ritual, or war? The questions Chinese tradition poses about knowledge respond to different problems, arising from different imperatives in their thought. This is a book about those differences. What makes them interesting, at least to me, is that they emerge at points where Western thinking has proved unexpectedly problematic.

For instance, Western theories of knowledge tend to fix on statements and beliefs—symbolic, linguistic, propositional entities—and have developed highly technical concepts of evidence, warrant, and justification, all to explain a preposterously small fragment of knowledge—the part that is true, “the truth.” This contemplative, logocentric approach, much favored in antiquity and never really shaken from later tradition, is counterproductive for understanding the contribution knowledge makes to the technical accomplishment of our civilization. The ingenuity of the inventions, the range and density of technical mediation, the multiplicity of artifactual interfaces in a global technoscientific economy attest to the reach and depth of contemporary knowledge. But this knowledge resists logical analysis into simpler concepts, seldom climaxes in demonstrable truth, and does not stand to pure theory as mere application or derivative “how-to” knowledge. Thus does the best knowledge of our civilization become unaccountable in the epistemologies of the epistemologists.⁵

The exorbitant attachment to theory and truth attends an indifference to art, or what Greeks called *techne*. For all the leading schools of ancient philosophy, theoretical knowledge is the preeminent value, science is the noblest aspiration, and demonstrable truth is the solution to all uncertainty. To know such truth requires clarity and certainty on a level discontinuous with the immanent, empirical, and ordinary. Knowledge becomes a problem of access. There are two levels: the one we live on, a level of everyday experience and opinion, and the transcendent level we have to access if we want to know the truth. The problem of access arises from the decision to make knowledge of truth the best, most prestigious knowledge, and to explain this truth as reality made present to an intellectual soul.

These decisions are taken over by later tradition with little dissent. Not until Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century does thinking begin

to change. Nietzsche initiates the now-prevalent skepticism about the “correspondence theory of truth.” The American pragmatists, especially William James, independently raise similar doubts. Today, most philosophers have abandoned the correspondence theory, though not always for the same reasons. What lesson should we take from the collapse of this ancient expectation concerning the nature of truth?

Nietzsche thought that without the ontological idea of truth (truth as true to beings) the value of knowledge becomes dramatically problematic. Why should we care about knowledge if it is not “the truth”? The question is not put derisively, as if he expects no answer. He poses it to show that it *is* a question, that once-satisfying answers are untenable, and to stimulate a new philosophy of knowledge. He expects reflection on the question to show that philosophical rationalism participates in the irrationality it claims to overcome. Valuing truth above all else is a way for atheists to still believe in God. To turn away from religion because it is not scientific and not true is not the triumph of reason over superstition. It is a new superstition, or one whose superstitious quality is newly apparent, except to those who still think truth is divine. Critical rationalists must awaken to the unreason of their rationalism, as they dutifully demystify demystification, and discover that “truth” is a name for the will to power.

Nietzsche called this predicament “European nihilism.” “Why has the advent of nihilism become *necessary*? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw this final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals.” The death of God is just the beginning. Nietzsche foresees a violent self-overcoming of Western reason, pushing modern culture to the edge of the nihilism that has haunted the West since antiquity. Plato sowed the seed of this nihilism when he taught us to need something transcendent. Without it, all the good things about us seem threatened by metaphysical failure. The merely human, tainted with the stigma of contingency, is worthless. Having inherited this onto-theological expectation, we tend to assume that without a transcendent reference (reason, logic, being), knowledge collapses into relativism, with no real difference between true and false. In the face of modern disbelief about the supernatural, philosophy falls short of a convincing response to its own nihilistic implications.⁶

Hence the postmodern, or perhaps post-Western, problem of knowledge: how to acknowledge the self-destruction of Western rationalism and get beyond the obvious relativistic, nihilistic implications. How to understand the

point and value of knowledge when we do not believe in a thing-in-itself. How to remain cheerful and creative in the pursuit of knowledge, when truth, as philosophy has understood it, does not exist. Such problems disclose a new horizon. Epistemology may be passé, but the philosophy of knowledge has never confronted more interesting questions. What is the value of knowledge, if not truth? What is the value of truth, if not adequation or correspondence? What is the relationship between knowledge and technical accomplishment? What is the relationship between knowledge and wisdom? What makes technical, technological knowledge wise?

These are not classical questions. I am not suggesting that we *have* to go to China for an answer, but the excursion may appeal to those who like to see unexpected alternatives in philosophy and to experiment with concepts. However, there is disagreement among scholars about whether such a thing as “Chinese philosophy” even exists, whether it is comparable to Western philosophy, or what should count as “philosophical” in Chinese tradition. Some scholars think Chinese thought is so alien, its language so distant from Western experience, that it is untenable to expect significant conceptual exchange between the two traditions. Others take the view that with due caution philosophy can enter into the movement of Chinese concepts and capture some of their tendency.

Needless to say I favor the latter view. While I try to avoid gratuitously reading Western assumptions into cryptic ancient texts, I do ask them questions their authors never heard of. Some scholars think that is a mistake. They would restrict scholarly usage to *emic* categories, meaning those consistent with the viewpoint of the culture under study. They disavow *etic* categories, or concepts meaningful to the community that studies the culture, as if the only way to discuss Chinese ideas rigorously is in terms the ancient Chinese might recognize as their own. That norm may be appropriate for some types of scholarship, but in philosophy it seems to me a case of the tail wagging the dog. I think we should have as many ways of reading the Chinese as we can invent. There should be a place for conversations that forget whether they are emic or etic, that no longer know whether they are Western or Modern (or Analytic or Continental), that seek a hybrid quality consistent with experimentation in concepts. Only by creative, restive venturesomeness, not by disciplinary specialization however global, will Chinese tradition begin to make a difference to the philosophy of the future.⁷

It is not important whether we call the ancient Chinese thinkers (Confucius and others) *philosophers*. We need not assume they are engaged in

any project similar to that of Western philosophers. We do not require comparable intentions at all, and they are obviously lacking. There is no word of ancient Chinese we can translate as “philosophy.” Such a word did not exist until the nineteenth century, when the word *zhexue*, combining two Chinese characters, “wisdom” and “study,” was coined by a Japanese scholar to refer to the philosophy of Western antiquity. Thus it was only in response to Western problems that philosophical ideas were first identified in Chinese classics, constructing “Chinese philosophy” according to familiar Western models (idealism, realism, and so on). Chinese scholars themselves think the results were not all bad. Some issues were clarified and concepts acquired new precision. But the unrestrained construal of Chinese thought on Western models and the simplistic equation of terms from the classics with concepts of Western theory are obviously untenable.⁸

The Chinese themselves faced a version of the comparative problem in their own history with the introduction of Buddhism, a new religion in China after the first century CE. How should they translate the formidable corpus of Indian thought, whose terse abstraction has nothing in common with Chinese tradition? They did not try to think like Indians, and did not scruple over etic categories—in fact, they used almost nothing else. The result was not naive scholarship. It was the invention of Chinese Buddhism. This need for experimental creativity in the face of cultural discontinuity parallels the challenge to comparative philosophy today, which is to invent the contexts and experiment with the terms in which philosophy is becoming global. Philosophy is not or is no longer “Western,” or at least it does not have to be. It may have begun in the West (even that is disputable), but it cannot be reduced to its history. Philosophy has never ceased to question its own conditions, and is now obviously global, or at least working through a new relationship to territory and the earth.

Dissatisfaction with epistemology is a part of that change. There are by now many lines of flight from epistemology—feminist, pragmatist, post-positivist, and poststructuralist, to name a few. I propose an even more literal deterritorialization. We do not need the Chinese problems to be our own for us to learn from how they respond to them. Their innocence of epistemology is what makes their thought interesting for the philosophy of knowledge. Innocence of epistemology does not mean indifference to problems of knowledge. The Chinese have ideas about knowledge because as they thought about the other problems that compelled them, they became perplexed by knowledge—by its difference from ignorance and error; by its

relationship to wisdom and virtue; by its effectiveness and irreplaceable contribution to civilization. And they were perplexed for a reason philosophers above all should appreciate, since, as sinologist Angus Graham explains, the “derivation of all value from the value of knowledge” is “one of the constants of Chinese thought.” *To know* is for them “the supreme imperative.”⁹

Innocence of epistemology also does not mean innocent epistemology, as when scholars speak of China’s “epistemological optimism.” Supposedly the Chinese innocently, naively rely on lower standards than Western theories of knowledge and science. One has to wonder, though, whether it is really lower standards or different priorities, different standards? If you expect veridical knowledge of things in themselves, or the apodictic demonstration of truth, or even just a robust experimental result, your standard cannot be too high. But certainty is not the only value knowledge serves, and other values can be satisfied without fixing on theory and truth. The notion of epistemological optimism comes from Karl Popper, for whom it is no less a mistake than a corresponding pessimism. The optimists believe that truth is manifest and always recognized. Pessimism is a disbelief in humanity’s power to discern the truth, associated with tolerance of doubt and willingness to accept obscurity. Thomas Metzger uses Popper’s terms to argue that Chinese tradition is extravagantly optimistic in its epistemology. But how can traditional Chinese thinkers be extravagantly optimistic about a truth they do not recognize and a knowledge they do not value?

The idea that knowledge requires truth—or that truth is objectivity or involves a tricky correspondence to reality about which one could be optimistic or pessimistic—is not a neutral norm suitable for comparing China and the West. Yet that seems to be Metzger’s assumption. He refers to what he calls the Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution, more conveniently, GMWER. China missed it. “The vast majority of the Chinese, including many intellectuals, remained simply unaware of or unresponsive to the GMWER.” Even after enlightenment through Western contact they resisted its truth, tending “to ignore the GMWER as unworthy of serious discussion,” and “reaffirming [their] epistemological optimism.” What looks to Metzger like indifference to the methodological difficulty of knowing the truth might also be the response of people less impressed than he thinks they should be by this Great Revolution. He believes the modern West really knows and China merely believes. *Our* norms are rational and objective, not mere cultural artifacts, like everybody else’s. Or they would be if we really had been modern, which we never were, and if the Great Modern

Western Epistemological Revolution were not a myth of demythification that should be hard to fall for any more.¹⁰

Chinese tradition is bullish on knowledge, which is obviously worth while, certainly better than ignorance, but also elusive and not without dangers of its own. With the notable exception of the Mohists, however, we nowhere find Western philosophy's rationalistic preoccupations. Ideas of truth and representation play no part in understanding what knowledge is or its value. Nor do the perplexities knowledge poses depend on problematic dichotomies like mind and body or appearance and reality. We already glimpsed what the Chinese value in knowledge. The best knowledge, the wise knowledge of a sage, knows the evolution of circumstances from an early point, when their development is not so settled that it cannot be diverted, making highly effective action practically effortless (provided you know how). A servant foils a great duke and prevents a war merely by starting a rumor. Wisps of dust convey strategic opportunities to a commander who can really see the little things. Such knowledge is not deduced from principles or held in the mind as a representation or theory. The expression of the knowledge is action, a response to circumstances that is effortless yet highly effective.

The Chinese describe such action as *wu wei*, which literally means "no action" or "not doing," but in philosophy refers to inaction that is paradoxically active and highly effective. The value of the best, most sagacious knowledge is to fund such action. We meet this idea at the beginning of Chinese reflection with the Confucians, that is, Kongzi and his followers in classical (pre-Qin) times (sixth to third century BCE), where Chapter 1 begins. Chapter 2 introduces the Daoists, principally the works known as *Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing*. We shall see little difference with Confucians about what knowledge is or why it is valuable. The difference lies in the conditions thought conducive to *wu wei* effectiveness, the way to cultivate it, how to train it for wisdom. Confucians want to do *wu wei* to be good, meaning benevolent, humane, righteous. Daoist authors mock these values. For them the point of effortless effectiveness and the knowledge that makes it possible is to nourish one's vitality, replenishing vital *qi*, extending life to the utmost limit.

A new voice enters in Chapter 3 with Sunzi and the Chinese art of war. The understanding of knowledge in China's military philosophy—how to recognize it, what it does, why it is worth caring for—largely agrees with Confucians and Daoists. The military philosophers esteem knowledge more highly than Western theorists of war, for instance Machiavelli or Clausewitz.