

Wang Chong's Epistemology of Testimony

INTRODUCTION

Wang Chong's 王充 (27–ca. 97) combative style makes him difficult to locate in the Chinese tradition. He is often portrayed as a quarrelsome sophist. Michael Nylan, for example, notes his “rather pedantic obsession with absolute linguistic precision” and his tendency to “equate winning an argument with discovery of the Truth.”¹ Michael Puett complains that Wang Chong “often is willing to use almost any method to criticize the beliefs of the day” and that “his arguments rarely add up to a coherent position.”² Even relatively sympathetic readings still portray him as a maverick – a skeptic or a proto-naturalist (albeit one hampered, like Aristotle, by seriously anachronistic science). Much modern Chinese scholarship celebrates him in similar terms, or, in a Marxist vein, as a champion of materialism in opposition to idealism, superstition, and obsession with antiquity.³ Similarly, Michael Loewe writes: “Expressing as he does views that were somewhat exceptional to the great body of Chinese thought, Wang Ch’ung’s main characteristic is his independence of mind and his general refusal to accept the assumptions and dogmas of his contemporaries, without being given

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¹ Michael Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue with Their Own Tradition,” *Philosophy East and West* 47.2 (1997), p. 141, and p. 167 n. 46, respectively.

² Michael Puett, “Listening to Sages: Divination, Omens, and the Rhetoric of Antiquity in Wang Chong’s *Lunheng*,” *OE* 45 (2005–06), p. 280.

³ Van Ess points to the influence of Feng Youlan in this regard in Hans Van Ess, “The Old Text/New Text Controversy: Has the 20th Century Got It Wrong?” *TP* 80.1–3 (1994), p. 159 (see Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, *Zhongguo zhexue shi* 中國哲學史 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974] and idem, *Zhongguo zhexue shi xinbian* 中國哲學史新編 [Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1964]). For Marxist readings, see, e.g., Tian Changwu 田昌五, *Wang Chong, gudai de zhandou weiwulunzhe* 王充古代的戰鬥唯物論者 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1973) and Xu Min 徐敏, *Wang Chong zhexue sixiang tan suo* 王充哲學思想探索 (Beijing: Sheng huo, du shu, xin zhi san lian

good reason to do so.”⁴ Although Loewe credits Wang Chong with something approaching a scientific method, he goes on to accuse him of failing to live up to that standard, criticizing “his habit of assuming the validity of certain principles without demonstrable proof.”⁵

A casual reading of Wang’s *Lunheng* 論衡 gives ample support for uncharitable readings. Here are three examples (summarized and paraphrased):

1. (On Divination): Heaven has no ears, and anyway, we are very small compared to heaven. So how could heaven hear a question?⁶
2. (On Ghosts): If ghosts are the spirits of dead people, why do they not always appear naked? Clothes have no vital spirits, after all.⁷
3. (On Nations): It is written that Yao united the ten thousand states in peace. But if you tally them up, there are really at most three thousand states; clearly, what is written is an exaggeration.⁸

The resulting impression is of a clever but unsubtle sophist – a ludicrous literalist willing to throw at the wall whatever he thinks will stick.

We intend to advance a more charitable way of reading *Lunheng*. Wang Chong was not (or not primarily) attacking others. Instead, he

shu dian, 1979). Hu Shi celebrated Wang Chong, saying that “his philosophy is nothing less than the scientific spirit of his time applied to problems in human life 王充的哲學只是當時的科學精神應用道人生問題上去,” while Xu Fuguan disagreed, arguing that “we can admit that Wang Chong’s conclusions are correct, but they are conclusions grounded not in method but in intuition; his methods are not as robust as those of his opponents 我們可以承認王充的結論是正確的;但這是沒有方法作基礎的結論,是由事實直感而來的結論飛他所運用的方法,反而沒有他的論敵的健全.” For details on that debate and on Wang Chong scholarship in Taiwan, see Zhou Guidian 周桂鈺, “Lun Wang Chong de kexue jingshen, ping Taiwan xuezhe dui Wang Chong de yanjiu” 論王充的科學精神評臺灣學者對王充的研究, *Journal of Beijing Normal University* (1992.2), pp. 72–81. Current PRC scholarship on Wang Chong covers various topics but tends to portray his “scientific spirit” (e.g., Zhou Yixian 周逸仙, “Jian lun Wang Chong Lunheng de kexue jiaoyu yiyi” 簡論王充論衡的科學教育意義, *Journal of Hebei Normal University* 15.11 (2013), pp. 42–46).

⁴ Michael Loewe, “The Religious and Intellectual Background,” in Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, eds., *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 1: The Ch’in and Han Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986), p. 698.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 699.

⁶ Wang Chong 王充, *Lunheng* 論衡 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995; hereafter cited as *LH*) 71, p. 999.

⁷ *LH* 62, p. 874. To be fair, Wang Chong was not the only one to have this worry. Compare Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*: “There is one insuperable obstacle to a belief in ghosts. A ghost never comes naked: he appears either in a winding-sheet or ‘in his habit as he lived.’ To believe in him, then, is to believe that not only have the dead the power to make themselves visible after there is nothing left of them, but that the same power inheres in textile fabrics. Supposing the products of the loom to have this ability, what object would they have in exercising it? And why does not the apparition of a suit of clothes sometimes walk abroad without a ghost in it?” (Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, ed. David E. Schultz and S.J. Joshi [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002], p. 96.)

⁸ *LH* 27, p. 361.

was most concerned with evaluating what others had said, with the goal of preserving what was true and eliminating what was undermined by other evidence. Wang Chong was thus grappling with problems in the *epistemology of testimony*. Much of Wang Chong's otherwise puzzling style becomes clearer when read in this light. Our goal is not, therefore, to defend any particular claim of Wang Chong's – or even, for that matter, to defend his way of approaching testimony. (Indeed, we will discuss why his epistemology is still problematic, even when properly understood.) Our interpretation shows him to be more *reasonable* than his critics assume, even if he ultimately fails to persuade the modern reader.

Consider, for example, a passage from the chapter titled “Yi Zeng” 藝增 (“Exaggerations in the Arts”), where Wang Chong discusses the reliability of different types of speech: the “loose talk that flies about and the sayings of the hundred traditions 蜚流之言, 百傳之語” that “come from the mouths of petty people and run rife in the lanes and alleys 出小人之口, 馳聞巷之間” is of course full of exaggerations, being almost nothing else. However, he adds that the more elevated “writings of the various masters, recorded with ink and brush 諸子之文, 筆墨之疏” still contain exaggerations. When he comes to the Classics (in what is clearly a hierarchically arranged discussion), he makes it clear that even here critical reading is necessary, though it should be accompanied by respect:

When it comes to the words of the [Five] Classics or the [Six] Arts, is there anything as reliable (*shi*) as they are? For prudence in speech, there is no surpassing the sages. Though Classics and Arts are “unchanging for ten thousand generations,”⁹ still some excesses do come out in them, and exaggerations surpass what is factual (*shi*).¹⁰ When exaggerations go beyond what is factual (*shi*), there is in every case some matter that is being accomplished thereby. It is all done deliberately, and not out of careless error that they take what is small and make it larger. 儻經藝之言, 如其實

⁹ This should probably not be read as a hypocritical case of Wang Chong himself exaggerating, but rather a slightly ironic usage of a conventional phrase – it should be read, in other words, with a nod and a wink. (Cf. Alfred Forke, *Lun-Hêng Part II: Miscellaneous Essays* [1907; rpt. New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962], p. 262 nn.1, 4.)

¹⁰ We have translated *shi* 實 variously as “reliable” (above), “factual,” “real,” or “true.” This is mainly to fit the demands of context, and because we believe Wang Chong often uses it more as an ordinary word than as a consistent technical term. Nonetheless, it is an important word in the context of our study and readers may want to take note of its pattern of usage. Thus, though retaining our contextually appropriate translations, we have indicated each usage of this word by adding the notation “(*shi*)” after the English rendering.

乎？言審莫過聖人，經藝萬世不易，猶或出溢，增過其實。增過其實，皆有事爲，不妄亂誤以少爲多也。¹¹

The common thread in each of these passages is a concern with testimony. We argue that Wang Chong's approach to this problem is not as radical as modern readers might wish it to be. Like his contemporaries, he takes testimony to be a basic source of knowledge: one can be said to know things *just* from hearing them or reading them in a book. He differs from his contemporaries primarily in his attitude towards evaluating evidence that has the potential to undermine knowledge gained from testimony (what we will call, following contemporary usage, a *defeater* of a particular claim). Wang Chong may be skeptical about many things, but he is no Skeptic: he does not doubt that we can know anything. Nor has he faltered where the West's early-modern philosophers later succeeded: he is not a timorous Descartes, trying (but failing) to doubt everything in order to rebuild from a firm foundation. Rather, we think that Wang Chong takes himself to be engaging his contemporaries on their own terms, and he uses a variety of surprisingly subtle rhetorical moves to do so. Many features of his apparently combative style are clarified by this approach, as we discuss in the following sections.

Wang Chong lived in a time of particular complexity as regards texts and testimony. As recent scholarship has made clear, the so-called "victory of Han Confucianism," supposedly brought about by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BC),¹² by no means resulted in a unified synthesis of either ideas or texts.¹³ Just how the various factions defined themselves is a matter of debate in which there is currently no consensus. However, it is clear that some part was played by "ancient script texts" (*guwen* 古文) and "modern script texts" (*jinwen* 今文) and their respective proponents, by 'prophetic' texts (*chenwei* 讖緯) that borrowed the authority of classical figures for contemporary political ends, and by the voluminous "chapter-and-verse" commentaries (*zhangju* 章句) on the Classics. Wang's position on this last seems clear: though the mastery of such commentaries was crucial for success in the offi-

¹¹ *LH* 27, p. 381.

¹² The memorial in which he proposed that official learning should henceforth be "Confucian" (*ru* 儒) in orientation is found in Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962; hereafter cited as *HS*) 56, pp. 2518–32.

¹³ This point is argued most explicitly in Michael Nylan, "A Problematic Model: The Han 'Orthodox Synthesis,' Then and Now," in Kai-wing Chow, On-cho Ng, and John B. Henderson, eds., *Imagining Boundaries: Changing Confucian Doctrines, Texts, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY P., 1999), but see also Anne Cheng, "What Did It Mean to Be a *Ru* in Han Times?" *AM* 3d ser. 14.2 (2001), pp. 101–18.

cial realm, he was said to be “fond of broad learning and did not hold with the chapter-and-verse style 好博覽而不守章句.”¹⁴ His position as regards the *guwen/jinwen* debate is less clear; it may be, as Hans van Ess has suggested, that there was no “major split as far as thinkers like Wang Ch’ung or Yang Hsiung are concerned.”¹⁵ Still, whatever political motivations may have been behind the debates, the doubt thereby introduced would certainly have served to muddle the issue of textual authority. And though one cannot say with certainty what Wang Chong’s position toward the *chenwei* texts might have been, their *ad hoc* and popular nature suggest that it may have been just such texts Wang was thinking of when he wrote that “popular traditions blind and mislead while spurious texts circulate freely, causing endless pain to people of worth and understanding 俗傳蔽惑，偽書放流，賢通之人，疾之無已。”¹⁶

Wang Chong’s answer to the textual complexity of his time was his sole surviving work, the *Lunheng* 論衡. The title has been translated in a variety of ways: *Disquisitions*,¹⁷ *Critical Essays*,¹⁸ *Balanced Inquiries*,¹⁹ *Balanced Treatises*,²⁰ *Discourses Weighed in the Balance*.²¹ Perhaps a more natural way to parse the title, though, is to see both characters as nouns with the first modifying the second: as “Argument-weigher.” This would suggest that the text was conceived as a kind of tool, which Wang Chong and his readers might use to evaluate different arguments. Such a reading is supported by a remark from the chapter named “Dui Zuo” 對作 (“Replies in Self-Defense”), where Wang Chong describes his purpose: “*Lunheng*, then, is a means for weighing light or weighty words, for establishing a balance between truth and artifice 論衡者，所以銓輕重之言，立真偽之平。”²²

¹⁴ *HS* 49, p. 1629.

¹⁵ Hans Van Ess, “The Apocryphal Texts of the Han Dynasty and the Old Text/New Text Controversy,” *TP* 85.1–3 (1999), p. 46. See also Michael Nylan, “The Chin Wen/Ku Wen Controversy in Han Times,” *TP* 80 (1994), pp. 83–145.

¹⁶ *LH* 84, p. 1183.

¹⁷ Alfred Forke, *Lun-Hêng Part I: Philosophical Essays* (1907; rpt. New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962), p. 9.

¹⁸ Yu-lan Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Dirk Bodde (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1984), p. 210.

¹⁹ Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1963), p. 293.

²⁰ Timoteus Pokora, “The Works of Wang Ch’ung,” *AO* 36 (1968), p. 122; Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue,” p. 143.

²¹ Joseph Needham and Gwei-djen Lu, “Problems of Translation and Modernisation of Ancient Chinese Technical Terms: Manfred Porkert’s Interpretations of Terms in Ancient and Medieval Chinese Natural and Medical Philosophy,” *Annals of Science* 32.5 (1975), p. 493, n.10.

²² *LH* 84, p. 1179. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that the *lun* 論 of *Lunheng* may well be a reference to the *Lunyu* (the Confucian *Analects*).

Our primary aim is to explore Wang Chong's attitude towards testimony and the implications it has for understanding his background goals. We begin by locating him along various axes in the conceptual space of the epistemology of testimony. We then show how doing so clarifies many of Wang Chong's rhetorical habits and makes clear why it is difficult (but not impossible) to extract his positive views.

ON TESTIMONY

We claim that Wang Chong cares about the epistemology of testimony. Testimony in this sense is any assertion that is intended to convey truth without offering additional evidence above and beyond the assertion itself. Testimony can come in a variety of forms: written texts, specific assertions by individuals, 'common sense' beliefs that appear to originate with no one in particular, and so on. A great deal of what we know is based on testimony. The present authors know that a Bactrian camel can weigh up to 1,000 kilograms.²³ How? One of us read that claim somewhere, and then told it to the other. Both of us plausibly count as knowing this bit of trivia. Yet neither of us weighed any Bactrian camels, nor do we personally know anyone who did. We know this fact just because we are on the receiving end of a chain of testimony, one that (we hope) stretches back to someone with good information about Bactrians.

Lunheng is thoroughly concerned with testimony – both where it should be doubted and where it can be trusted. It is clear that Wang Chong often accepts testimony as stand-alone evidence for particular claims. Every chapter of the *Lunheng* makes unproblematic appeals to facts that Wang Chong could only know on the basis of testimony. Perhaps more surprisingly, Wang Chong frequently makes explicit appeals to texts as supporting evidence for his points: in the eighty-four extant chapters of the *Lunheng*, all but nine contain explicit quotations that are used as proof texts or are otherwise taken at face value. Many readers understandably focus on Wang Chong's attacks, but positive appeal to textual authority is frequent and natural in the *Lunheng*. In discussing the maximum lifespan of humans (about one hundred years), for example, Wang Chong first makes the observation that there are

²³ Note that if you do not accept testimony as a source of knowledge, in some philosophically meaningful sense of the term, widespread skepticism seems to follow. Nearly all of what we know about basic science, geography, history, and sinology we know from being told about it by others; the unaided senses are a miserly source of truths. Analytic epistemology typically treats widespread skepticism as a *reductio* (Jennifer Lackey, "Knowing from Testimony," *Philosophy Compass* 1.5 [2006], pp. 432–48).

cases of people living that long in his own era. He then launches into a long list of ancient texts that support his claim, as if that were a more definitive form of evidence.²⁴

Wang Chong thus appears to be quite willing to use testimonial evidence. The use of testimony is unsurprising against the background of his times. Employing quotations from authoritative figures and texts was an almost universal rhetorical practice, and often functioned in lieu of other types of argument.²⁵ What differentiates Wang Chong from his contemporaries, we argue, is the attitude he takes towards testimony.

We will argue that Wang Chong is a *demanding, piecemeal, nonreductionist* about testimony. As a nonreductionist he believes that testimony is a basic source of evidence: it does not need support from other sources. To Wang Chong, testimonial claims were worthy of belief unless he had independent defeaters that undermined them. As a piecemeal nonreductionist, he believes that testimony ought to be evaluated at the level of individual claims rather than whole sources. For the most part, defeaters for Wang Chong are defeaters for individual claims, rather than for whole texts or whole kinds of testimony. As a demanding, piecemeal, nonreductionist, Wang Chong thinks that we have a strong epistemic duty to look for defeaters. One should distinguish demanding nonreductionism from the superficially similar *reductionist* position, which would require independent evidence for the truth of testimonial claims. The nonreductionist thinks that testimony is innocent unless proven guilty. Wang Chong demands only that we look hard for evidence of guilt, not that we give up on the presumption of innocence.

We will elaborate and defend each of these claims. First, a potential objection is worth addressing. The above categorization derives from modern philosophical work on testimony. One might worry about anachronism in attributing such a position to Wang Chong. But we do not claim that this is how Wang Chong would describe his own project. Rather, we claim that Wang Chong had a position on testimony that can be accurately described in this way. Doing so produces a reading that is more fruitful than many previous approaches.

Chad Hansen's discussion of the principles of charity and humanity in cross-cultural philosophical interpretation is useful in this

²⁴ *LH* 4, pp. 30–31.

²⁵ For an interesting study of how the practice appears to have evolved among Warring States thinkers, see Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority* (Albany: SUNY P., 1999), p. 89ff.

context. Writing on Mencius, Hansen describes these two alternative approaches:²⁶

The principle of charity says we should choose the interpretation that implicitly assigns to Mencius the set of beliefs which most nearly matches our own. That is, we try to maximize the number of sentences of the *Mencius* which come out true when interpreted into English. The principle of humanity, on the other hand, does not try to make all of Mencius's statements true but rather attempts to make Mencius's pattern of reasoning as similar to ours as possible. So if we attribute a background assumption which is different from our own, then we should also assume that he disagrees with us in other ways whenever he is reasoning from that assumption.

Hansen, of course, opts for the second option. Modern interpreters of *Lunheng* often become frustrated in applying either the principle of charity (because Wang Chong clearly believes many false things) or the principle of humanity (because Wang Chong's pattern of reasoning is highly idiosyncratic). In the current study, we do not assume that Wang Chong was like modern scholars either in what he believes or in how he reasons. Rather, we assume something weaker: that he was reasonable in the pursuit of his goals. A good interpretation ought to attribute to him a set of goals, and of methods to achieve those goals, that makes him sound as reasonable as possible.²⁷ That interpretation might still end up concluding that Wang Chong failed in pursuit of his aims, or that he had irrational and indefensible aims in the first place. But if we can find an interpretation on which we do not *have* to say such things, we ought to prefer it. The tools of modern analytic epistemology are flexible enough to allow for this kind of exploration.

²⁶ Chad Hansen, "Individualism in Chinese Thought," in Donald J. Munro, ed., *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1985), p. 39.

²⁷ Compare the conjunction of two principles endorsed by Christopher Gauker as alternatives to the Principle of Charity: The Principle of Rationalization, that "*Ceteris paribus*, of two interpretations we ought to prefer that which best rationalizes the subject's behavior," and The Principle of Non-Fickleness, that "*Ceteris paribus*, we ought to interpret a subject as having goals that he sticks to and regularly works to achieve" (Christopher Gauker, "The Principle of Charity," *Synthese* 69 [1986], pp. 1–25). Some readings of Wang Chong violate the Principle of Non-Fickleness: they see him as regularly and reliably self-undermining: that is, as setting out to find the truth but failing due to biographical factors.

LOCATING WANG CHONG'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

Nonreductionism

Contemporary philosophers distinguish *reductionist* and *nonreductionist* approaches to testimony.²⁸ A reductionist believes that testimonial evidence must be grounded in other, non-testimonial evidence. A nonreductionist, by contrast, believes that

testimony is *just as basic* a source of justification... as sense perception, memory, inference, and the like. Accordingly, so long as there are no relevant undefeated defeaters, hearers can justifiably accept the assertions of speakers *merely* on the basis of a speaker's testimony.²⁹

In other words, (“undefeated defeaters,” in Lackey’s terms), testimony in favor of a proposition *P* is good evidence that *P* is true.³⁰ If there is evidence to the contrary – a *defeater* for *P* in modern parlance – then we lose our initial warrant for believing that *P*, at least on the grounds of that testimony. The notion of a defeater plays an important role for the nonreductionist. Again, testimonial evidence is ‘innocent unless proven guilty’; a defeater is that proof of guilt. However, a piece of evidence is a defeater for a given piece of testimony only if it is not itself defeated by further evidence: that is, only if it is an *undefeated* defeater. We will address these complexities in more detail in our concluding section.

We claim that Wang Chong is a nonreductionist about testimony: that is, he thinks that speech and text provide, on their own, reasons to believe the claims they advance.³¹ That might seem odd, given Wang

²⁸ Here we follow Lackey, “Knowing from Testimony,” pp. 432–48.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 438.

³⁰ Though of course one might have independent evidence – that is, evidence that has nothing to do with the testimony in question – that causes you to reject *P*, all things considered. On most accounts, though, testimony is *ceteris paribus* sufficient for knowledge: if you come to believe that *P* on the basis of testimony that *P*, and *P* is true, then you know that *P* even if you have no further evidence about *P*.

³¹ A reading superficially similar to this is hinted at in Alexus McLeod, “Pluralism about Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy: A Reflection on Wang Chong’s Approach,” *Comparative Philosophy* 2.1 (2011), pp. 38–60. In his discussion of the term *xu* 虛, which he translates as “merely apparent” (48), McLeod describes a nonreductionist position: “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.’” He adds, “The mistake common people 俗人 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” (49). Our reading differs from the one implied by McLeod here in that we read Wang Chong as a piecemeal rather than a global nonreductionist (see below) – that is, he is more concerned with the truth of individual statements than he is with trying to establish the overall reliability of the people making them. Further, our formulation of nonreductionism is stronger than McLeod’s: *any* testimony, not just expert testimony, is evidential.

Chong's apparently mistrustful attitude towards classical texts, towards popular beliefs, and really towards almost everything. It is far more common to read him as believing that "misleading exaggerations, if not outright lies... make the Classics unreliable authorities"³² and that the "tradition had been contaminated by successive generations of classical scholars who preferred an uncritical 'love of the ancient' to using their rational minds."³³ In short, Wang Chong is often seen as a failed and hypocritical reductionist who uses his rhetorical skills to "highlight all the internal inconsistencies and improbabilities in the theories promoted by [his] opponents, while glossing over possible objections to [his] own hypotheses."³⁴

Nevertheless, we argue that Wang Chong *acts* like a nonreductionist most of the time. Further, there is only an apparent contradiction between nonreductionism and his obvious doubts about much of the testimony he discusses. One can be a nonreductionist about testimony while thinking that most testimony *does* in the end fall prey to defeat-ers.

We offer several reasons to think that Wang Chong is a nonreductionist. First, it is far more generous to read Wang Chong as a nonreductionist. If you think he is a reductionist – that is, if you read him as demanding independent evidence to support testimony – then he looks extraordinarily sloppy. Here's a characteristic passage:³⁵

Traditions says that the Yellow Emperor had a dragon face, that Zhuan Xu bore the character *wu* 午,³⁶ that Di Gu had merged teeth, that Yao had eyebrows of eight different colors, that Shun's eyes had double pupils, that Yu's ears had three openings, that Tang's arms had extra elbows, that King Wen had four nipples, that King Wu could gaze at the sun, that the Duke of Zhou was a hunchback, that Gaoyao had a horse's mouth, and that Confucius had a protrusion on his head. These twelve sages were all either in the position of ruler, or assisted the ruler and were concerned about the times they lived in. Everyone has heard about these [physical anomalies]. They are commonly spoken of by the Ru. And in the Classics and commentaries they are clearly described and can be believed. 傳言黃帝龍顏, 顛頭戴午, 帝嚳駢齒, 堯眉八采, 舜

³² Nylan, "Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue," p. 142.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁵ *LH* 11, pp. 108–12.

³⁶ Commentators note that it should be *gan* 干.

目重瞳，禹耳三漏，湯臂再肘，文王四乳，武王望陽，周公背偻，皋陶馬口，孔子反羽。斯十二聖者，皆在帝王之位，或輔主憂世，世所共聞，儒所共說，在經傳者，較著可信。

Wang Chong clearly believes these extraordinary physiological claims, and believes them solely on the basis of textual and other testimonial evidence. If Wang Chong is a reductionist, he is doing a terrible job at it – these are amazing claims, for which a reductionist should demand correspondingly amazing independent evidence. Reading him as a nonreductionist, by contrast, makes him look far more reasonable: these are claims which are supported by testimony and for which he has no independent defeaters. Since he has no evidence against them, they survive.

A second reason to see Wang Chong as a nonreductionist is that when he talks explicitly about texts, his worry does not seem to be that textual evidence as such might be unreliable. Rather, his worry is that the Classics have become damaged:³⁷

Now the Five Classics have run afoul of doomed Qin's excesses, have clashed with Li Si's willful denunciations, have been burnt and proscribed. Good people like Fu Sheng carried the Classics deep into hiding. When the Han arose, the Five Classics were again gathered together, but their texts had been devastated and were unclear. Chapters and sections were lost, scattered, and incomplete. People like Chao Cuo chopped up the characters and phrases for their own private ends. Then came teachers who were only able to rely on their own teachers, and be relied on in turn by those they taught, without really knowing what was correct. 今五經遭亡秦之奢侈，觸李斯之橫議，燔燒禁防，伏生之休，抱經深藏。漢興，收五經，經書缺滅而不明，篇章棄散而不具。鼂錯之輩，各以私意分拆文字，師徒相因相授，不知何者爲是。

This is a conventional and ubiquitous lament over the losses occasioned by the Qin biblioclasm. Wang Chong was neither the first nor the last scholar to use this pivotal event as an excuse for introducing critical and original thinking, though perhaps he does so more openly than many others. Furthermore, in Wang Chong's view, the burning of the books is only one of several sources of error in the post-Qin versions of the Classics. The interpretation of the base texts is often corrupted by far-fetched commentarial traditions as well:³⁸

³⁷ *LH* 82, pp. 1158–59.

³⁸ *LH* 84, p. 1179.

Those who use brush and ink manufacture and generate empty writings to make false and nonsensical commentaries. Listeners believe them to be true and actual, delighting in them and never setting them aside. Readers believe them to be real (*shi*) matters, transmitting them without cease. If this [transmitting] does not cease, then the writings get recorded upon bamboo and silk.³⁹ If these [speeches] are not set aside, they will mistakenly enter the ears of the worthy. 用筆墨者，造生空文，爲虛妄之傳。聽者以爲真然，說而不舍；覽者以爲實事，傳而不絕。不絕，則文載竹帛之上；不舍，則誤入賢者之耳。

This is not, we suggest, meant to be read as skepticism about texts in general.⁴⁰ The basic presumption is that texts are trustworthy, except where errors have been added and perpetuated. As Wang Chong explicitly states:⁴¹

Suppose it were the case that the Five Classics came directly out from Confucius' gates, and suppose that down to now they had never suffered devastation. If that were the case then we could say they were pure in their entirety, and it would be permissible to trust them. 使五經從孔門出，到今常令人不缺滅，謂之純壹，信之可也。

Wang Chong's goal is thus not to doubt the Classics, but rather to return them closer to that pure state.⁴² Hence, he says, "The creation of *Lunheng* came about because a great number of writings have

³⁹ That is, on more prestigious materials (and thus circulated in more prestigious settings). In general, Wang Chong makes a fascinating distinction between "short-form texts 短書" and "bamboo and silk texts 竹帛," e.g., *LH* 11, p. 112. "Short-form" here refers not to the absolute number of characters in the texts, but rather to the length of the strips on which they were written. In chap. 36, "Xie duan" 謝短 ("Admitting Shortcomings"), Wang Chong describes these "short-form texts" explicitly: "Matters from the Han era, which are not yet recorded in Classics, have the reputation of being mere 'foot-long records' or 'short-form texts' 漢事未載於經，名爲尺藉短書" (*LH* 36, p. 557).

⁴⁰ An example of what Wang Chong may have been criticizing can be found in the debates over the *chenwei* (apocrypha) texts that were ongoing in Wang Chong's time. Sometimes purporting to comment on Classics (particularly the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), sometimes invented as independent traditions related to the Classics (such as the fragmentary *Different Meanings of the Five Classics* 五經異義 discussed in Van Ess, "Apocryphal Texts of the Han Dynasty," pp. 29–64), they made genealogical and prophetic claims regarding imperial legitimacy. Though most likely disdained by scholars like Wang Chong, the *chenwei* texts enjoyed imperial support (see Gopal Sukhu, "Yao, Shun, and Prefiguration: The Origins and Ideology of the Han Imperial Genealogy," *EC* 30 [2005–2006], pp. 91–153, for a thorough discussion). Wang Chong does several times refer to "prophecy texts" (*chenshu* 讖書), typically in order to criticize them (*LH* 15, p. 156; 16, p. 201; 78, p. 1069; 83, p. 1170), but some of his more oblique statements may have been aimed at them as well.

⁴¹ *LH* 82, p. 1158.

⁴² Later, as we show in the section on exaggeration (below), he will add a further caveat with regard to the Classics, namely, that they must be interpreted correctly since they contain some things that are only metaphorically true.

all strayed from the facts (*shi*), and because empty and foolish words have dominated over the true and the beautiful 論衡之造也，起眾書並失實，虛妄之言勝真美也。”⁴³

Third and finally, reading Wang Chong as a nonreductionist is reasonable because nonreductionism is arguably the natural attitude towards testimony.⁴⁴ No one is actually in a position to carry out the reductionist vetting project in any reasonable timeframe. Hence reductionism is in danger of collapsing into serious skepticism about all sources of testimony.⁴⁵ The simplest hypothesis is that Wang Chong, like nearly everyone else, was a nonreductionist about testimony.

Piecemeal Nonreductionism

Among nonreductionists about testimony, one can further distinguish between *piecemeal* and *global* approaches to evidence. A piecemeal nonreductionist thinks that the basic unit of testimony is the individual *claim*. Hence testimonial claims ought to be evaluated one by one, and defeaters should also be brought to bear on individual claims. Global nonreductionists, by contrast, take the primary unit of testimony to be whole *sources*: texts, people, types of people, and so on. A defeater, for globalists, typically means evidence that the source itself is unreliable, and so that each claim it contains is no longer good testimonial evidence.

We claim that Wang Chong is nearly always a piecemeal nonreductionist, and that this probably marks him off from his more globalist contemporaries. That is, Wang Chong takes the basic unit of testimony to be the individual claim, and rarely rules out whole sources,⁴⁶ even when he is skeptical about individual claims those sources make.⁴⁷

⁴³ LH 84, p. 1179.

⁴⁴ Kent Bach, “Default Reasoning: Jumping to Conclusions and Knowing When to Think Twice,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (1984), pp. 37–58; Lackey, “Knowing from Testimony.”

⁴⁵ Lackey, “Knowing from Testimony,” p. 440 ff.

⁴⁶ The hedge word “rarely” is necessary. Wang Chong is *almost* always piecemeal, but he does occasionally seem to rule out whole sources; e.g., the beginning of “Fei Han” 非韓 (“Denying Han Feizi”), where Wang makes the blanket statement that he “denies [Han Fei’s] words and does not employ his methods 非其言而不用其法” (LH 29, p. 432). Even there, however, context suggests that this is intended satirically; Wang Chong also claims that if Han Fei had come to court without a cap, his words would be worth considering.

⁴⁷ There is complexity here that is worth addressing. The judgments of the globalist and the piecemeal theorist will often coincide, albeit for different reasons. For one, independent evidence that would give the globalist reason to reject a whole text (for example, by finding that it was entirely made up) would also give the piecemeal theorist reason to reject each individual piece. For another, piecemeal theorists may use the falsity of some pieces of a text as evidence about the unreliability of other pieces; on the other hand, the spectacular failings

Conversely, no particular source is accepted wholesale. Wang Chong evaluates even the most canonical of texts claim by claim, and there are chapters devoted to arguing against particular passages from them.⁴⁸

Labeling Wang Chong as a piecemeal nonreductionist might sound counter-intuitive given his notorious attacks on the Classics. Again, we think there is considerable evidence for our position.

First, Wang Chong would seem to hold an inconsistent attitude towards the sages and Classics, attacking them in some places and relying on them in others. This would be a serious problem indeed if he took a global attitude towards sources, but it is a perfectly reasonable attitude for a piecemeal nonreductionist. Texts are composed of bodies of claims, some of which might stand and others fall. The charitable reading sees Wang Chong as attacking those parts of texts for which he thinks there are defeaters. Since he is a piecemeal reader, there is no inconsistency when he uses what remains.⁴⁹

Unlike nonreductionism, which was probably ubiquitous, we think that a piecemeal approach to texts *does* set Wang Chong apart from his contemporaries. Many texts were taking their canonical forms during his time. Michael Nylan describes “divisive” court debates over this issue, in which scholars vied to “offer a satisfactory explanation of problematic passages.”⁵⁰ In such a climate, anyone who failed to “toe the party line,” and instead insisted on arguing that the passages were truly problematic, would have been at a severe disadvantage. John B. Henderson also describes how the intellectual climate of the Later Han “turned Confucian scholars’ attention to the integration and

of particular pieces might give the globalist sufficient reason to reject the whole. (See, for example, the review in Walter Kaufmann, “Nietzsche and the Seven Sirens,” *Partisan Review* 19.3 [1952], pp. 372–76, of the notorious forgery *My Sister and I*, which cites anachronistic passages referring to Detroit, to “English Nietzscheans” and to D.H. Lawrence as among the evidence that the text was not authored by Nietzsche. Such passages would give both the globalist and the piecemeal theorist sufficient reason to discount anything said in that book when studying the works of Nietzsche.) Given these complications, we think that the best evidence that a thinker is piecemeal is whether they are *sometimes* willing to accept different parts of a text as having radically different evidentiary status. What follows demonstrates that Wang Chong was by and large willing to do so. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to clarify this point.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., “Yi Zeng” and “Wen Kong” 問孔 (“Questioning Confucius”).

⁴⁹ Our global versus piecemeal distinction is a more general statement of a point made in McLeod’s critique of Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue.” McLeod observes (*contra* Nylan) that in the “Wen Kong” chapter, Wang Chong typically “dismisses a particular teaching of Confucius” but does not “[make] generalizations about the failure of Confucius as a teacher” (Alexus McLeod, “A Reappraisal of Wang Chong’s Critical Method through the Wenkong Chapter,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34.4 [2007], pp 585–86).

⁵⁰ Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2001), pp. 41–48.

harmonization of the books in the Confucian canon.”⁵¹ Such scholars were engaged in “reconstructing the lost unity and coherence of the classics as a whole,”⁵² or at least attempting to do so. Wang Chong’s frequent attacks on his contemporaries imply that they had a tendency to accept whole sources (particularly the interpretive outlooks of their own scholarly lineages) as genuine; as he puts it, “latter Ru [i.e., his contemporaries] believe the words of their teachers who went before, following the old and transmitting past [ideas], becoming fluent in such words and sayings... [and] not taking the time to concentrate and use their minds to investigate the true (*shi*) root and kernel of any matter 後儒信前師之言，隨舊述故，滑習辭語...不暇留精用心，考實根核。”⁵³

In outlining the general character of commentarial assumptions across multiple different traditions, Henderson argues that canons tend to be seen by their proponents as comprehensive, well-ordered, and self-consistent. In particular with regard to this last he observes that “to admit the existence of significant internal contradictions in the canon...seriously undermines the canon’s claim to truth.”⁵⁴ In short, Wang Chong’s piecemeal approach to any and all authoritative texts and traditions could potentially have been threatening to the globalist scholars of his time, whose fierce rivalry for imperial patronage depended on successfully constructing and defending the authority of their entire interpretive lines.

Second, numerous statements by Wang Chong suggest that he thinks of testimony as something to be evaluated piecemeal. Speaking of the fallibility of the sages, he argues that even they “still cannot be said to have completely gotten to the truth (*shi*) 未可謂盡得實,”⁵⁵ that they are prone to exaggeration at times,⁵⁶ that they may say things that are not strictly true in order to encourage people to be good.⁵⁷ These passages in *Lunheng* have been read as attacks on texts or sages as such – that is, as global attacks on whole sources.⁵⁸ But we argue that Wang

⁵¹ John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1991), p. 43.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵³ *LH* 81, p. 1123. The specific target of Wang Chong’s attack is not clear, but a reference in the same passage to the early career opportunities involved suggest that he might be referring to those who succeeded through study of the “chapter-and-verse” commentary, a tradition requiring copious amounts of memorization, potentially at the expense of critical thinking.

⁵⁴ Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary*, p. 115.

⁵⁵ *LH* 28, p. 395.

⁵⁶ *LH* 27, p. 381.

⁵⁷ *LH* 20, p. 261.

⁵⁸ Nylan reads the “Yi Zeng” and “Wen Kong” chapters in this globalist way: “Wang presents a lengthy list of arguments intended to cast doubt on the integrity of the entire *Odes* text

Chong would proceed very differently if that were the case. He almost never explicitly counsels that we ought to ignore a whole text or a whole source of evidence. Instead, he establishes the fallibility of sages and texts so that he can dispute *particular* claims. That is done against a background of *accepting* claims for which he cannot find defeaters.

Further evidence against a global reading is Wang Chong's consistent willingness to accept even vulgar popular beliefs as testimony.⁵⁹ This has often puzzled readers. Consider, for example, Wang Chong's extended discussion of ghosts. Wang Chong's skepticism about common stories is obvious. Note, however, what Wang Chong does *not* do. He does not attack the sources of ghost stories. He does not argue (as modern authors might be tempted to do) that the common people are not to be trusted, or that reports of ghosts always arise in unreliable circumstances, or that those who report ghosts are too emotionally invested to be credible witnesses.⁶⁰ Instead, Wang Chong works on the level of individual claims. In some places he says that ghosts do not resemble humans enough to be the spirits of the dead (as with will o' wisps);⁶¹ other places, the problem is that they look too much like the living (as when they are clothed).⁶² Sometimes the problem with ghostly action in the world is that ghosts are not conscious,⁶³ while other times it is that they lack a body with which to act.⁶⁴ Wang Chong does not seem to be looking for general defeaters here: instead, he is taking individual claims and evaluating them one by one.

The discussion of ghosts also highlights a curious consequence of Wang Chong's piecemeal approach. 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

but, oddly enough, each point in Wang's extended tirade refers to a single line from an *Odes* poem. The same chapter, for reasons that are far from clear, would denigrate the entire Documents classic on the basis of one passage. [Wang] cites anecdotes recorded in the Confucian *Analects* to challenge the supreme authority of recorded traditions about Confucius" (Nylan, "Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue," p. 142).

⁵⁹ For example, *LH* 11, p. 112.

⁶⁰ Even in places where he appears to be doing so – e.g. the first few paragraphs of "Ding Gui" 訂鬼 ("Appraising Ghosts"; chap. 65) – a close inspection reveals him to be doing something more subtle. When Wang Chong discusses sick people as a source of stories about ghosts, the point is not to say that sick people are unreliable *per se*. Rather, his strategy is to draw an analogy between the sick and others who meditate on a single theme for an extended time, and thereby see fantastical visions. Hence the goal is not to rule out a whole class of *testifiers* as unreliable, but again to rule out a certain kind of *claim* as unreliable.

⁶¹ *LH* 62, p. 874.

⁶² *LH* 62, p. 875.

⁶³ *LH* 62, p. 876.

⁶⁴ *LH* 62, pp. 878–89.

the clouds, or Yao's polychromatic eyebrows. He instead attacks the downstream interpretations: claims about how these reports should be understood. If he were a global nonreductionist, why would he engage in such nit-picking rather than in the far more promising task of attacking whole sources?

As a piecemeal nonreductionist, however, he is doing exactly what he ought to do. Unless you were also present at an event, defeaters for first-person sensory reports are very difficult to come by. So Wang Chong rarely has any available. Instead, he must attack the interpretations of those reports, for it is far easier to find defeaters for general claims. Hence he concludes not (as we would) that ghosts don't exist, but rather that whatever 'ghosts' are – that is, whatever it is that people are seeing – they are not the spirits of the dead.⁶⁵

Wang Chong's approach is radical compared to that of his contemporaries. But it is not the radical attack on tradition that many readers have supposed. An apt comparison might be with Thomas Jefferson, who produced his own "edition" of the Bible. He accomplished this by subtraction: in initial versions, he actually used a razor blade to excise passages that he thought were unsupported. Writing of his project, he said that:

In extracting the pure principles which [Jesus] taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests.... I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill. The result is an octavo of forty-six pages, of pure and unsophisticated doctrines.⁶⁶

Jefferson does not doubt that the Gospels contain deep, important truths. He simply thinks that they *also* contain much accreted error. His goal is therefore to strip away the errors in order to let the truths shine more clearly. We think that Wang Chong was engaged in a similar project. His autobiographical chapter reads, "When the hearts of the majority are in error, [Wang Chong] does not follow [them]. Thus

⁶⁵ *LH* 65, pp. 931–32.

⁶⁶ *Letter to John Adams, October 12, 1813*, in Thomas Jefferson, *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies from The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Thomas Jefferson Randolph (Charlottesville: F. Carr and Company, 1829), vol. 4, p. 223. Jefferson repeatedly emphasized that he endorsed what remained after this subtraction process: "To the corruptions of Christianity, I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others." (*Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, with Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, with Copies*; *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 506.)

does he excise and dismiss fakeness, and keeping and holding fixed the truth of the matter 眾心非而不從，故喪黜其偽，而存定其真。”⁶⁷ Note that this doesn't involve *discovering* what is true, or even finding general reasons to discount common belief and practice. Rather, his goal is to sort individual claims into true and false, and to retain only the former.

Demanding Piecemeal Nonreductionism

Any nonreductionist theory of testimony places heavy emphasis on the notion of an undefeated defeater. It is clear that we have some sort of *epistemic duty* to look for defeaters when we hear testimony.⁶⁸ Nonreductionists vary on how strong those duties are. On one end of the spectrum are the lax nonreductionists, who believe that one's duties are relatively minimal. You do not have to look very hard for defeaters, and the bar for being a defeater is relatively high. The demanding nonreductionist, by contrast, says that you have a very strong duty to look for defeaters, and that the bar to something counting as a defeater is low. The two poles represent a familiar tradeoff: the lax nonreductionist wants to avoid throwing out good testimony, while the demanding nonreductionist fears false positives. (There are, of course, numerous positions that lie in between the two poles.)

Wang Chong is clearly a demanding piecemeal nonreductionist. He repeatedly insists on our duty to examine testimony critically. Consider that in the “Wen Kong” chapter he criticizes contemporary scholars because they “focus their whole being on expounding and reciting, but do not know how to criticize and question 專精講習，不知難問。”⁶⁹ There are many other passages as well where he chides people for being insufficiently critical.

⁶⁷ LH 85, p. 1197.

⁶⁸ There is an important debate (about which we remain neutral) on whether epistemic duties are also moral duties – that, is, whether failing to look for evidence makes you a bad person rather than just a bad knower. The moral reading receives a famously strong expression in William K. Clifford's “The Ethics of Belief” (*The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* [New York: Prometheus Books, 1877, rpt. 1999]). See also Alan Wood, *Unsettling Obligations: Essays on Reason, Reality, and the Ethics of Belief* (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2002), for an extended discussion. There is at least some evidence that Wang Chong took the stronger, moral stance towards epistemic duties. In discussing his reasons for writing *Lunheng*, Wang Chong's passionate denunciation of falsehood in texts and popular beliefs hints that he also recognized such a moral duty: “Falsehood and nonsense are more in evidence than truth – facts (*shi*) and earnestness are disordered by fakery – and the people of this generation are unaware of it! Right and wrong have come unmoored – the purple and the vermilion mixed and mingled, jade stacked up together with tiles – to speak in emotional terms, how can my heart even bear this! 虛妄顯於真，實誠亂於偽，世人不悟，是非不定，紫朱雜廁，瓦玉集糅，以情言之，豈吾心所能忍哉!” (LH 84, p. 1179).

⁶⁹ LH 28, p. 395.

Wang Chong's demanding attitude towards testimony, however, must be interpreted against the background of his piecemeal nonreductionism. Again, we emphasize, he is not a skeptic of the sort that demands independent or foundational evidence for individual claims. Rather, he just thinks that one needs to look hard for defeaters. When the skeptic fails in the quest for additional evidence, the claim in question is thrown out. When the demanding nonreductionist fails to find a defeater, by contrast, the relevant bit of testimony is preserved.

It is interesting at this point to compare our reading of Wang Chong with Michael Puett's more tragic one. Puett reads Wang Chong as fundamentally pessimistic about testimony, writing that Wang's "main move ... is to demonstrate that contradictions and errors exist in the texts and that they therefore cannot be seen as repositories of absolute knowledge." He imputes to Wang Chong the belief that "the attempt to base all knowledge upon the early texts is doomed anyway, because the sages disagreed with each other."⁷⁰ We think Wang Chong would agree with both of these statements but not with the pessimistic tone – Wang shows little desire to base all knowledge upon early texts. Puett goes on to write in what he imagines to be Wang Chong's despairing voice: "How can we fully follow texts that do not even agree amongst themselves?"⁷¹

Puett thus reads Wang Chong as a despairing reductionist or a failed global nonreductionist – in either case, a seeker of absolutes who wants to ground knowledge in the claims of sages while remaining unhampered by a "rational system of knowledge."⁷²

We interpret the same passages differently. As a demanding piecemeal nonreductionist, Wang Chong insists stridently on the possibility that any and all texts could contain mistaken claims. He insists on it so stridently and at such length that it is easy to read him as falling into despair. But this is not so. For Wang Chong's goal is not ultimately, as Puett suggests, to find a text that one might "fully follow." Instead, knowledge is something that must always be selectively *extracted* from testimonial claims. We agree that Wang Chong would listen carefully to any sage he might encounter, but we also think that he would still feel obliged to ask a great many difficult questions afterwards.

Wang Chong's demanding attitude also explains his oft-noted concern with literal versus metaphorical readings of statements. We will

⁷⁰ Puett, "Listening to Sages," p. 271.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 280.

return to this distinction below. For now, note that if one is demanding about testimony, then one needs to be correspondingly demanding about what counts as a defeater for a particular claim. There might be a considerable divergence between the defeaters for a literal and a metaphorical reading of the very same sentence. Sorting out those readings is a crucial step in Wang Chong's demanding epistemological practice.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

We illustrate the above picture with a more detailed explication of example three from our introductory section. In speaking of Yao, Wang Chong writes:⁷³

The *Revered Documents* says, “[He] brought harmony to the ten thousand states.” This is written in praise of Yao's virtue in bringing about the transformation to [an era of] Great Peace, transforming the many Xia people and even including the Yi and Di. It is correct to say that he brought harmony to the outer lands. To say ten thousands states, however, is an exaggeration. 尚書：“協和萬國。”是美堯德致太平之化，化諸夏并及夷狄也。言協和方外，可也；言萬國，增之也。

Wang Chong does sound extraordinarily fussy here; Nylan accuses him of “a rather pedantic obsession with absolute linguistic precision,” which is certainly a natural reading.⁷⁴ We think that our theory about his background epistemology allows for a more sympathetic interpretation, however.

Wang Chong is a nonreductionist. He does not doubt the existence of the Sage King Yao, or that Yao was a good ruler. Why? Presumably because these beliefs are well-attested, and because Wang Chong has no independent evidence that would serve as a defeater. So insofar as Wang Chong is criticizing these and similar exaggerations, it is not (as Nylan claims) to show that they “make the Classics unreliable authorities.”⁷⁵ His criticism arises against the background of a clear acceptance of the primary claims of the *Revered Documents*. Instead, he is engaged in a piecemeal criticism of a single claim.

⁷³ LH 27, p. 381.

⁷⁴ Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue,” p. 142. Forke is even less charitable, accusing Wang Chong of overlooking basic facts about the use of large numbers in classical Chinese (Fork, *Lun-Hêng Part II*, p. 262, n.1).

⁷⁵ Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue,” p. 142.

His criticism of that claim, further, is more nuanced than it might appear. Wang Chong is aware of the figurative reading of the statement: that Yao's virtue was such as to bring about widespread harmony. Further, he clearly *endorses* the virtue of Yao. That is perfectly consistent with what we see as his general default attitude of acceptance towards textual testimony. His main point is, however, that there is also a literal reading of this statement, and that literal reading does not hold up to scrutiny.⁷⁶

The defeaters he goes on to provide are other facts about the number of states at the time of Yao. His sources for these claims are obscure, but presumably they too come from texts or traditions available and acceptable to Wang Chong and his contemporaries. Whatever its source, this is additional testimony – because, again, textual evidence is innocent unless proven guilty. Further, he does not just suggest that the number given is incorrect: he makes an effort to estimate the true upper bound of 3,000. Far from devolving into mere pedantry, then, Wang Chong means to emphasize that there is a fact of the matter regarding the true number of states. That number might even be handy to know. So it is worth trying to sort out, rather than merely embellishing for rhetorical effect.

Wang Chong is not engaged in an indiscriminate attack on beloved Classics. Indeed, immediately before the quoted passage above he says, “When it comes to the words of the [Five] Classics or the [Six] Arts, is there anything as reliable (*shi*) as they are? For prudence in speech, there is no surpassing the sages 儻經藝之言，如其實乎？言審莫過聖人。”⁷⁷ His position in the whole chapter is that the Classics and sages are generally good guides to the truth, and that exaggerations have been added for rhetorically admirable purposes. That hyperbole can mislead, however; Wang Chong's goal is to clear it away in order that we might appreciate the unimpeachable truths that remain.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Another example concerns the Zhou conquest. In arguing for greater literalness, Wang Chong writes, “When the Zhou defeated the Yin, it was in fact (*shi*) the same situation as with the Han and the Qin. Saying that defeating the Yin was so easy that ‘the soldiers did not bloody their blades’ is intended as a praise of King Wu's virtue, but it exaggerates and overstates the facts (*shi*). It would be permissible to say it was easy, but to say it was ‘bloodless’ is an exaggeration 周之取殷，與漢、秦一實也。而云取殷易，‘兵不血刃’，美武王之德，增益其實也。... 言其易，可也；言‘不血刃’，增之也。” (LH 25, p. 344)

⁷⁷ LH 27, p. 381.

⁷⁸ As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, the above-quoted comment on the Classics at first seems very similar to Sima Qian's comment about the difficulty of finding reliable sources for the earliest part of his history. Sima wrote: “Many scholars describe the Five Emperors as revered indeed. However, the *Revered Documents* only records from Yao onwards. The hundred experts talk of the Yellow Emperor but their writings are not elegant and a gentleman of

Our reading of Wang Chong thus provides a more sympathetic interpretation of passages that are otherwise difficult to defend. Wang Chong's concern with literal readings might nevertheless seem like a quixotic feature of his writing. We think that, far from being an idiosyncratic quirk, focus on literal readings plays an important rhetorical and epistemological role for Wang Chong. It is to that role that we now turn.

LITERALNESS AND RHETORIC

The passage about Yao is not a one-off occurrence: Wang Chong makes a habit of reading statements literally. This could be seen as a “comical obsession with absolute literalness in language.”⁷⁹ We suspect that most people read him this way. However, again, a more sympathetic reading is possible. We have already noted that, given Wang Chong's epistemology, the literal/metaphorical distinction is of great importance. We also argue that literal reading was a rhetorical *style* that Wang Chong employed for a specific reason. Roughly: Wang Chong did not just need to make the distinction for himself. He also wanted to force his opponents to make the same distinction. His plodding literalness, we suggest, was a deliberate rhetorical strategy intended to do just that.

Consider a few more examples of what look like an unhelpfully finicky approach to narrative description in texts:

A Ru text says in commendation, “Yang Youji of Chu was a great shot. Shooting at one willow leaf, in a hundred shots he scored a hundred hits.” This commends his skill in shooting. Now it would be permissible to say that he once shot at a single willow leaf and hit it. To say he shot a hundred times and hit it a hundred times is an exaggeration. Now take one willow leaf: one can shoot at and

standing would find it difficult to speak of them 學者多稱五帝, 尚矣。然尚書獨載堯以來; 而百家言黃帝, 其文不雅馴, 薦紳先生難言之” (Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959] 1, p. 46). He then mentions a non-canonical tradition attributed to Confucius and also his own travels and investigations, concluding that “in sum, that which does not depart from the ‘ancient writings’ is closest to correct 總之不離古文者近是” (ibid.). He lists the sources he has relied on most heavily, promising that while they may be incomplete, “all of what they do make manifest is not false 其所表見皆不虛.” It is this claim that shows Sima Qian to be more of a globalist than Wang Chong. Wang Chong is willing to say in general that the Classics come closest to correctness, but he would not agree that they are free of falsehoods. Interestingly, we do find Sima Qian employing what appears to amount to an aesthetic criterion in determining his final selection: “I have selected those words that are particularly elegant 擇其言尤雅者.” Wang Chong clearly does not share Sima Qian's appreciation of this quality, as shown by his rather more ambivalent use of it, for example on *LH* 31, p. 469.

⁷⁹ Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue,” p. 142.

hit it. But if one hits it again, it grows [ragged and] impossible to pierce. One cannot hit it repeatedly. If it were a case of shooting a leaf still hanging from the tree, willow leaves [on the tree] are so numerous that even if you had no intention of shooting at a leaf, you would naturally hit one. In this situation it must be that he had someone take the willow leaves from up in the tree and one by one move them to the ground, whereupon he shot at them. If he shot at them a few dozen times, this would be enough to demonstrate his prowess.... It is clear that he would certainly not have done it a hundred times. 儒書稱：“楚養由基善射，射一楊葉，百發能百中之”是稱其巧於射也。夫言其時射一楊葉中之，可也；言其百發而百中，增之也。夫一楊葉，射而中之，中之一再，行敗穿不可復射矣。如就葉懸於樹而射之，雖不欲射葉，楊葉繁茂，自中之矣。是必使上取楊葉，一一更置地而射之也。射之數十行，足以見巧...亦必不至於百，明矣。⁸⁰

...

In the “Martial Success” chapter of the *Revered Documents* are the words, “Blood flowed so the pestles floated.” This is also going too far. The blood flowed from those who had been killed, but how could pestles float on it? Note that King Wu fought Zhou in the wilds of Mu. The land north of the Yellow River consists of highlands, and the soil must surely have been very dry and arid. If the weapons were blunted and the blood flowed, it would immediately be soaked up into the earth. How could pestles float in it? Now the troops of Zhou and Yin would all have been issued ready-made rations, or perhaps they were given dry provisions, but surely it would not be a case of their having to grind their own grain using a mortar and pestle. Thus, whence came the pestles that were floated in the blood? When it says that “blood flowed so the pestles floated,” the intention is to speak of how, when the tyrant Zhou was punished, the weapons were blunted due to the number of fighters who were injured. That is why it goes so far as [to say that] there were pestles floating. 武成言“血流浮杵”，亦太過焉。死者血流，安能浮杵。案武王伐紂於牧之野，河北地高，壤靡不乾燥，兵頓血流，輒燥入土，安得杵浮？且周、殷士卒，皆齋盛糧，或作乾糧，無杵臼之事，安得杵而浮之？言血流杵，欲言誅紂，惟兵頓土傷，故至浮杵。⁸¹

⁸⁰ LH 26, p. 361.

⁸¹ LH 27, p. 391. Famously, Mencius took exception to the same passage but for quite a different reason, arguing that “the benevolent person has no enemies in all the realm 仁人無敵於天下,” and that given the benevolence of King Wu, the conquest could not have been so bloody. He argues that “it would be better not to have the *Documents* than to believe everything in them 盡信‘書’，則不如無‘書’” (*Mencius* 7B.3 [SSJZS edn., p. 2773]).

The natural reaction is to protest that the quoted passages are not intended to be read literally: that they contain rhetorical flourishes meant to convey the truth more powerfully and vividly. Wang Chong even acknowledges as much, as is clear from the extensive quotations above. He has not failed to understand what the texts intend to convey. We modern readers also readily distinguish between literal and metaphorical readings, and so Wang Chong's nit-picking seems pedantic and irritating. But there is good evidence that Wang Chong did not think that his contemporaries made this distinction quite so readily.

In "Dui Zuo," Wang Chong outlines the reasons that flowery speech is appealing and the unfortunate process by which it becomes part of the tradition.

It is in the nature of contemporary customs to be fond of curious and bizarre talk, and to delight in false and foolish writing. Why is this? Real (*shi*) matters cannot bring joy to the imagination, while the flowery and false startle the ear and stimulate the mind. For this reason, talented gentlemen who are fond of discussion and debate add to and increase the real (*shi*) matters to make gorgeous and luxuriant speeches. 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, 爲美盛之語.⁸²

Wang Chong is clearly concerned about the deleterious effect of such exaggerations. Three whole chapters (25–27) are devoted to a discussion of exaggerations. In addition, many of the critiques in other chapters also explain that the problematic views have come about owing in part to exaggerations. For example in "Lei Xu" 雷虛 ("Falsehoods about Thunder"), Wang Chong criticizes the belief that lightning is heaven's way of writing, and then explains it by saying, "In some cases, there are [real events] but [people] exaggerate in discussing them. In other cases, no such thing happened and the words come out of thin air. Given the popular taste for the false and nonsensical, there is a fondness for the manufacture of the rare and miraculous 或頗有而增其語, 或無有而空生其言. 虛妄之俗, 好造怪奇."⁸³ Focus on literal readings isn't necessary when everyone understands metaphors to be metaphors. Wang Chong clearly did not believe that he lived in such a time. This is not to say that everyone took these metaphors literally, but rather there was (in his opinion) a general unconcern with making the literal/metaphorical distinction.

⁸² LH 84, p. 1179.

⁸³ LH 23, p. 309.

Wang Chong saw his opponents, then, as embellishing testimony in vague and unhelpful ways, with the result that any possibility of distinguishing between the correct and incorrect becomes obscured: “A great number of writings have all strayed from the facts (*shi*). Empty and foolish words have dominated over the true and the beautiful. If falsehood and nonsense are not dismissed, then flowery writing will never come to an end. If flowery writing is allowed to circulate freely, then real (*shi*) matters will never see employment 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。”⁸⁴ Rather than searching for the truth in the Classics and other testimony, the writers whom Wang Chong criticizes sought to use the statements of the Classics to make ever more poetic expressions that obscured the truth. Such elaborate expressions might be generally regarded as beautiful but, Wang Chong claims, true beauty lies in adherence to facts. Separating out the true from the false thus ought to be the primary goal of scholarship.⁸⁵

Elsewhere in *Lunheng*, Wang Chong even formulates one of his rare explicitly positive statements about the need for literalness, and what can be accomplished thereby:⁸⁶

In general regarding the affairs of the realm, there should be neither exaggerations nor omissions. If one then investigates the beginnings and ends of things, the results will become clear of themselves. When they do become clear of themselves, then the facts (*shi*) about what is right and wrong will, at least in some regards, become certain. 凡天下之事，不可增損，考察前後，效驗自列，自列，則是非之實有所定矣。

⁸⁴ *LH* 84, p. 1179.

⁸⁵ Here we assume that there is some straightforward unified sense of “true” towards which Wang Chong aims. Alexis McLeod has argued that Wang Chong is a pluralist about truth, in the sense that *shi* 實 is an evaluatively basic second-order property that can be fulfilled by distinct first-order properties in distinct classes of sentences (McLeod, “Pluralism about Truth,” pp. 38–60). While an intriguing reading, we think there is little to distinguish it from a more straightforward monist reading of *Lunheng* on which there is a single, abstract, first-order property picked out by *shi* and which obtains of different utterances in virtue of different properties that those utterances have. (That is, truth is not the property of having some truthmaking property, but, say, the property of corresponding to the way things are, which different sentences will of course do for different reasons. In general, Wang Chong might just be a monist about truth and a pluralist about truthmakers, as nearly everyone ought to be.) We suspect that there is a deeper disagreement at work here. Briefly, we think McLeod’s evidence for different truth-properties might be better understood as tracking distinctions between literal and metaphorical readings of the same sentence. On our view, then, truth ultimately does not attach to linguistic utterances but to interpreted utterances. Different readings of the same statement will have very different truth-conditions – but that is because they give rise to very different propositions, not because truth itself is plural.

⁸⁶ *LH* 25, p. 344.

Plodding literalism, we suggest, was part of Wang Chong's effort to reverse what he saw as an unfortunate trend toward flowery rhetoric. By picking passages where the literal reading seems most ludicrous, Wang Chong forces his opponent onto the horns of a dilemma. Either his opponent bites the bullet and defends the literal reading (perhaps some leaves are really tough, or Yang Youji had unusually thin arrows...), or else is forced to admit that the reading is not strictly speaking true. Either way, Wang Chong has forced his opponent to make precisely the distinction he thinks is lacking in contemporary discourse. Having done so, the opponent might be more inclined to make the distinction in cases where it really matters. Wang Chong's literalism was not a schoolboy trick meant to score points. It was instead a rhetorical strategy designed to get his opponents into the habit of making the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical on a more consistent basis.

On a rhetorical level, this strategy is undoubtedly effective – witness the common reactions of modern readers, who are happy to accuse Wang Chong of hypocrisy every time he himself uses a figurative expression. Whatever else his strategy does, it still manages to get a rise out of readers. It appears to have been less well-received on a social and political level, as witnessed by Wang Chong's own professional failure.⁸⁷ That too is perhaps understandable: though effective, Wang Chong's strategy can be extraordinarily irritating. Focus on his goals, however, permits a more sympathetic reading of these otherwise frustrating *Lunheng* passages.

As a final bit of evidence for our reading, we note that Wang Chong was sensitive to metaphorical readings of statements as well – it is not that he is unable or unwilling to detect them. We noted one such case in our discussion, above, of Yao and the ten thousand kingdoms, where Wang Chong even endorses the message conveyed by the metaphor. He also thought that metaphorical readings were sometimes used to good effect, such as when he discusses the anthropomorphic images of heaven in the *Odes* and *Documents*:⁸⁸

In the phrases of the Six Classics and discussions of the sages, they are moved to speak of “heaven,” but that is because they want to reform those who are without the Way and strike terror into the ignorant. They want to say, it is not just in my mind, but

⁸⁷ His “misfortunes” are described sympathetically in the final chapter of *Lunheng*, “Zi Ji” 自紀 (“Autobiographical Record”) (see esp. *LH* 85, p. 1204), but it is not difficult to read between the lines.

⁸⁸ *LH* 42, pp. 647–48.

is also heaven's will. And so they talk of heaven, as if it had a person's mind. But they are not referring to the form of the blue sky above.... We investigate antiquity by means of the present, and know heaven by means of the human. When the *Odes* talks of "turning his kind regard"⁸⁹ and the "Vast Model" [chapter of the *Documents*] talks of being "moved to wrath," both are cases of taking the human body to explain the intentions of heaven. 六經之文，聖人之語，動言“天”者，欲化無道，懼愚者。欲言非獨吾心，亦天意也。及其言天，猶以人心，非謂上天蒼蒼之體也... 驗古以今，知天以人... 詩之“眷顧”，洪範之“震怒”，皆以人身效天之意。

Again, the unsympathetic reader might accuse Wang Chong of hypocrisy. But the charge would only be valid if Wang Chong had a commitment to literal readings alone. Instead, we suggest, Wang Chong is committed to consistently *distinguishing* literal and metaphorical readings. Metaphorical readings can also be true, and the truths they express can be employed in argument. Wang Chong makes the distinction reliably (or, more cautiously, takes himself to be doing so). He is then in a position to look for defeaters for both literal and metaphorical readings of the same sentence. Those defeaters might be quite different from one another. So the search requires first making the distinction between literal and metaphorical readings. Having done so, he is entitled by his own lights to use either literal or metaphorical readings that survive the search. Wang Chong is thus internally consistent.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: ON UNDEFEATED DEFEATERS

Clarifying Wang Chong's epistemology of testimony allows for a more charitable reading of the *Lunheng*. Interpreting Wang Chong's positive view remains difficult, however, and some of that difficulty stems from the very same background epistemology detailed above. We conclude by discussing one of the more obvious complexities that arises from Wang Chong's method: the issue of testimonial defeaters.

We have simplified our discussion throughout by just referring to *defeaters* for testimonial claims. Strictly speaking, however, what undermines testimony are *undefeated* defeaters: that is, defeaters which are not themselves undermined by further evidence. Since testimony is evidence, it can also be used as defeaters both for testimonial claims and for putative defeaters for other defeaters.

⁸⁹ The poem is "Huang Yi" 皇矣 (Mao #241), where "the Lord on High 上帝" is said to "turn westward his kind regard 眷西顧" (*Mao Shi zhengyi* [SSJZS edn., p. 519]).

That can lead to complex chains of reasoning. Consider: your mother tells you that chocolate is straightforwardly bad for you. Later, you read that chocolate contains antioxidants, and so has health benefits. The second claim is a defeater for the first one. But then you hear that antioxidants are themselves problematic, with meta-reviews showing that they might increase mortality.⁹⁰ That third claim is a defeater for the second claim, which means that the original claim now has no *undefeated* defeaters. The first claim thus stands. But of course, one might then find a fourth claim which undermines the third claim, leaving the second intact and so again undermining the first. And so on and on. That leads to a potential problem: chains of evidence can get more and more complex, without obvious limit.

This problem is especially acute for the demanding, piecemeal, nonreductionist. If you are demanding in your search for testimony, testimonial defeaters must themselves be held up to as much scrutiny as the claim they are meant to defeat. And if you take a piecemeal approach to bodies of evidence, you do not have the option (as in the example above) of trying to cut such chains short by ruling out whole classes of testimony as unreliable.

We find numerous such convoluted chains of reasoning in *Lunheng*. Consider the following schematic outline of the argument in “Long Xu” 龍虛 (“Falsehoods about Dragons”):⁹¹

1. When lightning strikes, ordinary people say that heaven had to fetch the dragon.
2. This is implausible: if dragons belonged to heaven, they would be virtuous and so would not need fetching – they would simply come when called.
3. Further, there is textual evidence that dragons live in ponds like reptiles. What use would heaven have for reptiles?
4. Yet it is also said that the Yellow Emperor ascended to heaven on a dragon [and so perhaps dragons are spirits which can at least ascend to heaven].
5. Dragons are inferior to humans, however. Since humans cannot ascend to heaven, either dragons also cannot, or else unlike a man a dragon is a pure spirit. Further, people say that dragons ascend to heaven in order to account for dragons’ gift of prophecy.
6. But there is considerable textual evidence to support the idea that dragons have bodies and can be ridden, eaten, and bred. So they

⁹⁰ Not merely a hypothetical example: see Goran Bjelakovic, Dimitrinka Nikolova, Lise Lotte Gluud, Rosa G Simonetti and Christian Gluud, “Antioxidant Supplements for Prevention of Mortality in Healthy Participants and Patients with Various Diseases,” *Cochrane Reviews* 3 (2012), pp. 1–237.

⁹¹ *LH* 22, pp. 282–93.

- cannot be pure spirits.
7. What are they, then? Several texts associate dragons with clouds, and also associate other serpents and fishes with clouds. This suggests that dragons and other reptiles have the ability to ride on clouds.
 8. So dragons can ride on clouds, change their shape, and become invisible. But that does not necessarily make them spirits, since texts support the idea that ordinary people also change their appearance without being spirits.
 9. Even Confucius was unsure about the nature of dragons, so it should come as no surprise that ordinary people are too. (An alternative, stronger interpretation of this line is that Confucius was unsure about dragons and so we ought to be unsure also!)

Wang Chong's argument quickly becomes baroque. Sometimes he is able to rely on nontestimonial defeaters from other sources – from general facts about animals, say, or from internal contradictions in a source. Often, however, what defeats a claim is another bit of testimonial evidence, which must then itself be held up to further scrutiny to see if it ought to be maintained.

The presence of such chains follows consistently from Wang Chong's background epistemology. But it makes many chapters of the *Lunheng* frustratingly opaque, even seemingly self-contradictory. That makes the reader's job difficult, especially when it comes to pulling out Wang Chong's positive views. Many of the claims that Wang Chong asserts, and asserts as putative defeaters for a claim, are themselves undermined further down the chain. The problem is exacerbated when, as we have argued, Wang Chong takes his positive view to depend on a selectively edited version of a canonical text. Many of the assertions he makes are not meant to be the positive view themselves: rather, they are way-stations on the way to uncovering the truth that he thinks was already there in the original testimony.⁹² Even worse, as a nonreductionist he doesn't need to dwell on cases where he thinks there are no plausible defeaters. So testimony that Wang Chong actually *accepts* often passes by with relatively little discussion compared to claims that he thinks are defeated or are so ambiguous as to need further clarification.

Dragons again provide an excellent illustration of these problems in interpreting *Lunheng*, this time the clay dragons associated with a

⁹² Nylan also notes this tendency, describing it as arguing "from a lodging place" and complaining that "under such conditions, it becomes nearly impossible for even the most careful reader of the *Lun heng* to decide which of the numerous propositions that Wang sets forth with dazzling verbal pyrotechnics actually constitute Wang's true beliefs" (Nylan, "Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue," pp. 146–47).

rain sacrifice promoted by Dong Zhongshu and Liu Xin.⁹³ In “An Shu” 案書 (“Notes about Texts”), Wang Chong seems to cast doubt on the rain sacrifice – and, apparently, several other means of propitiating the spirits as well – albeit in a cautious and qualified manner.⁹⁴ In “Luan Long” 亂龍 (“A Final Word on Dragons”), on the other hand, he appears to affirm the efficacy of the rain sacrifices. If we are correct in our explanation of Wang Chong’s use of defeaters, this apparent contradiction is neatly resolved.

Wang Chong begins the “Luan Long” chapter by mentioning Dong Zhongshu’s clay dragon ritual and using the *Yijing* line about clouds following the dragon as justification for it – in our terms, as testimony. He then cites several different defeaters for this testimony, which he attributes to other Ru scholars: clay dragons cannot stand in for real ones, real dragons do not provoke the continual rainfall you might expect based on this passage, and there is an absence of other affinity-driven phenomena as well (tigers do not provoke wind, nor a ‘thunder goblet’ thunder⁹⁵). In a display of resounding thoroughness unusual even by his own standards, Wang Chong then gives fifteen numbered arguments about why affinity of the type described in the *Yijing* is indeed real. It is important to note that the *primary purpose* of these fifteen arguments is to defeat the defeaters: to show that they are not conclusive and that the efficacy of the rain sacrifice *could* stand. Wang Chong then goes on to offer four “rationales 義” that defend the sacrifice but on purely symbolic terms. He even goes so far as to hint that the efficacy of the sacrifice is more psychological than supernatural. In light of our argument about Wang Chong’s epistemology of testimony, we are now in a position to make sense of his dialectic here. The original testimony (the rain sacrifice and the quotation from *Yijing*) is being challenged by defeaters. He defeats the defeaters (in the fifteen points). That leaves the original testimony standing. He does have some independent doubts about the original testimony (as we know from “An Shu”), but does not choose to put forth his own defeaters here. Rather his rationales offer a choice of symbolic interpretations that might make sense of the sacrifice and its relation to the *Yijing* passage. As an after-thought, he sketches

⁹³ This example is singled out by Nicolas Zufferey as especially contradictory and even provokes him to suggest that Wang Chong may have experienced a serious alteration of his views over the course of his life (*Wang Chong [27-97?]: Connaissance, Politique et Vérité en Chine Ancienne. Etudes asiatiques suisses* [Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 1995], p. 280).

⁹⁴ *LH* 83, p. 1169. Naturally these things are relative. In this case, Wang Chong questions and doubts them, but does not come out and say they are false or empty (*xu* 虛), as in general he is wont to do when he feels he has actually disproved something.

⁹⁵ This goblet was a drinking vessel ornamented with a thunder-pattern (*LH* 47, p. 695).

out a possible defense of the sacrifice on literal grounds as well. It may be that Wang Chong simply did not know exactly what to think about the rain sacrifice. He mentions a debate in which Huan Tan 桓譚 (ca. 43 BC–28 AD), in an attack on rain sacrifices, had defeated Liu Xin 劉歆 (ca. 50 BC–23 AD), but points out that “this [defeat in argument] does not mean his position was wrong 是事非議誤.”⁹⁶ On the other hand, he does not say that Liu Xin’s position was right either.

Some of the appearance of inconsistency in *Lunheng*, then, is more charitably interpreted as the work in progress of someone who consistently applies his own demanding method. That said, the charge of inconsistency may have bite to it. For the piecemeal nonreductionist, all sources of testimonial evidence are potentially on a par. Any particular text might be used as a defeater for any other. But the defeating relation is often symmetrical. That leads to a more serious problem.

Return, for example, to the passage about the ten thousand states. Wang Chong uses other textual evidence to dispute this total. But one might equally well use the statement about ten thousand states as a defeater for the other textual evidence. Piecemeal nonreductionism gives no guidance on how to break this symmetry. Sometimes there will be other, nontestimonial evidence that does the job. In many other cases, however, testimony can only be set against other testimony. How, then, does Wang Chong decide which bits are defeated and which are defeaters? Note that Wang Chong cannot simply argue that the statement is *intended* to be read metaphorically. That may be true, but the statement also admits of a literal reading, and the literal reading is testimonial evidence just like any other.

This is, we suspect, not just a problem for Wang Chong but for anyone tempted by piecemeal nonreductionism. (Indeed, one of the attractions of global epistemologies is that claims about source reliability *can* break this impasse.)⁹⁷ It may not be an insuperable problem, but we suspect that Wang Chong has not solved it. Instead, he seems to rely on his own judgment about what is plausible and what is not. That is, what he presents as target and as defeater are largely guided by his own positive views, often in a not terribly explicit way.

⁹⁶ *LH* 47, p. 695. This should go at least some way toward acquitting him of the charge that he suffers from “a serious confusion between minor rhetorical victories and truth” (Ny-lan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue,” p. 142).

⁹⁷ Returning to the example of the *Shiji*’s earliest chapters, raised above, we saw Sima Qian’s suggestion that “ancient script” be used as a criterion, followed by a further principle of using what is “elegant.” As mentioned above, Wang Chong does not seem to resort to such criteria.

The effect of his positive views does come through clearly in certain places, especially in the early chapters on fate and spontaneity.⁹⁸ Conversely, the most convoluted chapters seem to be the ones where Wang Chong himself does not seem to have any positive views of his own. Witness in this regard both chapters on dragons, where he seems to be groping his way through a mass of conflicting testimony without much guidance from what he himself believes.

It is precisely when there is conflicting testimony, we think, that Wang Chong is more justly accused of bias. To his credit there may not be much more that he can do, given his background epistemology, other than turn to his own beliefs to break these impasses. Indeed, we suspect that this is what most people actually do in ordinary life: faced with conflicting bits of testimony about which we have no further evidence, we fall back on what we ourselves find most plausible. Insofar as Wang Chong is inconsistent then, he is inconsistent in a very understandable, very human way. Indeed, if more people in his tradition had thought as he did – if he had been more successful than he actually was – the problem would be much less severe. Different people would give different weight to different bits of testimony, and debate could flourish. Ironically, it is only because Wang Chong was so innovative in his positive views that his differences from his contemporaries end up so sharply defined. Perhaps these very differences account, in part, for the development of some of his less likeable rhetorical methods.

When one realizes, however, that Wang Chong does have positive views, one can begin the process of actually trying to draw them out. Sometimes they are made explicit. Often, they are implicit in the background, guiding which defeaters he picks. Hence we must read *Lunheng* carefully. We must make an effort to separate out considered views from defeaters, be sensitive to the sources of claims, and always distinguish the literal and metaphorical readings of Wang Chong's claims. If the interpretation put forth in the present study is correct, it is only when we read this way that we are reading *Lunheng* as Wang Chong would have us read his, or any other, work.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- HS Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書
 LH Wang Chong 王充, *Lunheng* 論衡

⁹⁸ See LH 1-6, pp. 1-58.