



**Emotions and the Actions of the Sage: Recommendations for an Orderly Heart in the "Huainanzi"**

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EMOTIONS AND THE ACTIONS OF THE SAGE:  
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN ORDERLY HEART  
IN THE *HUAINANZI*

Griet Vankeerberghen

Introduction

In this article I want to formulate a general 'theory' of emotions, as it is found in the *Huainanzi*, a book of political philosophy written at the royal court of Liu An and presented to Emperor Wu of the Han in 139 B.C. There is no term in the *Huainanzi* that corresponds exactly to our word 'emotion', but the text makes ample reference to mental states that in Western discourse would be classified as emotions: anger, joy, hate, love, desire, sadness, and so on.<sup>1</sup> I will use 'emotions' as a term designating such mental states. *Nu* 'anger' and *yu* 'desire' are the two emotions that will figure prominently in my discussion.

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淮南子

怒 欲

The *Huainanzi* is a post-Warring States text that in terms of goals, methodology, and the sources upon which it draws connects closely with many of the pre-Han traditions.<sup>2</sup> It shares with these traditions an ambivalent attitude toward emotions. Emotions, in most ancient Chinese texts, are seen and accepted as facts of life, as properties shared by all human beings.<sup>3</sup> They are also found to be deeply disturbing. The power they can exert over human judgment and action is seen as a hindrance for humans as they strive to attain sagehood.

Thus, for example, in a conversation with Gongsun Chou, in *Mencius* 2A2, Mencius posits having an unmoved or unmoving heart (*bu dong xin*) as a *conditio sine qua non* for sagehood.<sup>4</sup> Mencius' statement about the unmoved heart bears directly on the topic of emotions. The verb *dong* 'to move' in his phrase resonates nicely with the 'motion' contained in the English word 'e-motion' (and its Latin roots). The organ affected in Mencius' phrase is the 'heart' *xin*, for ancient Chinese the locus of all mental processes, including those involved in judgment and action. I will interpret Mencius' statement as a general recommendation not to allow states such as anger, joy, hate, love, and desire to interfere with the judgments of one's heart and actions that are based thereupon.

不動心

動

心

A view such as Mencius' raises two major questions. How does the recommendation to emancipate oneself from one's emotions relate to assertions made elsewhere that emotions are common to all of us? Secondly, how can someone who has freed himself from the burden of emotions still be moved to act? Is the emotion-free sage not doomed to be a cool and passive contemplator of things? If not, where can he derive the impetus for his actions? I will search for an answer to these questions in the *Huainanzi*.

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## Anger

明主  
無怒焉  
無與焉

血充  
氣激  
發怒

Mencius' adage of the unmoved heart is matched in chapter 9 of the *Huainanzi* by the following enunciation about a sagely ruler: "Therefore, under the administration of a perspicacious ruler (*mingzhu*), in his state people are punished, but he feels no anger toward them (*wu nu yan*); at his court people are rewarded, but he feels no attachment to them (*wu yu yan*)."<sup>5</sup> The sage-ruler justly punishes wrongdoers, but does not do so because he is stirred up by anger. When punishing crimes, the ruler acts, but his actions are not motivated by an emotion. A passage in chapter 8 of the text indicates what it means to have one's actions motivated by an emotion such as anger. "The constitution of humans is such that if something invades and violates [what belongs to oneself], one feels anger. When one feels anger one's blood is in full flow (*xue chong*); when one's blood is in full flow,<sup>6</sup> one's *qi* is aroused (*qi ji*); when one's *qi* is aroused, anger manifests itself (*fa nu*); when anger manifests itself, one has that which will release one of one's dissatisfactions."<sup>7</sup> Had he not been a perspicacious ruler, but an ordinary human being, the ruler would have felt his blood in full flow and his *qi* aroused. Both processes would have compelled him toward the manifestation of his anger in the form of punishment of the criminal.

In the view of the *Huainanzi* and quite a few other Han and pre-Han texts, *qi* is the stuff out of which all reality is made. It exists in varying degrees of purity and fineness. Like all other bodies, the human body, including the blood, is made up of *qi*.<sup>8</sup> Since the human body is constituted by the same stuff as the other bodies surrounding it,<sup>9</sup> there is no problem in conceptualizing how the human body can be in communication with other human and nonhuman bodies. Impressions are received regularly through the sensory gates, but also more subtle forms of communication are conceived of and described by the authors of the *Huainanzi*.

According to the passage just quoted, anger occurs when an impression is received from outside—presumably through one of the sensory gates—that something belonging to oneself is being invaded. Physiologically the emotion is manifested by the agitated flow of blood and *qi* within one's body. Interestingly, the passage describes anger not merely as a sensation that remains confined within the body. It also indicates how anger inherently seeks to manifest itself in the outside world, in the form of a reaction against what is perceived as the source of the invasion from outside. Being angry does not merely mean feeling displeased at the sight of an aggressor but includes defense or revenge.

The passage in chapter 8 of the *Huainanzi* does not disapprove of anger. On the contrary, the entire process of perception, sensation, and reaction that is set in motion when something one's own is invaded from outside is ascribed to a common human constitution. Emotions are

described as normal processes that require expression. Earlier in the same passage, similar processes are described involving joy, “when one’s heart is content and one’s desires fulfilled (*xin he yu de ze le*),” and sorrow, “when in one’s heart one mourns someone’s death (*xin you you sang ze bei*).” Both joy and sorrow have their own modes of expression. They cause the body to move in a particular way: wild dancing and a desperate shaking of hands and feet, respectively. Like anger, they are ascribed to a constitution common to all humans (*fan ren zhi xing/ren zhi xing*).<sup>10</sup>

心和欲得則樂  
心有憂喪則悲

凡人之性／人之性

In this passage, concern is expressed not at the existence of anger, joy, or sorrow, but at the appropriate ways of expressing these emotions. Culture, as it is created and sustained by the sages, serves an important function in furnishing people with the appropriate means of expressing their emotions. Thus culture provides musical instruments and banners to express joy, mourning garments to express grief, and military symbols to express one’s anger. All these artifacts are part of the *wen* that help express the *zhi*.<sup>11</sup> If there were no sages to sustain and enforce culture, the emotions would be expressed with inappropriate means. Exotic and precious goods from faraway countries would multiply desires rather than satisfy them. The absence of music or military discipline would lead to wild fits of anger, sorrow, or joy. These ways of expressing one’s emotions would be so unworthy of human beings that they would even make “the wild beasts flee” (*ze qinshou tiao yi*).<sup>12</sup>

文  
質

則禽獸跳矣

The *Huainanzi* thus seems to have two sets of weights and measures. One is for ordinary human beings and prescribes the orderly expression of one’s emotions. The other is for those who have ambitions for sagehood. They, like the perspicacious ruler of chapter 9, and presumably also the culture-providing sages of chapter 8, are encouraged to free themselves entirely from the burden of emotions. Thus, attaining sagehood involves to a certain extent departing from the constitution shared by all humans. Sages are supposed to have shaken off their dependency on external cultural patterns in order to channel their emotions. They have the means within themselves to order their relation with other things in the world in such a way that emotions do not even arise. Since they have such means within themselves, they can eventually become the creators of culture for those who will never reach their level.

I will not discuss the ways by which certain individuals can elevate themselves above their fellow humans and reach sagehood. (Individual talent may be a factor. Also, deep immersion in and internalization of a specific cultural tradition might be a possible avenue.) What I will describe instead is exactly how these sages differ from ordinary humans, according to the *Huainanzi*. How do sages relate differently to their environment, such that they can react appropriately without emotions?

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How different are their hearts from the hearts of nonsages? Is the difference one of quality, one of degree, or one of organization?

### The Role of the Heart

聖人勝心, 眾人勝欲

A passage in chapter 14 of the *Huainanzi* indeed localizes the difference between sages and nonsages at the level of the heart. "The sage person lets his heart triumph; common persons let their desires win (*shengren sheng xin, zhongren sheng yu*)."<sup>13</sup> The issue at stake is how to decide whether to take or reject an object in the outside world that presents itself to one's senses. The quote just given indicates that with sages such judgments will be made with their hearts in charge, while nonsages will have their choices guided by their desires.

不知利害

Whenever the impression of something desirable reaches the common person, he cannot but be stirred by it and move toward satisfying his desire. "To be driven by desires means when one's eye is attracted to a color, one's ear to a sound, or one's mouth to a flavor, one hails these and delights in them, without determination of their benefit or harm (*bu zhi li hai*)."<sup>14</sup> The nonsage will be irresistibly pushed toward any object that presents itself as agreeable to any of his senses. As soon as his desire pushes him in the direction of the object, he will be unable to discriminate whether the object of his desire is truly harmful or beneficial to him.

不寧於體

不合於道

不便於性

以義為制

義

A sage, on the other hand, is able to let such discriminations intervene in his behavior. "[If a situation arises] when one is to eat something that is unsettling to the body (*bu ning yu ti*), hear something that is not in accord with [proper] discourse (*bu he yu dao*), or see something that is not beneficial for one's constitution (*bu bian yu xing*), or when these three sense organs are contending with each other, that which settles [the situation] in accordance with what is correct (*yi yi wei zhi*), is the heart."<sup>15</sup> The heart is in charge. It applies a standard of what is correct (*yi*) in order to judge objects, and is ready to intervene whenever transgression of this standard is imminent. Thus the heart functions like a gatekeeper. It intervenes when something threatens to go wrong, but lets regular processes take their course when there is no danger of transgression. When the heart does not intervene, it consents precisely by not intervening. This presents us with a model of the heart in which the heart is superimposed upon regular, more basic processes. It is not that the sage is categorically different from the nonsage, only that processes common to all humans are transformed when they occur in the sage, because they are sanctioned by his heart, and made to comply with the heart's standards.

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Some examples in the passage may clarify this point. Simple acts such as eating and drinking, the taking of medicine, or the excision of an ulcer are discussed. The passage claims that without the heart's discrim-

ination, one could never decide authoritatively what is harmful or beneficial to oneself and therefore should be chosen or rejected. “In those four cases [eating a meal, drinking, taking a medicine, excising an ulcer], ear, eye, nose, or mouth do not discriminate between what is to be selected or rejected (*bu zhi suo qu qu*). It is only when the heart is in control (*xin wei zhi zhi*) that everything reaches its proper place (*ge de qi suo*).”<sup>16</sup> As far as eating and drinking are concerned, both sages and nonsages have to engage in these actions at regular intervals. Sages are not above the sensations of hunger and thirst. But whereas we may assume that the nonsage takes food and drink in an immediate response to sensations of hunger or thirst, the sage’s response is mediated by the judgment of his heart. He eats and drinks because he knows that failing to do so will be harmful to his body and health, not because he has a craving for the food. One can imagine situations where the sage will postpone his meal—for example, because it is not served properly, or because it is not altogether healthy—whereas the nonsage has no such checks when he seeks to satisfy his hunger or thirst.<sup>17</sup>

不知所取去  
心為之制 各得其所

In the case of the ulcer that needs to be excised, or the bitter medicine that needs to be taken, one’s emotions push one in two different directions. On the one hand, one feels dislike for the pain and discomfort caused by ulcer or illness, and thus desires to be cured of them. On the other hand one dreads the bitterness of the medicine or the pain of the excision. This prospect makes one disinclined to undergo the cure. It should be noted that these are quite complex emotions that consist of much more than mere reactions to stimuli from outside. They involve preexistent knowledge of the discomfort that is involved in the cure. This knowledge is then projected into the future and linked to the expectation—itself based on preexistent knowledge—that undergoing the treatment, however painful it may be, will lead to the removal of the pain one presently feels and dislikes.

Again, in all likelihood both sages and nonsages will eventually revert to the same solution and undergo the excision or drink the bitter medicine. However, the processes by which they come to this result have to be construed quite differently. The nonsage will feel conflict. He will be torn apart by the different directions in which his emotions push him. He will be repelled both by his present pain and by the prospect of a painful treatment. The struggle that takes place within him will be decided only by the strength of the respective emotions to which he is subjected. A passage in chapter 7 of the *Huainanzi* shows the physiological effects of such a conflict of emotions. Zi Xia<sup>18</sup> is said to become alternately stout and thin while two desires battle in his heart: the desire for worldly goods and the desire to follow the way of the former kings. “Formerly, it seemed to Zengzi that Zi Xia was now losing weight, then gaining it. When Zengzi asked why this was so, he replied: ‘When I go

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兩者心戰

先王之道勝

out and see the enjoyment of being rich and honored, then I covet these. When I revert to myself and contemplate the way of the former kings then I also delight in that. These two fight in my heart (*liangzhe xin zhan*), and therefore I lose weight. When the way of the former kings wins out (*xianwang zhi dao sheng*), then I gain weight.'"<sup>19</sup> The story has an ironic twist. Someone who wavers like Zi Xia, even if this wavering includes a desire for the *dao*, is by that very fact preempted from possession of the *dao*.

便於身

In the sage of the *Huainanzi*, no such struggle takes place. His taking the medicine or undergoing the excision is the result of a deliberation in his heart. His heart, abiding by the proper standard, will discriminate between options to embrace and options to discard, and the sage will follow what his heart dictates him to do. The pain and discomfort that are caused by ulcer or disease are definitely a factor in the sage's deliberation, as is the bitterness of the medicine or the pain of an excision. We do not need to assume the sage to be immune to these sensations. What distinguishes him from the nonsage is that these sensations are not transformed into sweeping emotions that leave one no choice but to follow whatever they dictate. The sage will have a good and valid reason to take the medicine or undergo the excision, *in casu* that "it is good for his health (*bian yu shen*)."<sup>20</sup> This reason is what will guide his action, not dislike for the pain felt at present or dread at the prospect of future discomfort. We will now ask how this difference between sages, who act from good reasons, and nonsages, who are stirred by their emotions, is translated physiologically, in terms of *qi*.

### Straight and Deviating Qi

聖人

眾人

君子行正氣

小人行邪氣

Immediately after the opening line of the passage in *Huainanzi* 14 quoted earlier that states how "the sage (*shengren*) lets his heart triumph; common persons (*zhongren*) let their desires win," a parallel statement is added that "the superior person circulates straight *qi* (*junzi xing zhengqi*), while the petty person circulates deviating *qi* (*xiaoren xing xieqi*)."<sup>21</sup> I believe the juxtaposition of the terms *shengren* and *junzi* and of *zhongren* and *xiaoren* to be an instance of the eclectic tendencies of the authors of the *Huainanzi*, rather than a conscious attempt to delineate the semantic fields of two terms the authors think important to keep separate. Thus I am justified to deduce from the two sentences that the sage has his heart in control and circulates straight *qi*, while nonsages are led by their desires and therefore circulate deviating *qi*.

In this context, the two qualifications of *qi*—*zheng* and *xie*—are understood most fruitfully in their literal meanings of 'straight' and 'crooked' or 'deviated'. This would mean that in the case of the sage the flow of *qi* that is generated in receiving, processing, and reacting to information received from outside proceeds along straight paths, the flow

being directed by the heart. It would then be within the heart's power to let circulate those flows of *qi* that it approves of (*zheng*) and censure those it disapproves of. The flows of *qi* in the case of the nonsage would not follow such fixed paths. One might imagine the *qi* within the confines of the body of the nonsage moving up and down in a chaotic way from sensory gate to sensory gate, whenever impressions from the outside world are received that somehow command a reaction. For example, at the sight of a desirable object, a turbulent stream of *qi* would be generated departing from the eye, resulting in a movement of body and hands towards attaining the desired object. In such cases, the organ of the heart, rather than taking command, would be left floating wildly around wherever the current of *qi* takes it, lost like a ship in a storm.

正

The text itself defines both terms in a manner that is fully compatible with the images I used above. "Straight *qi* is beneficial to one's constitution within (*nei bian yu xing*), and outside allies itself with what is correct (*wai he yu yi*). When it is motion, it conforms to the pattern [of things] (*xun li*) and is not bound to things. Perverted *qi* is that which is pushed [in motion] by tastes and flavors, stirred up by sounds and colors, what rises with joy or anger, and does not heed later calamities (*bu gu hou huan*)."<sup>22</sup> Note how the passage states that the sage is guided by a standard different from and independent of his attachment to things ('pattern' *li*, or 'what is correct' *yi*), and how the nonsage lacks such a standard and therefore is swept away by his perceptions and ensuing emotions. He is unable to check these, even if giving in to them would lead to later calamities.

內便於性  
外合於義  
循理

不顧後患

理 義

### Anger Revisited

Now the necessary elements are in place to answer the two questions that I raised in the introduction.

In the example of anger, the wild motion of *qi* that occurs when an invader is perceived commands a reaction. Thus the fact that a successful defense can be mounted against any invader seems conditioned by the presence of an emotion such as anger. One may therefore wonder whether sages, who are said to have overcome their emotions, would be as successful in averting intruders as their more easily excitable counterparts. How can the perspicacious ruler of chapter 9, who feels no anger when he metes out punishments, be effective? The analysis given in the previous paragraphs has shown this problem to be a pseudoproblem. It has indicated that the absence of emotion does not entail the absence of motion. Rather, the difference is one between orderly and disorderly motion, between motion sanctioned by the heart or motion uncensored by it. Thus the perception of a wrong committed still sets the ruler's *qi* in motion, even if he is a sage, and will lead to an immediate

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reaction—that is, if, and only if, the heart deems it necessary and appropriate.

不顧後患

喜怒形於心  
嗜欲見於外  
離正

The claim goes even further. Not only will the sage have the same energy and strength to react to events in the outside world as the non-sage has, but his reactions will also be more effective. When one gets angry, feels a strong desire for something, or is subject to any of the other emotions, one is no longer in control of one's reactions. Rather, one is irresistibly pushed by one's emotions in certain directions. This means firstly that one is no longer able to take into consideration factors that may command postponement or even suspension of one's reaction (*bu gu hou huan*). In other words, one may be compelled to act in a way that one will later regret.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, strong emotions reveal one's weaknesses, and thus make one vulnerable to manipulation by others. "When pleasure and anger show in [the ruler's] heart (*xi nu xing yu xin*) and desires are visible in his countenance (*shi yu jian yu wai*), those charged with public office stray from what is permissible (*li zheng*) and [instead] flatter the ruler; those in authority bend the laws to go which way the wind blows. Rewards do not tally with accomplishments; punishments do not correspond to the crime. Superior and subordinate become estranged and ruler and minister start resenting each other."<sup>24</sup> The presence of emotions is what makes a person visible and thus vulnerable. Persons differ from one another in how strong or weak their emotions are, in the kinds of things that stir up their emotions, and in the relative strength of the different emotions vis-à-vis one another. The recommendation to emancipate oneself from one's emotions thus involves a certain de-coloring of the person. The sage does not stand out, does not reveal himself—or even has no self to reveal—although one need not exclude the possibility of different styles of sagehood.

The second problem is how the makeup of the sage relates to the constitution common to all humans. Clearly, the sage does not possess anything 'extra', something that nonsages lack. They all share a heart and the ability to take action in interaction with their environment. The difference seems to be more one of organization, of patterning, of creating hierarchies. So far, we have described three possible types of humans: human beings who lack culture and make "the wild beasts flee" because of the random and violent ways in which they express their emotions; human beings who in the expression of their emotions are guided by culture, as it was created by the sages and imposed on them from the outside; and then the sages who have within themselves the standards by which to regulate relations with things outside in an orderly fashion.<sup>25</sup> These three types all share the same basic stuff, but differ in that this basic stuff is ordered in different degrees. The better ordered and organized this basic stuff is, the more effective exchanges with one's environment become.

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## Perception

Chapter 13 of the *Huainanzi* tells the story of a rather foolish gold thief. A man was wandering through the market at a moment when it was very busy, saw a nugget of gold in a shop, stole it, and then ran away. The thief was easily caught, and when the law-enforcing officer asked him why he had done such a foolish thing, his answer was: "I did not see the people, I only saw the gold (*wu bu jian ren, tu jian jin er*)."<sup>26</sup> The man's mistake lies not so much on the level of processing information that reached him from various senses, but in the perception itself. With the same eyes with which he was looking at the gold, he should also have seen the people standing around, but he did not and could not. It is not that there was something wrong with the perceptive powers of his eyes as an organ of seeing, but the impression from outside caused by seeing the gold connected in such a way with his desire for gold that correct perception became impossible. It is as if because of his desire for the gold, the path along which the information about the bystanders would normally travel was blocked.<sup>27</sup>

吾不見人，徒見金耳

The same point is stated more generally in chapter 7 of the *Huainanzi*. "The five colors confuse the eye and prevent one's sight from being keen (*shi mu bu ming*), the five sounds disturb the ear and prevent one's hearing from being sharp (*shi er bu cong*), the five flavors upset the mouth and make one's sense of taste coarse and defective (*shi kou li-shuang*), likes and dislikes make the heart cunning and cause one's nature to be unruly (*shi xing feiyang*)."<sup>28</sup> It is not the mere sight of attractive objects that confuses the eye, but the emotions that are stirred up in the viewer at their sight. Sight cannot be keen because the eye fails to take in relevant information about either the objects that cause the emotion, or about surrounding objects (as in the case of the gold thief). Emotions, according to the *Huainanzi*, affect the very way humans perceive themselves and other things in the world because they carry an inherent bias toward certain objects that are found attractive or repelling, while objects neutral to a person's emotions go unnoticed. Imagine perceptions to be centripetal currents of *qi* that depart from the objects perceived, pass through the sensory gates, and then are decoded somewhere in the body. Emotions will not so much affect the central decoding process as limit and deform the currents of information. Information about some objects (e.g., the nugget of gold) will be grotesquely magnified, while other information will be filtered out or completely blocked. Emotions place a distorting grid upon a person's perceptive powers.

使目不明

使耳不聰

使口厲爽

使性飛揚

The sage, by emancipating himself from emotions, also removes this distorting grid on his perceptions. The sage has a clear and full picture of things. Since his perceptions are unbiased, he perceives things as they are, in the fullness of their relations with other things. Had a sage instead

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of a thief passed the gold shop, he would have seen the people as well as the gold—so much is certain. But he would also have seen them in a special and full way. An ordinary person—slightly less susceptible to self-delusion than the thief—might have seen the gold and felt a desire to make it his, but then have abandoned any thought of stealing upon seeing the people around it and realizing the high risk of being caught. Of two conflicting emotions, the person’s fear of being caught would have neutralized and superseded his desire for the gold. The sage’s seeing is not mediated by emotions in this manner. No desire for the gold is kindled in the sage, since he immediately sees the nugget of gold as not being rightfully his. The understanding of the relation of the gold to himself is an integral part of his perception. At the same time, the sage is perfectly aware of the fact that the gold is attractive for both economic and aesthetic reasons. That is part of his seeing. The heart ranks all these insights hierarchically. In this particular case, the understanding that the gold belongs to someone other than the sage will prevent the sage from taking any steps to acquire the gold.

In the *qi*-composed universe of the *Huainanzi*, every thing is connected to all other things. The gold is related to the shopkeeper as rightful property, to the sage as an attractive object that is nonetheless not his, to silver as a member of the class of metallic objects, to the sun as a member of the class of objects with a golden color, to a given collection of objects for which value could be exchanged against that of gold, and so on. The sage is the one who is able to fully view all these relations while focusing on a particular thing.

#### The Sage and the Mirror

So far, the achievements of the sage have been described mostly negatively, by opposing them to the delusions to which ordinary humans are subject. Thus the *Huainanzi* says that sages have emancipated themselves from ordinary emotions, until their hearts became empty and level. “Not being burdened by passions and desires (*shi yu bu zai*) is the extreme of emptiness (*xu zhi zhi*); not having things one loves or hates (*wu suo hao zeng*) is the extreme of levelness (*ping zhi zhi*).”<sup>29</sup> They are also said to be no longer the victim of the delusions in perception that are caused by the emotions. The turbulent *qi* that is generated by the emotions finds nothing to attach itself to, and therefore cannot clog up the channels of perception. “For those in possession of the way ... deviated *qi* has nowhere to halt and congeal (*xieqi wu suo liuzhi*).”<sup>30</sup>

The processes that take place in the sage can also be described in more positive terms. It has already been mentioned that all things—including the human body—are composed of *qi*, and that such *qi* exists in varying degrees of fineness, from the “pure and bright (*qingyang*)” *qi* that constitutes heaven to the “heavy and turbid (*zhongzhuo*)” *qi* the

嗜欲不載  
虛之至  
無所好憎 平之至

邪氣無所留滯

清陽 重濁  
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earth is made of.<sup>31</sup> When the sage frees himself from emotions, the *qi* within his body becomes finer and finer, until it reaches the subtleness of heaven's *qi*. Thus a direct connection between heaven and the sage is established. When the heart frees itself from joy and sorrow, from passions and desires, from likes and dislikes, and from dependence on external things, "a connection with what is numinal and luminous is established (*ze tong yu shenming*)."<sup>32</sup> "The sage nurtures the *qi* of heaven (*huai tianqi*) and embraces heaven's heart (*bao tianxin*)."<sup>33</sup>

則通於神明  
懷天氣 抱天心

Exactly how we should visualize this purification of the sage's *qi* is hard to determine. Since emancipation from emotions makes the heart empty, one might see the emptiness of the heart as a condition for the descent of more refined *qi* into the body. Alternatively, one might imagine the *qi* that is already within the body to undergo a qualitative transformation, so that it becomes luminous and quintessential.<sup>34</sup> Or one might think in more structural terms, and imagine how the peace and quiet that reigns in the heart after it is freed of the emotions causes the rougher strains of *qi* to sink to bottom layers. Finer strains of *qi* would then settle on top of these heavy layers, making the whole luminous.

Whatever form the process takes, it will make possible the full, unbiased perception of the sage. "When the quintessential permeates the eye, one's vision becomes keen (*qi shi ming*); when it is present in the ear one's hearing becomes sharp (*qi ting cong*); when it resides in the mouth, one's speaking becomes truthful (*qi yan dang*); when it assembles in the heart, one's thoughts become penetrating (*qi lü tong*)."<sup>35</sup>

其視明  
其聽聰  
其言當  
其慮通

One may conceive of this relation between quintessential *qi* and clarity of perception quite literally and physically. When more subtle *qi*—think of very finely polished crystals—forms the medium through which perception takes place, the images perceived will be sharper and clearer. In the process of emancipating oneself from one's emotions, the *qi* within one's body is transformed or reorganized until it acquires mirrorlike qualities. This mirrorlike *qi* will reflect things accurately, as they are. "If one's mirror is of the utmost purity, one's vision will be utterly keen (*jing tai qingzhe, shi da ming*)."<sup>36</sup> Just as water can only accurately reflect objects when it is still, and metal needs to be polished before it can function as a mirror, the sage needs to still his emotions and polish his *qi*. "That no one uses streaming water as a mirror but instead uses still water, is because it is at rest (*yi qi jing*). That no one attempts to see oneself in a piece of crude metal but instead uses a bright mirror, is because [the metal] has been changed (*yi qi yi*). It is only what is at rest and has been changed [i.e., the sage's heart] that can give shape to the true constitution of things (*xing wu zhi xingqing*)."<sup>37</sup>

鏡太清者，視大明

以其靜

以其易

形物之性情

The image of the mirror is found so compelling because of the neutrality of the mirror to the objects that are reflected on its surface. The images seen on a mirror correspond closely to the actual shapes of the

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與形接 不設智故

不將不迎  
應而不藏

objects reflected because the mirror is not distorted to see things a certain way. "When mirroring water accommodates the shape [of things] (*yu xing jie*), it expounds no set knowledge (*bu she zhi gu*), but square or round, bent or straight cannot escape it."<sup>38</sup> The mirror has few properties of its own. It duly and accurately reflects whatever object passes its surface. Thus, the comparison of the sage to a mirror leads us back to a negative qualification of sagehood. The sage is defined by what he does not do. "The sage is like a mirror. He does not escort [things] as they go or welcome them as they come (*bu jiang bu ying*). He responds and does not store (*ying er bu cang*). Therefore the ten thousand things transform without doing him harm."<sup>39</sup> Storing things means attaching oneself to things. This in its turn will cause emotional reactions, hamper one's ability to perceive things as they are, and therefore lessen the effectiveness of one's actions. Again the sage is celebrated as a person without color and without identity. His identity is constituted more by absence and receptivity than by the presence of strong traits of his own.

#### Autonomous Actions

The actions of the nonsage are essentially selfish reactions to external events. They are triggered by things in the outside world, and therefore cannot be said to be autonomous actions. The nonsage, because he is bound up with particular things, has a pronounced identity as a self. This self distorts his perceptions and conditions his responses to things. In the end, things and circumstances guide *him* rather than the other way around.

The sage who is selfless has the ability to see things as they are, and to let them go in whatever direction they should go. His *qi* being of the same fineness as heaven's, he sees things with the eyes of heaven. Like heaven he is encompassing and unbiased. He feels no desire to steer things in directions that would be beneficial only to him. His actions are not guided by standards that are superimposed on things and their development. They are appropriate responses to things and situations, as the sage correctly perceives in which way these will evolve. Only such actions are truly autonomous, because they are dictated by what circumstances demand, not by the selfish needs of the agent. The sage takes part in the patterns according to which things and situations evolve, without ever distorting their propensity.

This does not imply inactivity on the part of the sage. The sage himself is a thing among other things. He is related to things outside of him in spatial as well as temporal terms. Being a thing among other things, he has to evolve with things. While, in the case of the gold in the market, the sage's relation to the gold dictated to him not to act, one can imagine many situations where action would be required.

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The appropriateness of one's actions is thus determined by whether

or not they follow what is inherent in things and situations. What this is can only be decided in the heart of the sage which has become a mirror that registers things and their changes with utmost clarity. This means the sage is not bound by external and unchanging rules, by customs or commands. He can choose to follow them, when his heart so dictates, but sometimes his heart will make him see that what is right means going against the dictates of conventional morality. “When the superior person sees a crime, he is oblivious to punishment, therefore he is able to remonstrate. When he sees a competent person, he is oblivious to [that person’s] low station, therefore he can yield. When he sees someone who has insufficient [means], he is oblivious to [his own] poverty. Therefore he is able to make bestowals. While inwardly his sensitivity is in tune [with the situation], his actions take shape on the outside (*qing xi yu zhong, xing xing yu wai*).”<sup>40</sup> The sage can find the criteria for how to act entirely within himself, as they are reflected in his mirrorlike heart.<sup>41</sup>

情繫於中, 行形於外

### The Sensitivity of the Sage

The sage who has freed himself of emotions thus displays a keen sensitivity to things around him. He is attuned to things in ways that go beyond ordinary perception and ordinary communication. He possesses a sensitivity to things that resembles the bond of a mother to her baby. “A three-month-old infant son is as yet unaware of what is beneficial or harmful (*wei zhi li hai*). That the love of a caring mother is conveyed to him is due to their sensitivity to one another (*qing*).”<sup>42</sup> Just as a mother does not need words to convey her love to her baby, a sage ruler does not need ostentatious speech or action to rally his people behind him. “That when a sage is in power, people move and transform, is because his sensitivity [to them] comes first (*qing yi xian zhi*).”<sup>43</sup> The sage is so in tune with his people, and has such a deep-felt understanding of who they are and what they need, that he can guide them in the right direction without drastic measures or threat of punishment.

未知利害  
情

情以先之

Such sensitivity is only gained when desires have been removed from the heart. “Those in whom sensitivity conquers desire (*qing sheng yu zhe*) will flourish. Those in whom desire conquers sensitivity (*yu sheng qing zhe*) will perish.”<sup>44</sup> This sensitivity to things as they are of themselves (*ziran* ‘self-so’) might include being affected by states that come very close to ‘emotions’. A person with the heart of a sage might encounter situations in which a certain form of anger, sorrow, or any of the other emotions is called for. “Joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, sometimes they affect a person and are still self-so (*you gan er ziran zhe*).”<sup>45</sup> What is important is that they are ‘self-so’, that is, that they do not impair the heart’s ability to see things as they are. Emotions—as affective responses to one’s environment—are permissible as long as one keeps a certain detachment from them. As the sage is situated squarely

情勝欲者  
欲勝情者

自然

有感而自然者

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within the realm of things, his sensitivity to his surroundings will give rise to certain motions within his self. He feels affected when he sees crimes committed, knows that his people lack adequate food or clothing, or when one of his relatives dies. He will be moved by these occurrences to act in a certain way. What distinguishes the sage from the nonsage is that in the case of the sage, his heart retains its powers to accord or withdraw consent. Relevant motions of *qi* will wade through the sage's self and cause him to act. However, this will only be so when these motions are deemed appropriate by the sage's heart, and when such judgments are made from a full and unbiased view of things in their interrelations. There can be sensitivity but no bondage to things, as that would annihilate the sage's hard-gained autonomy.

### Conclusion

We have now come full circle. When emotions are condemned in the *Huainanzi*, it is because they threaten a person's autonomy. However, a person freed of emotions is not cold and insensitive. The sage, through interaction with his surroundings, will still be affected by certain motions which will lead him to act. But because these motions, unlike emotions, are sanctioned by the heart, they and the actions they give rise to will be appropriate and effective.

The images that the *Huainanzi* uses to construe these ideas are compelling. The difference between sages who act autonomously and nonsages who do not is presented as a difference in the way the motions of *qi* within their bodies are regulated. These motions can proceed in an orderly or disorderly manner—where the heart is seen as a gatekeeper; or they can be obstructed or free-flowing—where the heart is described as a mirror. Both images are about organizing and patterning the one basic stuff out of which everything is made. Whether one's basic stuff is well organized or not is thus a significant criterion to distinguish sages from nonsages. At the same time, however, since only one kind of stuff is involved and since the nonsage also has his full share of it, the difference is not absolute and can be overcome.

### NOTES

- 1 – Descartes lists six basic emotions (*passions primitives*) to which all others can be reduced: admiration, love, hate, desire, joy, and sadness; see Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1970), p. 115. The Stoics classify them in four major categories: appetite, pleasure, fear, and distress; see A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 7, pp. 410–423.

- 2 – In the notes, I will occasionally draw the reader’s attention to parallels between the *Huainanzi* and earlier texts.
- 3 – See, e.g., the opening passage of the *Zheng ming* chapter of the *Xunzi*. 正名
- 4 – Mencius 10–12/2A2. The reference is to *Meng tzu yin te* (A concordance to the *Meng Tzu*), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, supplement no. 17 (Peking, 1941). It is difficult to decide what precisely Mencius claims to be unmoved by: joy at the hypothetical prospect of being able to make the king of Qi into a true king, or distress at his inability to implement the Way. On this issue, see J. Riegel, *Reflections on an Unmoved Mind: An Analysis of Mencius 2A2*, in H. Rosemont and B. I. Schwartz, eds., *Studies in Classical Chinese Thought*, thematic issue of *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (3S) (1979).
- 5 – *Huainanzi* 9/70/26–27. I refer to the text in *A Concordance to Huainanzi: Huainanzi zhuzi suoyin*, ed. D. C. Lau and Chen Fong Ching, ICS Series (Hong Kong, 1992). I have adopted the textual emendations of the editors, unless I indicate otherwise. I have consulted existing translations and studies of individual chapters of the *Huainanzi*: for chapter 6, C. Le Blanc, *Huai Nan Tzu: Philosophical Synthesis in Early Han Thought* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1985); for chapter 9, R. Ames, *The Art of Rulership* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 177; for chapter 10, D. J. Harper, *Huai Nan Tzu Chapter 10: Translation and Prolegomena* (Thesis, University of California, 1973).
- 6 – Note that the effect of anger on the flow of blood is also noticed outside the Chinese tradition. See, e.g., Descartes, *Les passions de l’âme*, pp. 206–207: “C’est le Desir, joint à l’Amour qu’on a pour soy mesme, qui fournit à la Colere toute l’agitation du sang, que le Courage & la Hardiesse peuvent causer. . . .”
- 7 – *Huainanzi* 8/66/2–3.
- 8 – Compare Mencius 11/2A2: “Qi is what fills the body (*qi ti zhi chong ye*).” 氣體之充也
- 9 – M. M. Garrett contrasts this with the neo-Mohist view, in which discrete objects occupy empty space. See Mary Margaret Garrett, “The ‘Mo-Tzu’ and the ‘Lü-shih Ch’un-Ch’iu’: A Case Study of Classical Chinese Theory and Practice of Argument” (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1983), pp. 83–84.
- 10 – *Huainanzi* 8/65–66/21–22.
- 11 – *Ibid.*, 8/66/3–4. Griet Vankeerberghen



- 12 – Ibid., 8/65/21–8/66/1.
- 勝 13 – Ibid., 14/137/20. I chose to translate *sheng* as a causative ‘make victorious, let win’. This is a remarkable sentence. The first part about the sage seems to ask for an active voice, while the part about the common person seems to require a passive voice.
- 14 – Ibid., 14/137/22–23.
- 15 – Ibid., 14/137/23–24.
- 16 – Ibid., 14/137/24–26.
- 17 – Compare *Mencius* 53/7A27: “A hungry man finds his food delectable; a thirsty man finds his drink delicious. Both lack the proper measure of food and drink (*yin shi zhi zheng*) because hunger and thirst interfere with his judgement (*ji ke hai zhi*)” (trans. D. C. Lau, *Mencius* [Penguin, 1970], p. 188). The issue here is how to appreciate tastes rather than whether or not to consume the food or drink.
- 飲食之正  
飢渴害之
- 18 – Both Zi Xia and Zengzi are disciples of Confucius.
- 19 – *Huainanzi* 7/60/17–18; also referred to in *Huainanzi* 1/7/22–23 and the *Hanfeizi*. See Chen Qiyou, *Hanfeizi jishi* (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1958), p. 416.
- 20 – *Huainanzi* 14/137/25.
- 21 – Ibid., 14/137/20.
- 22 – Ibid., 14/137/20–21.
- 一朝之忿  
惑 23 – See *Lunyu* 24/12/21: “To let a sudden fit of anger (*yi chao zhi fen*) make you forget the safety of your own person or even that of your parents, is that not misguided judgment (*huo*)?” The reference is to *Lun yü yin te* (A concordance to the Analects of Confucius), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, supplement no. 16 (Peking, 1940), translation by D. C. Lau, *Confucius: The Analects* (Penguin, 1979), p. 116. The most general remedy Descartes gives to those who are strongly swept up by their passions is remarkably congruous. “Mais ce qu’on peut tousjours faire en telle occasion, & que je pense pouvoir mettre icy comme le remede le plus general, & le plus aysé à pratiquer, contre tous les excès des Passions, c’est que lors qu’on se sent le sang ainsi emeu, on doit estre averti, & se souvenir que tout ce qui se presente à l’imagination, tend à tromper l’ame, & à luy faire paroistre les raisons, qui servent à persuader l’objet de sa Passion, beaucoup plus fortes qu’elles ne sont, & celles qui servent à dissuader, beaucoup plus foibles. Et lors que la Passion ne persuade que des choses dont l’execution souffre quelque delay, il faut s’abstenir par d’en porter sur l’heure aucun jugement, & se divertir par d’autres pensées, jusques à ce que le temps & le

- repos aient entièrement apaisé l'emotion qui est dans le sang" (Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme*, pp. 216–217).
- 24 – *Huainanzi* 9/76/28–9/77/1. I emended *qi* to *shi*. 耆 嗜
- 25 – As Xunzi would have it, sages (unlike Mengzi and Youzi) do not need to avoid tempting situations. Since they have a well-regulated heart, they can "give free reign to their desires (*zong qi yu*)," and "whatever will be dealt with in this manner, will be dealt with reasonably (*er zhi yanzhe li yi*)" (*Xunzi* 81/21/66). The reference is to *Hsün tzu yin te* (A concordance to *Hsün tzu*), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, supplement no. 22 (Peking, 1949). 縱其欲  
而制焉者理矣
- 26 – *Huainanzi* 13/129/27–28. The same story is also found in *Lüshi chunqiu* 16/7, "Qu you"; see Chen Qiyou, *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* (Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe, 1984), pp. 1013–1014. 去宥
- 27 – See *Mencius* 56/7B21: "Mencius said to Kau Tzu, 'A trail through the mountains, if used, becomes a path in a short time, but, if unused, becomes blocked by grass in an equally short time. Now your heart is blocked by grass (*mao sai zi zhi xin*)'" (trans. D. C. Lau, *Mencius*, p. 198). 茅塞子之心
- 28 – *Huainanzi* 7/56/6–7.
- 29 – *Ibid.*, 1/7/6–7.
- 30 – *Ibid.*, 20/211/18–20.
- 31 – *Ibid.*, 3/18/19–20. 'Pure and bright' and 'heavy and turbid' are adopted from J. S. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 62.
- 32 – *Huainanzi* 1/7/7–8. *Huainanzi* 20/210/1 explicitly relates *shenming* to the processes of growth and decay engendered by heaven. 神明
- 33 – *Ibid.*, 20/211/3.
- 34 – Think of a human face, that at different times can look radiant or palish.
- 35 – *Huainanzi* 8/64/26–27.
- 36 – *Ibid.*, 2/12/2. See also Paul Demiéville, "Le miroir spirituel," in *Choix d'études Bouddhiques (1929–1979)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 112–137.
- 37 – *Huainanzi* 2/16/9–11.
- 38 – *Ibid.*, 1/2/13.
- 39 – *Ibid.*, 6/51/15; based upon *Zhuangzi* 21/7/32–33. The reference is to *Chuang tzu yin te* (A concordance to *Chuang tzu*), Harvard-Griet Vankeerberghen

Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, supplement no. 20 (Peking, 1947).

40 – *Huainanzi* 10/83/7–8.

得大形之正  
導之以理  
養之以清

41 – See *Xunzi* 81/21/54–58: “Therefore, the human heart can be compared to a plate of water. If you make it stand straight and do not move it, then what is turbid will sink to the bottom and what is clear will be above. This will enable one to see one’s beard and eyebrows and scrutinize the patterns [of one’s face]. If a slight wind passes it, what is turbid will be in motion below, and what is clear will be upset above. In that case not even a gross shape can be seen accurately (*de da xing zhi zheng*). The heart is like that too. If one guides it with what is inherent [in things] (*dao zhi yi li*), and nourishes it with what is clear (*yang zhi yi qing*), no thing will be distorted. Then one is able to decide about what is right or wrong, and settle doubtful cases. But if only a small thing attracts it, then one’s bearing will change at the outside and one’s heart will be biased at the inside (*xin nei qing*). Then even trivial patterns (*shu li*) can no longer be determined.”

心內傾 庶理

42 – *Huainanzi* 10/84/26.

43 – *Ibid.*, 10/84/25.

44 – *Ibid.*, 10/92/17. While for *Xunzi* *qing* refers to emotions in their unrestrained and disturbing form, in these passages in the *Huainanzi*, *qing* refers to positive and permissible emotional states.

45 – *Huainanzi* 11/96/19–20.