

A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

The energetic assault on traditional thought and literature focused attention on what should replace Confucianism as a way of looking at the world and at life. Here again, during the years 1918–1919, Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi manifested their role as leaders of the whole New Culture Movement. At a time that saw the introduction and lively discussion of the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson, James, Dewey, Russell, and others, Chen and Hu bespoke the dominant belief in science and social progress. In these days Chen, reacting strongly against what he conceived to be the social conformism and authoritarianism of Confucian thought, emphasized individualism as the basis of his philosophy. Yet his belief in science and materialism also inclined him strongly to the study of Marxism — an inclination checked to some degree by his interest in the ideas of John Dewey, who lectured widely in China in 1919 and 1920. Hu Shi, for his part, identified himself unequivocally with pragmatism. Nevertheless, in the movement as a whole, philosophical allegiances were less clear-cut. It was a period of fermentation and transition, producing also strong countercurrents to trends from the West (as shown in succeeding sections). We can say, however, that the prevailing trend among the educated was toward acceptance of such ideas as individualism, freedom, progress, democracy, and science.

CHEN DUXIU: THE TRUE MEANING OF LIFE

What is the ultimate purpose in life? What should it be, after all? . . . From ancient times not a few people have offered explanations. . . . In my opinion, what the Buddha said is vague. Although the individual's birth and death are illusory, can we say that humanity as a whole is not really existent? . . . The teachings of Christianity, especially, are fabrications out of nothing and cannot be proved. If God can create the human race, who created Him? Since God's existence or nonexistence cannot be proved, the Christian philosophy of life cannot be completely believed in. The rectification of the heart, cultivation of the person, family harmony, ordering of the state, and world peace that Confucius and Mencius talked about are but some activities and enterprises in life and cannot cover the total meaning of life. If we are totally to sacrifice ourselves to benefit others, then we exist for others and not for ourselves. This is definitely not the fundamental reason for man's existence. The idea [of altruism] of Mozi is also not free from one-sidedness. The doctrines of Yang Zhu [fourth century B.C.?] and Nietzsche fully reveal the true nature of life, and yet if we follow them to their extremes, how can this complex, organized, and civilized society continue? . . .

Because we Chinese have accepted the teachings [of contentment and *lais-*

sez-faire] of Laozi and Zhuangzi, we have to that extent been backward. Scientists say that there is no soul after a man's death. . . . It is difficult to refute these words. But although we as individuals will inevitably die, it is not easy for the whole race or humanity to die off. The civilization created by the race or humanity will remain. It is recorded in history and will be transmitted to later generations. Is this not the consciousness or memory of our continuation after death? From the above, the meaning of life as seen by the modern man can be readily understood. Let me state it briefly as follows:

1. With reference to human existence, the individual's birth and death are transitory, but society really exists.
2. The civilization and happiness of society are created by individuals and should be enjoyed by individuals.
3. Society is an organization of individuals — there can be no society without individuals. . . . The will and the happiness of the individual should be respected.
4. Society is the collective life of individuals. If society is dissolved, there will be no memory or consciousness of the continuation of the individual after he dies. Therefore social organization and order should be respected.
5. To carry out one's will and to satisfy his desires (everything from food and sex to moral reputation is "desire") are the basic reasons for the individual's existence. These goals never change. (Here we can say that Heaven does not change and the Way does not change either.)
6. All religions, laws, moral and political systems are but necessary means to preserve social order. They are not the individual's original purpose of enjoyment in life and can be changed in accordance with the circumstances of the time.
7. People's happiness in life is the result of their own effort and is neither the gift of God nor a spontaneous natural product. If it were the gift of God, how is it that He was so generous with people today and so stingy with people in the past? If it is a spontaneous, natural product, why is it that the happiness of the various peoples in the world is not uniform?
8. The individual in society is comparable to the cell in the body. Its birth and death are transitory. New ones replace the old. This is as it should be and need not be feared at all.
9. To enjoy happiness, do not fear suffering. Personal suffering at the moment sometimes contributes to personal happiness in the future. For example, the blood shed in righteous wars often wipes out the bad spots of a nation or mankind. Severe epidemics often hasten the development of science.

In a word, what is the ultimate purpose in life? What should it be, after all? I dare say:

During his lifetime, an individual should devote his efforts to create happiness

and to enjoy it, and also to keep it in store in society so that individuals of the future may also enjoy it, one generation doing the same for the next and so on unto infinity.

[From Chen, "Rensheng zhenyi," pp. 90–93 —WTC]

HU SHI: "PRAGMATISM"

There are two fundamental changes in basic scientific concepts that have had the most important bearings on pragmatism. The first is the change of the scientific attitude toward scientific laws. Hitherto, worshipers of science generally had a superstition that scientific laws were unalterable universal principles. They thought that there was an eternal, unchanging "natural law" immanent in all things in the universe and that when this law was discovered, it became scientific law. However, this attitude toward the universal principle has gradually changed in the last several decades. Scientists have come to feel that such a superstitious attitude toward a universal principle could hinder scientific progress. Furthermore, in studying the history of science they have learned that many discoveries in science are the results of hypotheses. Consequently, they have gradually realized that the scientific laws of today are no more than the hypotheses that are the most applicable, most convenient, and most generally accepted as explanations of natural phenomena. . . . Such changes of attitude involve three ideas: (1) Scientific laws are formulated by men. (2) They are hypotheses — whether they can be determined to be applicable or not entirely depends on whether they can satisfactorily explain facts. (3) They are not the eternal, unchanging natural law. There may be such a natural law in the universe, but we cannot say that our hypothecated principles are this law. They are no more than a shorthand to record the natural changes known to us. [pp. 291–294]

Besides this, there was in the nineteenth century another important change that also had an extremely important bearing on pragmatism. This is Darwin's theory of evolution. . . . When it came to Darwin, he boldly declared that the species were not immutable but all had their origins and developed into the present species only after many changes. From the present onward, there can still be changes in species, such as the grafting of trees and crossing of fowls, whereby special species can be obtained. Not only do the species change, but truth also changes. The change of species is the result of adaptation to environment, and truth is but an instrument with which to deal with environment. As the environment changes, so does truth accordingly. . . . The knowledge that mankind needs is not the way or principle that has an absolute existence but the particular truths for here and now and for particular individuals. Absolute truth is imaginary, abstract, vague, without evidence, and cannot be demonstrated. [pp. 294–295]