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# Zhang Dongsun's Encounters with "Logicism" – From Russell to the Objectivist Bases of "Science and the View on Life"

## Abstract

The article surveys the early work of Zhang Dongsun on topics like the logicism of Bertrand Russell and scientific philosophy, which aimed to criticize its foundations and replace them with a Neo-Kantian alternative. It tries to show how a series of Zhang's articles from the early 1920s, in which he sought to create a new "neutral" variety of logicism, can be used to better understand the intellectual foundations of the neovitalist "philosophy of life" of Zhang Junmai. By delving deeper into the underlying ideas and possible motivations behind Zhang's philosophical endeavours from the early 1920s, the article argues for a different kind of understanding of the historical basis of humanism in modern Chinese philosophy. Moreover, it strives to show how the "Science and the View on Life" controversy, as initiated by Zhang Junmai in 1923, might be rooted in or at least directly related to a syncretistic ideal, to conjoin science *and* the view of life in a new kind of harmonistic outlook. Most importantly, the article will try to show how Zhang Dongsun's critical engagement with Russell's philosophy, modern logic and physical science could be understood as the theoretical nucleus of the so-called "view on life" philosophy, not only in the context of the 1923 controversy, but possibly the entire Republican Period. Due to limited space, the article does not offer a concise introduction to Zhang's life and philosophy, but instead provides a focused discussion of particular fragments of his work from the early 1920s.

Keywords: Science, View on Life, Logicism, Zhang Dongsun, Zhang Junmai, Bertrand Russell

## 1. Prologue – Zhang Dongsun, Russell and the "Science and Metaphysics Debate"

The 1920s represent a pivotal period of intellectual transformation, a period of major turning points in modern Chinese intellectual history. In the aftermath of the extremely far-reaching May Fourth Movement, the Chinese intellectual world entered a new phase of the spread and proliferation of modern Western science and philosophy on the one hand, and novel attempts to reinterpret Chinese traditional systems of ideas on the other. Apart from several, relatively notable, instances of confluence and syncretism, in certain circles of representative Chinese scholars and intellectuals increasingly antagonistic opposition grew between these two positions. If the broader period of the May Fourth Movement (1917-1921) conveyed a unifying, rather than separative, trend in Chinese socio-political and intellectual modernization, this initial revolutionary fervour was quite naturally followed by a period of clarification of sets of leading ideas promulgated in the context of the movement as well as particular socio-political, cultural and scientific identities implied by the various versions of objectivity advocated in the pivotal years of the May Fourth period. One of the key events marking the outset of an open formation of disparate intellectual options, which continued growing and developing in the

decades to follow, was the so-called “Science and View on Life Debate” (*Kexue yu rensheng guan lunzhan* 科學與人生觀論戰, also referred to as the “Science and Metaphysics Debate” (*Kexue yu xuanxue lunzhan* 科學與玄學論戰))<sup>1</sup> that broke out in 1923.

This debate was a vital expression of the trends in contemporary Chinese intellectual world in many different ways: First of all, it was a concentrated expression of the internal developments relating the “scientific worldview” and “philosophy of life” (i.e. life view) in the time between the May Fourth Movement and the year 1923. More precisely, the proponents of the so-called “view on life” (人生觀 *rensheng guan*) consisted of a certain group of philosophers, who in the above-mentioned period of time moved back and forth between representative currents of modern scientific modernity, on the one hand, and Chinese cultural foundations of modernity, on the other. Secondly, the content of the debate reveals the outcomes of the “scientization” of Chinese philosophy<sup>2</sup> and intellectual worlds in the preceding years. Moreover, the notion of “scientific objectivism” advocated within the above-mentioned debate was an idea which emerged at the intersection between various different intellectual spheres of influence. In this paper, I will investigate one of the relatively understudied and less well understood strains of intellectual influence behind the formation of the notion of science and philosophy of life prior to the controversy in question (1918 to 1923; see Vrhovski 2022b, 9-12). In so doing, I shall focus on the more or less ignored link between Russell’s visit to China (October 1920 to July 1921) on the one side and the establishment of the “philosophy of life” current, represented by Zhang Junmai and other members of the *Gongxueshe* 共學社 (Common Study Society) and other related associations from the time. As the key link between these two periods, I focus on the impact of Bertrand Russell’s “scientism” on the understanding of objective science and subjective view on life (see Zhang Junmai 1923a, 5-7), which underlay the later controversy between more explicitly established currents or groups of intellectuals. In the article I will thus argue that the role of the key agent of critical involvement<sup>3</sup> of the very foundations of Russell’s

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<sup>1</sup> While Zhang Junmai 張君勱 referred to the debate as “View on Life and Science” (*Rensheng guan yu kexue* 人生觀與科學) debate, the “opposite camp” headed by Ding Wenjiang 丁文江 coined the name “Science and Metaphysics” (*Kexue yu xuanxue* 科學與玄學). Apart from the use of language the contenders’ preference is also expressed in the sequence of the concepts in the title. In contrast to individual papers, the title of one of the earliest exhaustive anthologies compiled by Ding (December 1923; later, in February 1924, reprinted in an enlarged edition – twice the original length – under the same title, by the East Asia Library [*Yadong tushuguan* 亞東圖書館] officially named the Oriental Book Company in Shanghai) even adopts a third option, using “kexue yu rensheng guan 科學與人生觀” (1923).

<sup>2</sup> Regarded from the perspective of the circumstances prevailing in Chinese academia at the time, the “scientization” of Chinese philosophy in the 1920s and 1930s was process in which modern logic and scientific methodology gradually gained special status in the philosophy as taught at Chinese universities. For example, for the case of Peking University, see Vrhovski 2022c. In the 1920s and 1930s, the process revolved mainly around the role of modern logic (not traditional Western formal logic) and a scientific outlook as advocated by Russell and other “scientific philosophers”, and whether this ought to be integrated into interpreting Western and building modern Chinese academic philosophy. See further Lin (2005 and 2012).

<sup>3</sup> What I mean here is that Zhang Dongsun and Zhang Junmai regarded discussing either Russell’s philosophy or the notion of scientific method related to Russell in Chinese intellectual discourse in the early 1920s as vital for their engagement with modern “science” and “philosophy”. In other words, when the “view on life” motion was still fermenting within the small community (the two Zhangs and possibly others) of intellectuals, Zhang Dongsun saw it as necessary to deal with Russell’s logicism and Einstein’s relativism – as spoken about by Russell – so as to establish a strong, “logicist” methodological basis of the epistemological basis of the “view on life” philosophy. However, as apparent from Zhang Dongsun’s writings, aside from criticising the epistemic core of Russell’s

philosophy and logic into the genesis of the controversy (as well as broader philosophical movement, which persisted after the debate) was played by Zhang Dongsun, who at the time was both attracted to as well as highly critical of the epistemological basis of Russell's logicism and his epistemology in general. Considering Chinese publications (articles and books) from the time between 1921 (Russell's departure) and 1923/4, Zhang's extensive studies on Russell's logicism and the philosophical meaning of relativist physics were undoubtedly the most in-depth, advanced and widely noticed studies on Russell's philosophy conducted by an adherent of, so to say, a contending "camp" of philosophers. Moreover, as Zhang himself also clearly indicated, his critiques aimed at setting the stage for the later broader current of a "philosophy of life". In its early stages, the current that emphasized the importance of the "view on life" over "science", that is, the independence of former from the latter (see Zhang Junmai 1923b-c), made use of their own interpretations of Neo-Kantian philosophy and Neovitalism, regarding them as the most appropriate modern philosophies to be used in their objections against scientific objectivism, Russellian-type New Realism, and dialectical materialism.

Since a concerned reader might, and rightfully so, question the assumption that Russell's philosophy in any way impacted both sides engaged in the actual polemics of 1923 and 1924, I must state the following: The analysis presented here derives from the presupposition that Russell's direct influence on Chinese intellectual discourse, which is amply attested for in the years immediately before the debate (see Vrhovski and Rošker, 2021; Vrhovski 2021, 2022a), persisted to influence the shaping of intellectual trends in China via, amongst other things, institutionalization of modern philosophy at Chinese universities on the one side and members of the leading communities of Chinese intellectuals on the other. As for the "Science and Metaphysics Debate", it is not difficult to see that it was the very same scholars and intellectuals who took part and spearheaded in the debate. Zhang Dongsun, for one, was closely affiliated with Liang Qichao and Zhang Junmai – the latter being the initiator of the debate and the neorealist wave at Chinese universities and intellectual circles which underlay the entire controversy. More specifically, what this implies is that Zhang Dongsun's criticism of Russell's logicism and the foundations of neorealist epistemology represented a theoretical precursor to the later intellectual "current". While in his latter expositions of the neovitalist "view on life" (*rensheng guan* 人生觀)<sup>4</sup> Zhang Junmai focused on the overall characteristics of the opposition between science and the view on life, Zhang's contributions should be considered as a foundational enterprise, striving to make a case for a Neo-Kantian alternative

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logicism, he seemed to recognize and adopt, the remaining parts of Russell's notion of science and logic. That is to say, he gave his own "Neo-Kantian" interpretation of the ontological-epistemic (mind-cognition) basis of "logicism" to the remaining body of Russell's logic.

<sup>4</sup> On a more general note, it must be further indicated that traditional "Chinese philosophy of life" must not be confused with the philosophical movement which spread in Germany in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries under the name *Lebensphilosophie*, even though the two discourses share some commonalities, such as a critique of purely materialist and mechanistic approaches to human existence and thought. These two philosophical discourses also proceeded from similar lines of thought in their basic epistemology, for they are both rooted in the supposition according to which a comprehension of life can only be obtained by and through life itself, and from within itself (see Rošker 2021). On Chen Lifu's 陳立夫 vitalism as the central GMD ideology in the 1930s, see Bodenhorn 2002.

to notorious notions such as the “materialist”, “logician”, or “neorealist” methodological bases of modern scientist philosophy.

Due to the limitation of space on the one hand and the rather specialized subject on the other, this paper will not be able to provide a general reader with an adequate introduction to either the work and life of Zhang Dongsun or the more general background of phenomena and concepts from modern Chinese intellectual history mentioned in the discussion. A certain acquaintance with both these subjects is thus required. Interested readers are thus advised to consult the relevant scholarship on Zhang Dongsun’s life and thought, as well as the role of his ideas in formation of modern Chinese philosophy during the 1920s and 1930s.

Although the Anglophone academic world has already seen several written attempts at summarizing or critically evaluating the content of the 1923 debate, most of these studies focused either on outlining the debate or on its place in the evolution of ideas of certain intellectual figures who took part in the debate, or particular currents of thought that emanated from the related worlds of ideas (e.g. Zhang Junmai and the subsequent development of Modern Confucianism as in Nelson 2020; Ding Wenjiang’s life and thought, as in Furth 1970). Thus, a fairly in-depth analysis of the debate from the perspective of Ding Wenjiang’s life and work was delivered by Charlotte Furth in her 1970 book *Ting Wen-chiang – Science and China’s New Culture* (Furth 1970, 94-136), while the first concise summary of the debate in the English language had already been written five years earlier by Kwok (1965), albeit in a rather tangential and fleeting, summarizing manner, some introductory research on the intellectual origins of the notion of *rensheng guan* was conducted by Gad C. Isay in his work *The Philosophy of the View of Life in Modern Chinese Thought*. Works like his and, for example, the contribution made by Huang Yushun 黃玉順 (2002, 211-239), are of great value for research on the general intellectual developments of early modern China, for they critically delve into the conceptual tissue underlying not only public debates such as this one, but also present a deeper insight into the conceptual developments of the intellectual discourse of the period under research. A recent noteworthy contribution directly addressing the content and the beginnings of the debate was made by Joseph Ciaudo (2019).<sup>5</sup> Critical evaluations of Zhang Junmai’s contributions in the context of the later developments of Modern Confucianism were attempted, for example, by Nelson (2020, etc.), Fung and Yung (2021) and so on. While within the Anglophone scholarship there exists a relative abundance of both general references as well as more in-depth accounts of the content and overall course of the debate, these surveys usually tend to disregard the role of Zhang Dongsun’s critique of Russell for setting the intellectual stage for not only the “Science and View on Life” controversy, but for an entire current within Chinese philosophy, which underwent public development within the aforementioned process.

## 2. Russell, Neo-Kantianism, and Zhang’s Early Epistemology

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<sup>5</sup> In the German language considerable contributions have been made by Fröhlich (2000). Less focused assessments of the debate either with regard to Modern Confucianism or the thought of individual intellectuals from the time have also been made by Fröhlich (1999), Metzger (2005), Suter (2011) and elsewhere.

In the early 1920s a current started to form which primarily advocated a traditional Chinese view of humanity and its relationship with the objective world, and in their argumentation its leading members were often reaching out for similar theoretical and intellectual means as used by their “adversaries”. By so doing, in a certain broader sense, they adapted a similar kind of “objectivity” into their own intellectual arsenal, even though they were originally opposed to this. By the same token, the opponents of Russell’s notion of objectivity, which they understood as a philosophical system founded on mathematical logic and modern physical sciences, would have to set up “their own notion of logic”, or even logicism, as a fundamental “anatomic element” of an objective and modern philosophical theory. Usually, as in the case of Zhang Dongsun and Zhang Junmai, this meant that they simply set out to seek alternative notions of essentially formally identical types of logic, by seeking to replace their key epistemic and ontological categories with their own categories of choice. It seems that in their eyes, solutions like, for example, setting “mathematical logic” upon a different conception of thought and mind – e.g. neovitalist or Neo-Kantian – entailed the loss of “control” (*zhichi* 支配; Zhang Junmai’s term used, for instance, in relation to “control of logic over life” etc.) of the objectivist science over “human life” or life in general (vitalism)<sup>6</sup>. Thus, in other words, the goal was not to radically restructure logic, but rather to reframe it and “contextualize” its objectiveness in a comprehensive view of existence, based on different ontological and epistemological bases. As I shall try to briefly demonstrate below, Zhang Dongsun’s engagement with Russell’s logicism was thus not an attempt to dissect and refute the essential content of his theory of logic, but rather its epistemic assumptions referred to as “Neorealist logicism”. What is of greatest importance to us is the apparent understanding of Chinese philosophers like Zhang, and that such a reframing resulted in a change of character or even possibilities with regard to evolutionary classifications of logic.<sup>7</sup> In other words, such a reframing signified an essential limitation of the objectivist claim of “logicism” or “scientism” over all other aspects of human existence. Somewhat paradoxically yet at the same time also necessary, in the early 1920s

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<sup>6</sup> It has to be pointed out that what Zhang understands as the pinnacle of Neo-Kantianism is the philosophy of Heinrich Rickert. In the preface to his 1922 article on New Realist logicism Zhang stated: “I wrote this article because, recently, I became very interested in researching German Neo-Kantian philosophy... Aside from Bergson, the modern philosopher I respect the most is Rickert.” A few lines later, he also remarked that: “...there also exists another [reason], which is that, according to my view, New Realist logicism appears not to be as thorough as in the philosophical faction affiliated with Rickert... Since my idea behind writing the present discussion was to present a prequel to my future introduction of Rickert’s philosophy, as regards my plans to synthesize Bergson with Rickert, for now, this will have to wait for another day.” Here, we can see that while Zhang’s admiration was centred around Rickert, at that time he was already aware that the “logicism” of the Neo-Kantian school was created by the members of the former’s broader or close circle of philosophers. While it is probably the case that Rickert did not attribute too much importance to logic, a philosophical enterprise that could indeed be described as Neo Kantian logicism can be found in the works of the work of Ernst Cassirer, whom Zhang does not seem to mention back in 1922. As a representative work of Rickert from the time, which would probably fit Zhang’s idea of the former’s thought, see *Die Philosophie des Lebens* (1920); the work by Cassirer, which epitomizes the foundations of an as it were “Neo-Kantian logicism” and fits the temporal frame of the here-discussed texts see *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der Neueren Zeit* (two volumes, 1922). This connection was pointed out to me by Matthias Neuber, to whom I would like to thank on this occasion.

<sup>7</sup> This becomes most clearly in the subsequent developments of Chinese discourses on logic, in which Zhang Dongsun played a rather central role. On Zhang’s later idea that thought (*sixiang* 思想) and logic are relative to the culture of their origins and existence see Zhang Dongsun (1938, 1939). For a discussion of broader significance of Zhang’s later ideas on the nature of logic in the 1930s, see Vrhovski (2020).

Zhang Dongsun's and Zhang Junmai's reference to science or the "scientific character" of presuppositions served as a way of verifying their standpoints as objective, even if these were innately antiscientific.

Zhang Dongsun, for one, started his analytic engagement with Russell's philosophy even before he was able to accompany him on his journey from Shanghai to Beijing. However, it was the personal encounters he had with Russell which kindled Zhang's profound interest in epistemology and the logic of neorealism (New Realism), and later also Einstein's relativist physics. His extraordinarily thorough scholarly attitude and desire for new knowledge, soon led Zhang into the depths of New Realism and its logicism, in relation to which he eventually established his own philosophical position, not only when it came to verity of Russell's epistemological basis but also his own position within philosophy as he knew it. Already by 1922 Zhang's engagement with the significance of a "logicist" attitude within New Realism, as well as across all modern schools of philosophy, started to yield the first concrete results. In the same year he thus composed his first concise critique of the epistemological foundations of Russell's logicism, in which he also outlined, what can be considered the starting arguments for the notion as well as the use of "logic" as an important token of argument in those currents of contemporary Chinese philosophy that, in the decades to come, established a fierce opposition to a Russellian type of scientism and materialism. Zhang's early elucidations of the potential – for want of a better expression – non-realist and non-materialist foundations of modern Chinese philosophy, resonated as a paradigm throughout the antecedent theoretical endeavours of his fellow philosophers, especially those connected to the so-called "neo-vitalist" current that started with Zhang Dongsun and related to philosophical ideas centred on "human life". Without taking greater risk, one would be even tempted to assert that Zhang's articles from this period preceded and possibly also directly influenced the gradual formation of a new wave of "Chinese humanist philosophy" as a counter-current to materialism and scientific realism in the 1920s. This is the same wave of "life views" or "philosophies of life", which in the following decades partly incorporated not only its merely seeming conceptual synonym "(neo)vitalism" but even currents or waves like "modern humanistic Buddhism" (although partly inclined towards Russell's realism), early Modern Confucianism, Feng Youlan's synthetic metaphysics, and so on. Although it deals primarily with epistemological elements of logicism and the nature of logic in Western modern realism, Zhang's 1922 article "Logicism of Neorealism" ("Xin shizailun de lunli zhuyi 新實在論的論理主義"; for the English translation of the article see Vrhovski and Rošker ed. 2021) played an immensely significant role for the establishment of the contemporary philosophies of the "view on life", which was centred around the subject and intuition. It questions the very relationship between human mind and the object of cognition, which in logicism is related to the logocentric predicament and the notion of a relation as existing externally and not internally. This kind of early contribution by Zhang was of especially great importance for the establishment of semi-traditional modern epistemologies, which started to appear within Chinese intellectual discourse from the mid-1920s onwards.

As Zhang elucidates in his long study on the subject, the main aim of his critique of Russell's logicism was to establish, what he understood to be tantamount to a concise and effective "Neo-Kantian" logicism or epistemology of logic.<sup>8</sup> The latter, however, was of key importance for his – never fully realized – project of a synthesis between Bergson's philosophy of life (alleged to contain the ontological bases) on the one hand and Neo-Kantian epistemology on the other. Exactly this combination was reflective of Zhang's personal approach towards the current which one year later became associated with the term "life view" or "philosophy of life" (after German *Lebensphilosophie* (Eucken)). As a matter of fact, very much akin to other contemporaries who took their ideas both from tradition as well as modern Western thought, Zhang's project represented an attempt to counterbalance these two central currents of Western philosophy so that the obtained synthesis would be, for example, consistent with the conceptions of the mind or the role of subjectiveness in traditional Chinese epistemologies. In Zhang's opinion, the two main currents of Western philosophy were defined alongside the following binary-based oppositions: logicism against psychologism, philosophy of thought against philosophy of life, emphasizing the universal form against particular form, transcendentalism versus empiricism, and emphasizing rational knowledge against opposing rational knowledge. From the above couples we can deduce that Zhang's overall endeavour must have also consisted of incorporating logicism and psychologism as well as transcendentalism and empiricism into a unified epistemological standpoint. Zhang Junmai's lecture and his subsequent writings on "Science and the View on Life" from 1923, on the other hand, dealt with the complementarity between these categories at a different level. In fact, the strategy of the entire "view on life" current consisted of this very point, to create an all-encompassing balance between two opposing schools of modern philosophy. While the way in which these were understood as "opposing" was related in greater part to their objective science-based propensities towards one or the other pole of a spectrum, rather than a series of dialectical negation. This tendency is particularly evident in the contemporary Chinese philosophers' treatment of the idea of "universality" as a comprehensive harmonic pattern of principles. What is not so clear on the first sight, however, was that exactly the same kind of Neo-Kantian foundations of logic as so eagerly advocated by Zhang could, rather paradoxically, be conducive to (in the intellectual development and not as a direct inference) the emergence of cultural relativism or pluralism in relation to the notion of logic itself. Moreover, if we regard Zhang's own intellectual development, this can be also stated for him. When we are speaking about intellectual developments, be it of Zhang's philosophy or his extended community of interlocutors, we are essentially observing a process in which, for instance, the Neo-Kantian notion of mind or "logic" was to a certain extent "re-contextualized" and interpreted within the Chinese intellectual context. That is not to say, however, that Zhang's conclusions reached by means of his understanding of Neo-Kantian philosophy should be regarded as the conclusions of the latter itself. Moreover, the manner in which Zhang utilized such ideas or abstractions (in

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<sup>8</sup> See footnote no. 6. On the difference between Russell's and Cassirer's notions of logic see, for instance, Smart (1943). Smart points out that: "Russell's conception of an immaculate, transcendent realm of logic and pure mathematics, which thought simply discovers, and Cassirer's thesis that logical and mathematical concepts are ideal constructions or creations of pure thought, are nothing but simple antinomies resulting from one and the same profoundly mistaken endeavour to disregard the experiential context of one particular science among all others and to link it, instead with logic..." (Smart 1943, p. 173)



a formal and not conceptual sense) from Western theories and how he constructed his arguments and ideas is exactly what is so precious for scholars of Chinese intellectual history to observe. Strikingly, even today objections to such research might be raised from the perspective of “rational universalism”, by which one would assume that, for instance, Neo-Kantian presuppositions can only bear conclusions consistent with “Neo-Kantian philosophy”, be it Europe or China. Our case, however, teaches us that in practice Chinese intellectuals’ use of Western notions of logic, science, mind and so on were less Western than they were Chinese. Moreover, it is in their use in which we may discover the strains of reasoning hiding behind the apparently Western terms and language of discourse. By and large, the same manner of “use” or “adaptation” was also the underlying common characteristic of the new theories of logic which developed in China in the 1930s. Zhang’s work from the early 1920s, however, also derived its importance by serving as an example of advocacy of human subjectiveness by virtue of discussing epistemological elements of logic and their role within the structure of humanity’s objective consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Although in his article from 1922 Zhang Dongsun’s discussion appears to have revolved around completely theoretical or insignificant details of Russell’s theory, his objectives were in fact exceptionally general and universal, with inferences that would be pivotal for his entire system of philosophy. His argument against Russell’s epistemology was centred around the presupposition of the separate existence of the “world of logical entities” and the definition of relation as the basic epistemological-ontological category (Zhang Dongsun 2021, 173). By so doing, he strived to show that relations cannot exist separately from the state of relatedness in the first place. Since relations in no way precede relatedness, he claimed, they could not represent the primal precondition of existence. The next thing Zhang wanted to point out as the shortcoming of the New Realist logicism was, that the latter allegedly only dealt with the domain of “thusness” and not also the “whatness?” He gave the following description of this situation:

Let’s say that now here is a table, and that we identify it as a table is based entirely on our judgment. What is called judgment is a “that” of any new simple experience placed into the previous complex system of experience, which is consequently turned into “what?” So, after we have looked at the table, we say that the table still is a table and still exists here. This statement cannot be asserted. Because, according to Russell, we can say that the table is only one perspective, and today’s perspective is not bound to be necessarily identical with the one from tomorrow. Therefore, we can only say that the “that” of table still exists. As regards the question whether it will again change into “what?”, this then cannot be asserted without any further cognition. (Zhang 2021, 182)

Here, Zhang presents the paradigm of his understanding of what is ontologically given in perception and forming judgments. The duality (simply, as two separate domains) of “that” and “what?” is reflective of a dynamic relationship between objective reality and the self. Above,

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<sup>9</sup> For further developments of this line of argument see Zhang’s later thought relating to “cultural relativism” of logic: Zhang Dongsun (1939).

Zhang demonstrates how a judgment that “there is a table”, which originates in a particular case of sensory-perception or a “new simple experience”, is eventually changed into “what?”, a complex network of experience, which we could tentatively describe as the self’s “sedimentation” of previous experiences together with how these are processed in accordance with the individual’s mind. In Zhang’s opinion, Russell’s philosophical error pertains to his over emphasizing of “that”, namely the forming of initial judgments, in human cognition, while in so doing disregarding the role of, so to say, the substance of mind which is the key agent in the eventual formation of the comprehensive substantiation of “what?” in self’s cognition – outside of the direct contact with “that”. Subsequently, Zhang also reasoned that while Russell’s New Realism can be efficiently applied only to the world of “that”, its logicism is capable of no effective accounting about the realm of “what?” He argued this in the following way:

Because the world of “what?” is a completely known world and knowing is judgement. If we say “A is A”, the second A includes an A opposite to “not A” or the meaning of “A” in A, B, C, D. If A did not contain “not A” or “B, C and D,” then A would not be established in the first place. Therefore, distinguishing and judging is what Hegel called “concepts used in particularities.” Based on that, the realist philosophy can be naturally applied to the world of “that”. But we cannot differentiate between “that” and “what?” There is no “that” which does not change into “what?” Consequently, we can say that in fact there only exists the world of “what?” Since there is only this world, the prerequisites to know this world are constituted entirely of differentiation and judgements, otherwise there would only be chaos and ignorance. At the centre of our research are not randomly established “relations” but rather the mysterious “judgments”, for relations still have to be subjected to judgment. In other words, relations are formed and made from judgments themselves. If we accept this point, we can see that our problem is not any more the form of relations, but only the nature of judging. (Ibid.)

What Zhang is trying to say here is that the New Realism’s exclusive focus on “that” is not tenable in the first place, since by so doing they ignore the fact that the preconditions for “that” lie in “what?”. That is to say, “what?” or human consciousness in its entirety (not only reasoning as in formal logic) is the original locus of differentiation, which is the key precondition for “that” having any sense at all. Otherwise, “that” would be just a collection of sensory affirmations, blunt impulses, suspended in one’s “mind”, with no meaning at all. On the other side, and following Zhang’s reasoning, it can thus be assumed that, since “what?” is the place, be it either *a priori* or by evolutionary segmentation of awareness, from where judgments originate and by which they have any meaning, it must thus be subsumed that judgments are such after what is referred to as “what?” and not after what is essential only to the domain of “that”. It is essential to recognize that Zhang believed that Russell’s notion of relation derives exclusively from the latter. This was also how in the first half of the 1920s Chinese philosophers came to understand the relationship between the New Realist theory of

external relations on one hand, and the “idealist” theory of internal relations on the other.<sup>10</sup> How Zhang understood Russell’s logicism was thus, as an epistemological *and* ontological standpoint, as a claiming of the priority of relations essential to “that” over the judgments embodying these relations that are actually formed in “what?” According to Zhang, it is that external relations are part of judgments in the first place and that judgments are *not part of simple forms of* “that”, such as individual instances of sense perception (sense-data and propositions about them). On the contrary, relations are part of judgments which derive from “what?” and make recognition of “that” in the world possible in the first place.

Based on the grounds given above, Zhang concluded that Russell’s neorealist logicism was utterly incomplete. At the same time, however, he still emphasized that logicism cannot be simply discarded as useless or even replaced by a form of psychologism. As an alternative solution, he sought a suitable and accordingly ontologically “sound” form of logicism in the German school of Neo-Kantian philosophy. As far as the general notion of logic was concerned, the cancellation of relationism led him to a rather hasty conclusion that logic cannot account for its own nature or existence, for – as he believed was maintained by the American New Realists – the logical form was only a reflection of external relations (*ibid.*, 183). In this point we are able to realize a perspective which was adamantly set against the logocentric predicament of the realist philosophy of mathematics and logic. Consequently, Zhang assumed that the question of the nature of logic can be solved through studying the properties of logical relations alongside the essence of ideas as the carrier and the main groundwork of logical form. This very position further amply illustrates the *ratio* against Zhang’s later understanding of culture-based evolution of logic. That is, of logic as an organism inextricably bound to individual intellectual cultures and their languages. For the above theses entail that there it is not possible to assume the existence of a universal formulation of logic, after which human reasoning would be shaped, but rather the reverse: It would make more sense to assume that, as an expression of an aspect of the nature of the human mind, the human thought as such must be essentially plural, and as such the sole basis for logical pluralism. Exactly this kind of understanding of the notion of the human mind (*xin* 心) was emphatically reiterated in the conclusion of Zhang’s article, where he was criticizing the neorealist idea of the “conscious mind” and Russell’s notion of the mind as a special kind of relation. Amongst other things, in the concluding paragraphs of his analysis Zhang thus posited that the real nature of the mind exceeds the “division between subjective and the objective, while its existence precedes the given distinguishing judgment” (*ibid.*, 184). Here, “mind” probably means “pure mind”, which was supposed to embody the empirical access to the “pure experience”, further manifested in various forms of cognition and sensation. What is even more important is that Zhang regarded the human “mind” and its secondary realizations – for example, in the form of ideas – as the core as well as the root of the nature of judgments and consequently also logic(s). In this way, the human mind is a real and independent entity, and not only a reflection of external relations, the logico-mathematical structure of the world. From the synchronic perspective of Western

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<sup>10</sup> I have explained the historical side of these developments in 1920s China in one of my forthcoming publications. Because, at the time of writing this paper, I have not yet received a confirmation of its publication, I am unable to list the publication in the references.

philosophy, from which we are bound to set out today, this can be a rather problematic notion, since it scrutinizes the idea of “universal mind” by setting it against the prerogative of “logical relativism”. But if we observe the later “cultural relativism” which gained momentum in Chinese intellectual world in the 1930s, and consider the fact that one of its foremost proponents in the field of logic was Zhang Dongsun, then we realize that the underlying reasoning which was conducive to its gradual formation must be primarily reconstructed and only subsequently subjected to theoretical scrutiny, relating the conclusions in Chinese intellectual discourse with its “sources” in Western philosophy. In other words, and observed from contemporary standpoint, it appears to us rather absurd to propose “logical relativism” (many different types of logic) and “cognitive universalism” (that is to say, a universal mind in all members of the humankind) at the same time. Yet what might lurk underneath such apparent contradictions might be related to contextual ambiguities underlying the Chinese philosophers’ use of the notions of “logic” and “mind” in the first place.

In the framework of the later vitalist-coloured polemics on the “view on life”, the above-mentioned epistemic turn in Zhang’s philosophy can be tentatively described as the “humanistic turn”, and in its ontological extension, a “vitalist turn”. The autonomy thus acquired by the human mind over material, physical reality falls easily within the domain of the neovitalist biology-based humanism. The human organism or its evolutionary entity of human life is thus not only the main carrying vessel of the autonomous mind, but also a category of entity superposed to the mere material *level* of the universe. Life and its inherent autonomy is thus not only established in opposition to material existence, but should be considered as existentially superimposed (as determinating) on the material existence.

As already hinted above, in the last calculation Zhang’s critical analysis of Russell’s logicism signified some sort of essential complementarity between the subjective and objective spheres. Considering what was said above, an important precondition for that is that the objective sphere is not considered as a mere synonym for the material. Furthermore, such complementarity was probably to be reserved above all for the accomplished form of human consciousness, which, however, does present itself in the form combining intuition with rational insight. It should not come as a surprise, however, that this very idea was implicitly presented as the fundamental paradigm by the proponents of the “view on life” in the 1923 controversy.

### 3. Zhang’s Engagement with “Logicisms” (New Realism and Neo-Kantianism) in the Context of Zhang Junmai’s “View on Life” (1923)

The consequences Zhang’s critique of Russell’s logicism had for the idea of the human being and the value of subjectivity in China became clear in 1923, when in the broader Chinese intellectual community, the controversy over “Science and the View on Life” broke out. Looking back, Zhang’s writing from 1922 in a way foretold the advent of a new current of philosophy onto the central stage of Chinese intellectual discourse. This was, of course, no coincidence, for the flame of controversy was started by Zhang Dongsun’s close collaborator and colleague Zhang Junmai, who in 1922 was still in Europe, learning about the then popular neovitalist thought and forms of idealism, which were intertwined with ever more biological

foundations of neovitalist philosophy. When Junmai was still learning from his mentor and interlocutor Rudolf Eucken, Dongsun, who had stayed in China, was already devoting his efforts to the establishment of epistemological and logicist foundations of their future intellectual enterprise. After Junmai had finally returned to China, the key role in the ferment of neovitalism within the new wave of “view on life” or “philosophy of life”<sup>11</sup> was played by the German embryologist Hans Driesch, who arrived in China in that same year. His was the third and last in the series of visits of Western philosophers organized by the Lecture Society.

Between the years 1921 and 1922, Zhang Junmai, who became the central figure of the controversy in question, visited the University of Jena, where he studied under and later also worked together with Rudolf Eucken. For Zhang, this year was more or less formative, for this was quite obviously the time when his previous contact with Bergson’s philosophy and German idealism became rapidly updated by Eucken’s idealism and neovitalist ideas. A considerable part of the discussions which took place between Eucken in Zhang in 1921 were recorded by Lin Zaiping 林宰平, who published his records one year later in the *Reform* (*Gaizao* 改造) journal, then edited by members of Liang Qichao’s circle (see Lin 1922). Arising from their cooperation, in 1922 the book *The Problem of Life in China and Europe* (*Das Lebensproblem in China und Europa*) was published, in which Zhang took his first steps towards his later notion of the “view on life” and human subjectivity. Emulating the model of contemporary trends in European neovitalism, where Bergson’s vitalism fused together with biological objectivism, Zhang also understood “human life” as a part of the category of biological life as such. It was precisely these views that were representatively synthesized in the philosophical thought of Hans Driesch, the objectivistic bases of which went back to the contemporary discussions about embryology, zoology, and the theory of evolution.

The controversy over science and the view on life broke out in the year 1923, after the transcript of Zhang Junmai’s lecture on the “View on Life” (“*Rensheng guan* 人生觀”; 1923) was first published in a periodical. The main thesis of Zhang’s lecture was the independence of the domain of subjectivity from that of scientific objectivity, which was embodied in the universe of discourse of the scientific method. This very same disparity between two “independent” spheres of human cognition was also reflected in Zhang’s classification of science into “spiritual” and “material sciences”, where some segments of “spiritual sciences” represented different forms of life views and were thereby mutually nonexclusive. Herein lies an extraordinarily significant idea of the necessity of plurality of life views that Zhang referred to as subjective (*zhuguan* 主觀), for plurality, if understood as the relationship of no exclusion and non-affirmation between different life views, meant that formal logic could not do justice to the properties of human life and thus also of the scientific method within the domain of

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<sup>11</sup> The first major appearance of the notion took place in the months surrounding the May Fourth events of 1919. In its first emergence, the surge in uses of the term *rensheng guan* 人生觀 and *rensheng* 人生 was closely tied to pragmatist philosophy of social change, liberalism, and even early socialist meditations on revolution and the change of human thought. While the view kindling the revolutionary transformation of Chinese society was often referred to as *xin rensheng guan* 新人生觀 (“new view on life/life view”), the reformed (*gaizao* 改造 – also one of key terms between 1917 and 1919) human life (*rensheng*) was considered just a different end of the same thing as the *xin sixiang* 新思想 or “new thought”. For more on this, see Vrhovski (2022b)

subjectivity. In this regard, we are able to recognize the method in which Zhang Junmai could have set out to build by basing himself on Zhang Dongsun's epistemological-logical theory. The remaining contradictions within which Zhang Junmai endeavoured to define the domain of the subject were the following: (1) Science is based on the **logical method** (*lunli fangfa* 論理方法), while the view on life derives from **intuition** (*zhijue* 知覺), which means that the views on life do not abide by logical laws. (2) The method of science is **analysis**, while the method of life view is **synthesis** (*zonghe* 綜合), and rational argumentation, on the other hand, is not the same as a form of thinking within a life view. (3) While science rests on the **law of causality**, life views are based on **free will** (*ziyou yizhi* 自由意志). (4) Science originates from **universality, generality of appearances of objects**, while life views are founded on the **uniqueness of human nature**; while science uses psychological tests to distinguish between intelligent and stupid people, the view on life rests solely on **individuality**. (5) Lastly, Zhang also distinguishes between science as the discourse on matter and the view on life as the discourse on human mentality; the first is centred around the **external world and relations between objects**, while the latter is devoted to the **cultivation of one's inner life** (see Zhang Junmai 1923, 3-4).

The oppositions given above essentially constitute a form of autonomy on the side of the domain of the individual realization of the subject, whereas Zhang Junmai actually limits the domain of intuition, cultivation and so on to the individual, while the collective manifestation of the mentioned subjectivities is an intellectual formation, which he identifies exclusively within a "view on life". In the same period of time, the aforementioned "subjectivity" was often equated with the "Chinese (referred to both as cultural/civilizational or spiritual) essence", which was generally referred to as "non-scientific". "Subjectivity" as the essential characteristic of Chinese culture was much discussed in the framework of the new "enlightenment movement" (*qimeng yundong* 啟蒙運動) from the mid-1930s. From this point of view, Zhang's taking resort in the concept of the "view on life" or "inner life" of humanity as a category independent from objectivistic scientific realization is in fact a quest for the autonomy of Chinese cultural essence from the objectivity of Western civilization. However, if, in reading Zhang's contributions to the above-mentioned controversy, we also take into account Zhang Dongsun's papers from the same period (1923-1924), an entirely different image emerges. Nevertheless, what this kind of image might imply pertains not so much to the question of explicit boundaries of "discourses" as it does to the potential internal discourse. A major corollary to this assumption is that an internal intersubjective discourse might not have had the same formal aim as the ultimate public "codification" of Junmai's "view on life", which also had to incorporate the rhetorical and terminological "objectiveness" following the example of neovitalism.

Since, at least in general theoretical sense, Dongsun seems to have maintained similar positions to Junmai, what was his exact take on the way in which the "Science and the View on Life" debate was conducted? By the year 1923, Zhang Dongsun's focus had shifted to the more "ontological" bases of Russellian scientific realism. In the year the controversy began, for example, Zhang published an article entitled "Philosophy of Relativism and the New Logicism"

(“Xiangduilun de zhexue yu xin lunli zhuyi 相對論的哲學與新論理主義”). Amongst other things, in the concluding lines of his paper Zhang wrote the following:

The relationship of some compatriots towards Western philosophy is not the same as that of textual criticism of Chinese philology (*Hanxue* 漢學), namely to meticulously study one or two points of Western empiricism, but rather an approach from Buddhist metaphysics; to noncritically select one or two points of Western sophism, even to the extent that [their treatises] become similar to the Song Dynasty Confucianism, where philosophy is regarded as identical to morality. In my opinion, this approach is not consistent with a complete learning about the Western philosophy. I believe that we are only capable of gaining an insight into Western philosophy by leaving aside all these things and delving directly into it. Similarly, in the Science and Metaphysics debate the opponents do not at all understand what exactly they are attaching, representing the scientific method, which they are thus advocating, without any concrete standards. It must be borne in mind that the Occam’s Razor in fact represents one of the scientific spirits, while at the same time it does not suffice to summarize the whole substance of scientific method. Nevertheless, I am also convinced that, so far, science and metaphysics have already been completely separated because of their lack of mutual understanding. Science is thus not what it used to be in the past, while philosophy has also changed. Because of this very reason, there is no doubt that the already antiquated materialism will soon be discarded, together with the already antiquated idealism. Words like “deity” (*shen* 神) or “soul” (*linghun* 靈魂) should not be occurring in philosophy anymore. (Zhang Dongsun 1923a, 81)

What exactly are Zhang’s intentions in the above excerpt and how does this relate to his “life view” agenda? Before I try to answer this question and establish the ultimate link between Zhang Dongsun’s philosophy and the 1923 debate initiated by Zhang Junmai, we must first say more about the broader context in which these conclusions were given.

Zhang’s article, from which the above excerpt was cited, represented an important building stone in his philosophical project. What he intended to illuminate with his meticulous dissection of relativism and “new logicism” were the very ontological foundations of modern scientific objectivity and its related scientific philosophy. It thus appears that Zhang’s engagement with Russell’s New Realism was very systematic. After his initial deconstruction of the epistemological bases of Russell’s New Realism, he then attempted to establish a direct connection between logicist epistemology and modern physical science as the objectivist basis of realist logic and philosophy. However, contrary to what one might expect, Zhang’s aim was not to discard Russell’s logicism and his theory of external relations, but rather to improve his philosophy by establishing a lost balance. In the same essay from 1923, Zhang also presented the first outline of his idea of a sound theory of logicism, which would be founded on the epistemology and philosophy of mind of the German Neo-Kantians such as Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936). However, as hinted above, Zhang’s intention was not to discard logical formalism or disconnect it from modern scientific cosmology – the structure of the universe. Instead, he

set out to show that Russell's relational externalism was in fact the underlying paradigm of relativist physics. Moreover, he used Whitehead's "natural philosophy" to emphasize that "nature and perception" are one, that "time and space are not independent from each other", and that change is truer than constant identity of objects. It is in this "synthesis" of aspects which Zhang apparently considered antagonistic or binary where he felt some sort of affinity. At the same time, as in the article from 1922, Zhang reiterated his rejection of the primacy of logical relations over ideas and the mind, which gives rise to judgments. To Zhang, however, this did not mean that logic was not the structure of the universe itself. It was just that "logic cannot be separated from thought. The realm of logic is the realm of thought... if New Realism would develop any further, it would inadvertently turn into objective idealism. But if we derive more from the perspective of the development of mathematics, then we can learn that the universe is an infinitely developing idea of value" (Zhang Dongsun 1923a, 80-81). Considering what was already said above, it is evident how the statement that "the realm of logic *are* the realm of thought" ought to have its emphasis on the second part, namely the realm of thought and not vice versa. Aside from that, here lies an important clue as to how Zhang Dongsun's enterprise might be directly connected to Zhang Junmai's "view on life" and his classification of thought into two major currents. Were both Zhangs in fact intending to present a system of philosophy or a worldview that was "science **and** view on life"? Was the entire controversy just a misunderstanding of their emphasis on the conjunction – in the introduction of Zhang (1923a) we can read that the boundaries between science and philosophy have already been blurred (*ibid.*, p. 58).<sup>12</sup> On one side, the main clue that Zhang Dongsun for one was in fact in search for a "neutral order" is given in the conclusion of his article on relativism, as follows:

- (1) In theory of relativity, the mind and object of knowing, and even the movement and stillness in time and space are **synthesized** into one undividable and independent thing.
- (2) From the results of fusing mind and objects, time and space, we are able to learn about another kind of a **neutral order**.
- (3) This order is "expansion" (*kuo* 擴).
- (4) Because mathematics arises from that, it thus possesses possibility.
- (5) We thus know that logic can be used as a means of profound research of the universe. (*Ibid.*, p. 81; *my emphasis*)

There are two key clues how to interpret the above conclusions in the context of the controversy prompted by Zhang Junmai. The first is the classification of two main currents of thought given in Zhang Dongsun's 1922 article, which he specifically attributed to Zhang Junmai. The other clue is given in another article from 1923, entitled "This is *A*" (*Zhe shi jia* 這是甲), in which he finally made the connection between his Neo-Kantian thought-based "logicism" and his

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<sup>12</sup> Later in the text, he further pointed out that: "The principle of relativity has got mathematical foundations, which is why his [Newton's] hypothesis has got a scientific value. The relativist truth is basic to common sense and philosophy. The today's theory of relativity is merely using scientific method to repudiate scientific absoluteness." (Zhang Dongsun 1923a, p. 59).



Bergsonian high regard for life (*shengming* 生命), which he chose to call his theory of “objective idealism” or “pragmatic rationalism” (Zhang Dongsun 1923b, 61).<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. The Connection – Neutrality of Objective Idealism and “Thought is Life”

Not only the subtle texture of Zhang’s philosophical encounters with New Realism and modern scientific objectivity, but also its essential connection, become more evident when we take a closer look at two main features of his works from 1922 and 1923. Back in 1922, when his encounters with Russell’s logicism and its theory of relations had first taken the form of a treatise, Zhang already revealed his agreement with the dual classification of modern thought, as maintained by Zhang Junmai. Most importantly, this paradigm, which was reiterated throughout his early-1920s treatises, seems to have meant more to both Zhangs than merely a scholarly distinction. Moreover, to them it probably represented the dual nature of human cognition and its purely ontological basis (Kantian transcendental conditions). In other words, to them the following paradigm was probably reflective of the pattern of the mind-universe (Zhang Dongsun 2021, 166):

<b>System A</b>	<b>System B</b>
<i>Logicism</i>	<i>Psychologism</i>
<i>Philosophy of thought</i>	<i>Philosophy of life</i>
<i>Stressing the general form</i>	<i>Stressing particular content</i>
<i>Transcendentalism</i>	<i>Empiricism</i>
<i>Advocating rational knowledge</i>	<i>Opposing rational knowledge</i>

Although at first sight the above binary classification of the extremes of the “human mind” seems to be divided by an unsurmountable gap of disjunction, in the light of the idea of *neutral order* this could perhaps be necessarily understood as conjunctive. As a matter of fact, Zhang’s 1923 article “This Is A” (“Zhe shi jia 這是甲”) supports this very assumption. In this article, Zhang’s provided a synthetic overview of his theses argued for in the previous two articles.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A considerably more substantial clue about how Junmai’s ideas corresponded with Dongsun’s motion can be found in one of the articles that the former contributed to the “Science and the View on Life” controversy. In Zhang Junmai (1923c), he pointed out: “Since the times immemorial, of all systems of ideas established by philosophers which integrated all phenomena, and whose teachings was able to leave an imprint on the human minds, none was as splendid the system of philosophy as established by Kant... ant distinguishes between two things: related to ethics is the scope of human free will; and related to knowledge is the scope of laws of causation. In this sense, freedom and causation do not stand in conflict with each other, so that subsequently human affairs and knowledge can both obtain reasonable explanations. This is one of the advantages of Kant’s philosophy. As for the object of knowledge, whether it arises from sense-perception or reason, Kant proposed a harmonistic theory, which posited that perception without conception is ignorance, while conception without perception is emptiness. In this explanation, both currents are reconciliated. This constitutes the second strength of Kant’s philosophy.”

<sup>14</sup> Following its publication, a minor written discussion developed between Zhang Dongsun, Zhang Junmai and Wang Jinxin 王晉鑫. See, for instance, Zhang Dongsun (1923c).

This time, however, he also revealed a very clear picture of how the disparities of the above-named contending currents could be brought into an intellectual developmental perspective. In other words, Zhang showed how the two systems were merely an outcome of the initially binary nature of cognition, which ought to be embodied in the human mind and reflected its thought. In this sense, it is reasonable to assume that a neutral order, combining both sides of the “mind”, should be considered not only as more wholesome use of our cognitive capacities, but also a step towards a more comprehensive understanding of reality as such. The latter point was particularly in line with the Neo-Kantian notion of pure mind and cognition so much admired by Zhang.

It is important to understand, that the above-mentioned evolutionary overview served Zhang as an “evolutionary” argument for his own philosophy, which he chose to name “objective idealism”. This argument was conducted through several stages, in which Zhang gave his evaluation of the currents of philosophy representative of the above two systems. He thus set out by giving an analysis of the conceptions of the “structure of experience” (*jingyan de goucheng* 經驗的構成) in pragmatism, empiricism, realism and idealism. Next, he closely observed the “conditions of truth” (*zhenwei de biao zhun* 真偽的標準) in the neorealist theory of verification and idealism. In his penultimate step he then investigated the “commonality of order” (*tiaoli de gongtong* 條理的公同) in light of the idea of relativism in contemporary scientific philosophy and “critical realism”. Last but not least, he arrived at what may be the most pertinent point for the present discussion, namely the very important thesis that “thought is life” (*sixiang ji shenghuo* 思想即生活). At this final stage, all the previous assumptions and arguments Zhang presented in his previous papers were combined to form one sensible whole.

Firstly, Zhang gave a much-needed elucidation of his understanding of the ontological-epistemological spheres of “this” and “what?”. These seem to have been used as two manifestations of the above-mentioned dual nature of the mind, while their actual role in cognition became clear within the dynamic perspective of life. Zhang first pointed out that:

Empiricism tells us about accumulation [of knowledge] through experience; pragmatism, on the other hand, tells us at a more profound level that our accumulation of experience is a realization of values; while New Realism goes even deeper to tell us that the realization of our values has got a universal form. As consequence, we can attain a revelation about how to solve the question of how “that” turns into “what?”, by combining the generation problem of transforming “that” into “what?” with the problem of necessity of changing “that” into “what?” (Zhang Dongsun 1923b, 55)

What the above excerpt describes is Zhang’s understanding of the gradual advancement of the “that” branch of Western philosophy. In Zhang’s description, the empiricists’ turn seems to have been towards the “that”, namely the emphasis of external experience in knowledge-formation. Pragmatism, however, made a slight turn back towards the subject as the locus of “what?”, when it pointed out that empirical engagement with “that” results in inner values. Finally, New Realism makes another sharp turn towards the external “that”. What, according

to Zhang, neither of these schools really grasped is the problem of how “that” is generated into “what?” and what necessitates such generation. Of course, for us it would be also vital to understand what exactly constitutes such generation and the actual nature of these two “spheres” presupposed by Zhang. Is such “generation” only epistemic or is it also an ontological process of becoming? To completely grasp what Zhang is trying to achieve here, it would be necessary to answer all these and many more questions. However, due to the limitation of space, here we shall only follow up on a certain aspect of this apparently dynamic and complementary relationship, which links generation with “becoming”, a view which may be seen as Zhang’s attempt to make use of idealism encapsulated in contemporary neovitalist teaching. It seems that he recognized in the becoming of human life the very nexus of the domain conjoining the embodiment of the *moral imperative* (necessity related to values, which are based on experiences) and the driving force of *physical becoming* (generation problem?).

Moreover, the dynamic relationship between “that” and “what?”, which Zhang strived to expound on using the propositional form “this is *a*”, was not only a reflection of the dual nature or structure of the human mind. More so, it was the nature of very “becoming” (*Werden*) embodied in biological life. In this sense, mind was the cosmos, mind was thought, and thought was life, which in turn was nothing else but the manifestation of the pure essence of ever-changing existence. As for the bipolar nature of mind, its necessity was also further embodied within the nature of human intellectual evolution as such. In this sense, the above-mentioned empiricism, pragmatism, New Realism, and even Kantian “formalist” idealism were merely side products of a meandering developmental path of human ideas, fluctuating between one extreme and the other. It is thus in the concluding lines of Zhang’s article from 1923 where it becomes clear that he was indeed pursuing a neutral fusion between the two extremes. How the idea of “life view” and “human life” fitted into the equation is explained in the following paragraph from his article:

The result of various kinds of preceding lessons are known only with this elementary form “this is *a*” as its core. It is because all forms are all under this form. But this elementary form is not a pure form. The so-called “this” is given in its bare form; while the so-called *a* is “what?” which is already distinguished from the other; and the so-called “is” designates “becoming” (*huacheng* 化成, *Werden*) – which means something like Hegel’s idea of *Werden*. Therefore, this elementary form is on the one hand the root of why cognition is established, while on the other hand it is the foundation for why the universe is established. Because both sides express the same entity, therefore once we have resolved epistemology, we have also resolved cosmology. In my opinion, “this is *a*” is a bare “this” turning into “what?” with already given differentiation. This kind of becoming [*Werden*] is what Bergson refers to as the “vital impetus”. This impetus is differentiation, in the sense that, for example, “this is *a*” also includes the “this” of *a, b, c, d* etc., while differentiating itself from “*a*” not including *b, c, d*, and so on. The function of such differentiation is the distinctive feature of the vital impetus. But there are still some philosophers, who have not yet clearly understood this point, who only regard life as noumenon and thought as ethereal. The reason for this is that

there are some philosophers who overly emphasize thought, in this way making it overly inflexible and shallow, and thus giving rise to this kind of reaction. In fact, aside from “this” turning into “what?” we are unable to find any other fundamental type of vital impetus. Life’s development is nothing but this kind of change, while the development of thought is nothing but the change of this into what. Therefore, the development of life itself is thought and the establishment of thought itself is life. (Zhang Dongsun 1923b, 56-7)

To explain the very intricate meaning of what Zhang attempts to point out above, it first needs to be noted that Zhang regards “this is *a*”, namely a formal expression of a judgment or a proposition, from the perspective of the so-called “pure” domain of “what?”, while still maintaining that “what?” is given *a priori* within the human mind – thence the distinction. For this reason, he points out that the existence of *a* asserted within the judgment, is given *a priori* within the capacity of “what?”. On the other hand, the dynamic mover of “what?” consists in its constant interaction with “that”. As Zhang further notes, however, when it comes to understanding the generational dynamics between “that” and “what?”, its conditions must be common to both sides: in this way, both sides share the static or rigid<sup>15</sup> object *a* on the one side, and the dynamic existential ingredient, which he links with Hegel’s becoming. How extremely generalizing Zhang’s understanding of this principle actually was becomes apparent in the following lines, where we gradually learn that Zhang does not distinguish between cognitive “becoming”, moral “becoming”, and physical, that is, biological “becoming”. This is exactly why his extreme theoretical propensity can be called a modification of (neo-)vitalism. In so doing, Zhang gathered inspiration from what he understood to be the quintessential idea of Bergson’s *vitalism*. Moreover, he expanded the idea of “vital impetus” to integrate all aspects of becoming, which can amount to what we could collectively refer to as “human life”. For him, the above line of reasoning seems to have been a clear indication that there is no line of division between thought and life, thought and change even, but the complementary and dynamic relationship between “that” and “what?”, which makes an individual at the same time on a certain (vitalistic?) continuum with the universe, and by virtue of the cognitive part of becoming necessarily different from it.

To return to the starting point of the present discussion: according to what was said above, a neutral, harmonic, and comprehensive form of logicism would have to derive not from logical form, but from the nature of mind and human thought in the first place. For logic is the formal structure of the universe and the *a priori* structure of the human mind, at least in its purest form. Logical structures are given in the subject of cognition in the first place, which enables it to advance towards purer forms of awareness. Moreover, the ontological, the object of cognition is given within thought as such; yet not only in one of its two extremes, but in their totality, which is attained by realizing that thought is life (another harmonic combination of the two currents) and that life is thought in development. In other words, life in all its forms itself contains the potential of the neutral order of becoming. Neutral order is possible because of the

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<sup>15</sup> That is to use Zhang Junmai’s term, *ningzhi* 凝滯, which he uses to refer to the basic properties of material objects as opposed to changing, dynamic life. See Zhang Junmai (1923c).

process of becoming manifested in life which “*is* thought”. Moreover, this position further entails that none of the previous stages in human intellectual development are to be excluded from a modern and more advanced “**philosophy of life**” (*Lebensphilosophie*). This is to say that – as noted by Zhang Dongsun (1923b, 55) – New Realism is not to be discarded but rather openly accepted and adopted, for its results are nothing but an imbalanced yet very much true and pertinent advancement of human thought. Similarly, logic or relativist physics are both very useful revelations about the formal, logical, material, etc. aspects of the universe, which an “objective idealism” cannot but integrate into its objectivist foundations. In this very sense, assuming that between Zhang Dongsun and Zhang Junmai there indeed existed a direct intellectual exchange and cooperation, the “view on life” (*rensheng guan*) was utilized as what they saw as a pertinent and theoretically tenable counterbalance to excessive “scientific objectivism” or extreme “neorealist logicism”, which in their view was circulating the mainstream intellectual discourse in early-1920s China. Zhang Dongsun’s philosophical enterprise was thus not merely an attempt to discard Russell’s philosophy, but rather an endeavour to give it its proper place and value within the “neutral order” of “science **and** the view on life”. And the opposing side’s inability to recognize this very motion is what Zhang criticized in the conclusion to his essay on relativism and logicism. What he meant is that they were aware neither of the actual nature of modern science nor modern “scientized” philosophy which, as he pointed out, already transcended their past confines, taking an important leap towards a possibly “neutral” unity between “subjective” and “objective”. The alleged “Science and the View on Life” opposition as noted by Zhang Junmai in 1923 was nothing but their common reading of the next stage in the evolution of modern scientific objectivity on the one side, and its corresponding modern philosophy on the other.

## 5. Epilogue – On the Necessity to Evaluate the Origins of the “Science and the View on Life” Controversy

In summary, the above analysis casts light on several important aspects relating to the development of ideas in Zhang Dongsun’s thought in the early 1920s, on the one side, and the possibly broader influence of the “scientific objectivity” he adopted in his writings, on the other. As regards the first aspect, it has been clearly shown that Zhang’s philosophical enterprise was based on his ambition to (a) identify the new character of objectivist, scientific philosophy, and (b) construct a new synthetic philosophical view, which would encompass both the essence of contemporary philosophy as well as its scientific foundations. Furthermore, in so doing he was also indirectly making use of the philosophy of Bertrand Russell, which he regarded as second in importance and level of development only to his new logicism, which would combine the objectivistic capacities of modern science and logic with Neo-Kantian ontology of mind and thought. As pointed out above, if we observe Zhang’s attempt to “use” Russell’s logicism as a phenomenon of intellectual history, then, prior to passing judgments about the soundness of his understanding and tenability of his conclusions, we must, aside from other things, also regard the pragmatic aspects of such use.

When it comes to Zhang’s “use” of Russell’s logic and logicism, I found this to be revelatory about the less clearly and explicitly expressed aspects of not only his thought but also the

discourse he shared with other Chinese thinkers at the time (the 1923 debate and so on). As such, Zhang's criticism of individual positions and claims advocated by Russell did not mean that he rejected the latter's notion of logic altogether. On the contrary, it seems that he ended accepting most of Russell's logic as objectively valid, while changing the notion of *objectiveness* of logic in the first place. As I have tried to show, the contextual turn in Zhang's "use" of Russell's logic was primarily epistemic. In this way, he could retain the aggregated positive results of the evolution of thought in the West, including formal logic, while redefining their scope of application by providing what he saw as sounder epistemological and ontological bases, that were at the same time in line with his strong preference for the neovitalist regard for the autonomy of life against the "static" and "mechanic" material universe. In other words, this very theoretical grounds enabled Zhang to realize the ambition which was emphasized by Liang Qichao as well as many other Chinese intellectuals in the late 1910s and early 1920s, namely to adopt everything that is useful from Western knowledge. It seems that Zhang Junmai thought that his treatment of Russell's logicism and his scientific philosophy was the most relevant path towards attaining all his philosophical objectives at the time. It was not just a direct engagement with a potential adversary when it came to the "logicist" claims, but also a process of the more or less adoption of certain aspects and paradigms of the latter's thought, that made him central to Chinese discourse on science, logic, and philosophy in the first place. Moreover, it was a path towards a synthesis of knowledge, driven by one major precondition, that the foundations of a thus emerging worldview would also allow due autonomy to human life, along with one's subjectivity, intuition, spiritual existence, and so on. The recent experience of Western material civilization – the disaster of WWI – illustrated that the autonomy of life should not be subordinated to objective science (on WWI and the critique of modernity see, for example, Van den Stock (2021)).

While Zhang regarded the above-mentioned synthesis as based on what is given as such within the nature of both the mind and as well as the universe, from a temporal perspective such a synthesis was not only regarded as necessary but already ongoing within Western scientific thought itself. As he explicitly noted, if New Realism was to develop any further – i.e. beyond the bias of relational logicism, it would have reached the same conclusions. Another important aspect of Zhang's thought, which connects him quite clearly with Zhang Junmai's "View on Life" from 1923, was his insistence to balance out Neo-Kantian objectivism with a form of vitalism, which derived from Bergson's philosophy. Thus, the final destination of Zhang's attempt to remodel Russell's logicism resided in the thesis that the form, essence, and the laws of thought are life itself. In so doing, he resorted to the very same kind of dynamism which a decade later he set out to defend against the materialists' claims of the monopoly of dialectical materialism over the so-called "dynamic logic" (*dongde luoji* 動的邏輯; see Zhang 1933). The quintessential difference between Zhang's notion of logic and such "dynamic logic" lay in the fact that, in his view, rather than logic the dynamic thing was thought. Moreover, the dynamism of thought could not be separated from life itself. What was particularly pertinent for the "Science and the View on Life" controversy was related to the fact that this "life" was life as a whole. If one was to remove the "subjective" or "psychologistic" or even "transcendental" part from it, this would severely diminish or even disable its movement. This can be particularly

well recognized in his and Zhang Junmai's bipartite classification of world philosophy. As mentioned above, for the two Zhangs this was not only a scholarly line artificially drawn between two schools of philosophy, but a line reflective of human intellectual development as well as psychological character as such. Thus, in his 1923 article "This Is A", for instance, Zhang Dongsun even connects the two currents with different national characters and so on. As a consequence, the main problem of contemporary philosophy was not which of these school to choose, but was incorporated in the very fact of the existence of the bipartite division. Hence, the problem lay in opposition and objectivistic exclusivism as an inherently "subjective" attitude, which infringed upon the, not in any way inferior, "objective" humanism.

Relating to the general intellectual-historical discussion, the above analysis can give us important insights into the complexity of intellectual change in the early 1920s. We are thus able to see that, for instance, Bertrand Russell's scientific philosophy, his logicism, his theory of external relations, and even his strong propensity towards modern relativistic physics, had an extremely profound impact on what, at least on the surface, seems to be tantamount to the early formation of modern Chinese humanism. This idea is staggering in many different ways. On the one hand, for example, it challenged the paradigm of *science against the view on life* established in contemporary historiography of modern China, while on the other it, most importantly, sets the 1923 developments in direct continuity with the developments in the years immediately before that. In other words, the 1923 controversy was one of the *direct outcomes of Russell's visit to China and the wave of scientization of Chinese philosophy, which his visit and ideas had set into motion* (for the developments at Peking University, see Vrhovski 2022c). Since, as shown above, Zhang Dongsun's criticism of Russell was not aimed at dismissing his logic as a whole but merely to set it on different foundations – which could also account for the formal nature of logic – the former's work from early 1920s could also be called a form of positive *appropriation of major segment of Russell's notion of objectivity*. Moreover, it is my conclusion that this casts important light on the nature of the entire "science and life view" enterprise, which in the domain of the public discussion was spearheaded by his colleague Zhang Junmai. All that said, I believe that the above analysis makes a strong case not only for redefining the nature of the "view on life" side of the 1923 controversy, but for redefining the roots and theoretical foundations of Chinese *humanism* or *philosophy of life* in the entire Republican Era. Of course, as Zhang Dongsun himself pointed out, in so doing we would also have to consider the possibility of the very human factor of *misunderstanding* the other party's intentions, which would thus be attributed not only to the later scholar of this segment of Chinese intellectual history, but even more so to the science side of the controversy as well.

By and large, the above conclusions might not seem so extraordinary at all if we regard them in the context of the intellectual trends of the time. That Zhang Junmai and Zhang Dongsun were not direct opponents of scientific objectivity but rather of philosophical scientism and objectivism does not make them exceptions to their contemporaries, with whom they shared a common enthusiasm for the modern age of science. At the same time, it would not be too risky to assume that the Zhangs' intention was to create a harmonic fusion of the, at the time, rather common-sensical antagonism between either *two opposing currents* or *cultures/civilizations*. In the early 1920s, the idea that the solution to the Chinese dilemma resided in a harmonic

unity or pragmatic combination of the two was a widely held conviction amongst the leading Chinese intellectuals. What is more staggering though is something which seems to have sunken into oblivion, namely – and as originally remarked by Liang Qichao in his welcome speech for Russell at the famous Chinese Lecture Society in 1920 – that the society’s intention in inviting all these scholars from the West was to learn about everything of value in its culture and knowledge. Following the disaster of WWI, in 1920 Liang was well aware of the problems of intellectual “one-sidedness” or cultural “biases” of civilizations, which is why he already urged that “what the world needs the most today is the idealization of life and making ideals more true to life (*shengkuohua* 生活化)” (Vrhovski and Rošker ed. 2021, p. 67). Could not the same motto be recognized in both the philosophy of Zhang Dongsun as well as the public polemicizing of Zhang Junmai? What we can learn by reinvestigating the intellectual complexity behind the “Science and the View on Life” debate is that the prism of strict discursive boundaries, through which we tend to observe the contest between science and metaphysics in the West, might not only be misapplied in the case of Chinese modern intellectual history, but, more importantly, conducive to our blindness about certain aspects of intellectual continuity and ingenious creativity which went on behind what from the outside might appear as the dry and shallow intellectual emulation of the Western paradigms. Only when we delve deeper into the way Chinese philosophers like Zhang Dongsun both learned from and responded to ideas like those of Russell, Einstein, Whitehead, Kant, Rickert and others, do we then begin to realize the dimensions of “elan vital” and intellectual creativity which underlay the process of Chinese intellectual modernization.

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